

KC KEAN



WATCH ME
FALL

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THE EMERSON U SERIES #1

KC KEAN

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Published by Featherstone Publishing Ltd

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Cover Design: Bellaluna Designs

Proofreader: Sassi's Editing Services

Watch Me Fall / KC Kean – 1st ed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALSO BY KC KEAN

*To always following your dreams, and being a badass bitch
when you do.*

Hurt comes in all different forms. There's always someone worse off than you, but that doesn't make your pain any less real, any less heartbreaking.

— EZRA CAMPBELL

LOU-LOU

THREE YEARS AGO



I bring the bottle of cheap vodka to my lips, taking a gulp without care, teaching me a valuable lesson as the liquid burns, trickling down my throat. That's what I get for being cocky and thinking I can take a shot smoothly.

Coughing and spluttering, I bring my hand to my mouth, my eyes watering but even over all the noise I'm making, I can still hear the snicker to my right, and embarrassment floods my veins. It's a good thing it's only the two of us up here, otherwise, I might have died from mortification. I can picture my obituary now, 'Lou-Lou Carter died from humiliation after attempting to prove she had a big set of lady balls by choking down a big mouthful of vodka straight from the bottle. Unfortunately, her throat had other plans and rebelled against the fiery liquid.' Fucking traitor.

"Quit fucking laughing, asshole," I say with a chuckle once I can catch my breath, and I sigh in relief after checking to make sure I didn't spill any down my vivid-pink mini dress.

I swipe my blonde hair back off my face, and look expectantly at the culprit by my side.

Leo Cooper.

His favorite gray baseball cap sits backward on his head, covering his blond hair as he laughs into his elbow, but I see the sparkle of humor in his gray eyes. He's always here for the fun and jokes, but he's beyond sweet too. Which is why we decided to boycott the party and drink alone up here in his bedroom.

“Don’t look at me like that, Lucy. It was funny. I knew you wouldn’t like it, but you wouldn’t listen,” he responds knowingly, and I roll my eyes as I stare down at him.

“If you had brought the expensive stuff instead of this cheap shit, I wouldn’t feel like my insides are on fire,” I retort, taking the seat beside him on the old couch with a huff. The music playing downstairs vibrates the floors, offering a hint of background noise as I relax back in my seat.

These parties are always boring as hell with all the stupid rules the guys lay out for me.

No getting drunk.

No being alone with any guy that isn’t one of the four of them.

No dancing with someone with a dick.

Blah. Blah. Blah.

I thought I was going to finally get completely shitfaced tonight, but the taste is fucking nasty. So that’s definitely not happening, unless I miraculously find an acquired taste for this crap.

I glance down at the bottle in my hand, pleading with it to magically turn into the fancy vodka we drank at my mom’s birthday party earlier this year, but it doesn’t work. I remember my mom gave me no lunch money in the build up to her birthday, all to have the expensive shit to celebrate, and there was no way we were going to be able to afford that tonight.

“Who the fuck gave Luella that?” Jagger’s thunderous voice booms around us as the bedroom door swings open. I purse my lips in agitation as he storms toward me, and I huff in frustration.

“What is it with you motherfuckers not hearing me? I don’t care if my birth certificate says Luella Carter. I *don’t* like it. I want to be called Lou-Lou. *Lou-Lou*,” I repeat for the hundredth time, but the scoff from Leo beside me gives me an answer.

Fuck what I think, they'll call me what they want.

Always have, always will.

Dicks.

Jagger crouches down before me, snatching the vodka from my hand dismissively, before glaring at me. His leather jacket is tight around his thick muscles as he rubs his jaw, his menacing glare doing nothing but melting my panties.

I can't stop my thighs rubbing together as I take him in. It's hard when one of my guys is around; two are far too tempting, and all four of them? Fuck, I'm ready to self-combust.

The girls at high school call me a whore because I'm forever with my best friends, and I honestly wish I was; a whore to these guys at least. But nope, I'm a fifteen-year-old virgin, desperate for one or all of them to claim me.

Jagger Izaro is my bossy, alpha asshole and his identical twin, Jameson, a close second in the brooding department. But they protect us all fiercely, and that's their way of showing they care. Jagger's angry glare only turns me on, and I don't think that's the reaction he's going for.

"Lay off, Jagger, we're having fun," Leo adds calmly, and I turn to him with a smile as he throws his arm around me.

"You're fifteen, idiots," Jagger grunts, pointing his finger at us, and I throw my hands up in the air in annoyance.

"Have you got your I.D. there too, Dad?" I toss back with my eyebrows raised, and Jagger shakes his head.

"I'm older than you," he mumbles, swiping a hand over his face, his deep brown eyes silently pleading with me to turn off my sass, but he should know by now the sass controls me, not the other way around.

"By a year, asshole. I didn't know sixteen was the new legal age to drink in Nevada," I argue back sarcastically, as he swipes a hand over his face for the second time. I freeze, spotting his bloodied and busted knuckles. The rawness of the torn skin means this happened recently.

My heart pounds in my chest as I reach out for his hand instinctively, and I hear the hiss on his lips, but I refuse to meet his gaze as I scan my eyes over the rest of him. I know I'll find the usual grimace, his eyes glaring into the side of my head already. It's the same every time.

"It's nothing, Luella," he mumbles, attempting to pull his hand from my grip, but I cling to his fingers, knowing deep down he could release my grip on him within seconds, but he chooses not to.

"*Nothing* wouldn't look like this, Jag," I respond, finally lifting my gaze to his. My mouth goes dry as I watch him lick his bottom lip, his eyes scanning my face, trying to decipher my mood like we haven't danced this same dance before.

I feel Leo move closer, but he remains silent, knowing full well I'm close to going nuclear.

I hate seeing any of my guys bruised, never mind cut, and it's my responsibility to keep them in check. They're always in some kind of trouble. Or that's what I tell myself. Why else would four hot guys keep my loser ass around all these years?

We've been friends since I was six-years-old, the memory forever in my brain, but the problem in front of me is more important than getting lost down memory lane.

"I want everyone out, Leo," I state, and without a word he's up on his feet and out the door, ready to kick everyone out of the party just because I told him to.

Jagger reluctantly moves to the newly vacated seat as I rise to my feet. Glancing around the navy blue painted bedroom, I take a second to remember where Leo keeps everything.

His double bed is to my left, the television on the wall to my right, angled perfectly for when we relax on the couch. Leo's closet is straight ahead, and I'm sure that's where I left it.

"You don't—"

"Shut the fuck up, Jagger," I interrupt, not wanting to hear his excuses as I rush across the room in my heels, swinging the closet doors open to reveal Leo's chaotic mess.

Clothes are thrown everywhere, but the neat stack of boxes at the bottom left is a beacon, and I relax a little when I spot the green medical kit sitting on top from the last time I had to use it.

Grabbing the supplies, I hear the bedroom door reopen, and when I step back out I find all four of my best friends in one spot.

H.O.T.

It should be illegal.

They treat me like a goddamn queen, even if they're assholes at the same time, but rightfully so; it makes them my kings. Always.

"Lou-Lou with the box of magic, do your thing. I have another idiot," Ezra calls out, his brown curly hair bouncing as he looks over his shoulder at me with a wink, his glasses framing his face, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip as his crooked grin melts my soul.

It definitely helps that he's *finally* started to call me Lou-Lou, unlike these other assholes, and that definitely makes him today's favorite.

Moving toward them, I understand what he means when I spy Jameson now in my spot beside Jagger with his hands in the same state as his brother's.

Side by side they're almost too similar, brown hair, brown eyes, chiseled jaws, and wide shoulders, making them every girl's wet dream. Especially at high school, everyone wants a piece of them, even trying to befriend *me* to get closer to *them*.

But I see the differences. Jagger's hair is longer, to his chin with a slight wave to it, while Jameson always keeps it above his ears and styled. Jameson also has a tiny red mark in his left iris that I've never seen on another soul, not even Jagger's, and I swear it looks like a tiny heart.

"Someone better explain to me what the hell has been going on," I grumble, opening the med kit on the bed as Leo walks back in.

“Everyone’s gone,” he murmurs, dropping down on the bed in front of me, and I mutter my thanks.

No one answers me, refusing to offer any details in regards to the two-cavemen-with-bloody-knuckles situation.

Taking a deep breath, I sigh, pulling my shoulders back, and place my hands on my hips as I turn to glare at the bloodied twins sitting casually on the couch.

“Answers,” I say firmly, giving them both my best don’t fuck with me face. My eyes narrowed, lips pinched and a raised eyebrow, but they both stare at me blankly, frustrating the hell out of me. “Listen, assholes, I was about to get drunk with Leo and find me a yummy piece of man meat to finally get hot and heavy with. Now, I’m giving all of that up to tend to your stupid fucking knuckles, so at the very least, you could explain what the hell happened.”

I sound like a demanding brat, I know, and I’m definitely letting that little tidbit of information slip in hopes of making them jealous. I’m instantly rewarded with anger burning in both of their eyes, offering me a hint of satisfaction.

They might be my guys, but they’re not *my* guys. Not how I want them, and I’m done sitting around waiting to explore my sexuality like every other teenager in this town seems to be doing.

“No one is fucking touching you,” Jameson growls, his voice like venom.

“I know and I’m trying to rectify that, numb nuts,” I sass back, turning to grab the rubbing alcohol and gauze as I ignore what he actually meant by ‘no one touching me’.

“Like fuck you are,” Ezra says quietly, which catches me off guard, and I chance a peek over my shoulder in his direction to see his hands clenched at his side and his eyebrows scrunched together.

He’s the same age as the twins, a whole year older than me. He doesn’t usually think he can boss me around, so I don’t know why he’s trying now. It’s not his usual character.

“Don’t tell her what to do, Ezra, we all know it pushes her to do the complete opposite because she’s, and I quote, ‘a boss-ass bitch’,” Leo says with a grin, and I frown.

What the hell?

When the fuck have they talked about this?

“It does not,” I quickly respond, knowing full well I’m full of shit.

Jagger scoffs. “Luella, I beat the fuck out of some punk tonight who thought he had a chance with you,” he bites out, his eyes swirling with something I hadn’t noticed there before, and my jaw hits the floor in surprise. “What makes you think I’m going to let you get wasted and go looking for dick when there are four right here in this room?”

My mouth goes dry as my eyes remain locked on his, completely shocked at his words, but a shiver runs through my body just like I expect.

I’ve flirted around with him for years, all of them actually. It’s natural between us, but no one has ever taken it further with me, and I’ve had enough of waiting around.

Throwing the rubbing alcohol and gauze into Jagger’s lap, I clench my hands at my sides.

“That’s not for you to decide. Everyone in my class is doing it, talking about sex like the devil himself licked their tight cunts, and I’m up here dry as hell. I want to experience it, Jagger. Me. It’s my choice,” I rant, my face getting redder with frustration with every word that passes my lips as I jab my finger in his direction.

Silence descends over the room, and I feel four sets of eyes glaring holes into my head, but I hold my ground and say nothing.

This isn’t the first time I’ve had an outburst about still being a virgin. I’m usually shut down with some crap about my age, but I’ve never complained in front of all four of them before.

When no one responds to me, I sigh in frustration, swiping a hand through my hair.

“Well then. If that’s all, you can take care of your own fucking wounds tonight, I’m going home,” I declare, glancing at Jameson out of the corner of my eye who continues to stare at me in a state of shock.

I turn for the door, avoiding Ezra and Leo’s gaze in fear of pity or rejection. Putting one foot in front of the other, I don’t even complete one step, when an arm bands around my waist and I’m pulled back against a solid chest, making me gasp in surprise.

The smell of leather immediately tells me it’s Jagger. My body is desperate to fall back into his touch, but I mentally fight against it, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of being able to read my body.

Remaining still in Jagger’s arms, I watch as Ezra rakes his teeth over his bottom lip, Leo swipes a hand over his mouth, while Jameson adjusts his cock, and I shiver at the bulge at my back too.

They’re all as affected as I am, but they’re not willing to do anything about it. Otherwise they would have by now.

My body tingles from head to toe in anticipation as each second goes by. Waiting to see what’ll happen next. Waiting for their next move or if they’re just fucking with me. The silence is its own version of foreplay. And I am *all* for it.

Jagger’s breath blows against my ear as he adjusts his hold on me slightly, his voice barely above a whisper as he finally breaks the silence. “I think it’s about time we gave our Luella exactly what she wants, boys.”

My heart pounds in my chest, my neck tilting slightly as his words dance along my skin and hit me in my core. For far too long I’ve dreamed about them touching me, the way I touch and explore myself. But I know I’ll fall apart at their hands easier than my own; I crave it so much.

“For once, I’d have to agree with Jagger,” I murmur, wetting my lips as I try to keep my eyes focused on the other

guys, but I'm needy for it all now. "Just don't get used to it."

"I one hundred percent approve," Leo says from the bed, wagging his eyebrows, and I grin.

"She has a lot of firsts we've been holding out on," Jameson says, his voice huskier than usual, and I squeeze my thighs together.

"You can take them," I reply as Ezra takes a step closer, coming to stand in front of me as I remain happily in Jagger's arms.

"Are you sure about that?" he asks, and I nod eagerly before he even finishes speaking. His gray eyes dance with excitement probably just as much as mine, but he keeps his face relaxed.

"I just want to orgasm from someone else's touch instead of my own," I admit, and I hear Jameson groan behind me on the couch. Leaning back against Jagger, I feel like the room is getting smaller, they're all getting closer without moving somehow.

"Luella, if we're doing this, we're doing it by my rules," Jagger orders, and I can't even complain. The fact he's agreeing is enough for me to shut my mouth and not argue. Only on this occasion.

"Whatever you say."

Leo's face lights up with enthusiasm, his hands rubbing together before he rushes into his closet, emerging moments later with a scarf in his hands, and my pulse quickens.

"She doesn't need her beautiful blue eyes to come, right?" Leo says with a quirk of his eyebrow as he keeps his gaze focused on mine, and the others chuckle in response.

"Ella does *not* need to know who is touching her, I agree with that," Jameson adds, suddenly appearing at my side, moving in closer and planting a firm kiss against my neck, and I bite back a moan.

Fuck. I'm in trouble if a little touch like that feels so good, I might not survive the night. The thought of not knowing who

is where only seems to heighten my desire.

“Now that’s an idea I can get on board with,” Jagger mutters against my ear, and I smirk, stroking a hand over his denim-clad crotch. The hiss that passes his lips is unmistakable, but I only manage to feel his bulge for a split second before he starts moving. Lifting me off the ground slightly before carrying me the short distance to the bed.

Without care, he grabs my waist, spinning me around, and tossing me onto Leo’s bed before I can reach for him again, and a squeal falls from my lips.

I bounce a couple of times, until I steady myself on my elbows. The thin strap of my hot pink dress has slipped off my left shoulder, and even that little adjustment makes me feel hot as hell, brazen to see where this will lead. Especially since I feel the guys track the movement too.

All four of them inch closer to me on the bed, and my body heats under their gaze.

“Get a good look, Ella, it’s about to get dark,” Jameson murmurs to my right as Leo crawls onto the bed beside me with the scarf in his hands.

“Last chance to back out. We’ve dreamed about this for a long time, so you won’t hear a no from us,” Leo adds, Ezra nodding to my left, and my pulse pounds in my ears as I finally hear them say those words out loud.

It isn’t just me, it’s never been just me thinking this all along. They need me like I need them. Knowing they feel the same way has me rubbing my thighs together again with urgency.

“I want this too,” I say clearly, meaning every word, and that seals the deal, giving Leo the confirmation he needs to wrap the navy, woven scarf around my eyes, and my vision is instantly gone.

My body tingles with anticipation as Leo secures the blindfold, while someone else’s hand pushes against my chest, encouraging me to lie down, and I go willingly.

I lay still for what feels like an eternity, completely untouched and desperate for their attention as my breathing grows heavier, while I hear them murmuring quietly between them.

It's on the tip of my tongue to call them out for toying with me, when light rock music starts playing quietly in the room, and I feel a hand slowly stroke up the inside of my thigh. I gasp at the touch of their callous fingers, and I try to guess who it could be, but I have no clue.

Another hand strokes up the inside of my right arm, while another caresses over my collarbone, making my nipples scream to be touched too, as I can tell it's not the same person. But my whole world lights up when I feel the bed dip behind me, and lips press against mine. Upside down; spiderman style.

Holy fuck.

My mind spins with all the sensations. I've wanted this for so long, and the soft, plump lips against my own only make it real as they adjust to kiss me properly and our noses brush lightly.

Moving my hands to try and cup their face, I'm instantly stopped in my tracks by hands grabbing my wrists, pinning them down on the bed, and I groan into my kisser's mouth.

Trying to focus my sense on touch, I struggle, especially since I strain to hear if any of them speak, revealing who is where, but as my kisser's tongue caresses my bottom lip, all is forgotten.

I swipe my tongue along theirs, dancing with them as the hand on my thigh reaches my core, and I hear a hiss when they realize I have no panties on.

"Fuck," they bite out, barely a whisper, and with the music it's too hard to tell who said it.

I feel their touch tease along my folds, circling my clit before dragging back down my pussy like a pro, and my back arches.

“Please,” I beg, not really knowing what I’m asking for, but it does the trick, kicking everyone into action.

The low neckline of my dress is pulled down, revealing my small breasts, and I groan with delight as someone catches my nipple in their mouth, sucking and swirling with their tongue.

I can feel hands all over me as my own wrists are released, but I *still* can’t figure out who is where from touch alone as my senses are overloaded, and my fingers grip the sheets at my side.

A finger teases at my entrance as a tongue brushes against my clit, and I cry out, desperate for more. I’ve already learned how sensitive my clit is from my own exploration, having the ability to come easily, but under someone else’s touch, *their* touch, I know it will be even quicker.

Curling my fingers into the t-shirt of my kisser, I pour all my passion into their lips as my hips move in time with the onslaught of my pussy.

“Look at her, a fucking vixen.” I hear Leo comment, and at this point, I couldn’t give a fuck where he is in all of this, because those words only add to my excitement.

The fingers at my core increase their pace, swirling around the tight opening of my pussy as someone’s tongue laps at my clit. The telltale sign of my orgasm rising starts in my toes, making my legs tense and my hips rise up off the bed as my back arches, and ecstasy floods my veins.

“Fuckkkk,” I groan, riding wave after wave of my orgasm as they simultaneously moan along with me as they watch me fall apart. I shiver under their touch. Feeling someone lick every drop of evidence from my pussy heats my body even more, and knowing I just experienced a few firsts all at once, makes me want to feel the ultimate prize.

I want to be kissed.

I want to be ravished.

I want to orgasm.

I want to be stretched out by someone’s cock.

And I want it now.

“I need to feel someone’s thick cock stretching me out so bad.”

At my words, everyone removes themselves from my body, and I almost pull the scarf from my face to see what’s going on until I feel movement on the bed around me, and fingers running through my hair.

“It’s going to hurt at first, Lucy,” Leo says, and I think he’s at my right, but I could be wrong. “But I promise you, we’re going to ease the pain as much as possible. And come tomorrow or the day after, you’ll be ready to go again, and we’re going to be right back here showing you just how good it is, okay?”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I nod, my legs parting of their own accord as lips press against my forehead. My dress long forgotten.

My clit pulses with excitement as hands touch my thighs again, they feel different this time, not as rough, but they tease me just the same. A shiver shoots down my spine as they brush their thumb over my clit, before something thick and long nudges against my entrance.

Holy shit.

This is actually happening.

And not only is it happening, it’s happening with the four people I care most about in this world. I never wanted anyone else to take this first from me but them. I just never believed it would happen, but now here I am.

Lips and hands touch me everywhere. My neck, my breasts, my arms, my stomach. Each touch trying to distract me from the bite I know will come; the one all the girls talk about.

Someone continues to brush their thumb over my clit as if they know it’s my magic button, and just as they push inside of me, I fall apart from their teasing, orgasming for the second time as a sting burns inside my pussy at the same time.

“Ahhh,” I cry out, a mixture of pleasure and pain as I writhe beneath them. My climax pulses through my veins as their cock sits deep inside of me, and I want to cry with how full and happy I am at this moment. “Please move,” I beg, feeling tears prick against my eyelids as hands grip my hips.

Slowly, they pull out almost all of the way, before slowly thrusting back inside my core. I can feel every inch of their cock inside of me, and as much as it burns, it feels like heaven being this close to one of them.

Tongues swirl my nipples as someone brings their lips to mine, and I sob at the overwhelming emotion coursing through my body. I try to plant my feet on the bed, but I still have my heels on which makes it impossible.

“Faster, please. Fuck, move faster,” I breathe out against the lips touching mine, but whoever is between my thighs hears me loud and clear, picking their pace up immediately.

Everything becomes a blur as my body melts into the bed, shivering under every touch I feel, and when someone sucks on my clit as another fucks me hard and fast with their cock, I find myself falling off the cliff once more.

They said it wasn't possible. The girls said no one orgasms the first time, but they've clearly never had these four take care of them like I have.

My mouth forms the perfect O as a silent cry stretches my lips, and the cock inside of me pulses too. My tired and weak body sags into the mattress as loving touches caress my body.

“So fucking beautiful, Lou-Lou,” Ezra murmurs from somewhere in the room, as I whimper at the emptiness I feel when their cock is removed from between my legs.

“You're our little beauty now, Ella,” Jameson adds, before I feel lips kiss my cheek.

“Beyond addicting, Lucy,” Leo says as a hand cups my cheek, and I lean into his touch.

“These are the only people I'm willing to share you with, Luella, and that's because they're my damn brothers. You're mine,” Jagger grunts, and I smile at his words.

This is all I have ever wanted them to say, and it feels like a dream.

The scarf is removed from my eyes, but it takes me a moment to blink them open, and when I do, I find all four of my guys staring down at me in admiration. Leo and Ezra to my left, and the twins to my right.

It's on the tip of my tongue to scream *I love you* at the top of my lungs, ready to figure out how to bring them all to orgasm too, but the moment is shattered when I hear my brother's voice call out my name from downstairs.

"Lou-Lou, where the fuck are you? It's urgent!" he hollers, and I gape down at myself in fear.

If he comes up here right now, World War III will break out.

My panicked gaze moves to Jagger's, who rolls his eyes in response.

"I'll hold him off for two minutes, you've got that long to get your fucking ass down the stairs," he grunts, and I nod like a fool.

It's not that they hate my brother or he hates them, but the whole town is scared of both sets of gangs they fall into, so neither one of them ever wants to back down.

Jagger rushes from the room, his heated gaze focused between my thighs for a moment before he leaves, and Ezra offers his hand for me to take.

I want to cry and plead to remain where I am, drifting on what feels like a cloud as I come down from the experience of my life, but two minutes really isn't all that long.

Lacing my fingers with his, I let him help me up and on to my feet, my chest pressed against his as he holds me close. I look up into his gray eyes to find him staring down at me lovingly as someone tries to straighten my messy hair.

"You're going to need these, Luce," Leo murmurs. I glance to my right to find him offering me a pair of black boxer shorts, and I frown in confusion until he hints at the bed.

A quick glance to my left reveals the red patches of blood, a reminder that my virginity is gone, and I smile as I take the shorts from him. They all give me space as I slip them on, before pulling the dress back up over my breasts and straps to the middle of my shoulders.

“If you keep grinning like that, Ella, your brother’s going to know exactly what happened up here,” Jameson says with a grin, which I return.

“What? That I had my world rocked? Ask me if I give a shit,” I respond with a wink, heading for the door slowly as the dull ache between my legs slows my movement.

“Hurry down there, see what he wants and get your pretty ass back on that bed,” Jameson adds with a grin, and I shake my head.

I waltz out of the door and rush down the stairs in a blur. As much as I’m grateful for the two-minute reprieve Jagger offered me, him and my brother together are the worst. Especially when my brother is seven years older than me. It just seems to make Jagger stand taller and be more of an asshole when my brother tries to throw orders around.

Spying the front door still open, I step outside to find my brother pacing up and down the path in agitation, while Jagger stands firmly in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest.

“Fuck, there you are,” my brother, David, grunts, marching toward me and grabbing my wrist before I can even respond. “Where the fuck have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

I frown up at him as he pulls me down the path, and I go willingly, although I glance over my shoulder longingly to see Jagger still in his spot, a frown etched on his face. Only the lights from the house lighting up the dark night.

I really want to stay the night, bask in this new stage in our relationship, but that’s out of the window now.

“I’ve been here the whole time, like I always am,” I bite back in annoyance as he opens the car door to his Chevy, and I

sink into the passenger seat with a huff before putting my seatbelt on.

He rounds the car quickly, slamming his car door shut as he gets behind the wheel and peels away from the curb.

“David, what the fuck is going on?” I ask in confusion, and he shakes his head. His reaction is borderline manic.

“It’s all a mess, Lou-Lou. A big fucking mess, we have to leave,” he says, swiping a hand down his face as I watch him pull onto the quiet highway, and my frown deepens.

“What the hell does that mean?” I ask, panicked. We live in the complete opposite direction of where we are heading.

Whatever’s going on, it can’t be good, because my brother is never like this.

His short blond hair looks like he’s not stopped raking his fingers through it for hours, the dark bags under his eyes worse than usual.

“We’re getting away for a while. Dad is meeting us there.”

Wait, what?

I can feel his panic, and I quickly search for my phone, wanting to call the guys, and my heart stops as I realize my purse is still in Leo’s room. Fuck.

“David, turn around. I need to get my bag from Leo’s,” I say, but he’s shaking his head.

“There’s no time,” he answers, and I shake my head.

“David, you need to explain what the fuck is going on. I’m not leaving this town, it’s my home. My friends are here, my phone is back at Leo’s house. You can’t just stroll in and take —”

“Can you shut up for one minute and let me explain? She’s gone, Lou-Lou. Mom is gone.”

What he says hits me like a ton of bricks as I slump down in my seat at a loss for words. My whole body goes numb as I refuse to comprehend what he means.

I get lost in my mind, so many questions on the tip of my tongue and not one of them passes my lips as I scramble to understand what is going on with my life. My mom has always been hit and miss, she comes and goes from our life whenever the drugs get the better of her. I can only hope that's what's happened again, and she's not actually, *gone*, gone.

I can see David's mouth still moving, but I don't hear any of his words, it's all just white noise.

My day just went from experiencing the happiest moment of my life to another trip down the worst fucking lane, all in a matter of minutes. My phone and belongings are still with the guys as I sit here helplessly.

All I can think about is the parting gift I'm left with, the ache between my thighs and a hole in my chest, while all they have left are the stains of my virginity on Leo's bedsheets.

"You're going to have to get fucking used to it. It's me and you now, whether you like it or not," he continues.

I place my head in my hands as those words wash over me like a bucket of ice cold water.

This isn't the end.

It can't be.

LOU-LOU

TWO AND A HALF YEARS LATER



I *'m so fucking tired.*

Spending the weekend with my closest friend, Eden, and her handful of crazy ass guys down in Knight's Creek for her birthday weekend started out fun, but damn, that girl has more drama than the Jerry Springer show. We couldn't even party for more than ten minutes before someone tried to spike her drink.

She needs to catch a break, just being in the vicinity of it all has me ready to pass out from mental exhaustion, so I can't imagine how *she* must feel. I mean, it's probably worth it for all that dick on demand, but still. Jerry. Springer.

It's late, I didn't really want to leave after we spent today relaxing by the river near her house, but I have my own shit to deal with. I glance at the time to see it's almost ten in the evening. I need food, then sleep.

I look in my rearview mirror again and mentally sigh. I see my house up ahead, and I can't decide if I should pull into my driveway or not... because I'm being followed. I noticed the same truck behind me that's been there since I left Knight's Creek hours ago, but I wanted to see how it played out, kind of hoping it was all in my head.

This fucker probably thinks I haven't noticed, but I've had my eyes on him since I crossed town lines, watching as his blue Ford truck followed my every turn.

Fuck it.

Pulling up outside the single story house I loosely call *home* with my brother, I park the Mustang on the street, tapping my fingers nervously on the steering wheel as I watch the truck pull up behind me. It's eerily quiet outside, which is surprising for this neighborhood, but it'll most likely come alive again in the next couple of hours. Even if tomorrow is a school day.

With a sigh, I swing my door open, and climb out, wasting no time as I head straight in the direction of the truck parked behind me, and as I near, I recognize the culprit instantly.

Ryan Carter.

He showed up with my friend Eden's SUV all fixed yesterday, and I recognized his face when I was watching them through the window. My brother mentioned him once, showing me a picture of some guy as he talked with Dad, and it's simply because we have the same last name that it stuck in my brain. I thought it was a coincidence at the time, but now I'm beginning to wonder if it's not.

Before I can tap on his window and ask him what the fuck he's doing at my house, his door swings open, and he climbs from the truck casually as if he is an expected guest.

"I didn't need a private escort all the way home," I state, folding my arms across my chest as the street lights illuminate the otherwise dark sky, but I see the quirk to his eyebrow as he grins down at me.

His short brown hair is swept to the side, his blue eyes shining with a hint of uncertainty as he tucks his hands in his pocket.

"Thank fuck for that because I wasn't offering you one." He shrugs before walking past me, and up the path to my house. "So, where's David?" he asks over his shoulder, and I frown in confusion.

Why the hell is he asking about my older brother?

As if hearing his name, my brother appears at the front door. His blond hair sticks up in every direction, a telltale sign he was napping, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, and

his chest tattoos on display. He looks like a fool. I really wish he wouldn't wear gray sweatpants too, he ruins the whole visual for me.

They talk quietly among themselves for a few moments, and I can't hear a word from where I'm standing, so I finally kick myself into motion and move to join them.

"What's going on?" I ask, seeing the seriousness on both of their faces as I get closer, and to my surprise, it's Ryan who swipes a hand down his face and looks in my direction first.

"You're my cousins."

Umm, what? I try to decipher how I feel about that, but I'm not a fan of surprises because in my experience, they always fucking end badly.

My eyes widen but I say nothing, waiting for him to explain why being related seems to matter. "After you mentioned you knew my name I panicked, no one knows my name anymore, and that's how I like it. Turns out your father's brother was my father."

"Oh," I say in response, a little stunned to learn my father had a brother, but the way he says *was* tells me he's no longer with us, and that makes me feel awkward as hell.

Another layer of secrecy from this shitty family. Excellent.

I bounce on my toes, stuffing my hands into the pockets of my denim shorts as I look between the pair of them. Something else is clearly going on, and one of them will start talking eventually. Otherwise, why would Ryan have followed me here?

David puffs on his cigarette casually, without a care in the world, which seems to annoy Ryan as he clenches and unclenches his hands at his sides.

"There are things about our family lineage I would prefer you never having to worry about. I want a better life for you, a better future, and I want to help make it happen," he states, only looking at me, like my brother doesn't get the same sentiment, and my mouth dries.

Well that's fucking ominous and super vague, but I'm interested to hear more about making my situation *better* because right now? It's not all that peachy.

My life is... sad.

It's been this way since we moved to White River two and a half years ago.

It was never what I wanted, but all that I was stuck with.

"How could *you* help *me* have a better future?" I ask, and David scoffs, flicking his cigarette onto the path before turning on his heel and walking inside.

I raise my eyebrow expectantly at Ryan, hoping for an explanation as to why my question seemed to upset my brother so much, but he waves a hand in his direction dismissively.

My relationship with my brother is strained to say the least, so I'm not about to go chasing after him to make him feel better to ease his bruised ego. Dick.

"I want to set you up at a decent college, without ties to me or your brother. Drama free. A complete fresh start, and your brother said he might have somewhere you would appreciate," he offers, a soft smile on his lips.

I fold my arms over my chest as I stare him down, my heart quickening in my chest. "And this is because you don't want me to understand the truth about our family?" I ask for clarification, and he squeezes the back of his neck.

"More along the lines of not wanting you to be dragged into a world *nobody* wants to be a part of," he reiterates, and I nod like I know what the fuck he means.

Glancing around the rough neighborhood we live in, I tuck a loose tendril of hair behind my ear as I exhale. I hate it here, it's no secret. The only thing that brightened my days was being friends with Eden, but she's gone now too, living her life in Knight's Creek.

What's left for me here anyway? My brother? Fuck, he's not enough to make me stay. And my father? He's just as fucking useless.

I turn back to face Ryan who looks at me expectantly, and I tighten my arms across my chest. “Wave your magic fucking wand then, fairy godmother. I want out of here.”

LOU-LOU

PRESENT DAY



The air-conditioner blasts in my face as I watch the world go by through the car window.

I'm nervous.

I'm *never* fucking nervous about anything. Or I haven't been in a very long time, and I don't like the feeling.

Wiping my sweaty palms on my denim skirt, I take another deep breath, but it does nothing to calm me down. I glance to my left to find Ryan watching me from the corner of his eye, and I sigh. It feels like he's waiting for me to have a breakdown.

I don't really know what's going on with my life right now, but what I do know is that everything is a fucking mess. Which is why I'm here, traveling hundreds of miles in the opposite direction of my friends and family. I agreed to make the move, but having spent the summer with my friends in Knight's Creek, I feel a tad more heavy hearted, even though I still stand by my decision.

Apparently, we're related. Carter isn't just a common last name. It means something, the blood between us.

That bloodline connection led to a lot of talks between Ryan and David, some of which got far too heated for me to get involved in, then suddenly I'm being told favors have been called in and I'm being relocated to a place they both agreed on.

I steeple my fingers on the armrest in frustration. Apparently the fact I'm an eighteen-year-old, grown ass adult, doesn't give me the right to know what the issue is, but I go along with them anyway because why the fuck not?

It's a new beginning, I tell myself, trying to make the words stick.

And I fucking need one of those.

"How you doing?" Ryan asks, glancing at me quickly before turning his gaze to the road ahead, and I hum in response.

"I'm fine." I fold my arms across my chest, my cropped top rising slightly as I take a deep breath again.

"I thought you were happy to have a fresh start?"

I turn to face him, watching as he grips the steering wheel and shifts uncomfortably.

"I am. I mean, I'm going to miss my friends, but David promised I won't have to move because *he* says so ever again, and I'm holding him to it."

I remember the last time I was carted across the country, and the ache still resonates in my chest to this day. But I shake my head, needing a distraction so I don't go down *that* damn rabbit hole again.

"Emerson U has a reputation as a great university. The graduates from there are highly sought after. Did you decide what you were going to major in?" Ryan asks, changing the subject, and I accept the change willingly.

"I've decided to major in Psychology, and minor in Political Science," I say, loving the way the words roll off my tongue so easily.

I've always wanted this. As much as I'm a badass bitch from the wrong side of town, I've always dreamed of being a badass bitch in the courtroom. I've seen so much shit in my life already, my family predominantly being on the wrong side of the law on far too many occasions, and I want to support the children caught in the middle of it.

It was always a dream, a wish, far out of reach, until Ryan stepped in.

Ryan nods, a soft smile on his lips as he focuses on the road ahead, and I get lost in my head again.

Emerson U is located in Emerson Grove, Michigan.

We drove to the airport, hopped on a plane, and now this crazy man insists on driving me to the damn house as well.

It's kind of... nice? I haven't had someone look after me in a long time.

This is where my future lies, and as much as I'll miss the few people I'm close to, I'm excited.

All David and Ryan have said is that they're saving me from a path worse than hell itself, and although their reasoning is vague as fuck, I'm willing to believe them.

I've felt nothing but numb ever since that fateful night three years ago, so anything will be better than that. My life isn't what I want it to be, and *definitely not* what I chose, so why not make a change? I'll be Lou-Lou Carter, version 3.0.

Silence descends over the SUV, but it's comfortable, neither of us liking small talk, which is seemingly a family trait because my brother and father are the same. Ryan's dad was apparently my uncle, but he passed away a long time ago.

Another tangle in the web of my life.

Have fun, be fun, create chaos.

I repeat my long standing mantra in my mind like I always do when I want to pull myself out of a funk, and it works a little.

I had a fun summer with my friends, Eden and Charlie, after finishing school in Knight's Creek, along with their boyfriends, but it felt like a piece of me was missing the whole time. I slipped my body under far too many guys trying to fill an emotional and physical void I knew was irreparable, but I didn't give up trying at least.

Even this morning I woke up hungover in some guy's bed, and I cringe at the memory. I was supposed to leave Knight's Creek bright and early with Ryan this morning, but that clearly didn't happen since I kept everyone waiting.

Thank god he has a private plane.

No one said a word about my behavior, it's like they know I'm barely holding on by a fucking thread, a ticking time bomb, and they're all treading carefully around me. Ryan and his wife Bethany. Eden, Charlie, everyone.

I hate being *that* girl, the one who causes people to walk on eggshells because they think I'm fragile, but here I am doing exactly that. It's definitely not helping my state-of-mind right now either.

I shift in my seat, grabbing my bottle of water as I spy the Emerson Grove town sign up ahead, and anticipation floods my body.

"Excited?" Ryan asks, hope in his eyes, and I shrug.

"Ecstatic," I respond, keeping my voice flat, and he rolls his eyes at me.

"Sarcastic much?" he grunts, and I smirk in his direction as I tuck my water back in my bag.

"Who, me? I would never," I state all doe-eyed and innocent, batting my eyelashes at him, but he sees right through it.

"Your brother said you'd be more than happy to be here since you didn't quite enjoy the town you were living in," Ryan murmurs, a hint of confusion in his voice as the navigation system announces we're five minutes away from our final destination.

Emerson U. Fuck.

"Funny he said that to you because he hasn't uttered a word to me about where I'm going at all," I say with a huff, swiping my hair back off my face as I watch the town fly by outside. It seems a mixture of quaint, quiet town meets

university central, and I'm sure I can find my place among it all. I can feel it.

"Wait, you don't know where you're staying?" he questions, and I shake my head, not bothering to turn to see if he saw my response.

I press the button to lower the window, enjoying the fresh air while loving the feel of the wind blowing my hair around my face. "Nope."

Ryan curses under his breath, another mouthful of crass words toward my brother, and I don't correct him. I can't when I agree with every single one of them. "Stupid fucktard," he murmurs under his breath, and I cover my mouth to hide my smile.

I loved my brother with all my heart once upon a time, but I blame him for my life being ruined years ago, and he knows it. He ran when shit exploded with my parents, my mom went off the rails with drugs like I'd first assumed, and my father wound up in prison that fateful night for some shit he's still serving time for.

Embarrassing.

"I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat, Lou-Lou."

Motherfucker.

I see the Emerson U campus up ahead, but Ryan takes a left two blocks before we reach the school, driving onto a street full of suburban houses. I panic for a moment, worrying I've been blindly entered into a sorority or something as they line the road to the right, but he thankfully keeps driving.

We pass a sorority house as they wash the cars parked out front, in their barely there bikinis. That is not for me. No thanks.

This is better than the dorms though. I thought I was going to find myself cooped up in a janitor's closet by myself. I would have taken it, but I can work with this, as long as I don't have to share an actual bedroom. That was the only stipulation I gave my brother. Other than that, I've not asked

for any further details on my living situation because I'd still be coming here anyway.

“Do you want to call David and get some answers before I pull in?” Ryan asks, slowing the SUV to a stop, and I glance at him out of the corner of my eye in confusion.

What the fuck is going on?

“And why would I need to do that?” I ask, pulling my phone from my bag at the same time, and he rubs the back of his neck nervously.

A quick glance at my phone shows me a text message from David, and I click on it.

David the Dickhead: You're welcome.

I'm welcome? What the fuck does that mean? He hasn't given me any reason lately that warrants a *thank you*.

The SUV comes to a stop, and I look at Ryan for an explanation, but the asshole is jumping out of the vehicle and lifting his phone to his ear before I can say a word.

Excellent.

I reluctantly grab my bag by my feet, lifting it over my shoulder before I climb down from the rented SUV. I shiver, feeling the chill in the air instantly as I look at the houses around me.

They're fucking huge.

Real suburban houses on steroids, that probably have games rooms and dens and shit. All cute with freshly cut lawns and perfectly painted exteriors, some even have a white picket fence.

This isn't how I grew up. Far from it. Nowhere I've lived has looked quite like this.

I turn my attention to the house we've parked directly in front of, and my eyes widen.

At the end of the long driveway stands a house that anyone would spend their childhood wishing for. A pale-blue three-story house, complete with a white front door, bay windows, large garage, and wraparound porch stand in front of me on a huge lot of land.

Excitement pools in my stomach. This, I could get used to this. This is the kind of house I dreamed of when I was little as I sat in my one story, trashy, olive green shit hole with a tiny ass yard.

None of that matters now. The past is the past, and when I step through the doors I'm currently staring at, I'll be firmly in the future.

“David, I swear to fucking God, you fucking cunt,” Ryan growls, catching my attention, and I glance in his direction, but he's got his back to me. His body is stiff as he rubs the back of his neck.

Rounding the SUV, I move toward Ryan, pointing a finger over my shoulder at the house to confirm it's the right place, and he nods. His main focus is still on bitching my brother out, and I want no involvement. I hate family politics.

I rub my hands together nervously as I approach the white door, taking a deep breath before I knock since I have no keys, and I'm not interrupting Ryan's argument to get any.

Looking over my shoulder as I wait for someone to answer the door, I see all my things piled high in the back of the SUV. I'm going to make this place my own. Be the badass bitch I always am, and live my best life.

I hear the door creak open, so I plaster a smile on my face as I turn back to greet them, and in what feels like slow motion, the ground falls out from beneath me as I come face to face with Jameson fucking Izaro.

My smile drops instantly as my jaw hits the floor in shock, my heart pounds wildly in my chest as I stand frozen in place. The brown eyes that captivated me so long ago are glaring at me, turning darker in anger the longer we stare each other down.

“Luella Carter finally decides to grace us with her presence, how fabulous. Finished riding all the cock from Cali to Michigan, huh?” he drawls, venom lacing every syllable of his words, and I swallow past the lump forming in my throat.

God, he looks different, yet completely the same all at once, and it renders me speechless, literally and figuratively. Clearly he’s not happy to see me if the pissed off look on his face and verbal assault is any indication. His jaw is tense, his brown eyes almost black as he frowns, but staring at Jameson still makes my heart beat the same way it did three years ago. Fuck.

Whirling around to find Ryan, it’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him what the fuck is going on here, when I find him right behind me, concern in his eyes.

“Lou-Lou, are you okay?” I hear Ryan ask as he squeezes my arm in comfort, but I can’t stop myself from looking back at the man standing before me.

I never thought I’d see him again.

I don’t remember him as a boy, but fuck me, he must have been because he is all man before me now, and my body fucking knows it.

Tattoos peek out of his fitted black t-shirt paired with black jeans, stubble lines his jaw, and his brooding has definitely kicked up a notch as he fills the doorway, his hands clenched at his side.

Say something, Lou-Lou. Fucking say anything.

Clearing my throat, I wet my lips as I finally speak. “What are you doing here?” I ask, ignoring his shitty comment as my voice comes out far too meekly, and Jameson sneers at me.

Ryan moves to my side, as if to step in between us, but I shake my head. Jameson Izaro is just like his brother, filled with anger and tension, but he would never hurt me. Not physically at least, because the way he’s looking at me now is cutting me deeper than I care to admit.

Seeing them again was supposed to feel like a fairytale or some shit... not this.

“This bitch shows up to my house and questions what *I’m* doing here,” he says with a deathly laugh, and I frown. “If you plan on staying here while going to Emerson U, then you’ll have plenty to learn.” He drags his eyes over me from head to toe, and I shiver under his gaze. “Leave the cunt at the fucking door,” he adds, flicking his gaze to Ryan, before turning on his heel and heading inside.

I stand like a fool, still unmoving as Ryan clears his throat beside me. “I’m assuming that’s not the welcome we were hoping for,” he states, and I scoff.

“Are they all here?” I ask, assuming Ryan knows what I mean, since this must be why he got pissed at David.

“Yes.”

I nod to myself, trying to process what is actually happening here, but I’m too overwhelmed, shocked and confused to even comprehend it all. I don’t like being caught off-guard, and neither Ryan or David gave me a heads up on what I’d be walking into.

“They’re mad,” I state, linking all of their feelings and emotions to Jameson’s because that’s how they operate. All for one and one for all. Like the four fucking musketeers.

“It certainly looks that way,” Ryan murmurs in response. “Listen, I can turn the SUV around, Lou-Lou. If you don’t want to be here I will take you wherever you want to go, just say the word.”

I pause for a heartbeat, glancing over my shoulder at him, but there’s no real question to consider when your heart already knows the answer.

I’ll face their wrath, their everything, for all of eternity, if it allows me to be close to them again. Even for a minute. I might be able to breathe freely, like I used to. No matter how mad they are, they’re also the void my heart, mind, and soul have been craving for the last three years.

This is my home now.

Emerson U isn’t ready for me.

No one is.

LOU-LOU



I huff, panting for breath as I slam the front door shut behind me. It doesn't cause a stir or make anyone rush to help me, which only makes me huff louder in frustration.

“God damn bag of motherfucking dicks,” I mutter to myself.

All. Of. Them.

Ryan offered to help me carry everything inside, but I knew it would be best to honor Jameson's warning. As a compromise he walked my duffle bags and suitcases right to the front door and I carried them into the open foyer. It was still exhausting, making my hair stick to my face with sweat, but I powered through and I kinda enjoyed the slow burn in my muscles.

With my back leaning on the solid wood door, realization washes over me.

They are here.

Jagger, Jameson, Ezra, and Leo.

They are fucking here.

How has any of this fallen into place? I'm confused, but my heart hasn't stopped beating wildly in my chest since I arrived. I'm a mixture of emotions, but I can't seem to place them properly before another washes over me.

It's the first time in three years I've felt anything *other* than anger or sadness. The emotional roller coaster I'm on

now hasn't happened since I was last in their presence, and I'm clinging to these feelings with everything I have.

Taking in the open foyer in front of me, I find three open doorways leading off in different directions, and the staircase straight ahead. Pale shades of gray color the walls, matching the white woodwork perfectly, making the place look like something out of a Home Design magazine and *not* a bachelor pad.

How in the hell did they end up in a place like this?

I can hear murmurs coming from the room to my left, and my mouth dries as my anxiety skyrockets, making my fingers tingle. Suddenly little Miss cocky and sassy Lou-Lou Carter has forgotten her tongue.

How do I walk in there? Like no time has passed? Because it clearly has, and I've done something to piss them off. I never left of my own accord all those years ago. I didn't have a choice.

I came here for a fresh start, a drama-free life, and it looks like I'm far from meeting my goal.

Eyeing the two suitcases and four duffle bags at my feet, I sigh in resignation. I can't hide from them forever because I have no fucking clue where my room is.

As if hearing my internal monologue, someone clears their throat, and my eyes shoot up. My mouth dries as I find Ezra Campbell looking at me from the doorway leading into the room I can hear all the chatter coming from.

My hands are frozen at my sides as tears prick my eyelids. I want to run to him, wrap my arms around his neck and sob into his shoulder with relief, but just like Jameson, disapproval burns in his eyes. I wanted to do the exact same to Jameson, but they're all catching me off-guard, and agony burns through my soul that they're so distant from me.

His dark curls are shorter than they used to be, falling slightly around his face as his stunning gray eyes run up the length of me and back again. Wearing a classic band tee and a pair of shorts, he looks every inch the Ezra I would expect to

see. Except the anger mixed with sadness in his eyes. I definitely don't like that.

Screw it all to hell.

“Ez—”

“I'll show you to your room,” he mumbles, interrupting me, before turning for the stairs without a backward glance.

Forgetting all of my belongings, I follow after him without question. Desperate to be close to him, to see if he still smells the same. Like the smells that ignite the memories of going to the funfair, grass, and hope.

I don't manage to get close enough as he races up the stairs, coming to a stop at the landing. The color scheme continues up here, with six doors in total leading off in the straight hallway ahead. Ezra bypasses them all until the room at the very end, which he swings open for me, tossing something on the bed, before turning quickly, storming back out to the hallway and into the door on my right without a word or even another glance in my direction.

The slamming of his door echoes in my ears, and my heart breaks a little more with each rejection.

How are they so close, yet so far away?

Swiping my hair back off my face, I sigh, making my way to the room he opened for me, and I'm completely surprised when I step inside.

A California king bed sits in the center of the room, with a huge window to the far left corner, and access to an en-suite on the right. There's a walk-in closet directly to my left, and a vanity set up by the window. The walls are painted dusky pink and pale gray, it's absolutely beautiful.

Who decorated my room like this?

The amount of care and consideration that went into this room is more than the scathing looks I've received since I got here. First with Jameson and then with Ezra. But someone cared enough to put this together, and in the colors I always dreamed about.

I walk over to the bed, my fingers tracing the delicately patterned pink comforter as I drop down onto the ridiculously comfy mattress, flopping back dramatically as I try to soak in what's going on around me. I spot a key on the bed beside me, that must have been what Ezra threw in here before storming off.

God, this is all too much.

When we were younger, we always talked about what we wanted in the future, where we would live, what we would do for careers, the usual dreams I'm sure many other kids have. But this room is completely that; *my dream*.

I always wanted a safe haven for me. All pretty and cozy. The only thing it's missing is...

Nevermind, there they are.

My eyes water again as I spot the cute trail of fairy lights twinkling above my headboard, completing my childhood vision.

Fuck. Get a grip, Lou-Lou. You're supposed to be a badass, not a weeping bitch. I grumble to myself internally as I force myself to sit up.

I need to go and get my belongings, but I need to understand the situation a little better before I go down there and show my face. I don't know how or why there is so much anger and resentment in the air. I don't know what I could've done wrong to warrant such a raw, hostile reaction.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I unlock the screen with facial recognition, and hit my brother's number. The memory of his '*you're welcome*' text floats around in my mind, which can only relate to me being here with *them*. I deserve some fucking answers instead of being left in the dark. Typical fucking David.

It barely rings twice before his voice filters down the phone.

"Lou-Lou, are you happy or mad?" he asks cockily, and my eyes widen for a split second, caught off-guard by his casual approach, before I answer honestly.

“I don’t know.” I close my eyes for a moment, stroking a hand over my face, but nothing calms the chaos, the anger, building inside of me. “What am I doing here? And how am I with them right now, David? None of this makes any sense. They’re fucking pissed at me, and I don’t even know what I’ve done to make them feel that way.”

I hear him sigh, but I wait for him to speak, knowing full well he’ll be trying to figure out a way to explain this without me going off the rails and going bat shit crazy on him.

“Lou, they’re mad because they came looking for you a while back, and I told them you weren’t interested anymore,” he mumbles, guilt thick in his tone, and I shoot up off the bed.

“Are you fucking serious, David? Who the hell do you think you are? You are not Mom and you are not Dad. You had no fucking right to do that!” I growl, my own anger burning inside my veins as my fingers tremble with the urge to hit something or *someone*. I start to pace beside my new bed to get rid of that excess energy.

“You were seventeen for god’s sake. What did you think I was going to say? ‘Oh yeah, take a minor with you, no worries,’” he says scoffing down the line, and it gets my hackles up instantly.

“Don’t be a dick. Don’t you dare try and downplay what you did. How fucking dare you!” My hand flies around with my rage as I spit each word out, but I can’t deal with him right now. “You know what, David? You can get fucked. I want my Mustang here by the end of the week, and I don’t want to hear a fucking word from you,” I grunt, before ending the call and tossing my phone onto the bed in anger.

My hands fall to my hips as my chin hits my chest, each breath I inhale harder than the last as I try to count.

1... 2... 3... How fucking dare he... 4... 5... He had no damn right... 6... None, not a single right...

Fuck, that’s not helping me right now.

I need my headphones. I need to listen to some dance music on full blast so I can escape this fucking mess before I

have a full, epic meltdown.

How am I supposed to tell them my brother spewed a mouthful of shit that had nothing to do with me? I can't. Right now they wouldn't believe a word I'd say. And that's why I'm truly and utterly fucked.

Running my fingers through my hair, I grip the strands roughly at my scalp in frustration.

Why do other people's actions always impact my life in such a negative way?

Fuck David for ruining my life *again*, but also, fuck them for believing him too.

Why couldn't they come and find me, to hear the words pass from my lips? Because they're a bunch of fucking cowards who took the easy way out. They've refused to listen to David plenty of times in the past, why didn't they this time?

Screw that, and screw them.

"Fuckkkkkkk," I groan, pressing my fingers into my temples, trying to ease the pain forming behind my eyes.

I don't know *how* or even *if* I want to resolve this situation, but at this moment, I really do need to calm myself down. As soon as I start to feel like this, I fucking spiral. My childhood traumas of having no control over anything makes it hard to contain my anxiety when I feel like I've lost the little bit of power I had.

My headphones are downstairs in one of the bags, so I need to make quick work of getting my shit up here and sorting it out. ASAP.

With a heavy sigh, I clench and unclench my hands a few times before heading for the hallway. My door is still wide open, so anyone could have heard me, but there's no one around, and some indie rock music is blasting from Ezra's room now.

My fingers long to knock on his door, beg him to understand and let me explain, but they didn't offer me that level of respect, so they're not getting it in return from me.

I rush down the stairs, hearing all the chatter and laughter still coming from the room by the front door, but I keep my head down and my gaze on the floor. If I don't look up, it won't exist.

It takes a few minutes to get each suitcase up the stairs, but the bags are manageable two at a time. I think I'm safe and clear as I grab the final two bags, but when I turn back around to go back up the stairs for the last time, I stop in my tracks when I come face to face with Jagger.

I'm quite sure a little whimper leaves my mouth, but I can't be certain. I'm too wrapped up in his actual presence to fully control my own actions.

The sneer on his lips would make anyone else recoil, backing away from him in fear, but to me, that's almost like a smile for him.

I can't help but look him over from head to toe. Taking in his black combat boots, tight-fitted black pants, and plain black t-shirt that clings to his bulky muscles, offering a peek at his black ink. His brown hair is pulled back into a top-knot, his stubble almost passing for a beard as he frowns deeply at me.

His anger feels extreme compared to the other two. The only emotion Jagger knows how to wear is anger, and he does it perfectly.

My reaction to Jameson and Ezra used to be me bursting into tears, showing my emotion, and falling to my knees before them, but it's never been that way with Jagger. Never.

Instead, I stand taller, forcing my shoulders back as I meet his gaze head on. Jagger Izaro prays on motherfuckers who show their weakness, and today, he doesn't get to see mine.

Tightening my grip on the bags, I put one foot in front of the other to go around him, but the asshole quickly moves to block my path like a child. I can't help but grind my teeth in agitation, but I still manage to force a sickly sweet smile on my lips.

“We're not children, Jag, move out of my fucking way.”

His name tastes like heaven on my tongue, and I want to say it again and again. He moves closer, bending slightly so he's eye level with me, and I don't miss the way his eyes betray him and dip to my chest. The curves of my breast on display in my little cropped top, and my grin grows wider. I might only be rocking b-cups, but I know how to accentuate them.

"You lost me twenty bucks."

I can see the challenge in his eyes, begging me to ask what for, and as much as I don't want to give in to him, I also want to get this over with so I can shut the world out and hide in my room.

"Why?" I ask, my tone bored, and he shakes his head.

"I bet Jameson you would take one look at him at the door and hightail it in the opposite direction."

His deep brown eyes remain fixed on mine as he holds his position just a step away from me, unwavering, and I shrug.

"I don't know why you think I would do that, but I can fix you with a twenty if it'll make you feel better," I offer, watching as his jaw ticks.

He's always had a love/hate relationship with my sass, and I had forgotten how much I missed it until now. He manages to bring out that side of me every time.

"Luella, you've just stepped into the lion's den, and this is my fucking kingdom. Control your tongue or I'll cut it off," he grunts, before breezing past me and storming out of the house.

I stand frozen in place for a moment, wondering what the fuck just happened.

Cut my fucking tongue off? Is this guy for real? He doesn't scare me. None of them do.

They can be assholes all they want. Ryan promised me a fresh start and the future of my dreams in Emerson Grove, all of which I'm going to get at Emerson U, whether these fuckers like it or not.

I can pretend they're not here. I can act like they're invisible. I'll do whatever it takes while they rot in their little fucking *lion's den*.

LOU-LOU



I stop in the middle of the path, my jaw loose as people bustle around me, but I can't deny it, I'm fucking excited and in awe of this place.

Emerson U.

Standing before me is a stone arch, randomly on the outskirts of campus, with a huge emerald green Emerson University sign above it. Shrubs and bushes line the rest of the perimeter, making the arch the main entry point, even though it looks out of place, it somehow feels symbolic.

I get butterflies in my belly and a light, warm feeling in my chest as I stare my future straight in the face.

This is what I'm here for.

"I wish people wouldn't just stand in the fucking way," a female grunts, barging past me, and I shake my head.

My body instantly wants to go into fight mode and knock the bitch to the ground as she glares at me over her shoulder, but I hold it together. Simply offering her a tart smile as I flip her off. No dumb bitch is ruining my morning. Especially not when I managed to get out of the house without any awkward exchanges with the motherfuckers living there.

A part of me secretly hoped I would see at least one of them, especially Leo, since our paths haven't crossed yet, but no such luck. It was the universe's way of reminding me I didn't need any drama before I signed up for my classes.

Me, Luella motherfucking Carter, enrolling in college.

Back when we all lived in Nevada together, I was voted the most likely to end up as a high school drop out with four kids from different baby daddies and working at the local grocery store. All because we lived on the rough side of town, barely a step up from a trailer park and because of my relationship with the guys.

Fuck, I would have rocked the shit out of that life, and respect any queen who can juggle the load, but deep down, those assumptions hurt, and I'm determined to prove them wrong.

Fixing the collar on my open shirt, I lift my oversized tote over my shoulder and head for the golden arch entryway. I didn't realize the temperature change here in Michigan compared to Cali would be so drastic, so I definitely have some shopping to do, but it's thankfully warm enough for me to forgo wearing a hoodie today.

I paired my white and blue flannel shirt with a ribbed, white crop top, and a pair of ripped, high-waisted denim jeans. I wanted to look badass today, and with my heeled sneakers, hoop earrings, and beach wave hair cascading around my face, I *feel* it.

Taking my first official step onto campus, I smile to myself as I take in the environment. This must be the courtyard area. There are picnic benches, patches of grass, and decorative flowers dotted around the wide space, with academic buildings framing the outside.

Since it's enrollment day everyone seems too busy to relax, but I can already picture the stereotypical groups hanging around here during the day, and it almost feels like the movies.

There are nine multi-story dark brick buildings, the grandeur and history etched into the bricks is awe inspiring, all filled with wisdom and knowledge, ready for us to absorb it.

The cobbled path at my feet runs right through the center of the courtyard, and on the left there are tables upon tables for different clubs and student activities available.

I do not need any additional expectations thrown my way, especially when I'm attempting to juggle Psychology and Political Science. I walk through the crowd, avoiding eye contact as they seem to congregate in little groups, chatting about their shared love of whatever bullshit they've signed up for.

My stomach grumbles, and I consider looking for a cafeteria or small café first, but excitement gets the better of me.

I really should eat. I showed up yesterday evening, and with the surprise of the guys already living in my new home, and being too afraid to have another unsettling confrontation with any of them, I haven't eaten since I snacked on some salt and vinegar chips on the way from the airport.

After orientation I'll eat.

Following the registration signs that lead toward the Augustine building straight ahead, I take a deep breath as I climb the few concrete steps that lead up to the lobby.

"Good morning, welcome to Emerson University, my name is Clara, what's your name and major?"

I look to my left to find a pretty blonde looking at me with a wide smile on her lips, and I realize she's talking to me. There seem to be a few other people guiding the freshman like she is, so I take a step toward her before I respond so others can get by me.

"Hi, I'm Luella Carter, and I'm here for Psychology and Political Science," I state, pride in my tone, until she raises her eyebrows in surprise at my response, and it gets my back up instantly. "Problem?" I ask, quirked an eyebrow at her as I fold my arms over my chest, and she quickly shakes her head.

"Uh, no, no. No problem. No problem at all," she stammers, wiping her hands down her jeans as she points behind her. "If you just want to head in that direction they'll be able to get everything sorted for you."

I don't respond, but I follow her direction, glaring over my shoulder at her when I catch her staring after me. Fuck. I hate

people. It's like *Legally Blonde*, but instead of cute and excessively preppy, it's because I'm a badass with a bitchy attitude.

"Did the judgy bitch piss you off too?"

A pretty brunette appears at my side, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and her make-up totally on point.

"She did," I state, quickly glancing at her as I continue toward the table ahead where teaching assistants are helping students, and she keeps pace with me.

"She's such a dick. I told her I was doing Psychology and Journalism, and she literally scoffed at me. Clearly I'm not a scary motherfucker like you though with your whole badass bitch demeanor, because she didn't bow down to *me* when I challenged her," she says with a chuckle. Who the fuck is this girl? With her slick dark hair, amber eyes, and casual jeans and tee appearance, I can definitely agree that she doesn't have a harsh aura around her. "Anyway, I'm Naomi. Naomi Nixon."

I can feel her eyes on me expectantly, waiting for me to respond and introduce myself as I come to a stop at the table.

"Hi, I'm Terry Green, a member of the administration and student advisor team, and you are?"

"Luella Carter," I respond in answer to both of them.

From there everything becomes a whirlwind as I sign documents, confirm payment details, and practically offer Emerson U my soul for the next four years. I had to sign up for my classes with Terry's guidance so I chose: Intro to Literature, Intro to Psychology, American Government/Politics and a few others. I am officially a full-time undergrad.

It feels weird being able to hand off a credit card to arrange things, and it's all courtesy of Ryan. We argued for hours over the summer about my financial status. I wanted to apply for financial aid and student loans and he insisted he wanted to support me with everything. Mumbling something along the lines of enjoy your youth or some shit, but I eventually relented, and now he is paying for college, and sending a weekly income to my new bank account.

I feel completely overwhelmed with it all, but we've compromised even though it's not in my nature. I promised to pay him every cent back when I'm the queen of the courtroom and he agreed to the arrangement. It all sounds amazing, even if I do have to continue on to Law school in addition to getting my Bachelor's degree. It'll be worth it in the end.

Fuck, at this rate, I'll be able to pay him back with his own money. I have no need for the obscene amount of money he dropped in there yesterday, and he plans to do that weekly. At least I can buy myself winter clothing, like a thick coat and winter boots, maybe some thermals, sweaters, gloves and a hat. I'll be buying a completely new wardrobe in no time. In the previous chapter of my life, I spent so many years buying necessities from the thrift store, so I'm slightly excited to buy everything brand new.

When I finally step back out into the courtyard, I feel mentally drained, but glad everything is sorted. The crazy girl slipped out earlier when she had signed up for a few different courses than me, and I was glad to be back on my own. New people instantly make me defensive. It's my natural instinct, I don't trust people easily.

School starts on Thursday, which gives me a few more days to buy the essentials I need for my courses.

My schedule doesn't look too bad. Mondays and Tuesdays are a little hectic, but I have half-days on Wednesday and Thursday, and every Friday off.

Yes, please.

Although, I can imagine my Fridays will be spent trying to keep on top of all the assignments I'll get, but it'll be worth it.

Big picture, Lou-Lou.

No more street gangs, no more guns, no more drug dealers on every corner. Being here already smells like victory.

"So, I'll see you on Thursday then?" Naomi says as she appears at my side again, and I frown in confusion, wondering where the fuck she keeps appearing from. She's like a fucking reincarnation of Houdini.

“Apparently so,” I respond shortly, before waving her off, and heading for the archway again.

I heard a few people talking about some cool café down the road, and I’m starving, so I want to indulge in some deliciousness. But first, I’m going to drop my bag off at the house and switch it out for my little crossbody. Then I can prowl the shops while I’m there and buy a few things with my shiny new card.

Retracing my steps back to the house, I love how it feels so familiar. I was worried I’d get lost, but after crossing the road in front of campus, I walk two blocks and turn right, following the sidewalk around until the house comes into view.

The street looks even prettier in the midday sunshine. You can clearly see which houses are for the sororities or fraternities, especially the Frat Houses, but I’m excited to let loose and party at one or the other. I can cross it off my ‘never have I ever’ list. The girls’ houses are all pristine with the sound of giggling playing on repeat as you walk by, but the guys, fuck me, theirs are just empty red cups scattered around the lawn, and is that a mattress on the damn roof?

I start to slow as I approach my new home, my heart sinking as I remember the first time I showed up here yesterday. My heart went from soaring with joy to begin a new life to breaking in pain at Jameson’s reaction and rejection. Followed quickly by Ezra and Jagger who only made it worse.

Fuck.

They’re going to have to figure out a way to get over it by talking to me so we can live in harmony once they hear the truth from my lips. Or I’ll have to move to the dorms. It’s as simple as that.

I just want to be in their vicinity, however that looks. Even if they spend the entire time treating me like a pariah, I’m drawn to them. Always have been, always will be.

I’ve never touched drugs, not once, no matter how many times they’ve been offered to me at parties. I’d never needed it because the four of them were my addiction. Even when I left

Nevada and wound up in White River, I was never able to replace them by chasing another high. And I fucking tried to fill that hole with sex but it never worked.

Swiping my hair back off my face, I catch sight of a shiny black car and squeal in delight. My Mustang, my beautiful fucking Mustang.

Peering inside the window, I smile at the full detail she's gone through, and I make a mental note to thank Ryan for that too. I don't see my keys, so I can only assume they're inside the house, but I refuse to let the dread of potentially seeing them take over.

I'm driving my baby into town for some motherfucking food and shopping.

I rush up the path, saying a few Hail Mary's before trying the door handle, which thankfully swings open straight away, and I step inside. Silence surrounds me as I strain my ears to hear if someone is home and where they are so I can ask about my car keys.

Checking the key holder near the front door on the wall, I groan when I see they haven't been placed there. Fuck, I guess I really am going to have to speak to one of these assholes.

I'm going to need a minute first.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I quickly slip into my room and switch over my bags like I had planned to, before taking a deep breath.

This is going to be fine. I just need to ask nicely and not piss them off so they don't use my car against me. Threats to my Mustang are not taken kindly.

Turning around, I move to take a step toward the door, and come up short when I find Leo Cooper leaning against my door frame.

My heart skips a beat in my chest as he shifts his blond hair out of his eyes, the hem of his blue t-shirt rising as he does. Revealing his happy trail that leads under his fitted denim jeans, and my lips part. His square jaw is tense, his

cheekbones begging for me to stroke a finger along them as he glares at me.

Full house. I've come face to face with every one of them now.

Damn him and his alluring abs for tempting me.

I've finally seen them all, and every single one of them looks angry as fuck.

Is it strange to still love that about them?

They're pigheaded motherfuckers, but they stir something in my soul even to this day.

"Leo," I say, more like a whisper than the confident voice I was going for, and he raises his eyebrow at me, not uttering a word as his gray eyes swirl with emotion that I can't place.

With Jameson, I felt confused.

With Ezra, I felt lost.

With Jagger, I felt anger.

But with Leo? I feel awkward. It's a reaction I have never felt around any of them before, and it completely shatters me.

But remembering my phone call with David yesterday, I lock my emotions down.

They don't deserve to see my hurt and pain when they took David's word without questioning it or asking me themselves.

"Have you seen the keys to my car?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest as I keep my face neutral, and he pulls my keyring from his pocket, dangling them from his finger mockingly.

I take a step toward him, closing the distance without even thinking about it, but the moment I near him, he closes his fist around the keys, denying them to me.

My eyes shoot to his, and I freeze on the spot. This close to him, I can smell his spicy cologne, see the tiny scar on his right eyebrow, and his gray eyes flash with challenge.

Almost toe to toe, his six-foot height is noticeable even in my heeled sneakers. I desperately want to reach out and touch him, but I can tell that won't make the situation any better.

“After all these years, I thought I knew what I would say to you when I finally saw you again, but I'm speechless,” he breathes, and I feel myself almost swaying at the sound of his deep voice washing over me, his breath fluttering against my lips. “You show up here, not caring how things ended, with your tits out and your stomach on display, and it fucking pisses me off,” he adds gruffly, and I gape at him, shocked at his words.

I thought he was about to say something at least... nice, but fuck, apparently Jagger and Jameson's shitty attitude has rubbed off on him too. Great.

Sighing, I hold his gaze. “I don't want to argue with you, Leo. I really, *really* don't. I have missed you more than you can ever imagine, but it seems you're all happy to continue without full communication, and that's bullshit. When you're ready to act like men, and actually have a conversation with me, so we can be on the same page, let me know. I stopped handling boys a long time ago, I'm not about to start again now.”

I reach forward, grabbing his fist in my hand, and to my surprise his fingers unroll, allowing me to grab my keys quickly. My fingers still, tingling from the brief brush of his skin against mine.

My chest heaves with each breath I take as I take a step back and throw the keys in my bag, and squeeze the door handle with my other hand. I need to get a lock fitted on this door, they don't deserve access to my private space.

“Oh, I see, running again, Lucy. *You haven't changed at all,*” he murmurs, taking a step back into the hallway with a pissed look on his face.

I shake my head at his words, he really doesn't care to have a conversation like an adult. “Whatever you say, Leo,” I respond, shutting my bedroom door behind me as I follow him down the hall.

“You remind me of a saying I heard once, want to hear it?” he asks, and I recall this game well. He’s going to say it whether I like it or not, but I have a feeling it won’t be as funny as it used to be.

“Knock yourself out,” I say with a sigh as I breeze past him and head down the stairs.

“Most people don’t change, they just find better ways to lie.”

The tone of his voice is grave, pain rippling through every syllable, and it almost makes me pause midstep. But I manage to keep my head high and not react to his words.

As I reach the front door, I glance back over my shoulder to find him standing with his feet shoulder-width apart at the top of the stairs, and his arms folded across his chest.

I want to run at him, scream for him to hear my side of the story, but I have no idea what he does and doesn’t know, and it seems they’re all quite happy to keep it that way.

My stomach grumbles again, reminding me of why I’m leaving the house.

Defeat settles heavy in my soul again, and I leave, closing the door gently behind me as I wallow in frustration. My eyes fall on my Mustang, and a soft smile tempts the corner of my mouth.

At least something is going to make me happy today, I just thought it could have been him too.

LOU-LOU



The radio shuts off as I pull the Mustang to a stop in front of the house, and I frown in confusion at the people milling around outside with plastic cups in their hands. Thankfully, I can still park in my unofficial spot, but there are way more cars here than when I left.

Who the fuck are all of these people? And why are they at my house?

All I did was pop into town, I wasn't gone that long.

The house has been like a ghost town the past two nights since I saw Leo, none of them here at all, so it surprises me to see it so busy. I've been on the edge of my seat worrying over where they were, but then I remembered they chose to keep me out of the loop so I pushed through and focused on settling in.

I've had three days and two nights to figure my shit out, get over my fucking emotions, and put my big girl panties on. I need them to hear me. Whether they like it or not, now that they're here, standing right in front of me, I have *a lot* to fucking say.

Every single one of them is pigheaded as fuck, they always have been, but if anyone used to be able to get through to the foursome, it was me. I need to remember that, and so do they.

My trunk is filled with the last few items I need for classes which start tomorrow, mostly books. I'd spent the entire drive home planning out what I needed to say to the guys when I

finally saw one of them again, but now that's all gone out the window.

Running my fingers over my lips, I consider what on earth could be going on, and it dawns on me when I watch two guys carry a keg in.

They're throwing a fucking party.

I should have fucking known. It's what they're good at. Each of them offers an element to create the best damn parties in existence, and once upon a time I craved those nights, but why did they have to pick the night before school starts?

When I'm trying to be a good girl. Or, a good-*ish* girl.

Sitting out here in the car isn't going to make things any better though. With a sigh, I climb out of my car, looking up at the house as I open the trunk and grab my bags.

There's a garage attached to the house, where they must park their vehicles, but I'm left parking my Mustang on the street. Maybe I should park it in the empty driveway, that'll get their attention. They'd have to come and speak to me then.

Shaking my head at myself, annoyed with my petty thoughts, I shuffle through the few people chatting on the front lawn. The closer I get to the house, the more I notice the music blasting inside. I instantly recognize the dance track, and I know for sure that Leo is the one running the music selection right now, this is definitely his kind of jam.

My heart clenches as I acknowledge another part of them that I never forgot, but I hate how things have clearly changed in the last three years. I no longer feel as certain about what I do and don't know about them anymore. Three years is a long time and I'm not the same girl they used to know either.

I move into the foyer, and I'm surprised to see so many people in here as well. Girls with barely there outfits on, and guys chanting the football team's name and chugging beer like it's going out of style.

Fuck.

I could really do with letting loose too if I'm honest. So much for being good.

As much as I want to talk to the guys, I am totally down for having a good time and forgetting my current problems for the night, at least. They gave me the perfect opportunity to have some fun.

I don't recognize anybody here, and I glance down at my watch, even more surprised to see it's barely six in the evening, and there are this many people here already, some already fucking drunk.

It seems they didn't lose their popularity when they moved from Nevada to Michigan, even though the student body is completely different here.

I quickly step to the side as a guy comes barging toward me, trying to catch a football flying through the air, and he almost hits me, but I somehow escape before it can happen, side stepping toward the stairs.

Fuck.

If there's going to be a party, I definitely need to get on the same wavelength as these people, and quickly. Otherwise, they'll just irritate the fuck out of me in their drunken state, and it'll ruin my own vibe.

Moving for the stairs, I quickly race up them, trying to avoid as many people as possible. I stumble to a stop when I find Jameson standing by my door with his arms folded over his chest and a glare on his gorgeous face as he stares me down.

My heart races in my chest uncontrollably, and as I bite the bullet, pushing past the tension to say hi, he cuts me off.

"What the fuck is this?" he grunts, pointing at the handle on my door, and I gulp at his harsh tone, watching as his face reddens with anger. Thankfully the music isn't as loud up here so I can hear him without having to shout over the noise.

He's pointing directly at the brand new lock I had installed yesterday while they were away. I was in the angry stage of seeing them again and being ignored, and I decided to secure

my privacy so what better way to do that than by locking my door.

These raging fuckers are clearly unpredictable right now, and I am allowed to protect myself. Or that's the excuse I'm using for my petty shit.

Rolling my neck, I keep my face neutral as I meet his gaze. "What does it look like? It's a fucking lock." My sass takes over, and for a split second, I could swear a half smile ghosts his lips, but it's instantly gone.

"Who the fuck put it there?" he growls, but I roll my eyes, walking toward him as I pull the key from my purse.

"Is this my room?"

He scoffs. "*Obviously.*"

"Then it doesn't fucking matter to you, does it?" I argue back, placing the key in the lock and turning it.

"It's my name on the deed, Ella. I say what goes," he says roughly against my ear as I keep my gaze fixed ahead, but my insides melt at the use of my nickname on his lips.

That one word is like a little dab of glue, helping to piece me back together.

I want to throw my arms around his neck and plant my lips on his so we can stop arguing, but I somehow manage to refrain.

"Is there anything else, Jameson?" I ask, wetting my lips, and he doesn't respond for a moment as I feel his breath against my neck, giving me chills.

"We're not done with this," he murmurs, pointing at the lock. "But we're throwing a party, and my date will be here in a minute."

His words cut me deep, my eyes squeezing shut instantly as I inhale sharply at the knowledge another girl will be draped over him tonight.

Get a fucking grip, Lou-Lou. Don't let him see he's getting to you.

“Are we done here?” I ask as I take a deep breath, pry my eyes open and drop my bags carelessly in my room, before turning to face him.

“What’s the matter, Ella? Got something to say about my date?” he asks with a sneer as he leans on my door frame, and I blatantly take a moment to cast my eyes over him.

Standing before me in his white polo top and black fitted shorts, he looks hot as hell, especially with his hair styled to the left. But I see what he’s doing here, he’s goading me, and I refuse to let him know he’s getting to me. *Game on, asshole.*

I offer him a sweet smile as I take a step toward him, my fingers reaching up to straighten his collar, and he frowns down at me. Standing this close is intoxicating, but I’m determined to win this little game.

Toe to toe, he has a fair height advantage over me, but I wet my lips again as I look up at him through my lashes with a sparkle in my eye.

“Jameson, baby,” I start, watching as his Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, and I relish the fact I know I’m affecting him too. “You can have a date all you like, I’m not threatened. Do you want to know why?” I say huskily, and he nods ever so slightly for me to proceed. Hook. Line. Sinker.

I lean in closer, letting my hands slip slowly down his chest, and I stroke my fingers along the material over his pecs as I push my breasts into him.

Fuck, it makes me shiver too, so I don’t know if it’s riling him up as well, but I can’t stop now.

“She doesn’t know you like I do, Jameson. No girl ever will. I already know that, and when you’re finally ready to talk, you’ll remember that too,” I murmur, feeling his hands ghost my hips. It takes everything I have to take a step back from his touch, reach for the door, and slam it shut in his face.

His surprised look stays imprinted in my mind for a few moments as I stand frozen in place. I half expect him to swing it open, storm in and continue arguing with me, but after a few moments I realize he isn’t going to.

My fingers tremble as disappointment coats my skin, and I feel myself deflate a little. I quickly lock the door, my body slumping back against it as I try to catch my breath.

Fuck.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I need to get ready for this fucking party and they desperately need a reminder that Lou-Lou Carter is here.

They clearly played a part in getting me here, it isn't by coincidence so now they need to see the new, older me. I might still have the same blonde hair, blue eyes and dotted freckles over my cheeks, but it's my soul that's changed. I don't take shit from anyone, I just need to include them in that category. I have confidence, I know this, and they're going to see it too.

My clit tingles, begging for attention after being in such close contact with Jameson. My nerves are completely shot to hell.

Raking my fingers through my hair, I grip my roots in frustration, my back pressed into the wood behind me.

I need relief.

If I join the party right now like this I'm going to pounce on the first bulge I fucking see, and I am *not* embarrassing myself like that.

Not while *they're* here.

Fuck it.

Rushing to my nightstand, I quickly pull out my favorite purple toy, and slip into the bathroom, not even bothering to shut the door properly behind me.

The slate tiles lining the walls make it feel cozy in here, with the white, clawfoot bathtub in the left corner, the walk-in shower to the far right, and the vanity and toilet beside me. I switch the light to dim before turning the shower on, and unceremoniously, I stick the dildo to the shower wall.

I feel hot all over, my heart erratic as my chest heaves, and I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

Holy fuck.

I look like a damn bitch in heat.

My pupils are blown, my chest tinged pink with need, and my shoulders shake as I wet my lips.

Look at the fucking state of me. Look at what they do to me. And what do I do to them? Make them fucking scowl and be angry. It's a lie. A front. And when I'm done making myself feel better in here, I'm going to walk out there and prove them wrong.

Slipping my pale pink cami over my head, I make quick work of kicking my Vans off and stripping out of my leggings and underwear.

I contemplate putting my hair up in a bun, but I haven't got a hair tie on hand, and I have no fucking time to waste finding one either.

Stepping under the warm spray, I let the water beat down on my face as my thighs clench together. My eyes fall closed as my fingers brush over my taut nipples, and I shiver at the contact, imagining it is one of *them* instead of *me*.

The amount of times I have replayed my first time having sex in my head is too embarrassing to count, but even now, I still can't figure out who was where and who took what from me. All I know is it was the best time of my life.

I slip one hand down my stomach, between my thighs and straight to my clit as I remember how delicious Jameson just smelled when he was standing so close to me. The feel of his pees under my fingertips, his swirling dark brown eyes, right down to the muscles bulging under his polo.

Fuck.

Turning around so my back is to the wall, I swipe my hair back off my face, watching as the water cascades in front of me. I need to feel a release, and I need it now.

Lining the thick purple head with my entrance, I don't hesitate to work it deep into my pussy straight away, loving the stretch and the fullness I feel instantly.

I sigh, my lips parting as I circle my clit while slowly working my hips, teasing my core. It feels so good, and it may not be the real thing, but I'm desperate enough for it to be a suitable replacement.

Closing my eyes again, I picture the four of them. Jameson and Jagger side by side, both giving me their signature glare, but there's a loving twinkle mingled in there too. I picture them watching as I arch my back in pleasure, sandwiched between Leo and Ezra.

I imagine the toy between my legs is Leo as Ezra stretches me from behind, the two of them groping every inch of my body until I explode.

My body tingles as I remember the feeling of orgasming at their touch all that time ago, and like a ticking bomb, I detonate.

A moan slips from my lips as I squeeze my breast, my finger continuing to draw delicate circles around my clit, and my hips slow, drawing every ounce of this feeling out.

Trying to catch my breath, my heart pounds in my chest as I slump back against the wall. The toy is still inside of me, and I shiver, my pussy clenching one last time.

I pry my eyes open, and my mouth drops as I look through the water falling at my feet to find Jameson standing in the open doorway.

What the fuck?

He stares at me with heat in his eyes, his hand rubbing the back of his neck as his gaze burns every inch of my skin. The outline of his stiff cock visible from here.

Before I can ask what the fuck he's doing in here, he throws something down by his feet with a bang, and I stare at it in confusion, still unable to move from my spot.

“No fucking locks,” he grunts, turning on his heel and slamming my bathroom door shut behind him.

That motherfucker.

I’m going to kill him.

Or they’ll be the death of me.

Either way, I’m fucking ready for it.

LOU-LOU



I run my fingers over the silk material of my blush pink dress, and a smile creeps over my lips. Turning my back to the mirror, I look over the intricate diamanté straps that hold the dress together, and I know I look hot as fuck in it. I always have, it's one of my favorites.

They won't know what's hit them. *Assholes.*

Running my fingers through my bouncy, blonde curls, I turn back to the mirror with an extra level of confidence washing over me. The diamanté straps criss-cross over my back, and hang delicately over my shoulders at the front. Satin material scoops at my neckline, offering a fantastic glimpse of my tits, and sits mid-thigh, accentuating the length of my legs.

Paired with my clear heels, and make-up on my eyelids matching the shade of pink in my dress, I know I'm ready to show my face after Jameson watched me get off.

I can hear the heavy beats of the music thrumming through the house, and the anticipation inside of me has me ready to join everyone.

Even if I don't get a chance to speak to any of the guys, I'm determined to have a good time. Let my hair down, and try to relax for the first time since I got here, all while teasing the fuck out of them too.

After one final glance at myself in the mirror, I pull my shoulders back and head for the door. Jameson wasn't very graceful at pulling the lock from my door, the jagged wood from him barely unscrewing the whole system properly means

I need to get a new door. But for the time being, all I can do is stuff a pair of my panties in the hole to block anyone being able to see into my room. I hope that makes Jameson fucking mad too.

We're going to have words about this. I should be able to have privacy, especially if they're throwing parties. I don't want anyone thinking my room is easy access for a random place to fuck or to come harass me. If anyone is getting any dick in here, it's me.

Wrapping my hand around the door handle, I swing it open to find someone standing with their back to my door.

Not just someone; Ezra.

My mouth dries as I take in his curly hair and casual t-shirt and joggers combo he's rocking. He looks back over his shoulder at me, and I almost weep with joy when I see his glasses fixed on his face. The black rims remind me of when I would steal his glasses as a child, which later turned into me mothering him to wear them when we got older.

I hate to admit it, but whenever I'm in their presence, it's like I'm home. I can't put my finger on exactly why, maybe it's the safety aspect I've always felt around them, or the comfort of their presence I've spent so long waiting for.

I'm not stupid, I know nothing has changed for me when it comes to how I feel about them. But it's clearly not reciprocated, and that is something I need to learn to deal with.

I watch as his seemingly deep gray eyes travel over the length of me, his eyebrows raising when he gets the full picture as I slowly spin around, making sure he sees every inch of my skin. I feel the comment before it passes his lips right as I turn to face him.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" he grunts, his voice washing over me like a slice of heaven, but I don't show him.

Instead, I roll my eyes, slipping around him before he can stop me. I turn back around to face Ezra, my bedroom door

still slightly open as I shrug. “I’m going to have fun. Care to join me?”

His hands clench at his sides as he rakes his eyes over me once more.

Fuck. If none of the others see or react to my presence, then I don’t care, I’m already happy with the response from Ezra alone.

“No,” he responds gruffly, folding his arms over his chest, and I offer a sad smile which I can’t control, before waving my hand dismissively.

“That’s fine. Be a doll and shut my door, would ya? Some asshole made a mess of it,” I state, turning on my heels and heading for the stairs.

“Lou,” he calls out, surprise at my dismissal clear in his tone, but I don’t turn around.

They need a little taste of their own medicine.

It’s not until I’m halfway down the stairs that I realize no one else was on the second floor, and the steps are empty too. But at the bottom of the landing is a red rope blocking the path, with two guys I don’t recognize, standing like bouncers, blocking party-goers from passing through.

If these goons are here, why is Ezra outside of my room acting like a fucking gatekeeper?

“Can I get by please?” I ask with a smile, gaining the attention of the two guys manning the stairs, and when their eyes travel over the length of me, I don’t feel as excited as I did when Ezra did it. It’s not their attention I’m after.

But they nod like bobble-heads, and let me slip past, the crowd instantly swallowing me as I move among the groups dancing.

The house is packed. Moving through the foyer, the numbers have easily doubled from earlier. If there are people outside too, I would have to say this is the biggest party I’ve ever been at. Not even the parties on the east side of White River were this big.

I look around at the rooms leading off of the foyer, and it feels like a maze even though I've had a few days to familiarize myself.

Alcohol.

I need all of the liquor on hand to get on the same level as some of the people here, and I need to feel the high of the liquid pumping through my veins ASAP.

Moving into the large kitchen, all chrome and white, it's a bit quieter in here. The kitchen island holds center stage, filled with all different types of alcohol from cheap beer to top shelf liquor to choose from, while it looks like the kegs are set up outside through the huge bi-folding glass doors.

Eyeing my options, I opt for the expensive vodka I love so much. The exact one we used to sneak from my mom's collection. Coincidence? Likely.

I can't help but glance around to see if any of the guys are in here, but I come up empty.

It's not about them, Lou-Lou.

Shaking my head, I quickly make a vodka and orange juice mix, and opt to head outside. I want to get to the dancing stage of tipsy, where moving my body to the beat is all I care about. But until then, I need a little space.

I step out into the night air and sigh at the slight chill cooling my skin from all the body heat inside. There's a beer pong table set up to my right, where a few guys are playing, and some girls are dancing in the middle of the yard. Seats are randomly placed around the grassy area, fully occupied by party-goers.

Looking up at the night sky with my drink in hand, I feel eyes on me, and I can sense it's one of the guys currently haunting me.

I've always known what their gazes feel like, because I've always wanted their attention.

Tilting my head in that direction, I find Jagger and Jameson standing side by side with scowls on their faces as

they hover at the back of the yard.

Jagger looks like he's about to go nuclear on me with the way his chest heaves and his muscles tense on his arm. While Jameson gapes at me just like he did back in the bathroom earlier. I'm not sure if they love or hate my outfit, or the fact I've joined the party, but either way, they're giving me the reaction I want.

What neither of them realize is, I understand the interpretation of their stances, and both of these motherfuckers care.

They. Still. Fucking. Care.

I cling to that as I offer them a sickeningly sweet smile before I bring my drink to my lips and down my liquid courage. My focus is aimed at them the entire time, and just as Jameson looks like he's going to make a move in my direction, Jagger quickly raises his hand, hitting Jameson's chest hard to force him to stay where he is.

Licking my lips slowly, then rubbing them together, I quirk my eyebrow, just as a girl approaches and drapes herself over Jagger... who accepts her touch easily. Her silky red hair floats down her back as Jagger splays his fingers out on her ass cheeks, and it's my turn to clench my hand in annoyance, truly bitten by the jealousy swarming me. Her tight black dress hugs her curves, and my eyes track Jagger's movements as he drifts his fingers along the material.

Distraction. I need a distraction. And to beat them at their own game.

The hit of the vodka instantly tingles through my veins, and I smile uncontrollably as I place the empty plastic cup on a nearby table. Flicking my gaze around the table, I find all the chairs occupied by guys, who most definitely have to be on some kind of team because they look athletic as fuck. They'll suffice for now.

I can still feel the twins looking at me, but if they want to busy themselves with irrelevant girls, I can do the same with the available guys around. Or at least appear to be.

Wetting my lips, I find I have the guy's attention beside me as he smiles with a gleam in his eyes. I bat my eyes at him, already feeling the bad decision in my veins.

"Girlfriend?" I ask, cutting straight to the point, and he shakes his head instantly. His red hair is messy around his head as he leans back, running his fingers through it.

"Nope, but I could make some adjustments if the right girl was offering," he says with a smirk in response, and I internally roll my eyes at how cheesy he is.

I let him reach his hand up, tugging on my hair slightly, but he suddenly pulls back when his hand is yanked away.

What the fuck?

Looking over my left shoulder, I find an angry Leo standing beside me. His eyebrows are knitted together, his frown lines deeper than I think I've ever seen them, and the sneer on his lips makes him look completely different to the guy I remember.

"The right girl *is* offering, just not the right girl for *you*, motherfucker. Touch her again and you'll lose your fingers to my fucking meat cleaver," he spits out, his knuckles whitening as he wraps his fingers tight around this guy's wrist, and I just stand in shock.

Leo clearly still cares, but I don't want to be in the center of this pissing contest right now. It's unnecessary.

It's clear Leo and the guys have a similar fearful presence here like they did back in Nevada, because this guy does nothing to fight back.

The rage in Leo's eyes is startling, and I'm not stupid enough to attempt to push him right now. Not when he's this level of mad, and I have a chance at working my way under his skin instead.

Using the liquid courage from my vodka, I place my palm on his chest and stroke gently, which has him glancing my way instantly.

“Leo, how about you get me another screwdriver? You could have one with me and I might be able to convince you to dance,” I add, stepping in closer to his side, and he reluctantly releases his hold on this guy.

It doesn't go unnoticed that this guy doesn't argue back, and none of his friends stand up for him either, which either means they're a bunch of pussies in general, or fearful of Leo. My guess is on the latter, and it doesn't surprise me, they've always had a reputation for being the center of trouble and following through on their threats if pushed.

“Leo,” I murmur again, looking up at him with pleading eyes, and he sighs with acceptance.

Placing his hand on the base of my spine, he nudges me away from the table and toward the open doors leading inside again, and I go willingly, trying to contain the shiver he evokes from me. But not without glancing over my shoulder to spy the twins watching us.

I grin when I see them watching every move we make, which makes me assume they were ready to jump in before Leo did, and it fills me with excitement.

Turning my attention back to Leo, I let myself bask in his touch for a moment as we make our way through the groups of people, coming to a stop at the liquor table in the kitchen. I nibble on my lip as he pours two vodka orange mixers into a pair of red plastic cups and hands one off to me without even glancing in my direction.

It's progress, at least.

Without a word, he lifts the other to his mouth and chugs the whole thing down in one go, and I follow suit, refusing to be left behind.

Once I'm done, I place my cup down beside his, and he finally looks down at me.

I love how he's still got a few inches on me when I'm in heels, it heats my skin without him even attempting to do anything.

“You’re going to be the fucking death of me, Lucy,” he mumbles, and I smile wide from ear to ear, which has him shaking his head.

“I mean, in what capacity? Death by me hitting you over the head with a cast iron frying pan and killing the only brain cell you have left? Or death from the biggest orgasm in the history of mankind? I could go for either right now,” I say with a heap of sass, winking when he bites back a smile.

“Don’t tempt me. I can chaperone you, or we can ask one of the twins to step up,” he retorts, heat burning in his eyes as I pout at him.

Fucking party pooper.

I don’t know where my next words come from, or if the vodka relaxes my already weak filter, but they fall out of my mouth before I can even consider them.

“Why can’t you just say that you’ve missed me like I’ve missed you, Leo? Then we can understand where the wires were crossed. I hate being near you without being *near* you. That might just be the death of *me*.”

Leo stares down at me in surprise, his gray eyes wide and his brows pinched together. He swipes a hand down his face, at a loss for words, and I decide I’ve been too raw with him.

Apparently my liquid courage was more than happy to let me show my hand too soon. I don’t know why I feel the urge to spill my guts to Leo right now, but I need space before I continue to word vomit all over him.

I need to put my mask of indifference back on and set out to do exactly what I planned when I came down here, and that’s let loose and have motherfuckin’ fun.

“If you need me, I’ll be dancing,” I offer, before heading for the living room. I catch a few girls giving me glares as I pass, which will likely have something to do with the attention I was getting from Leo, but I refuse to get involved in all of *that* when my emotions are so close to the surface.

I worm my way through the bodies to the center of the room where everyone is dancing, and I’m surprised to find

Naomi there. Dressed in a white tank top, blue mini skirt and black converse, she looks cool as fuck.

Her eyes widen in acknowledgment as she sways her hips to the beat, and as much as I don't know her, I know her more than anyone else right now. So when she offers out her hand to dance, I take it.

The next track, *Black Magic* by *Jonasu*, comes on and my body instantly starts to move with hers. Song after song plays, and with the vodka seeping further into my system I relax, enjoying the music and the silent company Naomi offers. I expected her to talk my ear off, but thankfully she seems happy to just have a partner to dance with.

Maybe I could get used to having her around. I have friends, they're just not here, and it might be nice to have an excuse to get out from under the guys' roof since I'm apparently a 'huge inconvenience'.

"I'm going to get another drink," Naomi shouts over the music as she grabs my arm, and I nod.

"Perfect, I'm going to take a quick bathroom break. I'll be back in a minute," I say in response, and she nods in acknowledgment.

Making my way through the bodies that surround us, I can't see any of the guys, but I'm highly aware that no guy has even attempted to approach us while dancing. The fact the guys on the stairs quickly avert their gaze from mine as I approach tells me something has been said.

Motherfuckers.

Seeing the line for the downstairs bathroom, I decide to slip past the red rope and use the main one at the top of the stairs quickly.

I can't use my own bathroom right now, not with the memory of Jameson still so fresh.

I make sure to take my time on the stairs in these heels now that I've had a few drinks, gripping the banister like my life depends on it. My hair is sticking to the back of my neck with sweat as I swipe it back off my face.

Ezra is no longer standing outside of my door, which makes me a little sad. I can't stop wanting to see them now that we're here, and I don't care how ridiculous that sounds.

With a sigh, I wrap my hand around the doorknob to the bathroom, and freeze in place when I find it unlocked, but not vacant.

Blood rushes to my head as I meet Jagger's gaze head on. Seeing him isn't the issue, it's the pretty redhead from earlier, down on her knees with his cock in her mouth that angers me.

He doesn't seem surprised to see me or mad at the interruption for that matter. Instead, I watch as he laces his fingers in her hair, encouraging her to take more of him as he maintains eye contact with me, a smirk gracing his lips.

The challenge is clear in his eyes as I stand here and see absolutely nothing but them.

I shouldn't feel this devastated. I really fucking shouldn't.

But the moans from her lips as he grunts shatters the hope I had been clinging to. He doesn't want me anymore.

Tears threaten the back of my eyelids, and I fight to hold them at bay. This is too much for me, and I refuse to let him see how affected I am by his actions. But at least I truly know where I stand now with Jagger Izaro. *I understand.*

Standing taller, I flick my hair over my shoulder as I return his challenging glare with one of my own. Feeling extra brazen with the liquor buzzing through my veins, I slip the straps of my dress off my shoulders, letting the material flutter to the floor at my feet. All while this girl continues to go to town on Jagger's cock.

His eyes blaze with heat as he can't stop himself from taking in every inch of my bare skin on show, his fist tightening in the bitch's hair, and I tilt my head slightly as I smile.

I turn on the spot, with my heels somehow balancing me as I dip low to get my dress off the floor, offering him the perfect view of my ass and pussy.

I can tease all day long, and I'd much rather him think I was a whore than a girl with deep and attentive fucking emotions. I hear him grunt deep in his throat, and the way the girl gargles I can tell I pushed him over the fucking edge.

Looking back over my shoulder at him, he looks like his eyeballs are going to burst out of his head with rage, but I smile. "Honey, be careful what dick you put in your mouth, I heard he has herpes," I holler, before putting one foot in front of the other and marching to my room.

I'm glad no one's up here. I didn't consider that in my naked farewell since my goal was clearly meant to say 'fuck you'.

Slamming the bedroom door shut behind me, I slump back against it, anger rising inside of me properly now I'm alone, and I scream. Kicking my shoes off, I carelessly grab one and throw it at the wall with rage, the heel embedding into the sheetrock.

Fuck Jagger. Fuck them all. I'm so fucking done.

I need to be the Lou-Lou I learned to be without them. Like it or not, that's who they're going to get.

LOU-LOU



Both nerves and frustration burn through my veins as I take my seat in the lecture hall for my first Political Science class. Nerves tingling with excitement for finally being here and taking this step in my life, while frustration pricks along the surface after last night's events.

Pulling my laptop from my bag, I also grab a hair tie, and pull my wavy hair back off my face with a sigh.

Even now, sitting here and watching the other students filter in and the professor set up at the front, my mind still reels back to seeing Jagger with that red-headed bitch.

My hands clench on the table, and I force myself to pry them open, rubbing my palms over my high-waisted skinny jeans so I don't lash out at the closest person.

Focus on the here and now, Lou-Lou.

I smile at a few people as they fall into their seats around me in the middle, and it almost feels like every guy is quickly averting their gaze. I pray it's just my mind playing tricks on me.

After storming to my room last night, I screamed out loud, but it wasn't enough so I screamed into my pillow too, trying to ease the rage inside me in a calmer manner. It was still fucking pointless. I barely slept, and since this is a nine-thirty class, I opted to get ready, grabbing a protein bar for breakfast that I bought in bulk the other day, and get over here without running into any of the assholes.

I really need to find a local gym or a kickboxing class because I need a stress outlet that can handle my anger. That's on my to-do list this afternoon since it's only a half-day of classes today.

"Hey, girl, cute top," Naomi says, appearing to my left and falling into the seat with a sigh, and I smile at her.

"Thanks," I murmur, looking down at the pale pink tank top I tucked into my jeans, and the leather jacket I threw over it. I'm warm enough, but I definitely need to add getting a heavier coat to that to-do list.

"Where'd you go last night?" she asks, organizing her desk, and I cringe, remembering I left her to go to the bathroom and didn't return.

"Sorry, I got a headache and decided to climb into bed instead of coming back down and partying," I lie, but I did go to bed at least.

Fixing her cardigan, she frowns at me. "Wait, what? Come back down? No one is allowed upstairs at the Izaro's house unless you... live... do you live there?" Her amber eyes widen as she connects the invisible dots I didn't offer, and I simply nod in response. "Damn, girl. Why don't you seem happy about that? Do you know how many girls would fight for your spot?"

I instantly blanch at her words, my defenses rising as I sit taller, my jealousy from last night quickly resurfacing, and she immediately starts shaking her hand at me.

"Oh, fuck girl, not me, they're definitely *not* my type." I see her mock shudder and cringe at the thought of living in the Izaro house. "Men in general are *definitely* not my type. Well, maybe a trans man, but now I'm rambling about shit you don't need to worry yourself over," she says, her pitch getting higher the more she talks, and my shoulders relax.

"You're good," I mutter, relaxing in her presence. Now I know she's not a risk, and I smile. "As my way of apologizing, we should definitely have a night out some time, and I can

attempt to be a badass wing-woman,” I offer, and her smile widens in response.

“See, I knew I liked you.”

Just as I’m about to respond, my mouth quickly dries as Leo walks into the class.

Fuck.

His baseball cap is on backward, his blond hair slightly peeking out of the front. He looks far too good, as always. His fitted jeans and indie band tee makes him look like a skater or something, but I remember the time he attempted to skate and it was disastrous.

His gaze meets mine with a knowing smirk on his lips as I continue to gape at him, until I realize he’s dropping down into the seat on my right. I finally remember where I am once I hear the chatter around us, quickly averting my gaze away from him and focusing on the front.

He’s sitting beside me. Leo chose to sit beside me.

I shake my head, remembering that he too was an asshole last night, and I need to show at least some immunity to their damn fucking charm.

Side-eyeing Naomi, I watch as she covers her mouth with her hand, smothering a smile like she knows what I’m going through, and I narrow my eyes at her.

Bitch, do not watch my downfall, it won’t be pretty.

I can feel Leo’s presence like a burning fire at my side, the heat teasing my skin, but I keep my eyes focused on the front of the room as the professor starts running through first day etiquette shit and the syllabus. Dr. Rupert Jefferson is my Political Science professor the first semester, and he seems nice enough. His salt and pepper hair is swept back off his face, with a pair of glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He looks like the kind of guy who loves being a father, and that thought alone leaves a sickly feeling in my stomach. I always seem to crave things I can’t have. Like a good, loving father, who actually wants that role in your life.

“Okay, that’s all for today, you will all receive an email detailing the suggested topics in the syllabus by the end of the day, we’re going to lead from there next week,” he announces, before closing his laptop and turning off the projector.

Thank God, we’re done. Sitting beside Leo Cooper for three solid hours, has me feeling like I have third degree burns.

“Hey, want to grab lunch?” Naomi asks, and I nod eagerly. I need any distraction at all to get away from Leo right now. He’s not said a word or even chanced a glance in my direction the entire time. I would know, I was watching him and he probably knew it too.

“That’d be great, but I have no idea where I’m going. I haven’t had much time to wander around campus,” I admit, and she smiles as she lifts her bag over her shoulder and stands. I follow suit, but as I rise, I feel Leo brush past me.

He cuts in front of my table which he didn’t do earlier, and his hand ghosts my waist so slightly I think I almost imagined it, but the subtle glance back over his shoulder tells me it was real. Even if his eyes offer no indication of what’s going through his mind right now. He doesn’t offer a smile or any form of acknowledgment with his glance, which reminds me, I’m mad. And fucking gullible, for how his little caress makes me forget that. Apparently, I crave whatever he will give me.

“Fuck, my friend, the heat between you two is fucking *unreal*,” Naomi states, fanning herself, and my eyes widen in surprise at her assessment. She felt it too?

“*That* is highly questionable,” I offer as a vague response, before shaking my head and changing the subject. “Food, lead me to the food.”

I spend the entire walk to the food hall with my eyes wide open, watching to see if I come across any of the guys, but I don’t. Not until we actually enter the cafeteria and I find them center stage.

All four of them.

The dining hall is lined with a variety of eateries on the edge of the room, with the seating all laid out in the middle.

Jagger, Jameson, Ezra, and Leo are sitting right in the middle of all the chaos. Girls hang off their arms, guys edge closer to be near them, and it reminds me all too much of high school.

Except back then, I had a seat with them too and wasn't standing on the outside looking in, like I am now.

"Food," Naomi says, linking her arm through mine and pulling me toward the pizza station, and I go willingly, happy for the distraction. She is amazing at social cues, and doesn't ask awkward or personal questions. I *like* her.

"What pizza are you having? And before you answer, if you try to put any kind of fish or fruit on there as toppings, I might question this new friendship," I state with a straight face, and she grins.

"I'm a plain old Margherita pizza kind of gal since my mom only *ever* bought the fishy or fruity kind as a kid," she says with a chuckle, and I join her.

"I have to have all of the meat I can get on my pizza since we could only ever afford the Margherita ones," I offer in response, and understanding falls over us.

We grow quiet, lost in our own thoughts as we grab our chosen pizza slices and drinks, before turning to face the mass of tables.

"Just a quick check, do you want us to sit as close as possible to *them* so they can see exactly how fucking hot you are? Or would you prefer to sit on the opposite end of the universe?" She doesn't specify who 'them' are, but she's a quick learner, and can clearly feel the tension radiating off me.

"Right now I would definitely prefer a separate planet if that were even remotely a possibility," I answer honestly, and she nods, but before she can take the lead, I turn and head for the table I spotted already.

I feel a little bit like a lost puppy. New place, new people, new... everything, and it has me a little out of sorts. The only familiar thing here is *them*, and they don't want anything to do with me, all while clearly arranging for me to be here at the same time. It doesn't make any sense.

Fucking ridiculous.

Dropping down into my seat, at the table by the main doors, I drop my bag at my feet and relax back in my chair for a moment before I grab my water and take a drink.

“I feel like it doesn’t matter where you sit, their eyes follow your every move. So, they *definitely* know how hot you are,” she says with a smile as she takes the seat across from me, and I frown in confusion. “Girl, don’t give me that look, the second you turn your eyes off them, theirs instantly fall to you.”

My gaze turns in their direction, unable to stop myself from checking where they are, and as I do, Ezra quickly glances away. A grin attempts to take over my lips, but I hold it back, shaking my head as I take a bite of my pizza, and Naomi chuckles.

She doesn’t say anything else, switching the conversation to mundane things like the weather, but I appreciate it.

I make a mental note to try not to go to the pizzeria every day, even if it is so freaking good, otherwise I’ll turn into a fucking meatfest slice, and I don’t need that.

The more I sit here, the more I realize, I can do this. I can put the effort into acing my classes, finding my groove and become the boss bitch I want to be. Even if those assholes never speak to me.

Once we’re finished, I grab my bag, and we head for the exit.

“So, where are you staying?” I ask, realizing she knows where I am, but I have no idea where she lives.

“Oh, I’m just here in the dorms, specifically in the First-Year Hall,” she answers, pointing her thumb over her shoulder as we step outside, at the building to our right. “Give me your number, and if you’re free we can try and do something this weekend if you like,” she offers, and I nod, quickly exchanging numbers before she heads for the dorms.

The cool afternoon air is almost refreshing compared to the heat I’m used to, but it does make me zip my leather jacket up

as I walk through the courtyard and toward the stone arch. I'm ready to head home, put a movie on, browse through some online shops for a new coat, and search for a gym. The perfect afternoon.

A few students fill the courtyard, chatting in small groups and paying me no attention as I step through the arch. My foot is barely on the other side of it when rough hands grip my upper arms and spin me, my feet slightly leaving the ground until my back slams into the stone of the arch.

I hiss at the impact, feeling the air stolen from my lungs, my teeth grinding together as I clench my fists ready to react, only to find Jagger fucking Izaro glaring down at me.

His dark hair is pulled back into a man bun at the back of his head, but a loose piece hangs over his face, and as angry as I am, I still have the urge to touch it.

Containing myself, I sigh. "What the fuck, Jagger?"

He sneers, placing his hands either side of my head as he lowers so we're face to face.

"Enjoy the show last night?"

"Did you?" I bite back, glaring at him, and he scoffs.

"Please, I've seen pussy before, Luella," he grunts, and I grin.

"But none as pretty and pink as mine, hmm? Not quite as tight, never dripping enough with a sensitive little clit like mine. Am I right?" I goad, watching as his jaw tightens and his brown eyes blaze.

His eyes flicker to my lips for a brief moment before returning to my eyes, his anger still in place, but I saw it, his millisecond moment of weakness. It was tiny, but it was there, and I also see him build his walls around himself again, leaning closer until we're nose to nose.

"Oh, little Luella Carter, I didn't fuck you then. I *definitely* won't be fucking indulging now," he barks, his fist hitting the stone behind my head before he turns on his heels and charges off.

Well fuck.

I hope that fucking hurt, asshole.

Challenge accepted, Jagger Izaro.

LOU-LOU



My gaze falls on the coat hanging on the back of my door, and I drum my fingers over my lip as I consider my options. But I need to get a move on because my first class of the day starts in forty minutes, and I have no idea where on campus I'm supposed to be going.

I tap my foot on the floor, still uncertain over whether I should wear it or not. I need to wear *something* warmer because it's raining outside, but this coat magically appeared on my bed when I got home on Thursday evening, and I have no idea which fucker bought it.

I haven't been able to ask any of them either, since they've been completely MIA since Jagger pinned me against the archway, and I still haven't gotten their numbers or them mine.

Fuck.

That was then, and now it's bright and early on Monday morning and they're still not around at all. Not on campus, not at home. Am I what's keeping them away? I don't know, but I can't say I didn't enjoy relaxing in the house on my own. I feel so much more comfortable here, and I'm sure if the guys were here I would have hidden away in my room.

Instead I was able to stock the fridge with some of my own food, relax in the living room, and watch all of the movies on demand.

Make a decision on the fucking coat, Lou-Lou.

Damn, it's so pretty.

I reach out, feeling the bubbled, waterproof material under my touch. It's a freaking Prada cropped puffer jacket, and my idea of heaven. Whoever bought it, knew I would fall in love.

Fuck it.

It was made for me. The style, the black glossy color, all of it, and it will go amazingly with my skinny jeans, black knee high boots, and deep red tank top.

I slip my arms in, running my hands over the zipper as I glance at my floor length mirror. They might be a set of fucking assholes, but they know my taste even after all of these years.

Tightening my hair tie, my blonde, wavy hair high on the top of my head, I take a deep breath, before grabbing my bag and heading for the door.

As I shut my bedroom door behind me, I pull my key from my bag and turn the lock, smiling at myself as I do. Jameson fucking Izaro is living on another planet if he thinks I'm going to just roll over and do as he says.

If I want a lock on my door, I'll have a fucking lock on my door.

Glancing at the time, I hurry down the stairs and rush outside, pulling my hood up over my head as I lock the front door behind me and extend my huge umbrella.

I begrudgingly bypass my Mustang, opting to make the short journey on foot since I know it will take forever to find a parking spot. Living so close to Emerson U leaves me no excuse.

Today is a busy day, I have classes from nine in the morning until four this afternoon, but that suits me perfectly. I just need to find Salvatore Hall for my first class, and the campus map is hopefully going to guide me.

I'm not sure if I'll see Naomi today, but I'm half hoping to, especially since she had to go home for the weekend and we couldn't do anything.

As I near the campus, I start to come across groups of people, the walkway becoming busier. Everyone's huddled up under their umbrellas and focused on where they're going since the rain is unrelenting this morning. I snuggle further under my coat as I spot a wooden arrow just inside the entry arch, pointing to my left with 'Salvatore Hall' written on it.

I follow the stone path around the outskirts of campus, until a small building appears at the far corner, and I sigh with relief, picking my speed up a little when I confirm it's where I'm supposed to be.

The second I get to the top of the steps and under the shelter, I pull my hood down and shake my hair out, just as a few other girls do the same thing too. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I glance at my schedule, and this morning is Intro to Psychology with Professor Forbes, room two-twenty.

A few groups are cutting around me, and heading for the stairs, and I blindly follow them, letting the hoard of students swallow me whole, hoping it takes me where I need to go.

Taking the two sets of stairs up to the top, I step out into the hallway to find room two-twenty to my left, and smile in relief.

Just as I'm about to pull the door to the class open, a hand reaches out and beats me to it. I look to my right to find a muscular, blond guy smiling down at me.

"I'll get that for you," he murmurs, and I return his grin on instinct, mumbling my thanks as I slip by him and make my way into the lecture hall. Professor Forbes is already in her spot at the front of the class, and dark oak tables line the rest of the room.

"We have no time for sitting where you please in this class. Take the next available seat, working from the front, and that will be your spot for the semester," Professor Forbes declares, not looking up from her laptop, and I make my way to the next available seat which is thankfully at the end of the second row, so I only have one person to contend with.

It's predictably dull in here, all gray and cream tones with plastic chairs and wooden tables lining the space, highlighting the lecturer's podium as the focal point of the room.

I take my seat, hearing the chair scrape beside me, and I find the blond guy from earlier who held the door open for me.

"Hi, I'm Vince," he says, and I take him in a little more this time. He's wearing the college's football jersey, Emerson U, with a pair of jeans and a waterproof jacket. His shoulders are so broad I would have to guess he's on the defense, but I know little to nothing about football to even pretend to actually know.

"Lou-Lou," I offer in response with a half smile before shaking off my coat and setting up my laptop.

The classroom settles as everyone filters in, and I spot Naomi, who waves as she walks to her seat two rows behind me. My heartbeat bounces in my chest when Leo walks in, his eyes finding mine instantly, and then he shifts his gaze to my coat on the back of my chair and he grins.

Motherfucker.

His grin quickly wipes from his face when Vince leans forward, blocking me from view, and I take the cue to pull myself from under Leo's spell, focusing my attention back on the conversation.

"So, whereabouts are you—"

"Hell to the fucking no, move your ass. Now," Leo growls, interrupting Vince, and I sink back into my seat with a mixture of shock and embarrassment coating my skin.

Nothing is ever quiet or inconspicuous with these damn idiots.

"Do we have an issue here, boys?" Professor Forbes calls out, and I wet my lips as I look at Leo, who is getting redder in the face the longer he looks at Vince.

"Nope. We'll be all good once this cunt moves, Sheila," Leo hollers back without moving his gaze, and I can hear the other students murmuring about the scene unfolding in front of

them. He just addressed the Professor by her first name. How the fuck does he get away with this shit?

Kill. Me. Now.

I love attention, and I love the spotlight, but on my own terms. This? This is absolutely unnecessary and clearly another one of Leo's pissing contests.

"Leo, what are you doing?" I whisper angrily, but he leans forward, gripping the edge of Vince's desk right beside mine, keeping his gaze fixed on him.

"I don't know what your issue is, man," Vince states, his hands slightly lifted defensively as he attempts to relax back in his seat, and Leo scoffs.

"My issue is where you're sitting, *man*. Move, and we'll be all good," he bites, venom lacing his words, and I bury my face in my hands. This is ridiculous.

"Professor Forbes said to take the next available seat, I just —"

"Sheila, help me out here will you?" Leo grunts, standing tall again as I peer up at him, and his angry eyes flick in my direction, before quickly settling back on Vince.

I was right here when Vince walked in too. I heard exactly what Professor Forbes said, and she doesn't seem the type of woman to stray from her orders.

I'm ready to see Leo Cooper crumble.

Raising my eyebrow at him as excitement at his downfall bubbles to the surface, I get ready for her to answer him as she sighs heavily. "I think it would be in everyone's best interest if you moved. Getting Leo or anyone linked to the Izaro's upset will just cause you further issues. Issues you have no need getting tangled up in," she states, and my jaw almost hits the floor as I shift my gaze to gape at her.

I find her already looking directly at me, and it feels like her words were directed right to me and not Vince, as every single pair of eyes watches to see what happens next. You can sense their anticipation in the atmosphere, silence hanging

heavy in the air. But mostly what I feel is the anger rolling off of Leo.

I see Leo grinning like the fool he is as he places his hands on his hips, but what surprises me more, is Vince looking at me expectantly.

“Listen, if you need me to stay I’ll—”

“She doesn’t,” Leo growls, interrupting him again, and it even gets on my nerves at how rude he’s being.

“I was asking Lou-Lou,” Vince bites back, surprising me with the tone of his voice, and I quickly wave my hand, Professor Forbes’ words playing in my mind.

“Really, Vince, it’s okay. You don’t need to get tangled up in this shitshow. Just go,” I say calmly and quietly, and with a heavy grunt he rises to his feet.

Luckily he hadn’t unpacked anything yet, and simply grabs his bag and stalks to the back of the classroom as my face heats with embarrassment.

I focus my gaze straight ahead as Leo dramatically flops down into the newly vacated seat and I find the girls sitting in front of me staring at us.

“The fucking show’s over,” I snap, and everyone quickly looks away, but my annoyance only intensifies. Especially when Professor Forbes also turns away to look at the whiteboard.

I can feel Leo looking in my direction, and my hands fist in my lap as I attempt to remain calm, but the feel of his hand gripping the back of my chair as he leans close sends my irritation to the next level.

“Fuck. Off. Leo,” I hiss, and thankfully, he does, leaning back in his seat, but his hand remains on my chair.

I avoid him for the entire class, as I give my full attention to Professor Forbes as she drones on about what is expected from us this year following along in the ten-page syllabus. I’ve always been intrigued by psychology, and what makes people

tick, so I note everything down of interest on my laptop as she goes through a general introduction to psychology.

The second she calls time on the class, I stand, giving Leo my back as I slip my coat on and place my laptop in my bag.

“You look stunning in your coat. You’re welcome,” I hear him whisper against my ear, leaving goosebumps in his wake, and I shiver. I hate how I react to his words, even when he’s riling me up.

Refusing to give him the attention he wants, I pull my bag tight over my shoulder and head for the door, finding Naomi waiting for me just outside of the lecture hall.

I don’t look back to see if Leo is following as I let Naomi slip her arm through mine, letting her pull me down the hallway and drag me down the stairs quickly. She knew I needed an escape plan.

“Girl, you’re a beacon for drama, and I can’t deny the fact that I slightly love it,” she whispers with a conspiratory giggle as we race down the steps, and I shake my head at her, biting back a laugh because *I get it*. If this wasn’t happening to me, I would fucking love it too.

“Don’t even go there. I need a day on campus where I don’t have an issue,” I grumble in response as we step outside. The rain has eased up and the sun is peeking through the clouds, encouraging a smile to form on my lips.

Please let this be a positive sign for me.

“Hey, Lou-Lou, wait up!” I hear Vince holler as we reach the bottom of the steps, and I cringe, not wanting another repeat, but I reluctantly turn to see him come barreling toward us.

“Hey,” I murmur in response as Naomi stays at my side, awkwardly waiting to see what he wants.

A few guys follow behind him, but they continue past, standing a little off to the side as Vince clears his throat. “I’m sorry about that back there. Leo, he...” he starts, rubbing the back of his neck nervously, but I shake my head.

“Honestly, you have no need to apologize,” I offer, and his smile widens.

“I’m glad you said that, because I was coming to see if you would be at the Court Charity event on Friday?” he asks, and I glance at him in confusion since I have no idea what event he’s talking about.

“I plan to drag her along with me so we might see you there,” Naomi answers, making Vince nod happily before winking my way and strolling toward his friends.

“What the fuck, Naomi, I—”

“Not a fucking chance, Lucy,” Leo grunts darkly from behind me, and I wince before turning to face him.

I am at my motherfucking limit with this asshole today.

“How do you always fucking appear when I need you the least?” I bite out, making sure to keep my voice down as I step toward him, and Naomi drops my arm as I come toe to toe with Leo. His jaw is tense as he clenches his hands at his sides and glares down at me, but I keep going before he can respond. “Let’s get one thing straight, Leo Cooper. I can do what I want, when I want. You can’t have it both ways, and you’ve made yourself crystal fucking clear on what you think about me. I won’t let you treat me like shit, pretend I don’t exist, then what? Lay some fucking claim to me in public? *No*. Thanks.”

My own face is scrunched up tight in anger, my pulse pounding from the adrenaline as rage burns under my skin. I manage to turn on my heels, grabbing Naomi’s arm, before I march off leaving the douche-canoe in my wake.

Maybe Naomi is on to something. Men *are* fucking useless. Except for their cocks.

But a dildo works just fine too, right?

LOU-LOU



I shut the front door behind me, straining my ears to see if anyone is home, but all I'm greeted with is silence.

Please let it stay like that.

After Leo's little show of dominance in class, I thankfully didn't see any of them for the rest of the day. Not even at lunch. I'm not sure if it was intentional or not, but I was grateful for the reprieve giving me peace and quiet.

Hell, if Leo or any of the other three were willing to claim me completely, not just as a show in front of others, I would fucking go, willingly, like a little lost puppy, but that isn't the case. They just want to make sure no one else can have me.

I need to focus on me like I intended, like I have done for the past three years. I shouldn't be a complete sucker for them so easily, but I just can't help it.

Pushing up off the door, I head for the living room to my right, and I relax when I find it empty. Perfect. I got two assignments today, one for Political Science, and another for Intro to Literature, so I want to get a start on them now rather than later.

I take a seat on the gray cable-knit couch, dropping my bag at my feet as I peel my boots off, and place them by the coffee table. The living room is probably one of my favorite rooms here. It doesn't scream bachelor pad with the fluffy navy carpet, two gray couches, oak coffee table, and matching entertainment center set up with a television and video games. It feels like a home.

Shaking my coat off as I head for the kitchen, I hang it up under the stairs, still hating how much I'm in love with it even though I know one of these assholes bought it, but it really is just too beautiful.

I make quick work of making a coffee and head back to the living room, beyond relieved no one has appeared to spoil my Lou-Lou time because I really don't want to be cooped up in my room forever.

Pulling the coffee table closer to the couch, I open my books and put my laptop onto the wood tabletop as I turn the television on, and find my favorite series to rewatch in the background, *Teen Wolf*. Nothing makes me work harder than a hunky and intelligent Dylan O'Brien on my screen.

Stretching my arms out, I take a sip of my coffee and get to work, getting lost in theories, explanations, and searching for sources. I'm not sure how much time passes before my neck begins to ache, and I sigh, getting tired from information overload.

Happy with how much study time I have put in so far, I know I can have the first assignment checked off my to-do list by tomorrow, so I close my laptop and lean back on the couch, letting my eyes fall closed.

My stomach grumbles, but I also feel a little agitated and I can't put my finger on why. I can't decide whether I should go and grab some food, or head over to the local gym I found online over the weekend.

Before I can come to a decision, the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut in the distance has my eyes blinking open. Fuck, my peace and quiet is shattered.

I push myself to sit up again, just as Leo and Ezra step into the room to my right and freeze on the spot. They both look surprised to see me, but not mad, and it makes me scared to move because I don't want to fucking spook them and cause another argument.

Leo's baseball cap is still sitting backward on his head as he folds his arms over his chest and his muscles flex with the

movement. Ezra clears his throat first, pushing his glasses up his nose as he looks between us, his eyes widening with relief. “Well, finding her turned out to be easier than we thought,” he murmurs, dropping his own bag at his feet before casually strolling toward me and falling down onto the couch, claiming the spot next to me.

My eyes widen as he ruffles his own hair, curls moving around as he does so, and smiles in my direction.

What the fuck is going on right now?

Have I entered the fucking Twilight Zone or an alternate universe?

I flick my gaze between Ezra beside me and Leo who remains by the door, and I feel like I’m waiting for a bomb to drop as I’m engulfed in the silence that follows Ezra’s casual words. As the cliché goes, if it seems too good to be true it usually is, and if life has taught me anything, it’s to be wary of a drastic shift in people’s behaviors. *Especially* these motherfuckers.

I must look like a deer caught in the headlights with my eyes wide and my hands fisted in the cushions, still too scared to move a muscle, until Leo sighs, tossing his bag down beside Ezra’s. My heart races in my chest because I can’t get a good read on him.

He stomps around the coffee table, and flops down into the other open spot on my left, sandwiching me between them. An Ezra and Leo sandwich.

Is it hot in here? I can’t fucking breathe. I’m sure they can see my pulse racing in my neck as both of their legs brush against mine.

Leo mumbles something under his breath, but I don’t catch a word of what he says because he says it so quietly, which forces me to meet his gaze. I find him already looking in my direction as he swipes a hand down his face, and I quirk an eyebrow, waiting for him to repeat himself louder this time.

“I didn’t like what you said to me earlier,” he mumbles, barely above a whisper, and I have to strain my ears to hear

him properly as I tilt my face closer. Frowning at his words, I wait for him to continue, and he sighs again. “Ezra, you’re better with this wordy shit, help me out,” he grunts, covering his face with his hands, which only makes my frown deepen.

“Does someone just want to get to the point and explain what the fuck is going on?” I blurt out, turning my attention to Ezra, who covers his mouth as a smile teases his lips, and he shakes his head. “Honestly, I’m tired, hungry, and ready to brawl. I don’t have the time or effort to deal with your hot and cold shit right now,” I add, counting out my gripes on my fingers as I move to stand up, but Ezra places his arm against my chest, pausing my movement.

It’s not tight enough to completely block me, it’s just a silent want, asking me to remain seated, and I do, flopping back into my seat in a dramatic fashion as I wait for one of them to start fucking explaining.

“What Leo is trying to say is, he’s sorry,” Ezra announces with a pointed gaze at Leo, and my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

“Well, I wouldn’t fucking call it an apology. That motherfucker was sitting next to her, I’ll do it again if I—”

“Shut the fuck up, Leo. You’re making it worse,” Ezra interrupts, all while I continue to try and process what they’re saying.

Looking at Ezra, he nods his head in Leo’s direction, and I follow the movement, finding Leo’s piercing gray eyes staring back at me. It’s like I’m transported back in time to the guy I knew before everything went to shit. The difference now? Is how much fucking hotter he is.

My heart pounds in my chest as I cling to the droplet of hope they’re offering me, but like I said, it must be too good to be true. Surely.

“I don’t think I have made myself very clear,” he finally states, rubbing the back of his neck, which I recognize as a nervous action in response to an uncomfortable situation since Ryan does it all the time too.

“Then please, go ahead,” I say sarcastically, wanting him to give me everything, but refusing to look like a complete pushover, and I hear Ezra snicker from beside me.

“I’ve missed your brazen mouth,” he says, a slight smile touching his lips, and I raise my eyebrow at him expectantly as my insides fucking happy dance at his words.

“I don’t blame you,” I retort, raking my teeth over my bottom lip as I fold my arms tighter against my chest, and I don’t miss the way his eyes track the movement.

He rolls his eyes as he looks back at me, but releases a heavy sigh for the third time which reminds me this conversation isn’t as light as I would like it to be. “A lot of things have changed, Lucy. *A lot*. But having you here finally makes this place a home, and I’m desperate to fall into the comfort of how things used to be between us, but it’s not as simple as that,” Leo says, and I find myself nodding in acknowledgment. He sounds defeated, and sad, but he can’t just say I want things to be a certain way, and I’ll just jump to meet his needs.

What does any of that mean?

“What’s changed? I know it’s been three years, but I didn’t *choose* to leave,” I defend, glancing over at Ezra whose eyes have darkened, and his jaw is tense. “I made the best out of a bad situation for me. I didn’t even know you guys would be here until Jameson opened the door! David chose to keep me in the dark, for fuck’s sake.”

At the sound of my brother’s name they both growl, and I groan in frustration. As much as I want to understand what the hell has been going on, another part of me doesn’t want to keep rehashing shit that we can’t change. The whole thing is infuriating.

“He definitely hasn’t helped the situation,” Ezra murmurs under his breath, and I raise my hands to stop them from continuing.

“I get it, I really do, but right now I just want to be here, with you guys, remembering how happy I used to be in your

company. I'm sure you've had your own shit to deal with, so have I, and this, being here with you both, makes me feel safe, calm and relaxed. I want to bask in that for a little while. Even if it's just for tonight. Tomorrow, I'm going to remember how dickish you have been to me since I got here," I admit, dropping my mental walls a little to let the truth seep out, and Ezra nods as I glance between them.

"We want that too," he answers, and it's like a part of my soul settles, serenity washing over me as he wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me against his chest.

I don't move for a moment, fighting with myself over whether I'm giving in too easily, but deep down I know I'm not. I'm just relenting, for a minute. They're mad, just like me, but for different reasons, and if I want them to respect me and my thoughts and opinions, then I have to do the same.

Lead by example with these adult children, Lou-Lou.

Communication has always been a major factor for us, and I'm not going to ruin it the second they offer an olive branch, even if it is only temporary.

I wrap my arm around Ezra's waist, loving the feel of his worn band tee under my cheek as his arms tighten around me.

"Of course you give him all of the snuggles first, Luce, don't play me like that. I said I was sorry," Leo adds with a fake pout, and I turn to look at him with my eyebrows raised.

"No you fucking didn't, Leo Cooper. Ezra said it, and you denied it," I point out, and he waves his hand dismissively at me.

"Semantics," he says with a smile.

"Sure," I respond with an eye roll. "But in all seriousness, I really am tired and hungry, I—"

"I will make us some food while you choose a movie, and Ezra can just sit there as useless as ever," he jokes as I sit up and Ezra's arm falls away from my body.

I miss the contact instantly, but he quickly jumps to his feet to shove Leo toward the kitchen as I stare, remembering

them acting just like this years ago. It's as if I've never been away.

A rock settles in my stomach as I feel the other part of the hole missing, and I clear my throat, approaching the subject delicately because I know their answer is going to hurt.

“So, I'm assuming Jagger and Jameson aren't here because they don't feel the same as you guys. They don't want to figure this shit out,” I state, and they instantly stop playing around to face me with sad, guilty faces, and my heart sinks.

“They don't. Not yet, Lou-Lou. Give them time,” Ezra murmurs, and I shake my head.

“They don't deserve it.”

And I definitely don't need a lame excuse on their behalf. They have their own mouths and they sure know how to fucking use them.

I busy myself with putting away my school stuff, before placing my bag at the side of the couch, and flopping down into the corner. When I get comfortable I find Leo has gone to the kitchen to sort food, and Ezra is quietly sitting on the other corner to me, flipping through the movie options.

I made it awkward, but fuck, I don't care.

Leo and Ezra being here right now doesn't change things how I really want and need it to. I need them in my life, and I want to be more than friends. All four of them. I always have and always will. Mood swings and all, that's never going to change.

But they never stay split on a decision for long. The twins will either let me in again or Leo and Ezra will go back to hating me, and I don't think I could survive the latter. I want to put the effort in and understand, but fuck, this isn't a one man band.

“Get out of your head, Lou-Lou,” Ezra murmurs. I turn to glance at him to find a soft smile on his lips, and I sigh.

“I can't, Ezra. I've spent the past three years dreaming of this, and nothing is going how I imagined. I feel like I have no

control over the situation,” I admit, my mouth unable to shut up as I spill my feelings out to Ezra.

He spins his legs up and over the arm of the couch, placing his head in my lap as he smiles up at me and I stare down at him in surprise.

He remembers.

Whenever we were younger and I was upset, I never wanted to be coddled or bubble-wrapped, but I always struggled to calm myself down without human contact. Until one day, when Ezra flopped his head down in my lap and I proceeded to run my fingers through his soft, curly locks. It’s not the same length that it used to be, but the moment I drag my fingers through his brown hair I instantly relax.

Neither of us say a word as he hits play, the movie of choice is, *The Hangover*. Classic, I can definitely go for that.

I fall into a rhythm, stroking his hair while the movie plays until Leo comes in with a plate full of food, and my stomach grumbles at the delicious smells. As he moves to stand in front of me he pauses, before placing my plate on the arm of the couch and raises his finger to his lips.

Glancing down at Ezra, his eyes are closed and his chest slowly rises and falls in deep breaths, and Leo sighs in relief.

“I hope you don’t plan on moving. He’s got three years worth of sleep to catch up on.”



Whispered voices pull me from my deep sleep, my closed eyes scrunching as my nose wrinkles, hating the disturbance, but the second I register the tones, my heart rate spikes jolting me out of my peaceful sleep.

“I say we just fucking leave them there,” Jagger grunts.

“Don’t be a dick, Jag. They’ll be late for classes,” Leo defends as I try to wiggle my fingers and toes discreetly so they don’t know I’m awake.

The more I come to my senses the more I take stock of my body, feeling the cramped, muscle pain in my neck and the heavy weight on my lap.

How the fuck did I fall asleep last night?

“It’ll serve him right for falling asleep on her. She doesn’t deserve any of us welcoming her back with open arms, especially not *him*. Have you assholes forgotten what happened or something?” Jameson adds harshly, and my blood runs ice cold as his words hit my soul, splintering it a little more.

“It’s also because of *her* he’s actually fucking asleep for the first time in three years too,” Leo argues, and I can’t take anymore. I can’t lay here and let them talk about me like I’m not right here.

Stretching my legs out in front of me, I drag my hands down my face, the movement causing the room to fall silent, but the telltale sound of footsteps stomping away doesn’t surprise me.

When I reluctantly peel my eyes open, I find Leo and Jameson still standing right in front of me with their arms crossed and their eyes firmly fixed on me. Leo has a more gentle gaze, almost like he cares and last night made a difference, but has no clue how to calm the tension building around us. While Jameson just looks angry as fuck, like always, and the longer he stares, the angrier he gets.

Ignoring them, I glance down at the weight on my lap to find Ezra’s curls exactly where they were when he laid down in my lap last night, except he’s turned to face the back of the couch.

I fell asleep on the couch with Ezra.

Butterflies form in my stomach causing my heart to beat erratically, and when I see his gray eyes flutter open, a smile instantly takes over my face. It feels like the first genuine smile I’ve given someone in years.

“Hey,” he murmurs groggily as Jameson huffs, and I hold back the eye roll I’m burning to release.

“Hey,” I offer in response as my fingers instinctively trace through his hair, and Jameson curses out loud, gaining everyone’s attention, so I give that motherfucker a one finger salute with my other hand.

“For fuck’s sake. Is this for real? You’re going to just fall for her shit, *again*? Like she didn’t let us treat her like a fucking queen before she ran? Like we didn’t burn every path to find her? Only for her to turn her nose up at us and want nothing to do with us?” He pauses, pacing in front of us as he tries to get his point across to Ezra. “You’re a bunch of assholes, and I’m going to say ‘I told you so’ when it happens again,” he hisses, his face getting redder as a vein protrudes on his forehead with anger, and it makes my own rage bubble quickly to the surface.

“Did you confirm with *me* that I wanted nothing to do with you? Or are you making shit up for your ‘hate on Lou-Lou’ tirade,” I bark back, rising to my feet when Ezra moves to sit up. I place myself toe to toe with Jameson, blocking him getting to the door and doing his own disappearing act.

Leo lifts his hand to my shoulder, an attempt to calm me down, but I quickly bat him away. I don’t need to cool off or relax, I need Jameson to see I’m just as fucking angry as he is with the situation.

Jameson smirks down at me, the red mark in his iris prominent as emotion swirls in his eyes. Jameson’s hands clench at his sides as he intentionally looks me over. I can’t imagine what state I’m in, wearing yesterday’s clothes and my messy bed head taking over, making me look so *not* put together.

“We found little David, in some dirty room at a crackhouse, high on coke with a cock deep in his mouth paying off debts he couldn’t keep up with. He told us what *you* said, and when we wanted to be sure, Jagger came hunting for you. He repeated what you said to him. Word. For. Word.” His finger jabs in the air between us, punctuating each word as confusion morphs my face.

“The first time I saw Jagger in three years was the day I showed up here and was taking my shit upstairs. The last time before that was the day my brother dragged me away, and he was standing on your front porch watching us drive down the street,” I respond darkly, my voice hollow as I try to wrap my head around his lie. *Jagger’s lie.*

“Don’t fucking lie, Ella. Jagger. Told. Us.”

His chest heaves as he lowers his face to mine, but I don’t move or flinch under his intense gaze. This is all bullshit. Anxiety and stress burn my lungs as I try to comprehend all of their crap.

“Then. Jagger. Fucking. Lied.” I punctuate the words just as he did, but he shakes his head, dismissing my truth as he takes a step back and his eyes fall closed for a moment. I get it, that’s his twin brother, but it’s still a lie all the same. “Where’s Jagger? Get him in here,” I add, not removing my gaze from Jameson when the deep rumble of Jagger’s voice seeps into the room.

“I’m already fucking here, *Luella.*”

I whip my gaze over my shoulder, focusing solely on him as he leans against the door frame without a care in the world. Like the lie that fell from his mouth when they first came looking for me didn’t set the stage for all of *this*.

“When did you come find me? And what is it I *apparently* said to you in response?” I demand, turning to face him properly as I fold my arms over my chest defensively. I can still feel Ezra beside me as he remains on the couch, but I can’t look to Ezra or Leo for support. Not when someone I once trusted with everything turns out to be no better than my goddamn brother. This is between Jagger and me.

“I found you at a party in White River dancing with some guy,” he states blandly, like I’m boring him, and it only makes me angrier, my tunnel vision focused on the shit spilling from his mouth.

My body feels so tense, waiting for the blow to come from him verbally, but I don’t recall ever seeing him at a party in

White River.

I would know any of these four anywhere, anytime.

“I didn’t—”

“You didn’t see me. I know,” Jagger interrupts as he stands tall, and I hear Leo’s sharp intake of breath to my left.

“What the fuck, Jag?” Ezra murmurs, surprise rich in his voice, but the shock surrounding me does nothing to ease my anger.

Slowly prowling toward me, I see disappointment in his eyes. “I saw you there at the party, dancing with some guy. His hands were all over you. Groping your tits, stroking his fingers over your hips, and *you just let him.*” Disgust burns in his brown eyes as he stares me down.

Fuck.

I mean, that could have been one of many parties I went to in White River. Hell, it’s how I spent most of my time. Trying to forget about *them*.

He comes to a stop in front of me, his hand brushing over the stubble on his chin as I continue to meet his gaze. All while he looks completely unfazed.

“And at what stage did you interrupt and have this make believe conversation with me?” I bite out, refusing to deny what he’s describing, and he snickers.

“I didn’t. You clearly didn’t need us anymore or have any interest, so I didn’t waste my time on a fucking whore.”

My hand lifts, and the sound of my palm smacking against his cheek rings out around us, but he barely moves an inch from the impact. His brown eyes burn into mine, darkening as anger builds inside of him, but fuck him, I have a raging inferno inside of me.

“I. Am. Not. A. Whore,” I grind out as he remains still, refusing to acknowledge the red mark growing on his cheek as my hands fist at my sides. “Have I been fucked by others? Yes. But I spent those three years drowning myself with sex and alcohol, or anything at all, that would make me forget how

broken I was without you.” My voice rasps as I get louder with each word.

I feel raw, exposed, and utterly vulnerable. But they need to hear the truth. *My truth.*

Jagger’s eyes widen ever so slightly at my admission, but I brush past him, not wanting to hear anymore lies come from his mouth while dodging Leo’s hand as he tries to stop me.

“Lou-Lou, wait,” Ezra calls out, and I pause when I get to the living room door, looking back at what was once my world.

“Fuck all of you. You know *nothing*. Nothing at all,” I spit out as anger threatens to turn into tears as my emotions get the better of me. “You had no say or control over me while I was in White River. Fuck, I had no say or control over myself because I let my feelings burn me from the inside out. But you do *not* get to throw that in my face or call me a whore. Ever.”

LOU-LOU



“Lou-Lou, over here!” Naomi calls out, pulling my attention from across the courtyard to the lawn under the massive Red Maple tree.

I wave in acknowledgment and head in her direction, maneuvering around the people who already have their tents and sleeping bags setup.

After this morning, I decided I didn’t want to be around for another Izaro house party, and took Naomi up on her offer to attend the charity sleepover in the courtyard on campus tonight.

I didn’t know what to expect, but I did *not* anticipate this many people being here. The place is almost full. I paid my thirty dollar entry fee for the donation when I got here, and I’ve spent the past fifteen minutes trying to find Naomi in a sea of tents and bodies.

I’m going to relax, let my hair down, and forget about the assholes back in my house that always seem to have the ability to cause havoc in my life.

Smiling at Naomi as I approach, I notice the purple tent she’s sitting next to, and I pray it’s for us. I managed to buy a sleeping bag earlier from Walmart, but I didn’t even consider a tent even though the night temperature in Michigan is cooler. Complete fucking oversight on my part and I hope I don’t have to suffer in the cold.

I drop down beside her as she holds out a plastic cup filled with beer in it for me, and I take it appreciatively.

She's wearing a *Game of Thrones* pajama set with her brown hair tied up in a bun on top of her head, and it suits her whole vibe. I have my hair the exact same way, but with pale blue checkered pajama pants and an old, long-sleeved band shirt, nowhere near as matching and as put together as Naomi is.

"Hey, I'm glad you made it," she says as I take a sip of my drink and drop my bag down, letting Naomi take my sleeping bag as she puts it in the purple tent. Thank God.

I turn my attention to see everyone else sitting around us as I respond. "Yeah, me too. I didn't realize so many people would be here," I state honestly, and she nods in agreement.

"True, right? Let me introduce you to a few of my other friends," she offers, pointing to the cute redhead to her left. "This is Poppy, her boyfriend Derek, Tommy, and of course, you know Vince from our Psychology class," she finishes pointing at the guy Leo forced from his seat the other day, and I cringe as I offer an awkward wave.

"Don't worry," Tommy says, waving a hand dismissively as he leans toward Vince. "It'll be old news soon enough. The Izaros and their two little errand boys will do something else soon enough that'll have everyone gossiping again in no time."

Oh, so I'm gossip now? That's new information.

His words about Ezra and Leo have me sitting tall and immediately becoming defensive in a split second, but I bite my bottom lip and keep my smart ass remark to myself. They aren't mine to defend, not after this morning. And even though this guy says the gossip mill will move on to something or someone new, what he doesn't seem to realize is, if the drama revolves around them, it'll still likely involve me if that class and my first Izaro party was anything to go by.

As if sensing my internal struggle, Naomi clears her throat and slings her arm around my shoulder. "Anyway, when do you play your next game?" she asks, shifting the conversation and attention back to the guys who instantly start reeling off football shit and I sag back in relief.

I remain mostly quiet as I observe everyone interacting and the whole courtyard soon ends up drenched in darkness as we party our way late into the night. Until someone suddenly turns on the temporary, twinkling lights they must have set up around the lawn earlier in the day, and it looks cute as hell.

It's strange to feel so calm and at ease with a drink in my hand and not want to delve into a make-believe connection with someone to make myself forget the four assholes. I hate the guys right now.

Hate. Them.

But this refreshing sense of serenity I feel is because of them being so close again, I just know it.

“So, is everything okay with you and that Leo guy?” Vince asks, and I turn my attention to him, trying to see what angle he's trying to play, but to my surprise he just looks curious about *me* and not drama.

The thought of Leo, and how he and Ezra were treating me last night, makes me desperate to seek them out, but they believed both David *and* Jagger. It's like I never really knew them at all.

“Everything is sorted out. Just a misunderstanding,” I answer vaguely, and he nods.

“So, what are your cool ass dreams for the future?” he asks, swiping his blond hair back off his face as he edges closer toward me so our knees brush. He seems genuinely intrigued, and it's strange to have a natural conversation with a guy.

If we were in White River or even Knight's Creek, I would be strategically placing myself in his lap right now, exploring him while letting him explore me without worry or care. But after Jagger's harsh words this morning, I find myself holding back. *Whore*.

“I want to be a lawyer, I haven't figured out the specifics yet, but yeah; a lawyer,” I answer, pulling my bent legs into my chest as I wrap my arms around them. His eyes widen with surprise, but not like he thinks I'm being ridiculous or

overreaching, more like he's... impressed? That's a strange feeling since the reactions I've received from administrators at Emerson U have been completely polar. "What about you?" I remember to ask, trying to act as if I'm interested, and he shrugs.

"My father runs a corporate company in New York. I get to play football here and have my fun, but at the end of it, I'll have Business Management and Economics under my wing ready to find my footing in the family business," he states, and I can hear the hint of sadness in his tone, but I don't pry, it's not for me to push.

I shiver with the cool air surrounding us as I glance at my watch. It's a little after midnight, and I'm already tired. I thought I would have been well rested after the sleep I had on the couch with Ezra, but clearly it only made me crave more sleep.

"Do you want my sweater?" he asks, pulling a backpack from behind him and holding out a gray sweater with *Emerson U* scrawled across the front, but before I can answer, a black hoodie is hanging in front of my face, blocking Vince from view.

I glance up to see who is holding it, and my heart beats heavily in my chest as my gaze meets Jameson's glare.

Fuck.

"She's good," he grunts, not pulling his eyes from mine to even glance at Vince. A typical Izaro snub.

Hovering above me in a gray hoodie with a leather jacket over it and a pair of black fitted jeans, he looks fucking lickable. Thankfully, even in my slightly tipsy state, I remember what happened between us this morning and don't throw myself at him.

I feel Naomi's fingers wrap around my arm in support as I clear my throat and straighten my spine. Fuck him.

"Actually, I'd really appreciate it, Vince," I say sweetly, looking away from the asshole above me as I bat the black hoodie out of the way.

I catch sight of Tommy looking at me with raised eyebrows as I focus on Vince. I grab his gray sweater, pulling it into my lap with a smile as I hear Jameson growl above me.

Why does this fucker show up at this moment? It's getting on my last nerve. How long has he even been here for? Wait, has he been fucking watching us?

"I. Said. She's—"

"I heard you, Izaro, and if she says she's okay with mine, then Lou-Lou can have *mine*," Vince interrupts, and my mouth dries at the tension that instantly heats up a notch. But I'm slightly impressed that Vince continues to stand his ground around these assholes, even if it may be the death of him.

"Thank you," I murmur in response like Jameson isn't even there, but my body tingles with his eyes ghosting over my skin.

"Don't fuck with me, Ella, you won't like where this goes," Jameson threatens, and I ignore him, Vince's sweater still in my lap as I turn to Naomi.

"I'm tired, are you ready to head in?" I ask, pointing at the tent behind us, and she nods.

"For sure, let's go," she mutters with a smile on her face as I rise to my feet and grab my bag.

Now, standing tall, I find myself far too close to Jameson at my side, the heat from his body touching mine as I continue to try and ignore his stare. I offer Vince his sweater back, opting to not get involved in the sweater war going on, and he takes it with a disappointed sigh.

"Lou-Lou, I'd love to take you out some time," Vince states brazenly, his gaze focused on mine as I feel Jameson's eyes burn the side of my head as I nod.

"Maybe."

Jameson's hand grips my arm as he pulls me close to whisper in my ear. "I don't do jealous, Ella. Never play these games thinking you're going to win because you're not."

I shiver in his grasp as I force myself to remember to breathe. “Good to know, pity your brother wasn’t the same, then we wouldn’t find ourselves in this situation,” I hiss in response.

With that, I step out of his hold and turn around to find Naomi already inside the tent, holding the material to the side and I crawl in next to her, but I still remain tense as I wait to see if Jameson does anything else.

Once Naomi has closed us in, blocking out the rest of the world, I slowly release the breath I was holding.

“I’m just saying, you’re attracting all the hotties and the drama, and I don’t know how you keep up,” she says with a giggle and I roll my eyes.

“Me either.”

JAMESON



I clutch the black hoodie in my hand tightly as I watch Ella's sweet ass climb in the tent behind her, closing her off from the rest of us as Naomi zips up the entrance. My jaw is beyond tense as I try to calm the anger building inside of me.

Vince Monroe, this motherfucker is going to regret the fact he keeps pushing us. Leo placed him on our radar when he made a scene in class the other day with Ella, and again now. With me.

Conversations continue around me, but I can feel the unfortunate audience looking in our direction. I really don't want to give them anything to see, but this motherfucker needs a *real* warning, and not some threatening words. Leo's verbal approach didn't work. If anything, he made it fucking worse.

Spying Vince and his friend Tommy eyeing each other, waiting to see if I'm going to do anything, I crack my neck, before rapidly dropping to a crouched position. Before Vince can even turn his attention back to me, I've dropped the hoodie onto the grass, grabbing the weasel by the collar of his shirt as my other hand grabs the switchblade in my pocket.

I tuck the knife under his chin as he tilts his head in my direction. Vince's skin pales, and his eyes widen in shock as fear washes over him. The reality of the situation sinking in.

Even though he's a freshman, surely he's heard the rumors, the whispers, about the Izaro twins. Fuck, I think the only person on campus who doesn't know how bat shit crazy we are is Ella, and that's only because she was blind to our fucked

up ways when we were kids. She has no idea how things have escalated since then. This lifestyle, it's ours, and hers, whether we like it or not.

"Do you need reminding of who you're fucking with?" I murmur, keeping my voice low and dark as I glare at him. I watch as he gulps, my breath brushing over his face before I lean back, straightening my shoulders.

"I'm not fucking with anyone," he answers, not moving a muscle as I feel his friend's eyes burn into the side of my head. People are looking, I can feel their attention our way, and the area around us has gone quiet.

"You better fucking not be, otherwise you'll have bigger issues to worry about than a blade to your throat. *That* I can promise you. So if you want to keep your dick attached, stay the fuck away from her," I bite before rising to my feet, closing the switchblade and stalking off through the crowd, as they all quickly act like they weren't watching the drama unfold.

Fuck the hoodie, let it still be there when she wakes up and comes out of the tent in the morning. It'll also serve as a reminder to the motherfuckers who think she's fair game.

I keep my head held high and shoulders relaxed as I pocket my knife and head for the exit. The *don't fuck with me* look on my face keeps even the needy girls away tonight. Thank God.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I hit the group chat quickly.

Jameson: Someone has to swap. I'm not going to be able to watch over her without pulling my blade out again. I'm on my way back to the house now.

Stepping through the archway to head off of campus, I barely put my phone in my pocket before it vibrates with an incoming message. Someone's going to be pissed at me, but I really couldn't give a shit.

Ezra: Again? What the fuck, Jameson?!

Leo: I'm on my way now.

Jameson: That motherfucker deserved it. She's in the purple tent by the maple tree, and if you happen to fucking see Vince Monroe hovering outside, please greet him with a swift kick to the dick.

I swipe a hand down my face, letting my anger get the better of me again after messaging the guys, but I force it down. We have worse things to be handling than Vince fucking Monroe, but when it comes to Ella, it seems I'm unable to stop myself from reacting on instinct.

Fuck. I was happy to hate her, but instead, all of my anger is now geared toward Jagger. That jealous motherfucker lied. To all of us, but even to me, all because he saw her dancing with some other dude. We were fucking together in the same damn womb and he *still* kept me out.

I love my brother with every cell in my body, but when he thinks he's doing what is best without bringing the situation to us to discuss, he gets on my fucking nerves.

Her outburst this morning set my soul on fire, and I didn't even go to any of my classes because I was so lost in her words and the truth that had unfolded.

Seeing the stark reality that she was the one telling the truth, and how much being apart from us hurt her, left me needing to lock myself in my room and give myself some space before I lashed out.

Turning onto our street, I can see the people partying in our yard from here and my shoulders sag in annoyance. I really don't want to deal with anyone or anything right now. I was more than happy to sit back and quietly watch Ella all

night, but the little green eyed monster and my ego got the better of me.

My phone vibrates in my hand again, and I quickly glance at the screen noticing the message is sent directly to me.

Jagger: I'm out back, come see me when you get here. Don't get sidetracked on the way, fucker.

Fuck him and his shitty mood. Someone's unhappy that we're pissed at him, like we don't have the right, and it irritates the fuck out of me even more that he feels like he didn't do anything wrong. Jagger's a big boy who needs to handle the consequences of his actions.

A part of me definitely wanted to be spiteful and shut him out of shit, but I saw the way he reacted to her words too, and they did more damage than I ever could. He deserves the pain.

I don't respond, pocketing my phone as my other hand wraps around the folded blade in my pocket, toying with the leather holder subconsciously like I always do.

Walking up our pathway, I side step a few girls stumbling out into the front yard, and opt to slip around the side of the house instead of cutting through and having to interact with more people.

The size of this damn place still gets me, and we've lived here for over a year. Leo came with Jagger, Ezra, and me when we graduated high school. He enrolled in Emerson High for his senior year and we started our freshman year at Emerson U. But even now, I'm still not used to all of the space.

It isn't our home, not when it ties back to my father. It is simply a roof over our head while we figure shit out.

Fuck, back in Nevada, Jagger and I lived in a beat-up fucking trailer with our mom, and when she passed away, our deadbeat father showed up. Only, he turned out to be way better off financially than any of us expected. We were

dubious, and rightfully fucking so. Now, our house may be bigger, but so are our fucking problems.

The back porch light highlights the whole yard, and my gaze instantly zones in on Jagger, ignoring all the other shit since I hate this whole charade. He's standing by the beer pong table with Julia hanging off his fucking arm *again*. She's a hot redhead for sure, but she's clingy as fuck, and well... just not Ella.

His eyes find mine as I make my way across the grass, my hands firmly in my pockets as I twirl the knife, and he thankfully brushes Julia off to meet me halfway.

"Do I need to arrange any damage control with you and your little blade?" he asks, referring to my text, and I roll my eyes.

"Nope. I just needed to cement a message, and hopefully he heard it loud and clear," I respond, glancing at the crowd in the yard who continue to have their fun around us.

"Good," he says, nodding as he rubs the back of his neck, his telltale move that he has something else to say. I raise my eyebrow at him, waiting for him to spit it out. I might be pissed as hell at him, but he's still my brother, and we're still fighting against far too much shit. "Dad's called in another run this week, and then a fight again. Next Friday. It looks like a four man job, but then I'll need you guys covering the party front here while I play the puppet at a fight in Detroit."

Fuckkk.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My hands clench in my pockets as anger burns through my veins. We have no fucking say in the situation, we know exactly what's at stake, and there's no question whether we'll fall in line or not.

With a nod, I leave Jag outside and head for my room. I move quickly, avoiding everyone's gaze as the dance tracks continue to play, and I rush upstairs, two steps at a time, until I'm standing at the top.

My room is the first on the left, but my eyes fall to the room at the end of the hall. *Ella's*. Three years ago, she left, and we had no fucking clue what was going on until days later, when everyone's lives imploded.

There's a lot she doesn't know, and even more I really don't want her to ever find out.

LOU-LOU



Back kick. Push kick. Side kick. My movements are fluid as I go through the motions in quick succession while I push myself harder. Feeling the sweat as it drips down my spine, my forehead, and in between my breasts. I pause for a second to swipe the loose, wet tendrils of hair stuck to the sides of my face before I lift my arm to block the pad coming my way.

“Again, Lou-Lou,” Keith, the instructor, calls out as he takes a step back in the ring.

I shake my arms out, trying to relax my muscles before we go again. A slight bend to my knees, my shoulders pulled back, and my fists held high covering my jaw, *this motherfucker is going down.*

Bouncing on my toes, he does the same as I plant my left foot on the ground, extending my right foot fast and sharp in his direction, and I hit the pad in his hand perfectly. There’s not a second to waste as he brings his other pad around and I quickly pull my leg back and re-extend rapidly.

“Keep going!” he shouts, having me repeat the motions again and again without pause, just as I had previously done with my other leg, and my muscles cry for a reprieve. “Excellent,” he yells, slapping the pads together and I drop my leg, resting my wrapped hands on my knees as I catch my breath and get my heart rate under control.

Fuck.

I haven’t been to a kickboxing class in a long ass time, and this fucker definitely knows how to put me through my paces.

But it's like riding a bike, seamlessly slipping into the rhythm like I haven't been away.

“Did all you assholes see that? That's the level I expect you to be at if you want a chance of getting in a ring. Lou-Lou doesn't even want to go pro and she's running fucking circles around the lot of you. Start taking tips and get your shit together,” he bellows, pointing in my direction as the guys all standing around us watch intently. I'm so exhausted I can't even bring myself to react to the glares I can feel burning into my skull.

A lot of these motherfuckers think they're gangsters, a few could definitely make it to the pros if they worked hard enough, but for guys my age, they are all too cocksure for me. While Keith looks like an OG with his tattooed head, wrinkled hands, and aged face. He still has the moves now, so I can't imagine what he was like at our age.

“Maybe Lou-Lou could take my tip,” Finn hollers, making the rest of the guys snicker, and I roll my eyes as I stand tall again, looking in his direction. This little fucker introduced himself earlier, thinking I was here to fangirl. Motherfucker soon learned I'm not the one who should be fangirling.

“Baby, that's all there is to it, so it's a no from me,” I sass back with a sweet smile on my lips, and a few of the guys chuckle, but most of them remain silent, watching for Finn's reaction first. Finn seems to be the cool guy around here that everyone wants to follow and be like. With his buzz cut and bulky frame, he looks like he rolled straight out of juvie. “Are we done here?” I ask Keith and he nods, smacking Finn around the back of his head with one of the pads, distracting Finn from glaring at me.

Without a backward glance, I head through the gym and straight to the women's changing room. This is only my second time here, but after my first visit on Sunday, Keith asked me to stop by this morning. Now, I'm signed up to two classes a week, and it feels fucking fantastic.

Stepping into the red and white drab changing room, I quickly pull my bag from the locker and move over to the

benches. It's tiny in here, likely because they don't get many women.

I glance over at the open shower area and cringe. No way am I fucking doing that here. The door doesn't lock and it looks like I'd come out filthier than when I stepped in. They *definitely* don't have many girls coming here.

I glance at my phone to see it's almost seven, and opt to run home like this, in my pink sports bra and black yoga pants. Quickly lacing up my sneakers, I put my earbuds in, pull my mini backpack over my shoulders, and get the fuck out of here.

I thankfully don't run into anyone as I leave, the cool morning air touching my skin as I step outside. It looks like another overcast day today. The temperature is slowly continuing to drop, and it feels completely foreign to me compared to all my time in Arizona, Nevada, and California.

It's only a ten minute jog home from the gym, since it's located on the outskirts of town, and the motion will keep me warm.

Cranking up *Remember* by Becky Hill and David Guetta, I instantly step into a light run, my pace matching the beat.

My mind instantly goes back to the charity event for the hundredth time, how Jameson just appeared out of nowhere, and it makes me wonder how much they've been doing that? Blending in with the scenery and watching me wherever I go. I can't say I don't like it, I've always wanted to be the center of their attention, but maybe that was just a pipe dream.

It feels like there's been too much hurt and pain now. Especially after my evening with Leo and Ezra was ruined by Jagger's lie the following morning.

Were they always this overbearing and harsh? Was I just used to being on the inside? Or was I oblivious because they were my best friends, literally the center of my universe?

They can't keep trying to walk all over me. I'm my own fucking woman, and I've done just fine without them. I haven't loved every second of it, but fuck, I did what I needed to do to survive.

Vince wasn't around the morning after the charity sleepover, and if I hadn't seen him at school I'd have been worried something was wrong. But Jameson was wrong. That motherfucker is jealous. Just like his asshole brother.

Shaking my head, I push all of their drama to the back of my mind.

They get to be with whatever girls they want, but yet I can't be with whatever guys I want. They're attempting to control my every move. I think they need reminding that the Lou-Lou Carter who didn't take their shit still exists.

The wind whips my face as I turn onto my street and run up the driveway, and only when I reach the door do I slow to a walk.

Unlocking the door, I let myself inside, and I pull my earbuds out, only to be met with complete silence. Great, no one's here still. I don't know whether it's a blessing or a curse, but I'm aware I miss the presence of others in the house even if it is *them*.

Opting for food first, I make my way into the kitchen to make coffee and some toast. I really can't cook for the life of me. Fuck, I'd have continued living on takeout for the past few days if I hadn't opened the fridge to find prepared meals wrapped with my name and days of the week written on them.

Leo fucking Cooper. Chef extraordinaire.

From lasagna, meatloaf, and salmon, to cookies and pumpkin pie. God, he has been working his magic in this kitchen, and I am happy to reap the benefits. He has always been a good cook, but he is phenomenal now.

The bread popping out of the toaster makes me jump, pulling me from my thoughts as I quickly grab the butter and smother the toast in the goodness. There's a certain way to make toast, and it's not hard, the rule is simple; don't leave it out on the side too long without buttering, otherwise it won't melt. Nobody wants chunks of butter sitting on top of the toast, that's just gross.

I drop down into a seat at the dining table, with the perfect view of the pristine yard, placing my plate beside my steaming cup of coffee as I let the silence wash over me once again. It's Wednesday, and I haven't seen a single one of the assholes in this house. Leo has magically appeared at a few classes, and I've seen the four of them in the food hall a few times, but *never* in this house.

I can't help but get the sense that something is going on, and they're quite happy for me to not be in the know. I recall them being like this once before, when the gang they were running in had them doing some initiation shit.

It could be nothing. The separation between us could just be the ramifications of the distance that has grown between us over the past three years, but there's something gnawing at my stomach which tells me it isn't related to that.

With a heavy sigh, I lift the coffee to my lips as I run over what I have to do today. My day is mainly filled with classes, but the thought of my dreaded literature class has me freaking out. I have to read a passage to the class as part of our public speaking assignment.

A shiver runs down my spine as nerves get the better of me.

Ask me to call someone out or talk with my fists in front of others, and I'll do it without batting an eye, but ask me to write a fucking poem and deliver it to a room full of people, and I think I'm going to hurl.

Pushing my toast away, I swipe a hand down my face as I glance at my phone looking for the time.

Shit, I need to shower and get moving, but I *really* want to have a sick day today.

A message pings on my phone, and a smile ghosts my lips as I see my friend Eden's name flash across the screen.

Eden: Hey girl, I hope you're rocking it at Emerson U! I can't wait for you to meet Carter. I miss you! We have to

plan a visit soon.

My oldest friend, well, the only girl friend I've ever really had that's stuck around, has relocated to Ohio with her guys, and her newborn baby, Carter. I wish I could be jealous of the life she's living, she really seems so happy, but not in that nauseating kind of way. Anyone else and I'd be jealous to the core, but she deserves it. She's been through far too fucking much.

Lou-Lou: Hey! I can't wait, he needs all of my snuggles. We definitely will. Please, flood my inbox with all his cuteness until then.

With a genuine smile plastered on my face, her message has made me forget about today's ridiculous worry of public speaking. Using the moment to motivate myself to get up, I quickly scrape my plate and place my dishes in the sink.

Making my way upstairs, I smile at the lock on my door, completely surprised Jameson hasn't caused a riot over it again and taken it off. Quickly letting myself in, I toss my phone and keys on the bed beside the clothes I've already pulled out, and rush to shower.

I wash my hair and body in a blur, the floral scent circling around me before I wrap a towel around my body and step back into my room.

My mind notices the silence again and it irritates me, so I grab my phone and crank up my latest playlist, relaxing a little as the music surrounds me. Making quick work of blow drying my hair, I don't have time to curl or straighten it today, so I part it and French braid it back into pigtails, and spin each of them into buns.

Love it.

Slipping into my tight black jeans, I pull my black, thin strapped, cropped top over my head, and fasten my lace up

boots. I'm not saying this new outfit goes perfectly with my designer coat, but I definitely had it in mind when I made the purchase.

I use a little bronzer, mascara, and eyeliner, before I feel ready, but the knowledge of reading this fucking poem later in class has my nerves fluttering.

Moving to stand in front of my floor length mirror to appreciate the full look, I take a deep breath before I scream in surprise when I see Ezra's reflection behind me. He leans against the door frame with a tired look on his face, and it's on the tip of my tongue to ask if he's okay, but I remember the last time I saw him properly.

He'd slept with his head in my lap, and the next morning the knowledge of Jagger's lie came to light. Which leads to the assholes ghosting me again.

Fuck.

I grab my phone and turn off the music, cringing at the awkward silence that surrounds us.

"You're nervous," he states, folding his arms over his chest as he looks me over, and I rake my teeth over my bottom lip.

"Uh, I'm fine," I answer vaguely, avoiding eye contact with him as I get ready to leave, but when I move for the door he doesn't move, blocking my exit. Instead, he raises his eyebrow at me in question, unfolding his arms and stuffing his hands in his pockets as he crosses his legs like he's getting comfortable.

"I can see in your eyes that you're anxious about something. What is it?"

I roll my eyes at his ability to notice everything, and sigh. "I have a public speaking part in one of my classes today is all, no big deal," I murmur in response, hoping that would make him move, but his gray eyes widen in understanding.

"Lou-Lou Carter, are you afraid?" His voice sounds teasing, a slight twinkle in his eyes and I want to glare at him or tell him to fuck off, but the chuckle in his voice is refreshing. I've missed that sound.

“I said I’m fine,” I grumble in response, meeting his gaze, and he takes a step forward, bracing his hands on my shoulders. My body tenses at his touch, making my heart pound.

“You’ve got this, Lou-Lou. You either walk like a king or —”

“Or like you don’t give a fuck who is,” I interrupt, finishing the old saying we used to live by, and a soft smile ghosts my lips as he smirks at me.

Happy with himself, he leans forward, pressing his lips to my forehead, before stepping back and vanishing into his room leaving me stunned.

I remain frozen in place, my fingers skimming over my skin where he just touched me, and chills run through my body.

Fuck.

I’m always going to be fucking addicted to these motherfuckers, craving their touch.

EZRA



Slipping into the classroom quietly, I stay to the back, watching as Lou-Lou fidgets nervously with the cuff of her coat waiting for her turn to present.

I haven't seen her nervous in a very long time, well, besides the obvious fact of not seeing her in three years. And this morning, when she uttered the final line to our 'words to live by' back to me, it reminded me exactly what I was missing out on by pushing her away.

Ghosting her again just makes me an ass, I fucking know that, but this is harder than I thought.

I'm missing out on *her*, everything about her, and I have spent far too long missing her to let this beautiful soul slip through my fingers again. We all need to figure our individual shit out first and then have an actual conversation as a group. But trying to get Jameson and Jagger on the same page is like trying to force it to rain in a desert with no clouds.

We have a copy of Lou-Lou's schedule, not that she needs to know that, but I used it this morning to see when she would have this speech, and called ahead to ask the professor to make sure she went in the second half of the class so I could make it in time from my business class.

"Luella Carter, you're next," the professor calls out, and I watch her stand slowly as I lean against the back wall with my arms folded over my chest waiting for her to begin.

She swallows hard as she moves to stand at the podium, and I watch as her lips barely move, but I can tell from here

she's repeating those words from earlier.

Either walk like a king or like you don't give a fuck who is.

I watch as she wets her lips and looks around at the students, her eyes skimming over everyone and my heart starts to pound in my chest in anticipation of her seeing me, and her eyes widen slightly when she does.

Raising my eyebrows expectantly, she rolls her eyes before clearing her throat and looking down at the sheet of paper in her trembling hand.

Pain is knowing love and losing it.

Love is caring even when you shouldn't.

Caring is putting someone else first before yourself.

Putting someone else first makes you forget to be selfish.

Being selfish is never wanting to lose what you once had.

Five lines.

Five lines and she cut me deeper than any blade has.

Five lines and I just saw her fucking soul as she uttered those words while maintaining eye contact with me the entire time.

She's always been my world. The *only* girl for me.

Fuck. I've never touched another girl. *Ever*.

But, Jagger, he steps in when the void she left consumes me.

He tries to help me forget it all, but right now, I want to remember every last breath.

With a wink, I saunter out of the room like my heart isn't pounding wildly in my chest. My insides are on fire, desperate for her.

If I plan to win her back properly, she's going to need more than my words, she's going to need to see action. Not only from me but from *all* of us.

We're a team, the five of us, we always have been, and it's about time everyone remembered that.

LOU-LOU



“Are you sure this looks good?” Naomi asks, posing in the mirror as she looks at herself from different angles, and I smile.

“Girl, you look hot. H.O.T. Hot,” I state, swiping my hands together like I’m raining money on her and she giggles in response, reaching for the bottle of tequila and take a swig before flopping back down on my bed.

In a fitted black dress and a pair of matching Vans, she’s rocking her own style, and I love it.

“If you don’t think every single guy down there is going to drop dead at the sight of you in that dress, you’re truly mistaken,” she says with a grin, her eyes dancing over my outfit, and I roll my eyes.

That’s dramatic.

I think.

I move to step in front of the floor length mirror as my hands smooth down my dress. It’s daring as hell, and I’m completely obsessed with it. Khaki green in color, the neckline cuts down into a deep ‘V’, revealing my pushed up cleavage. A matching string of material ties around my waist and the chiffon see-through skirt stops mid-thigh.

My matching khaki green thong came with the dress, showing off my trim waist and the globes of my ass. Letting my blonde curls frame my face, and my smokey eye shadow deepen the blue of my eyes, I feel sexy as fuck.

Naomi is right. It's a motherfucking show stopper.

And I hope it serves its purpose.

After Ezra appeared at my Literature class, I haven't seen a single one of the guys since. It's like they fucking disappeared again, and it's frustrating as hell. I thought seeing Ezra there meant something, but clearly not.

I want their attention, even if it's to argue and scream at each other, I want it. I'm my own version of toxic, constantly wanting what always hurts.

Relaxing in my room earlier, the house suddenly came to life with music blasting and people showing up in groups out of nowhere. I didn't even realize the guys were home, but I refused to go in search of any of them, and I didn't make a scene. Instead, I called Naomi, and she's been here with me ever since, getting ready to attend the party in style.

I tried to avoid the guys and the drama last weekend by going to the charity event, but that was an epic fucking failure.

If you can't beat them, join them. And boy am I going to join them in style. I really can't seem to escape their big dick energy, so I give up trying.

I feel burned by the four assholes. And David. Fuck, all of them together. But apparently I like dancing and playing with fire.

"One more for liquid courage?" Naomi says, holding the tequila in one hand and two shot glasses in another, and my eyes widen with delight as I nod, walking over to the bed.

"Only one?" I ask, pouting my lips, and she shakes her head at me.

"We can make tequila sunrises when we get downstairs," she offers as she pours the shots, and I take one from her outstretched hand with a nod. That sounds like the perfect idea to me.

Clinking our glasses together, we don't count down as we tip the liquor back and let it burn down our throats.

“Holy fuck,” I hiss, my face scrunched like it isn’t the third shot we’ve done, and Naomi laughs as she stamps her feet rapidly on the floor in reaction to the burn.

“Let’s get down there before I pass out,” she says with a giggle, and I nod in agreement. I want to dance, and that’s not going to happen if we’re comatose.

Running my hands over the thin material of my dress once more, I grin at myself. Whether they like it or not, *everyone’s* eyes will be on me tonight. This is my front, my self-created barrier. I’ve let the four assholes see my pain and struggles, even saying them out loud, but it didn’t make a difference to them. They’ve still acted the same.

So now they’re getting who everyone else has come to know since I left Nevada three years ago; Lou-Lou Carter, party girl.

Slinking my arm through Naomi’s, I opt to leave my phone on my nightstand, and when I lock my bedroom door behind us, I tuck the key into my bra. I straighten the neckline as we head for the stairs. I’m truly surprised Jameson’s temper hasn’t exploded because of the new lock on my door, but I’m counting it as a win, even if I wanted to rile him up with the move.

Chasing Highs by Alma blasts through the speakers, and I can barely hear myself think as we reach the bottom of the steps and the bouncers undo the rope for us. I watch as the bald guy to our left takes in my outfit, his eyes flaring in surprise before he gulps and quickly averts his gaze, but I saw the heat there for that split second.

I hear Naomi chuckle from behind me as I slip past the bouncers, and I know it’s official; Lou-Lou motherfucking Carter has arrived.

Pulling Naomi through the crowd, I head straight for the kitchen, wanting a tequila sunrise like she promised, and every time I feel someone’s eyes on me, I notice they quickly look away after I catch them staring.

Motherfuckers.

The second I step into the kitchen, my eyes fall to Jameson who stands there with three girls hanging off his every word as he crouches down to their level, talking animatedly with his hands.

Do not give in to the green-eyed monster, Lou-Lou. I tell myself, but anger bubbles to the surface instantly. My mind still jumps into the ‘he’s mine’ frame, even after all these years, and it’s not easy for me to slip out of it.

As if sensing my arrival, Jameson’s eyes shift in our direction, and I watch as his gaze slowly drags over every inch of my body, making me fucking preen as my skin heats.

“Trouble at two o’clock,” Naomi murmurs in my ear, indicating Jameson, and I grin because I already see how he’s reacting to me and I’m unable to pull my eyes from him.

In his painted-on black jeans and matching fitted-tee, he looks hot as hell, but the anger brewing in his brown eyes doesn’t match the rest of his aesthetic. His gaze is fixed on my core, covered by the thinnest slip of material, and I make a show of teasing my hands over the chiffon.

Jameson’s hands flex at his sides as he rises to his full height, the girls around him almost forgotten until he meets my gaze and I see the challenge. Even the girls around him naturally take a small step back as they feel his energy change.

“Ella,” he yells, cutting off the girls as they talk around him, and they all look in my direction with glares on their faces. “Get over here and tell these girls how good my dick is,” he says with a grin, blindly grabbing a beer off the kitchen island beside him and bringing it to his lips casually.

“Are we engaging or running?” Naomi mutters in my ear, and I squeeze her arm in reassurance as I shrug my shoulders at him.

“I didn’t know you had one,” I say with a sweet smile, and Naomi scoffs beside me as she bites back her laugh, even one of the girls by Jameson snickers too. The other two, however, immediately move to jump to his defense, taking a step toward me, but he quickly swings his arm out, holding them in place.

With the other hand, he beckons us over with a crook of his finger, and I roll my eyes, the anger burning in his eyes still noticeable, but this fucker's deflecting.

"He's standing in front of all of the liquor, if we plan on enjoying a cocktail or two, we're going to have to head over there anyway," I say, turning my gaze to Naomi's and she grins, nodding along with me. She knows full well I'd be going over there whether he was blocking the alcohol or not.

Naomi pulls her arm from my grip, switching the position so she's now holding my arm, and I lead the way. I can't stop my hips from swaying seductively from side to side as I cover the short distance to them, and it fills me with confidence and arousal when Jameson's eyes track every single move.

As I come to a stop beside Jameson, I press my arm against his as I lean over the table and get the tequila I need, offering my back to the rest of the room and the girls standing beside him. Don't get me wrong, they're pretty, they'd just be prettier elsewhere.

"What the fuck do you think you're wearing?" he murmurs against my ear, and my teeth rake over my bottom lip as his gravelly voice fills my veins with desire. A shudder runs uncontrollably through my body.

"Oh, this little thing? I've had it a while," I say in response, batting my eyelashes innocently as I look up at him, but his gaze is focused on my breasts.

Naomi takes the liquor from me as she gets to work making our drinks, mixing the tequila and orange juice together, and they even have the grenadine syrup too. Perfect. I take the opportunity to turn and face the girls he's trying to impress, giving him a scathing look as I turn my head. Asshole. I don't want Jameson to really see how jealous I am.

Last weekend he said he wasn't jealous when he made a scene with Vince in front of everyone at the charity event, and I will not embarrass myself by caving. I have to keep my emotions in check.

This cat-and-mouse game will get tiring eventually, but I won't be the first to buckle under the overwhelming feelings.

"Are you guys having fun?" I ask, looking at Jameson first as I press my chest into his arm teasingly, before glancing at the other three. It catches me off guard when Jameson slowly removes his arm, intentionally brushing against my nipples and throws his arm around my shoulders casually.

"We're having the best time, Ella baby. Brooklyn here was just asking what the inside of my bedroom looks like, you can tell her if you want to," he says, indicating the blonde in front of me, and I fight back the frown that takes over my face.

That motherfuckering asshole.

I haven't seen the inside of his bedroom, well not the one here I haven't, and *he knows it*. But the girls don't, and all three of them glare at me, and if looks could kill, I'd be fucking slayed right now.

So, if he can't get me to act jealous, he'll get these girls to do it instead. I can see through his pathetic attempt at manipulation and it's laughable.

I almost want to call out the douche, but he doesn't deserve the satisfaction. Instead, I lift my hand to his shoulder, turning so we're chest to chest as I squeeze hard. I plaster a smile on my face and his stormy brown eyes darken.

"Jameson Izaro, don't be completely fucking gross and use me to make these poor girls jealous." I lift my hand and gesture to the three of them attempting to give my *most sincere* look of sympathy. "I'm worth more than that, and so are they. Besides, they'll only be disappointed later when they see your needle dick and find your tongue skills lacking." His hand finds my waist, his fingertips gripping so tight I can already feel bruises forming as I turn my attention to the girls. "Ladies, I apologize for his lack of charm, and... equipment. When you're done with him, stop by my room. I have some unopened toys that give amazing orgasms so it'll make up for Jameson's inability to give any of you pleasure," I state with my hand on my chest, and a deepening sympathetic smile, before turning on my heels and heading for the living room.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as Jameson doesn't say a word after me, and I force myself to leave him there with those girls. I pray Naomi is finished making the drinks since I literally just walked off to prove a point, but when I make my way through the crowd and step into the living room, I glance over my shoulder to find her right there.

Thank fuck.

She comes to a stop in front of me, and the second she passes me one of the drinks, her head flies back and a burst of laughter falls from her lips as she shakes her head at me and my antics.

"Girl, you are something fucking else. If I was into confident, mouthy blondes, I would have a lady boner right now," she says, still giggling, and I fake pout at her like the news disappoints me.

"I would just like to *feel* a fucking boner right now," I grumble, taking a sip of my delicious drink as I move toward the makeshift dancing space, a hand lands on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

My body tenses as always, and when I look up, I'm slightly surprised to see Vince standing before me with a crooked grin on his lips as his gaze rakes over me.

His look alone doesn't ignite the fire burning deep inside of me, begging for me to ride him right here and now, not like it did with Jameson, but maybe that's where I'm going wrong. The men I always wanted only seem to want to fuck with me, control me, and hate me for shit I never did.

Maybe Vince can help remind me there are other fish in the sea.

Smiling up at him, I hold my drink against my chest as I place my other hand on his shoulder, mirroring his move, and he grins.

"Lou-Lou, I was looking for you, and boy do my eyes serve me well," he states, leaning down to whisper in my ear, and my smile widens.

“What are you doing here?” I ask in response, still highly aware Jameson and Leo won’t be happy with his presence, and as much as I love to get a reaction out of Jameson, I don’t want anything ridiculous to backfire on Vince. It’s unfair to involve him in our fucked up game.

“I heard there was a party at the Izaro house, and Tommy said you were here a few weeks ago, so I was hoping you’d make an appearance again,” he murmurs in response, his other hand finding my hip and squeezing gently. I lean back, smiling up at him.

“I actually—”

“What the fuck is this cunt doing here?” Instantly the music shuts off just as Ezra’s words bite through the air, and I whirl around to find him standing right behind me with his gaze fixed on Vince.

Fuck.

Not Ezra too.

“Ezra, I don’t—”

“Lou-Lou, keep your mouth shut. This fucker was warned by Leo, then by Jameson. Do I need to make you fucking aware too? Are you deaf, dumb, and blind? Fuck, do you need my glasses?”

My hands clench as Ezra interrupts me again, his jaw tight as he pulls his glasses off the end of his nose and offers them out in a mocking gesture, but Vince doesn’t take the bait.

“Listen, man, I’m just chatting with—”

“I *have* the glasses, *man*, so I’m not fucking blind. I can see who you’re trying to fucking talk to even when you’ve been warned multiple goddamn times. Someone needs to teach this fucker a lesson. *Again.*” Ezra’s body is tense as he clenches his fists, completely out of character.

“What the fuck, Ezra?” I bite, pushing against his chest as he moves to take a step closer, and I can feel my cheeks heating with a mixture of rage and embarrassment as every single person in here stops to watch the drama unfold. The

quiet that surrounds us only makes my pulse pound louder in my ears as we become the center of attention.

“Do you want the honor of kicking the fucker out or carrying the princess upstairs to her room?” Jameson hollers at Ezra as he moves into the living room from the kitchen, and my eyes fall closed as I try to take a deep breath, my jaw grinding with annoyance.

“Wait, you live here?” Vince asks, and I glance over my shoulder to see him frowning down at me as if I set him up, and I shake my head.

I do *not* owe any single one of these fuckers an explanation. Not a single one.

Turning back to face Ezra, as Jameson comes to stand beside him, arms folded over his chest, I look to my right to see Naomi nodding her head in a silent goodbye, like she can read my mind.

“How about the three of you go fuck yourselves, and I’ll take myself to my room,” I offer, turning toward the stairs with a huff.

Guys and girls stand gaping at me as I try to make my way through the crowd, and I shove far too many people because they’re too drunk to comprehend moving of their own accord, so it isn’t my fucking issue.

As I approach the stairs, the security guard keeps his head down as he unclips the red rope, and I march up the stairs. My feet stomp like a petulant child, or as much as they can since I’m in heels, but I really don’t give a fuck.

Why can’t I just have a good time without the fucking dickheads trying to step in and ruin my fucking fun? I’m over it.

God, imagine if Leo *and* Jagger were here too, I’d have had no chance, or more like Vince would have no chance of walking out of the Izaro house alive.

As I reach the top step, I turn back to glance over my shoulder, only to find every motherfucker in the foyer

watching my every move. Anger flares on Ezra and Jameson's face as I flip them off.

"I'm in the last room at the end of the hall if anyone wants to come and change my mood," I announce with a wink, before turning around and casually walking to my room as I hear Jameson and Ezra growl that no fucker goes upstairs.

Pulling my key from my bra, I twist the lock and step into my room before slamming the door shut behind me with a scowl.

Maybe I need to get out of this house? Maybe I need to consider the dorms because this is getting unbearable and suffocating.

Fuck.

I glance around my room, and my eyes fall on the opened bottle of tequila on my nightstand beside my phone.

Screw it all to fucking hell.

Maybe I just need some tequila to shut off all the fucking noise inside my head.

JAGGER



My chest heaves as I keep my gaze focused ahead and my arms raised to protect my jaw. Sweat beads down my spine as my opponent's blood trickles down my knuckles and lands at my feet in the ring, blending in with all of the other blood stains on the mat.

Round seven.

Showtime.

Dez Spinner, tonight's new opponent, stands facing me in the exact same stance, but the blood isn't on his knuckles, it's dripping from the multiple gashes on his face.

The crowd chants around us, shouts and screams from the men placing bets as the light above glares down on us in this shitty fucking warehouse, but I only feel two sets of eyes on me.

Leo's, and my father's.

I've drawn this fucking fight out, just like good old daddy ordered, and now I can *finally* put an end to this as quickly as possible so I can get the fuck out of here.

Dez stands tall, his wide shoulders drooping as he drops his arms slightly while he circles around me, and the referee takes a step back, giving us the space we need. This motherfucker is too cocky for his own good. He clearly doesn't know this whole damn fight is rigged, and he's only lasted this long because my father needed him to.

“I heard the big, bad Jagger Izaro could knock guys out in under twenty seconds,” Dez says with a sneer, blood running down from the cut above his eyes, and mixing with the blood dripping from his nose. Even though I haven’t knocked him out, he’s still on the receiving end of the pain.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as I shake my shoulders out, grinning at the fucker.

Standing in this ring, with nothing but a pair of shorts on, and tape around my fists, I feel alive, I just hate that it’s not for my own happiness, but my father’s.

I don’t offer him a response as I take a quick step forward on my right foot, causing him to quicken his pace as he circles me, and he almost stumbles over his own damn feet.

The sharp movement from me has him lunging forward with his arms outstretched as if he’s going to get me in a grapple hold, and I waste no time drawing my right arm back, and smashing his face with a right hook as he nears.

He’s a complete pile of arms and legs as the impact snaps his head to the side, and his body falls with it, hitting the mat with a thud.

I can tell by the way his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his legs lay limp, that he’s completely out for the count. Even still, I lean over him, noticing the cut along his cheekbone mix in with his other facial wounds.

When I see him regain consciousness, I lower myself so we’re nose to nose, ignoring the screams and cheers from those around the ring, I murmur, “Whoever told you twenty seconds was a motherfucking liar. Either that or you just helped me break my record.”

As the last word leaves my mouth, the referee presses his palm against my chest and pushes me back, and I go willingly. My heart pounds as my muscles ache with fatigue, but I love it. I love the burn from going seven rounds, and finally being able to unleash my true strength and anger at the situation.

“Tonight’s main event winner is... Jagger Izaro,” the commenter bellows through the speakers as the ref lifts my

arm in the air. I don't bask in the moment, refusing to enjoy anything my father has placed in front of us. He deems it a gift, I deem it fucking hell.

My eyes automatically search out Leo, who I find leaning against the wall by the locker rooms, and I offer him a subtle nod.

I want to get changed and get the fuck out of here before my dad decides to give me another fucking assignment.

Commotion to my right catches my attention as I spot my father and his friends cheering over the money I just made them. I recognize a judge, two lawyers, and the fucking chief commissioner of Emerson, and not one of them glance in my direction. I want to show my disgust on my face, but I force myself to keep it in check.

Pulling my arm from the ref holding my wrist, I swipe the loose hair back off my face, before I slip through the ropes and jump down from the ring.

I storm through the crowd, not giving anyone a chance to fucking speak to me, and as I get to the changing room, I find Leo holding the door open for me already.

Thank fuck.

I slip inside, letting him shut the door and lock it behind me, and I release the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Getting to the locker room without my father's attention is usually the most important part. By the time I slip out of here, he'll be neck deep in liquor and won't require me for the rest of the evening. Unless he comes looking for me and decides to start adding more jobs to our never ending to-do list. Been there, done that.

"Fuck, man, let's hurry up and get the fuck out of here," Leo murmurs as I walk over to the small bench area where my bag is, nodding in agreement.

I swipe my towel over my face and chest, feeling the sweat and blood wipe off easily, contemplating whether to shower here or make my escape as quickly as possible and do it at home.

“Ah, fuck,” Leo grumbles, and I glance to my left to see what has him worked up.

“What’s going on?” I ask, seeing his attention directed at his phone, and he shakes his head.

“Group chat,” is all he offers in response, and I pull my phone out of the front pocket of my backpack.

Jameson: Can we do a hard search on Vince now? This motherfucker showed up here, and if Ezra had not interrupted, he would likely be dick deep in Ella right now!

Ezra: I’m going to kill him. Someone bring a shovel.

Fuck indeed.

These little pussies are whipped by Luella, her sassy mouth and sweet ass. If she wanted to fuck little Vince, then leave her to it. It doesn’t matter to me.

My jaw tightens and my empty hand clenches, my body angry at the lies my inner monologue says as I toss my phone aside and quickly dress. None of my brothers are going down for murder because of jealousy. I won’t allow it. Especially Jameson with how twitchy he’s been with his blade lately.

“Leo, you go. My bike’s here, so I can follow you to the house in a minute,” I grunt, slipping a white t-shirt over my head, and my leather jacket on top, before fastening my combat boots up.

“Are you seriously going to ride home in shorts?” he asks with a skeptical quirk of his eyebrow. I ignore him as I untie my hair and quickly redo it, before grabbing my backpack and helmet. “Plus your knuckles are busted up, and the tape is still on your hands,” he adds, looking down at the remnants of my fight and I sigh.

“These are the consequences I was talking about because of those dickheads, including you, insisting we bring Luella to live with us. I warned you all she wasn’t interested anymore, and now you’re seeing it for yourselves. And surprise, surprise. She’s validating my words and you don’t like it,” I state, and he shakes his head at me.

“Fuck that, Jagger, you lied. You’re lucky we fucking care about you enough not to break this family apart because of it. *She needs us, and we need her.* Once you pull your head out of your ass, you’ll see that too,” he bites out, anger in his eyes as he rubs the back of his neck in annoyance, before turning on his heels and exiting the locker room.

Well then.

Swiping a hand down my face, I lift my bag over my shoulder and do the same. When I step out into the hallway, I opt to turn right, using the disarmed fire exit to lead me out onto the street instead of having to fight my way through the damn crowd inside.

I would usually be on my post-fight prowl for pussy right now, but instead I’m left to handle another situation that circles around Luella again. Excellent.

My stunning Harley Davidson, with its polished black and chrome parts shining in the moonlight, is waiting for me exactly where I left it, and I fall onto my seat with a heavy sigh. If only my life was as easy as just me and my bike, but nope. My father has to exist as well.

Once upon a time, he was a nobody, no one but a fucking drunk with a desire to gamble, and now, now my father is on track to become part of Emerson’s city council. All because he learned how to line the pockets of men in higher places through drugs, gambling, and whatever else he could illegally get his hands on. And now they give him the funding and backing he desires as repayment to look legitimate.

And the dirty work? The dirty work falls to the four of us, but if we want to keep everyone safe, there’s no alternative. We do as we’re told.

LOU-LOU



I take a gulp of the tequila, anger still coursing through my veins as I tap my heeled foot. These fucking men get on my nerves. How are they all so infuriating? I can't take being controlled like this.

I can't.

Placing the bottle back on my nightstand, I flop down on my bed, my lamp lighting the room as I stare at the ceiling in silence, frustrated beyond words, but screaming into my pillow and throwing my heel across the room isn't going to help me this time.

I put in a lot of effort to look this fucking hot, all for them to spoil it in less than ten minutes because of their petty jealousy issues. My phone vibrates on my nightstand, and I sigh as I lift myself up to take a glance at it.

Naomi: Hey girl, fuck those guys. Relax, chill out, and try not to stress too much. Poppy is here, and she's going to give me a ride home. Talk to you tomorrow.

Lou-Lou: I'm so sorry. Maybe next time we party elsewhere so I don't have to deal with them.

Fuck. I'm a shit friend, but in my defense, I'm not used to having to handle this much drama. It just keeps finding me at

the minute.

I need to take her advice though, sitting here like this and moping around my room isn't solving anything. I can still hear the dance tracks shaking the floor beneath my feet, they had the tracks playing again the second I reached the stairs. I need to put something on the television or my laptop and put my noise-canceling headphones on so I don't have to hear it. Then in the morning I can head over to the kickboxing gym early to beat out the anger stirring inside of me begging to be released.

Rising to my feet, I grab my laptop and headphones off the desk, and put them on my bed before heading to make sure the door is locked. Just as I try the handle to be sure, a rapid knock comes from the other side and I jump back a little in surprise.

Either someone has managed to slip past the security guys or there's one of the two assholes on the other side.

Fucking hell.

Contemplating whether or not I should answer, the bitchiness inside of me is desperate to give someone a tongue lashing, and I'm unlocking the door before I even realize it.

My pulse pounds in my throat as I forcefully swing the door open to find Jagger standing on the other side. His hands are gripping the door frame as he peers down at me with ice in his brown eyes and his teeth bared like I did something to piss him off, but I ignore all that and focus solely on the blood.

There's dried blood on his white t-shirt, and when I glance up at his hands, I find his knuckles are cracked, while his face has little red splatters too. My heart rate soars as panic sets in, and I instinctively move toward him and place my hands on his chest.

"What the fuck happened to you?" I mutter, my mouth drying as I try to see where the blood on his t-shirt is coming from.

He doesn't utter a word or make a move as I pull his t-shirt up at the hem, but I sag in relief when I find no cuts on his toned stomach. Damn, I forgot how in shape Jagger always is.

His six-pack, and the dips of his perfect V has me desperate to trace my fingers and tongue over them.

I'm hyper aware of each breath he's taking, the music turning to background noise as I continue to check him over.

When he still doesn't answer me, I flick my gaze to his, watching as he frowns down at me, a mixture of confusion and annoyance on his face, but still, he doesn't move or speak.

"Jagger, where is this blood coming from?" I whisper, barely audible with the music blasting downstairs as I drop his t-shirt, and he just continues to stare into my eyes, making me freeze on the spot.

Why does it suddenly feel like I can't breathe?

Even with my heels on he's still got a good couple of inches on me at six foot two inches, and with him leaning over me the way he is, I feel almost delicate before him. Like he could crush me with his bare hands. Fuck, he likely could, but I know even if he's mad at me, he would never physically hurt me.

Since he's happy to stand and let me check him over, I reach up and take his right hand, and bring his knuckles closer to my face. There's no serious injury, they're just busted from fighting and it looks like the person on the receiving end must have gotten fucked up.

I peer up through my lashes at him, questions whirling around in my head, but I know if I ask them right now he'll run for the hills, putting all the distance between us again.

My heart pounds in my chest as I lightly grip his hand in mine and take a step back, hoping he'll follow, and to my surprise and relief, he does. We both know how this game works, even after three years apart.

He drops his other hand from the door frame, and as I slowly move backward toward my bed, he follows willingly. When I feel the mattress hit my legs, I take a step to the side, and he turns around taking a seat without a word.

Releasing his hand, I swallow past the lump in my throat as he stares at me expectantly. "Give me two minutes to find a

first aid kit and I'll be back," I say quietly, brushing my hair out of my face, before turning back to the door. Just as my hand grabs the doorknob, his voice cuts through the air.

"I already placed one in the back of your vanity in the bathroom before you came."

My eyes widen at his words as I glance over my shoulder at him, but he's looking down at his hands resting in his lap.

Holy fuck.

I nod, even though he isn't looking as I close and lock my bedroom door, and hurry to the bathroom in my heels. I can't focus on his confession right now, fuck, I'm already a disaster from his proximity.

Crouching down in front of the vanity, I open the cabinet to find a small, green zipped bag at the back, hidden among bottles of body wash and shampoo that I hadn't even realized were here.

Shaking my head, I grab the bag and quickly move back into the bedroom to find him sitting exactly where I left him. As I near, I unzip the bag and place it on the bed beside him, digging through to find the alcohol wipes, gauze and bandages, and I feel his eyes on me with every move I make.

When I turn my attention to him, I hold my hand out patiently, and he places one of his mammoth hands in mine reluctantly with a roll of his eyes. Clearly *someone* remembered they hate me while I ran to get the med kit.

Excellent. He's a dick, but this is almost soothing, a complete reminder of our childhood.

I pull an antiseptic wipe from the packet, and tentatively swipe it over the back of his hand first to gauge his reaction, getting rid of the dried blood, and I stumble when his other hand grabs the back of my thigh and pulls me closer so I'm standing in between his legs.

Holy fuck.

It's my turn not to utter a word since I don't want to acknowledge his actions as my heart beats wildly in my chest

with the combination of everything right now.

His calloused fingers remain on my leg, unmoving as I focus on his hand, but that little bit of contact doesn't seem to be enough for him right now.

“So, apparently you've been a naughty girl,” he murmurs, his deep voice washing over me, and I wet my lips as I glance over at his face.

There's a glimmer of amusement in his brown eyes that I've not seen in a very long time, certainly not since I've been here. But I know with Jagger, it won't last long, so I continue as if everything is normal between us, wanting to make the most of the time I have with him.

“I would *never*, Jagger,” I say with a grin, meeting his gaze and he shakes his head, not even hissing as I drag the wipe across his busted knuckles again.

“You *always* would, Luella. You don't know how to be a good girl,” he responds, his voice thick as his thumb strokes back and forth on my bare leg.

Fuck.

What dimension have we slipped into?

I need to remember all the reasons I'm fucking mad at him right now, but his damn touch is melting my brain, making it short-circuit and as much as I don't want to admit it, I don't want him to stop. His touch is sending tingles directly to my core, and I'm too fucking needy right now to demand he stop.

“That's because no one ever taught me,” I murmur, leaning to his left to grab the gauze, my breast grazing his arm, and as I do his hand trails further up my thigh, skimming the bottom of my ass cheeks.

I shiver at his touch, barely biting back the moan desperate to slip from my lips. When I stand tall again, trying to take a discreet deep breath as he keeps his hand exactly where it is, I quirk an eyebrow at him in question.

“Do you want me to fix these knuckles of yours?” I ask, my voice raspier than I expect.

“There’s a lot more broken here than the skin of my knuckles, Luella,” he states ominously, and I couldn’t agree more, but none of that really matters right now as my pussy screams to be touched.

The pain, the past, the heartache, none of it matters at this moment.

Without realizing, my hands lift to his head, my fingers stroking through his hair until I reach the man bun secured at the back of his head. My eyes are still fixed on him as Jagger’s other hand wraps around the back of my leg, and he pulls me in flush against his chest.

“This outfit alone tells me you’re trouble, Luella,” he mutters, his gaze flicking to the see through skirt part of my dress covering my pussy as the palms of his hands rise to cover my ass cheeks. His fingers dance along the material of the thong I’m wearing, and I clench my thighs together.

“I adapt to my surroundings, Jagger. So it must be you,” I sass back, trailing a hand down the side of his face and wrapping it around his thick neck lightly, and his eyebrows raise in surprise.

I have no idea what the hell I’m doing, just being in his presence like this has me tipped upside down. I feel bolder, sassier, flirtier.

His lips are barely a breath away from the exposed skin in between my breasts, the deep V of my dress luring him in, and he stretches his tongue out to swipe at the bare skin. I heat under his touch as my fingers tighten, both in his hair and around his neck, and his thighs press against mine trapping me in.

“This doesn’t mean anything, Luella. I have an itch to scratch, and it seems you do too. That’s all,” he states, his eyes darkening with each word.

At this moment, he has me so worked up I don’t care if he fucks me and I never see him again. I just want his touch. I’ll hate him again tomorrow when desire and tequila aren’t running through my body.

“Then make your move, Jagger,” I purr, feeling his pulse beat beneath my touch. He grins, and it almost looks foreign on his usually scowling face.

“I don’t ever make the first move, Luella.” He’s challenging me and I love it.

“Then remove your hands from my body, and I’ll finish myself off,” I goad, and his eyes widen ever so slightly as I stand my ground, inching my chest forward a little to tease him.

“No mouth on mouth,” he grunts, and I frown in confusion, but before I can question it, he pulls the sliver of material covering my core to the side and sinks his fingers into my wet pussy.

A groan falls from my lips without care as I fall forward, landing in his lap, but he’s quick to move us so my back is flat on the bed, and he’s hovering above me.

I gape up at him in surprise as he grabs the hem of my chiffon dress, tearing the material all the way up to my waist in one swift move.

Propping myself up on my elbows, my hair falling behind me, I bite my bottom lip as he treats my thong with the same level of care, tossing the torn scrap of material over his shoulder.

He stands staring at my exposed core, and my thighs beg to be pressed together, to feel any friction at all, but I force myself to keep them open and let him look at me. His gaze alone makes my nipples tighten and my body scream for him.

“Who are these from?” he grunts, pointing at the small circle bruises on my hips, and I roll my eyes.

“Your dickhead brother,” I murmur in response, and he raises his eyebrows in question. “He fucking wishes,” I offer in answer to his look, and he rolls his eyes at me.

“Look at your little pink clit glistening with need,” he says huskily, and my hands clench at my sides as I refrain from reaching out and pulling him toward me. “You say you hate me so much, yet your body doesn’t seem to think so,” he adds,

running his finger from my clit to my core, slipping two fingers deep inside of me before quickly pulling out and gripping my thigh.

Fuck.

He's doing it on purpose.

"This is a hate fuck, Jagger, of course my body is supposed to react like this," I retort with a huff.

"If it's a hate fuck you want, Luella, it's a hate fuck you'll get," he bites out, before grabbing my ankles and spinning me on to my front.

I gasp at the move as he quickly slips my heels off and grabs my hips, pulling me up onto my hands and knees as he hovers behind me. The telltale sound of a condom wrapper being torn before it falls to the floor.

I love his rough touch, the marks I know he's going to leave as he digs his fingers into my hips, replacing his brother's bruises with his own, and I fucking know it's on purpose.

The material of my dress drapes over my back, revealing my ass and core, and he removes one hand from my body for a moment, and I almost question what's going on when his cock is nudging at my entrance.

"Oh God," I moan as he stretches my core. I feel so full I can barely breathe, and when he's fully seated, he thankfully waits a second to let me adjust.

Just as I'm about to beg for him to move, his hand claps down hard on my ass cheek, the sting jolting my body as I cry out again, the sound of the spank echoing around my room. Pulling out until only the tip remains inside of me, he wraps his fingers in my hair, tilting my head back, before plowing deep inside of me again.

"Fuck," he grunts as he repeats the motion again, my neck almost cramping from the angle he's holding me at as his cock thrusts deep inside of me.

This is everything. Fucking everything I need right now.

“More,” I beg, desperate to feel him tomorrow when he’s elsewhere regretting this moment, and he doesn’t disappoint, picking up his pace as he slams into me relentlessly.

Tingles dance across my nerves as he nudges my g-spot with precision, and I think I’m close to coming, when he pulls out suddenly, and I groan at the loss.

“Up,” he states, taking a seat on the edge of my bed as I rise to my knees, and he grabs my hips to place me over his thighs.

Chest to chest I can’t help but look into his eyes. His cock slips deep inside of me as I get seated, and he feels even deeper now. He tears at the front of my dress, the deep V quickly vanishing as the entire dress falls open, and he drags the material down my arms before tossing it aside.

I’m completely naked, while he’s still fully dressed with his shorts down to his knees. That shouldn’t turn me on, but it fucking does.

His mouth captures my nipple, and my back arches at the contact as his teeth bite the tight peaks, making me hiss, but I relish in it.

Bracing myself on my knees, I rise up, meeting his gaze as his hands twist in my hair again. I’m left looking at the ceiling as I slam down on his cock, and I take pleasure in the groan that falls from his lips.

I use his shoulders for leverage, gripping tight as I change tactics and grind against him, his hand gripping my hair almost resting on his thigh as the other squeezes the tit he’s not feasting on.

He’s consuming me. He’s everywhere, and I can’t get enough.

My clit drags against his hot skin as I feel my climax building inside of me, and he releases my nipple to murmur in my ear. “Scream for me, Luella, I want to hear you cry just like you did that night.”

His breath against my ear, mixed with his cock deep in my pussy, his grip on my hair, and the chill against my nipples

only heightens the sensations I'm feeling, and as much as I hate it, I explode at his words.

I feel dizzy as my orgasm rips through my body, and he grabs my hips to drag it out, his own climax making his mouth fall open as his neck goes pink and his movements become jagged.

Holy. Fuck.

As we slow, I start to take stock of myself as sweat drips down my back, and my hair sticks to my skin as he releases me. All while I'm lost in his gaze.

I watch as Jagger blinks, and just like that, I see the shift in his eyes.

His walls are back up and the distance slowly grows between us, even though I'm still sitting in his lap with his cock deep inside of me twitching.

Not ready to face the blow I know is going to come from him, I rise from his lap, wincing as his cock slips from between my thighs, and stand on wobbly legs, moving to the side of my bed.

He stands, and I watch him pull his shorts up out of the corner of my eye and my heart sinks.

I rake my fingers through my hair as I kick my shoes off and walk toward the bathroom, not wanting to see him leave.

I barely step into the bathroom when I hear the sound of the lock followed quickly by the door slamming shut. A part of me wants to have the final word, but my ego feels a little too bruised right now. This feels more than a little dismissive.

Not wanting to look at myself in the mirror since I feel so emotionally raw, I rush back to my bed, and slip under the covers as quickly as I can, hiding from the world.

How did it feel so good and hurt so damn bad all at once?

LOU-LOU



My comforter is pulled tight over my head, blocking out the outside world, but the sun still filters through, managing to wake me up far too early for my liking.

Last night was... everything, yet nothing all at once. I feel stung by his actions right down to my soul. When he warned me it meant nothing, I wholeheartedly agreed. I didn't even attempt to bring his lips to mine, and that was fine too. Fuck, the experience overall was world shattering... until he got up and left without a word, and I stupidly let him. But, I'm just mad he left a sour taste in my mouth before I could dismiss him instead.

Admittedly, I was too caught up in the moment last night, and now I'm feeling emotions I've pushed aside for a very long time. Emotions I'm refusing to acknowledge right now. But I can't let Jagger see the impact he's had on me since the moment I stepped through the door. I refuse to show him my weaknesses anymore, he doesn't deserve to see or know anything about me. The right to know the adult version of me has to be *earned*.

With a new found determination, I whip the comforter off, my eyes scrunching in protest at the sunlight glaring through the windows. In all of the madness last night I forgot to close the curtains. I shiver at the temperature change, my naked body desperate for me to get back under the sheets and warm up, but I'm determined to get on with my day.

I need a trip to the kickboxing gym now more than ever, and since it's Saturday, I have nothing else planned except coursework.

Perfection.

Jumping from the bed, I head straight for the bathroom, turning the shower on while I run through my routine of taking my makeup off. I hate how I left it on overnight, but fuck, I just couldn't face myself in the mirror at the time. Not wanting to see the truth of the pain Jagger leaving left on me.

My lipstick is smeared across my lips, my mascara smudged around my eyes, and my foundation only remains in patches.

Once I've taken care of my racoon eyes, I pull my hair in a bun on top of my head and step under the spray, the hot water melting my stresses away instantly, and I enjoy the motion of lathering the floral body wash all over myself.

I'm not washing my hair when I'm going to become a sweaty mess at the gym, I can save that for tonight when I can pamper myself with a movie playing in the background. Then I'm going to have to figure out where to start with the additional class assignments I was given on Thursday.

Turning off the shower I wrap a fluffy gray towel around myself, and it reminds me I need to do some laundry this weekend too. Fuck, not having to run the entire house like I did back home gives me more time to myself, but I keep forgetting the boring chores that are only for me now.

Feeling fresh, I opt for my favorite black training shorts, with a matching sports bra, and a pale blue tee. I pull on my ankle socks and step into my favorite sneakers, before grabbing my phone and keys.

It's just past ten in the morning so let's just hope none of the guys are awake yet.

I lock my bedroom door behind me, forcing a bounce in my step as I head downstairs. The clean floors and surfaces instantly catch me by surprise again. You wouldn't believe there was a party here last night, it's ridiculously clean. Not a

piece of furniture out of place or any red plastic cups scattered around the living room.

Rounding the stairs, I head for the kitchen, but my steps falter a little when I can hear voices coming from in there.

Fucking hell.

I need a protein bar if I'm going to have the energy to go and kick some ass this morning, and besides, they can't see how much their actions hurt me, especially Jagger if he's there. But deep down, I know it's my fault for thinking I could have a one night stand with him.

Pulling my shoulders back I stand tall as I saunter into the kitchen to find all four of them relaxing around the dining table.

Quadruple fuck.

I thought I would have been okay if it was just one or two of them, but all four? I'm screwed. This is not what I need right now when my emotions are so close to the surface.

Three pairs of eyes glance my way instantly, Leo and Ezra sitting facing me, while Jameson glances over his shoulder in my direction, leaving Jagger to continue staring at his plate.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I keep my face neutral as I move toward the coffee machine, and I thank whoever's watching out for me when the pot is steaming from being freshly brewed.

I can feel them tracking my movement as I make my coffee with a little sugar and some half and half before moving to the cupboard where my protein bars are. I wish I hadn't placed them so close to the dining table because it brings me closer to them, and right now I'd rather be on the opposite side of Michigan.

Avoiding their gaze, I open the top cabinet and pull the last one from the box. I'm ready to turn on my heels and get the fuck out of here without saying a word, but someone clears their throat, and I know that's a signal that I am not allowed to leave yet. The fact that I turn around to acknowledge the command pisses me off.

I close the cupboard door and glance at the table with a quirked eyebrow to find them looking at me, including Jagger.

Ezra's curly hair and glasses frame his face, and the soft smile on his lips melts me a little. Leo sits next to him, a small smile on his lips, with his cap in his hands, mindlessly playing with it, and I can see his leg bouncing from here.

Looking at the Izaro twins, they both stare me down with confusion in their dark eyes, and otherwise blank expressions. Sitting like this, with the same expression on their faces, they look so alike it's surreal. Jagger makes it clear who is who, but there are differences I can see that I'm positive others don't.

Jameson's little red heart in his eye for one, but Jagger's jawline is slightly squarer than Jameson's, and Jameson has a small mole under his right ear.

"Sit with us," Leo offers, pulling the chair out beside him, and it's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off, but he continues. "Please, Lucy."

Fuckkkk.

He wasn't a part of all the fucked up shit yesterday with these guys, but there is still so much unsaid between us. I contemplate his request for a moment, and I spot a smirk on Jagger's lips. He thinks I'm going to run like he *thinks* I always do.

Well, fuck him.

Plastering a smile on my lips, I turn my attention back to Leo as I round the table to fall into the seat he pulled out for me, preening under the smile that graces his lips. I place my phone on the table with my keys, protein bar and coffee mug, but no one utters a single word.

After what feels like an eternity, I can't help but break the deafening silence.

"Everyone have fun last night?" I ask, glancing around at them all as I open my chocolate protein bar and take a nibble like I've got all day. Jagger instantly glares at me as he takes a sip of his coffee, and Jameson scoffs, while Ezra fixes his glasses nervously and Leo says nothing. "I'm going to take

that as a no, unless you're too hungover to remember," I add with a grin, and Leo shakes his head at me like he knows I'm trying to cause trouble.

"I heard you were misbehaving," Leo says, fixing his cap on his head with a smirk and a raised eyebrow, and his words remind me of something similar Jagger said last night too, except he called me *naughty*.

It takes everything I have not to glance at him out of the corner of my eye, wanting to catch his reaction as I keep my gaze fixed on Leo.

"Me? Please, I would never," I say, pressing my hand against my chest in a mockingly innocent way. A giggle passes my lips as a fist slams down on the table, catching me by surprise. Everyone looks at Jagger, who is practically baring his teeth at me, and I widen my eyes innocently as my heart pounds in my chest with a burst of adrenaline.

"What the fuck, Jag?" Jameson grumbles, his hands raised as he looks down at the coffee that's splashed over his t-shirt, and I bite back a smile.

Just as his mouth opens to respond to his brother, my phone vibrates on the table, and it's like a beacon for everyone. I frown when I glance down and don't recognize the number. My facial recognition unlocks the screen, but before I can read the message Leo grabs my phone and pulls it out of my view.

"Leo Cooper!" I shout as he stands, and I do the same, reaching out to try and grab it back, but when he stands on his chair and lifts his hand in the air, I opt to just stand still with my arms crossed and glare at him. Motherfucker.

I have nothing to hide, and I'm not about to make a fool of myself trying to jump up or climb him for it.

"It seems Vince didn't get the message," Leo grunts, turning to point the screen so the guys can read it, and I shake my head flabbergasted by the whole fucking situation.

"Excuse me, give me my fucking phone back. And what do you mean by 'It seems Vince didn't get the message'?" I

state, trying to read the screen, Leo eventually turning it in my direction, but keeps it out of my reach.

Unknown Number: Hey, Lou-Lou, it's Vince. I'm sorry about last night, but I meant what I said, I'd really like to take you out some time.

Ah shit.

It's more hilarious that these guys are getting angry about it. They can't pick and choose who I'm with, not if they don't want it to be themselves, and at this current moment in time, I'm not sure I want it to be them ever again either. They've pissed me off enough recently to last a damn century.

A bark of laughter bursts from my lips, earning me a glare from each of them, but it doesn't cut the tension rising in the room around me.

"I thought you said you took care of this?" Ezra grumbles, pointing his finger in annoyance at Jagger who rolls his eyes, before looking directly in mine.

"No, I said I took care of *her*," he bites, and the others frown in confusion, glancing between us, and he grins menacingly at me. "And by that, I mean I fucked him out of her system. Didn't I, Luella?"

This motherfucker.

My hands clench at my sides as I glare at him, refusing to look at Jameson, Ezra, and Leo right now. "Baby, he's not been in my system yet so I think it'll be him fucking *you* out of my system," I toss back with anger, and he growls as he plants his hands down on the table.

"Don't play with me, Luella. You won't fucking win," he grinds out, and it's Jameson that places a hand on his chest to push Jagger back from the table, and he takes a step back, but doesn't budge any further.

“Oh, Jagger, I’d be more than happy to put that to the test. You came so quick last night, I hadn’t realized we’d been racing,” I rage.

“Wait, you two fucked last night?” Ezra says, confusion in his voice, and when he glances my way, I roll my eyes in annoyance that we’re doing this right now, but I offer a subtle nod which only darkens his gray eyes making them appear stormy. “But you were in your room this morning,” he murmurs, looking back at Jagger, and I scoff as Leo steps back down off the chair, watching us all with wide eyes.

“Ezra, he fucked me and ran like a pussy. There wasn’t anything more to it,” I said, snatching my phone back from Leo’s hand since he’s distracted before grabbing my keys off the table, abandoning my coffee and protein bar.

“I didn’t run, Luella. It’s not my fault if your feelings are hurt because I left. Fuck, I made you come, didn’t I? If anything, I did you a favor,” he says with a laugh, trying to brush off my truth, and I rake my teeth over my bottom lip.

He’s so fucking infuriating.

Jameson shoves against Jagger’s chest at his words, and it catches me off guard, but I’m done with these fuckers for the day, and I’m done trying to guess why they do what they do.

“What was it you said the other day, Jagger? ‘You didn’t fuck me then and you wouldn’t be indulging now.’ Well, I hope you got your fill because it won’t ever happen again,” I hiss, glaring daggers at him as I storm from the kitchen, rushing for the front door, but I don’t miss his jibe as I go.

“Look at Luella Carter, running again.”

Fuck him.

I slam the front door behind me, and rush to my Mustang which is still parked on the street. Unlocking the car, I slip into the driver’s seat and start the engine, turning the radio on, and cranking the volume up when I recognize the song. *Sabotage* by Bebe Beth, blasts through the speakers, and just when I’m about to put the car in gear to peel off down the street, the passenger door opens, and Ezra slips in.

I'm about to chew him out because I want to be left alone, but the anger boiling in his gray eyes tells me I need to keep my mouth shut for now. I need to get out of here, I need to get to the gym and find something or someone to beat the shit out of. He'll have to find himself a ride home because I'm not changing my plans for him.

He doesn't say a word as I work the gearstick and start to pull away from the curb.

"Don't fucking interrupt my song right now," I grunt, before speeding down the road, my chest easing with the distance between me and the house, but Ezra's presence keeps me on my toes.

What the fuck am I going to do with these motherfuckers?

EZRA



I continue to watch her in amazement. She is something else entirely. I kept my mouth shut the entire time we were in the car, just happy to be in her presence. I didn't want her to be on her own after Jagger's harsh words. He's an asshole, and his words even angered me.

Fuck.

Sometimes his mouth gets him into too much trouble, but I refuse to let him tear Lou-Lou down when he's in self-sabotage mode. The song playing in her Mustang earlier was beyond fucking fitting.

The second she pulled up outside of Keith's Gym, my eyes widened in surprise. I knew to keep my mouth shut as she climbed out of her 'stang and marched up the path, leaving me to follow her.

Damn, my dick was hard from watching her handle the stick on the car. I love how she's always just *her*; completely unpredictable, and full of emotion. Sometimes it's anger, like now, but the fire in her eyes and her tense posture still looks good on her.

Lou-Lou wears her heart on her sleeve, even if she would scream in your face with denial at the fact.

Now, she's beating on the full length punching bag, a complete array of arm and leg movements like it scorned her. She's dripping with sweat, taking all of my attention as she concentrates on the bag. In her head I'm sure it's wearing

Jagger's face. Her form and power is phenomenal. Fuck, Jagger himself would be impressed with her technique.

The four of us are trained to Jagger's level, and I almost offered to get in the ring with her, but I'm more than happy to watch her beat the rage out of herself without being on the receiving end and feeling the physical pain. That should be Jagger's role.

"Ezra, what has you here?" Keith asks as he approaches the foldout chair I'm sitting on, and I point in Lou-Lou's direction, not needing to expand on that, and he chuckles. "She's fucking fire, right? I had her in here last weekend training with the amateurs, and she showed them a thing or two."

My eyes widen in surprise as I glance at him. "She's not —"

"Calm yourself down, Ezra. She was helping me out if anything. She seems to have a lot of pent up anger, and this is her outlet. Far be it for me to get in the way of that. But now I see one of you guys here, it all makes total sense," Keith responds quickly, interrupting the rant I was about to go on, and I relax back in my seat at his words. My gaze returns to Lou-Lou as she continues to beat the fuck out of the bag.

He's not wrong. She definitely has a lot of pent up anger, and I know a lot of what she's trying to get rid of right now stems from earlier, and Jagger last night. Realistically, from me being a dick last night too, but fuck that Vince guy, he doesn't get to even breathe the same air as her.

"Every time she shows up here I want you to send me a message to let me know," I state, meeting his gaze, and he nods instantly in response.

Keith O'Hare was one of the first people we met when we moved to Emerson Grove. He could see the anger we had within ourselves, and we trained here until we fitted out the basement at the house with the equipment we needed.

He has a bigger role in this town than it initially appears, and I'm sure Robbie Izaro has him under his thumb now too.

Otherwise, there wouldn't be a constant flow of fighters to go against Jagger.

I focus back on Lou-Lou, fixing my glasses as I dismiss him, and my phone vibrates in my pocket. I continue to watch her double jab, and kick the shit out of the bag for a second before I take a glance. The message on my screen is far from welcome, and I feel myself darkening as my stomach drops and my vibe completely changes.

Leo: Where you at, Ez? Jameson just got a message from Robbie.

Fuck.

Ezra: I'm still with Lou-Lou, watching her pound the fuck out of a punch bag with Jagger's head on it. What did it say?

Leo: Ah shit? How hot does she look? Telling you will spoil your moment, bro.

Swiping a hand through my hair, I sigh.

Ezra: Like a kickboxing angel sent from hell.

Ezra: Get it over with. You know whatever he sends affects us all whether you tell me now or later.

Leo: Send pics!

Leo: We have a job tonight.

Fuck.

That did spoil it all. I quickly glance at the time, noting it's still early afternoon before I respond.

Ezra: Tell me the deets when I get home. Then I want to set up access to Keith's surveillance system because as much as we have all this shit at home, she can't go down into the basement to train.

Ezra: And fuck you. If she sees me take a photo right now she might make me piss blood for days.

I hate this distance between Lou-Lou and the rest of us. One day we'll be able to have it all. Today just isn't that day.

LOU-LOU



I step out into the cool Michigan air as I leave Keith's Gym, pausing for a moment, and I don't even count to five before Ezra steps out with me. I fight the eye roll begging to be released, but his predictability is just underwhelming.

I'm sweating from head to toe, feeling entirely accomplished, but in my rush to get the fuck out of the house earlier, I didn't consider bringing a spare set of clothes or water. Thankfully Keith had a water bottle I could use because if not, I would have passed the fuck out from dehydration. Turning my back on Ezra, and his hot as hell body wearing his gray sweatpants and loose tee, I march toward my Mustang in just my gym shorts and sports bra, holding my t-shirt.

Unlocking my door, I drop into my seat, and quickly start the engine so I can make the most of the air conditioning. As expected, the passenger door opens, and Ezra places another bottle of water in front of my face as he closes the door behind him.

"Don't be a brat, Lou-Lou. Just take the damn water," he says with a sigh, and I reluctantly take it from his hands, glaring at him *and* acting like a total diva when I'm trying to act like I'm not.

These guys make me act ridiculous, which probably makes me predictable in their eyes.

After taking a swig of the water, I place it in Ezra's lap before I drop the handbrake and start to pull out of the small parking lot outside of the gym.

“I don’t recall you being so sassy or... jealous,” I state, referring to right now and last night. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye as I pull out onto the road, but he’s glancing out of the window seemingly lost in thought.

I drive for a few minutes down the quiet streets, taking the route that has little to no traffic, and I think he’s not going to respond to me at all, until he takes a deep breath and huffs.

“A lot of things have changed since I last saw you, Lou-Lou, and some things haven’t. I was always possessive of you when we were kids, making sure no one came near you but us. I’m just more vocal about it now,” he says, shrugging his shoulders with a soft smile, and my heart pounds in my chest at his confession.

Fuck.

I try to think of a moment from our past where I remember something prominent happening like this, but I come up blank, completely lost in his words.

I don’t say a thing as I pull up outside of the house, completely overwhelmed with the fact he just let slip. I jump as he squeezes my thigh in comfort, pulling my gaze to his.

“I know the air isn’t completely clear between all of us, and I’m not going to lie, I’m completely jealous as fuck that Jagger was inside of you last night. Especially since...”

His words trail off, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip as I frown in confusion unsure of what he planned to say.

“Especially since... what?” I murmur, prompting him to respond while silently pleading to understand what’s going on in his mind right now.

I’m desperate to reach out to him, to comfort him as my world revolves around his response, but I refrain, not wanting to feel another lashing of dismissal from one of these assholes.

With a heavy sigh, he squeezes my thigh again as he removes his glasses with his other hand and scrubs at his eyes before looking back at me.

“Especially since I haven’t touched another girl since you,” he breathes, and my heart stops in my chest as I gape in surprise at him. He’s lying. He has to be lying. “I’ve been touched,” he adds, and my eyes widen as he smiles gently. “I can see the confusion in your eyes. I’ve been touched, just not by…”

“A girl,” I finish, my heart beating so hard it might fall out and land in my lap as I gape at him.

I remember as kids, seeing the world through Ezra’s eyes when he would explain what made him think I was pretty, and someone like Jagger, hot too. He’d talked about being bisexual, but I left before anything else ever came to light. Never knowing if he got to experiment.

“You will forever be my girl even though we never really got a minute to bask in the afterglow of that night because it was beautiful. But it was me, Lou-Lou. *It was me.* And *nothing* else would ever be enough in comparison.” A gentle smile takes over his face as he reveals a part of his soul to me, and I want to crumble at his feet. “I want everything, and I want you by my side, but the timing is very difficult with all the complications going on,” he blurts, before swinging the car door open and rushing into the house.

What in the ever-loving fuck just happened?

My hand raises to my face, my fingers feeling the heat in my cheeks as the realization of his words hits me square in the chest.

It was him.

It was Ezra.

I lost my virginity to Ezra.

Wetting my lips, I slowly climb from the car and make my way up the path to the front door, and it feels like it takes me an eternity to reach it. My pulse rings in my ears with each step, and I can barely hear or see any of my surroundings as my mind clouds with an overload of thoughts on Ezra’s confession.

I step into the house and close the door behind me, only to find the four of them huddled at the bottom of the stairs whispering among themselves. Fucking perfect.

Leo catches sight of me first, clearing his throat, and the others instantly stand tall and glance in my direction sheepishly as they attempt to look casual.

Jagger, Jameson, and Leo look just as they did before I left. Casual, relaxed and sadly, hot as fuck.

Jagger's wavy hair is down for the first time, his brown hair framing his face perfectly. Although the scowl on his face ruins his enticing persona. Jameson is fiddling with his switchblade, his basketball shorts hanging low on his hips as he stands shirtless. My eyes instantly raking over his abs on display. While Leo stands with his hands in the pockets of his gray sweats, barefoot with a fitted-white tee making his muscles look immense.

Before I can ask what the fuck is going on, Jameson grunts, taking a step toward me. "Fuck off, Ella. We're busy. Don't expect another cock to stretch your little pussy tonight, we won't be here."

His cruel words remind me *exactly* who I'm dealing with, cutting me to the core and shattering the euphoric feelings I had just moments ago before stepping into the house. I want to throat punch this motherfucker so damn much, but I manage to keep my emotions in check. Refusing to give him the riled up response he's after.

"Jameson, don't..." Ezra steps forward, placing a hand on Jameson's chest but I wave my hand in the air, cutting him off as I school my facial features.

"Save it, Ezra. Like you said, there's *a lot* that's changed, and consideration toward someone else's feelings was clearly one of them," I bite out, storming toward the stairs and shouldering past Jameson as I go, but no one stops me.

When I'm halfway up the stairs, I hear the sound of someone being smacked, followed by a grunt. "Fucker, we're

protecting her, not hating her *this* hard. Get a damn grip on yourself. We leave at eight,” Leo hisses loudly.

Determination floods my veins when the first snippet of their shit comes to life before me. Leo should have berated them a little quieter so I couldn't hear.

I'm done with the secrets and lies living within this house.

At eight o'clock, I'm following these motherfuckers.



I yawn, stretching out my back as I watch our house like a hawk, searching for the first inkling of movement. I tiptoed out of there over an hour ago, and I've been hiding in my Mustang ever since.

Watching.

Waiting.

Right now, I'm so bored with waiting I'm wondering whether it's actually worth this effort, since I've remained quiet and still the entire time.

I sag in relief as the garage door slowly opens, finally.

Fuck, hide.

I've been lying in the back like a damn crazy lady, wearing black combat boots, leggings, a fitted tee, and matching leather jacket over the top. The sun went down at seven, but I've got my black aviator sunglasses firmly in place, and a beanie on my head.

For a spy, I look hot as fuck, but that's beside the point. My focus and attention is firmly on these arrogant motherfuckers and the sneaky shit they're hiding.

Ezra said something about me not knowing everything, and there being secrets. It's sure as shit not *me* doing any of that, and I deserve answers. It's the least they could do after they've been cockblocking me and lying to me since I arrived in Emerson Grove.

Watching as the garage door hits the top, an SUV peels out first, completely blacked out, with the fancy reflective tint over the windshield so you can't even see who's driving. Followed quickly by a Harley Davidson, which is clearly being ridden by Jagger.

Fuck, I'm angry as fuck at him, but seeing him ride the bike he always dreamed of owning makes my heart swell.

Get a grip, Lou-Lou.

As soon as they pass me, I quickly climb into the front seat, starting the engine but keeping the lights off as I creep behind them with a couple of car lengths between us.

I have no idea what I'm going to find, it might be them sneaking off to record porn together. Who knows? Either way, I'm involved whether they know it or not.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as they take a right out of our street, heading in the opposite direction of campus, and I grip the steering wheel nervously since I'm not familiar with these roads yet. I'm ready for some answers, and tonight I hope to get them.

It's surprising how quiet the roads are, but it's a Saturday night so Emerson U's students will likely be partying somewhere, just not at our house for a change. As I follow them toward the center of town, I keep my distance since I have to turn my headlights on for safety, the light traffic making me nervous because I won't be able to fully blend in.

Just as we approach the edge of Emerson Grove, we pass by a nightclub, lined with crowds of people looking for a good time. I'm almost jealous, considering whether I should pull over and join them or not, but curiosity along with the desire to know the truth has me determined to follow after them.

Jagger, on the Harley, speeds ahead of the SUV, which I'm assuming carries the other three, turning off from the town's main street, and heading toward another residential area. The SUV is close on his heels while I try to keep at least two cars between us without them getting too far ahead so I wouldn't lose sight of them.

When they take the next left, turning into a rundown street, I slow my pace when no cars take the turn as well. Holding back a couple of houses, I glance at the homes, and it feels like I've been transported back to Nevada. Not a single house that I can see has a cut lawn out front, they're all one-story with no care or love showing on the outside, and my heart lurches at the memories that threaten to rise to the surface.

I wet my lips as I spy Jagger pulling up outside of a house with people milling around outside. Pulling to a stop three houses down under an oak tree, I hold my breath as I watch Jagger get off his bike, the people standing around quickly turning to look at him as Leo, Jameson, and Ezra slip out of the SUV in sync with each other, like a scene from the movies.

They all fall into step together, the path clearing for them as they head toward the front door, and my pulse pounds in my ears.

What the fuck are they doing here?

On the outside looking in, it looks just like a party is going on; the kind of party my brother would throw back in White River. When he thought he was king, all because of the goods he was selling.

My conscience tells me this is a drug den, it looks like all the others I'm familiar with, but why are the guys here? I thought they stepped away from anything even remotely linked to this lifestyle. But I've seen the house I'm staying in, so what am I missing?

The four of them slip inside, and the group of ten people outside split up, a handful following them in, while a few hightail it out of there in an instant. Leaving two girls on the porch, wondering what the fuck is going on with the clueless looks on their faces as the porch light glares down on them.

I turn my lights off, staring hard at the house like I'll suddenly be able to magically see inside, but it's no surprise when that doesn't happen.

What am I supposed to do now? Just wait here?

It feels like an eternity passes as I sit quietly in my car, desperate to see what's going on, but they could just be getting high or something? I don't think that's the case or else I would have noticed abnormal behaviors by now, considering their frequent disappearing acts. God knows they've been acting like their usual dickhead selves.

A scream sounds out in the distance and one of the girls outside is freaking out, she kicks her heels off and starts running down the road, screaming some guy's name, but she's going in the opposite direction from me so I can't hear her clearly enough.

What the fuck is going on?

More shouts and screams fill the air, and I can't remain in my seat any longer, unlocking the car and climbing out quietly, like that'll make a difference, as I pocket my keys.

I barely take one step toward the house when I hear something behind me, and my adrenaline spikes as fear sets in, and I clench my fists, ready to defend myself. A hand wraps around my throat, and my back is slammed into my Mustang with force, knocking the wind out of me.

Readying my body for a fight, raising my fist, I gape in surprise when I find Jameson looming over me.

His eyes gleam with anger as he growls down at me, tightening his hand around my throat as he presses into me so there's not a single inch between us, and it takes me a second to catch up.

"The fuck, Jameson?" I grunt, my words rough with his hand around my throat, but he doesn't relent.

"What are you doing here, Ella?" he bites, his eyebrows wrinkling in confusion at my unexpected presence, and I lift my hands, pushing hard against his chest, but he doesn't budge.

"What are *you* doing here?" I throw back, but he scoffs, completely dismissing my question as his fingers flex around my throat.

“I’m the one asking questions here,” he states, pulling my sunglasses from my face. I lift my foot, and slam my heel down on his boot, but he barely winces as I realize he’s wearing combat boots too. Fuck. “Don’t make me repeat myself, Ella,” he hisses, his breath blowing against my face as my heart pounds in my chest, and I dig my nails into his wrist as his fingers squeeze a little more, stealing the breath from my lungs.

“Jameson, if you’re going to choke me, do it like you fucking mean it or don’t do it at all.”

My eyes shimmer with unshed tears from the pressure at my neck. My words are barely a whisper as my face heats with the lack of oxygen, and he shakes his head, staring at me like he has no fucking idea who I am.

Using his other hand he digs into my pocket, producing my car keys in an instant, and he drags the key softly against my cheek as he leans close, the tip of his nose touching mine.

“You’re going to be the fucking death of me, Luella Carter,” he grumbles, before pulling me off the car and tossing me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. I don’t budge as I gulp deep breaths as he unlocks my car and carries me around to the passenger seat.

Before I can argue he’s opening the door and dropping me into the seat, slamming the door shut behind me. He locks the door again as he stalks around the front of the car, his anger radiating in his body language before unlocking the car again and dropping into the driver’s seat.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I finally rasp, rubbing at my neck, and he starts the engine, peeling down the street and past the house, before he answers. Completely distracting me from the entire reason I came here.

“I’m keeping you out of the bad shit you have no need to be involved in,” he growls, his jaw twitching as he floors the gas pedal, throwing me back in my seat, stealing my air again.

Why do I have more questions now than when we left?

LOU-LOU



The tension in the car has done nothing but amplify with each mile we put between us and the house we were just at. My hands remain clenched in my lap as this motherfucker drives my Mustang like it's his. He looks hot as hell behind the wheel with his brown hair swept back off his face, and his jawline tight, but that's beside the point.

Jameson hits the brakes as we pull up outside of our house far quicker than it took for me to follow them, and my seatbelt holds me in place when he slams them harder than I expect.

Neither of us have spoken a fucking word, and on my end it's simply because I have so many fucking questions running around in my head that I don't know where to begin. His anger sits over his head like a red cloud as he grips the steering wheel tight.

"We're going to have words about this fucking car when it comes to driving it in the winter. We're in the middle of fucking Michigan, Ella, it's not going to handle the snow even a little bit," Jameson bites out, turning to glare at me, but before I can respond he's swinging open the driver's door and climbing out.

This motherfucker thinks he can tell me what to do with my car? He can fuck right off.

I unclip my seatbelt and grab the door handle, ready to give him a piece of my mind, when he slams the driver's door shut and locks the car before I can open it. I gape, trying the

handle just in case as I watch him storm around the front of the car, coming to stop at my side.

Any other time, with any other guy, with *any* other expression on their face, this would *almost* seem romantic as hell; locking a woman in a car so you can open the door for her. But my hopes of that are ruined by the anger etched into his handsome face, with his tight jaw and stormy eyes, and the fact he finally opens the door to just grab my upper arm and pull me up from my seat.

“Fuck off, Jameson,” I hiss as he keeps his hand tightly fitted around my arm and stalks toward the house, practically dragging me so I remain at his side. “I can walk on my own you know,” I add, trying to shove my elbow into his gut but it’s impossible, so I use my free hand to sucker punch him in the stomach.

He grunts at the contact, but doesn’t keel over like I hoped. I learned the hard way that his stomach is made of stone, and I have to hide the grimace on my face so he can’t see the pain my action has caused me.

Lost in our little bubble, laughter suddenly comes to life around us, and I glance to my left to see a party happening at one of the frat houses a couple of houses down. I’m so consumed by these assholes I don’t even acknowledge the shit going on around me. I need to get a grip on myself and start focusing.

Jameson unlocks the front door with his free hand, moving me inside like I weigh nothing, and it isn’t until he’s slammed the door shut and locked it that he releases me.

I rub at my upper arm as I glare at him, but he simply scoffs like I’m a huge inconvenience.

“Are you going to explain what the fuck you guys were doing over there?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest as I quirk an eyebrow at him, seeing if he will react to my attitude, and he releases a heavy sigh.

“Ella, you don’t get to ask questions here,” he grumbles, walking past me and heading for the kitchen, and I move

quickly to keep up with him.

“Yeah, I know, you said that earlier. But I can ask whatever questions I want. You guys are the ones getting involved in something shady that could impact me. I can feel it,” I retort, hands on my hips as I stop and stare at him, watching as he grabs a bottle of liquor from the kitchen cabinet and moves over to the breakfast bar. His hands clench as he braces them on the countertop, his angry gaze turning my way.

His brown eyes swirl with fury as his teeth grind in annoyance, and he looks hella hot, even if he is an asshole.

“You don’t know what the fuck is going on around you for a reason, Ella. Now, my brothers are vulnerable because they’re a man down, all because *you* had to stick your nose in something you weren’t supposed to!” he shouts, making my heart sink in my chest.

Fuck.

“I didn’t mean to make them vulnerable, I just—”

“You just what, Ella? Couldn’t leave shit alone? We’re juggling enough right now that we don’t need to deal with this as well. Jagger was right. We should never have voted to bring you here.”

He slams his fist on the countertop before opening the bottle of bourbon, bringing it to his lips and taking a big gulp.

His words cut me deeper than I care to admit. As much as everything is shit right now, I’m not sad to be here. My emotions are everywhere and their need for control is infuriating as fuck, but I feel like I’m home again. Even if we spend an eternity arguing and yelling, never being more than *this*, it’s still where I want to be. But what angers me more than anything is his agreement with Jagger, who *always* wants to push me farther away.

“You know what? You and Jagger can go fuck yourselves. It’s always a battle of who can cut me deeper between you two, and right now, you’re both equally doing a stellar fucking job,” I grind, pulling my beanie off and tossing it to the side as my fingers grip my hair in anger.

My eyes fall closed as I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself, but it doesn't work.

“No, you've got this all wrong, Ella. You're so off-base it's laughable. The issue we have is we care *too* fucking much, otherwise we wouldn't want to keep you as far away from this shit as possible,” Jameson responds, disregarding his bottle of bourbon as he takes a few steps toward me to close the distance between us, and I lift my gaze to his.

What the fuck does that even mean?

Their verbal and physical contradictions are giving me whiplash.

We stand toe to toe, glaring at each other as our chests heave with each breath. His brown eyes swirl with a mixture of emotions that I can't quite decipher. His hand comes to my throat again, softer this time, and I don't stop him, my own emotions completely going haywire right now too as my pulse ripples beneath his touch.

Jameson's eyebrows knit together as he tilts his head down a little more, towering above me with his six foot one height. I can smell the sweet scent of bourbon on his breath as it fans over my face. It feels like the world has completely stopped around us. I can't move, stuck between his hand on my throat and the emotion in his eyes, freezing me in place as his lips slowly inch lower, our gazes locked on one another.

A door slams shut in the distance, followed by the sound of pounding feet and shouts, completely destroying the moment between us. Jameson releases me with a huff and steps back, heading straight for the liquor again just as Leo, Ezra, and Jagger come storming into the kitchen.

I look at Ezra first, watching as he pants, hands on his thighs as he catches his breath, concern etched into his eyes as he looks between Jameson and me. Leo stands beside him, his hands gripping his blond hair at the scalp as he too catches his breath. But when I turn my gaze to Jagger, seeing the darkness and anger coloring his face red, I know he's about to go off, and I just can't handle being torn down again by his cruel words.

I feel raw.

They're keeping secrets, secrets that are clearly big enough to bring forth this kind of intense reaction, and I'm done feeling like shit because of their unpredictable mood swings. This hot and cold bullshit has to end.

"What. The fuck. Was that?" Jagger growls, and it feels like the fucking floor shakes beneath my feet at his rumble, but I roll my eyes, waving a hand dismissively at him.

After Jameson's harsh words, followed by his confusing confession of caring, and our *almost moment*, I'm too vulnerable to be the badass bitch I need to be right now to stand my ground and argue with Jagger.

"Save your fucking breath," I murmur, swiping a hand down my face. "Your brother has already lectured me and explained how me being here was a hindrance. Give me some fucking space, and Monday morning I'll go talk to the administration at Emerson U to see about moving into a fucking dorm. Then your *problem* will be solved."

My heart aches at my own words, it's not what I want, but this constant back and forth thing we've got going on is not fucking good for me either. It's emotionally and physically draining.

"Like fuck you will," Leo interrupts, taking a step toward me, but I shake my head putting a hand up so he doesn't continue moving forward and he stops before he gets too close.

"*You* brought me here. *You* had me move into this house. *You* are the ones with all the secrets. *You* are the ones attempting to fucking control the people I speak to or fuck, all while being the ones that keep pushing me away at every opportunity. If *you* don't want to tell me shit, that's fine. But I'm done being pushed around because I once fucking loved *you* and now *you've* decided I'm not worthy of being on the inside anymore."

My throat burns from yelling, but I keep my head held high as I shoulder past Jagger and rush to my room before they

can attempt to respond.

I finally have to accept the fact that I don't mean anything to them anymore. Things are far too different for us to ever go back, and I need to come to terms with that.

LEO



Silence descends over the kitchen as Lucy walks away from us, followed by the deafening sound of her slamming her door shut, echoing through the house.

“What did she have to fucking say for herself?” Jagger grunts, cracking his knuckles as he glances at Jameson who shrugs his shoulders in response.

“I didn’t really give her much of a chance to talk to be honest. I did all of the talking and she listened,” he responds casually, and it makes me frown.

“If that’s the case, then what the fuck did you say to her to make her go off like that?” I ask as Ezra swipes the bottle of bourbon off the table and takes a gulp.

“I told her some truths she obviously didn’t like,” Jameson says, but I can tell the conviction isn’t quite there as he swipes his hand down his face. It seems my Lucy is worming her way under Jameson’s skin too.

“We just keep fucking this up. Maybe she’s right. The dorms might be better for her because all we’re doing is suffocating the girl we’ve all pined over for the majority of our lives,” Ezra says quietly, and I shake my head instantly.

“No fucking way. Did you not just hear what she said? *We’re* the fucking issue, and we need to figure out our shit. We need to put an end to all of this, it’s dragged on too long. Robbie needs to be put in his place,” I state, my hands clenching as the annoyance causes nervous energy to course through my veins.

Admittedly, tonight was truly dangerous for her. She has no idea what we're doing, and that's for a reason, even if she can't see that for herself. We want her under our protection but away from Robbie all at once. He already holds enough over our head, and he's always fucking known she's our kryptonite.

"He's right," Jameson mumbles, making my eyes widen in surprise, but I'm glad he's slowly pulling his head out of his ass before we lose her all together. I don't think that's something we could recover from again.

Lifting my cap off my head, I swipe my hair back, before placing it on backwards as I look around at the other three. "Jagger and Jameson, you guys finish the job. Ezra, do your tech shit and monitor them. *I'm* going to try and salvage anything left of Lucy since we keep destroying her with our own shit," I order, and surprisingly, no one argues. I'm never the one to give orders, so I'm impressed they seem to stick.

Although, Jagger sighs. "She's tougher than you all think, she doesn't need babying," he grumbles, fixing his leather jacket as he gets ready to leave again.

"Says the only guy who has been inside her since she got here, and you royally screwed that up too. Fucking her and leaving right after? Way to instill trust and respect, asshole," I grouch, repeating my same words from this morning.

I'm not getting into it again, we all have our ways, but I'm sick of the decisions that seem to leave Lucy hurt, and those motherfuckers now know it.

Leaving them in the kitchen, I head straight for the stairs, taking them two at a time until I come to a stop outside of her room.

The lock taunts me, and it's my fucking fault it's there. When I learned of Jameson ripping the last one out, I took her side when she had another installed, wanting to offer her a little easy win, but now it's backfired on me.

Slipping into my room, I quickly strip out of my jeans and t-shirt, and step into a pair of basketball shorts, grabbing my

little lock kit, and leaving my hat on my bed before heading straight back to Lucy's door.

Using my tools, I make quick work of picking her lock, not even bothering to knock and give her the chance to reject me. The second I unlock the door, it swings open to reveal Lucy sitting at the bottom of her bed with her arms folded over her chest as she looks at me expectantly, clearly having heard me messing around.

She's trying to glare, waiting for me to explain myself, but my words leave me as I gape in awe at her raw beauty. In a little navy silk cami and shorts set, she looks stunning. Her blonde hair is piled up on the top of her head, and I even fucking notice the red nail polish on her fingers and toes.

I have fought with everything I have to see her in front of me again, and she doesn't disappoint. She's every bit the queen we need.

"Are you going to explain yourself?" she asks, her gaze casting over me just as I did to her, and I shrug in response.

"I wasn't exactly ready to be rejected, and I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm not apologizing for what I said," she states, tightening her arms over her chest, and I nod, taking another step toward her.

"I didn't expect you to."

My words hang in the air between us for a moment, her blue eyes glimmering with an overwhelming sense of chaos. I watch as she moves to the top of her bed, crawling under her blankets and pressing a button on her television remote.

"Are you staying or leaving? I want to watch *Infinity War* and clear my mind, but I can't do that with the draft you're letting in." She keeps her gaze fixed on the television, but the tension increases around us.

There's a lot of frustration, and we're at an impasse. We have secrets she wants to know, but she's at her limit and needs a distraction because she knows she won't get anything from us unless it's a unanimous vote, and the whole shit show

downstairs shows how they feel. They're not wrong though, we're all on the same page of keeping her out but we're going about it wrong.

But she's not demanding I leave, and I'm not going to miss the opportunity to watch my favorite Marvel movie with my favorite girl beside me.

I shut her door behind me, flicking the lock into place and switching the light off, before moving toward her silently. She pulls back the covers, and I sink into her sheets, pleased with the job I had done on her room. It's everything she envisioned when we were kids, and I tried not to leave a single detail out.

She ignores me, keeping on the other side of the bed, and I know not to push my luck with her right now, even if my cock is hard and my body screams for her.

Laying beside her, her floral scent surrounding me, I drift to sleep like the shitty protector I am, wrapped up in her, and my body feels calm for the first time in a long time.

LOU-LOU



My back arches as I stretch out, yawning as my alarm beeps beside me, and when I feel the cold sheets beside me, I pout.

Blinking my eyes open, I look to confirm that the spot next to me is empty, and I wish I could go back twenty-four hours to when Leo picked the lock and strolled in like he owned the fucking place. As much as I hate to admit it, I liked having him there.

Now it's Monday morning, and since he left here before I woke yesterday, I haven't seen any of them. Opting to hide out in my room after Saturday night, but I did manage to get on top of all my coursework, which was a stark reminder of what it is I'm here for.

A future.

Not the drama, not the stress, not even the shady shit my roommates are up to. I'm here for *me*, and I definitely needed the reminder.

Lifting myself up, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and check the time. I have just under an hour before my first class starts, so I haven't got time to mess around. Clearly I got a little too excited pressing the snooze button this morning.

Opening my curtains, I glance down into the backyard to see Ezra and Leo running suicides, racing backward and forward over the length of the space, and I roll my eyes at their level of energy for this time in the morning. Both shirtless,

their hair swept back off their face with sweat as their shorts hang low on their hips.

Hot. As. Fuck.

I swipe my hair up into a messy bun, and head for the bathroom. Quickly showering, I feel refreshed and ready to start the day, even if it means having to interact with those assholes.

Wrapping a towel around my body, I move to my walk-in closet to choose my outfit, and since it's sunny out I opt for skinny jeans, a black cropped top, and my red leather jacket. Pairing it with my favorite heeled boots, hooped earrings and shades. I keep my make-up light, and my hair piled on top of my head.

I take a deep breath before I unlock my bedroom door and step out into the hallway. I was kind of hoping Leo would make a surprise appearance again last night, but unfortunately not.

Making my way down the stairs with my backpack in hand, I steel myself for the glares and grunts I'm likely to get from the twins. I almost consider trying to grab food on campus, but I know how busy it can get on a Monday morning so I think better of it.

Walking into the kitchen, I falter when I find all four of them sitting around the dining table. Their conversation goes quiet as I enter the room, and I swallow past the lump in my throat, keeping my gaze anywhere but on them.

Before I can grab something quickly and get the hell out of there, Leo speaks up. "Hey, Luce. I made you some eggs and bacon, it's keeping warm in the oven."

I glance over my shoulder at him, the surprise clear in my gaze, I'm sure, as I nod.

Just sit down, eat the food, and get the hell out of here, Lou-Lou. I mentally pep talk myself, grabbing the plate of food from the oven, and the smell makes my stomach grumble. I'd not had home cooked food in forever before I

came here, especially not in White River, and now I can't seem to get enough of it.

Heading for the table, Jagger sits on the end, facing Ezra, while Jameson sits beside his twin, and Leo next to Ezra. I move for the open spot beside Leo instinctively, and he pulls the chair out for me as I approach.

Yep. Leo is today's favorite.

When we were kids I would always announce my favorite of the day, so sometimes it would make them fight over it. Each of them wanted to impress me, but as we got older, things changed, and Jagger got openly grouchy about it. It's just still natural for me to do it considering there are four of them.

I drop down into my seat, offering him a smile as he clears his throat, his gaze averting from mine, and it leaves me confused.

Lifting a forkful of eggs to my mouth, I glance at all the guys, to find them all looking back at me. Ezra and Leo look nervous, their brows knitted as they flick their gaze around the table. While Jagger and Jameson look ready for war with the glares on their faces, their eyes form slits like they're preparing for the worst.

What the fuck is going on?

What shit are they about to drop on me that has instantly put me on edge?

I look ahead, at the empty seat across the table to find a huge chunk of hard plastic just casually sitting on the chair. What the hell is that?

I squint a little as I try to figure out what it is without having to ask the guys, when my eyes zero in on the label.

"Why the fuck is there a car battery on the table?" I ask, wondering who has pissed them off enough for them to leave them without a working car. The silence that greets me makes me pause as I look back at them with my eyebrows raised.

Jameson swipes a hand over his mouth, attempting to disguise a grin, which only makes me frown. I glance back at the battery, my heart starting to pound in my chest as realization dawns on me.

“Is this the fucking battery out of my Mustang?” I screech, dropping my fork which clangs loudly on the plate as my hands clench on the table, and it’s Jagger’s burst of laughter that confirms it. “What the fuck?”

I push the chair back with my legs, planting my hands on the table as I glare at the four of them. At least Leo and Ezra look a little sheepish about it, but the twins... the twins think this is brilliant. With their wide eyes, and pleased grins.

Motherfuckers.

“Why would you do that?” I shout, leaning across the table to pull the battery up off the seat with a heavy groan, and drag it toward me. It’s Jameson that answers as he stands from the table.

“I told you that your car was no good for the winter and we would talk about it,” he states, as if that’s enough explanation, and my face heats with anger.

“What part of the conversation involved you taking the fucking battery out? It’s not even winter yet. You need to get a grip on yourself because your need for control is borderline crazy,” I hiss, pinching the bridge of my nose as I try to calm my breathing.

“I apologize, my word choice may have played a part in the confusion. Let me rephrase,” he says with a grin as he crosses his arms over his chest, his muscles bulging under the tight black sleeves of his top. “I was taking the situation into my own hands. A bit like you did on Saturday night when you followed us. This is your consequence.”

Is this piece of shit for real?

“That car is a fucking five liter, V8, 2011 Ford Mustang GT with a pristine interior and drive train, and you just pulled the plug to prove a point? Like I won’t just walk down to the auto parts store and buy a new one? You just admitted it has

nothing to do with me driving it in the winter and everything to do with the fact I followed you!” My voice is only getting louder as anger courses through me. “Fuck you, and fuck your consequences. I worked hard for that car, you have no right.”

This is too far. Completely too far.

“Ella, I’m the fucking car guy. Of course I pulled it apart properly, and don’t think I don’t have every car guy within a twenty mile radius in my phone,” he says with a roll of his eyes, but it only irritates me more.

“You’re a fucking dick. You still had no right touching my shit,” I bite, and he shrugs.

“You had no right following us,” Jagger says, interjecting and getting my hackles up even more.

“So what are *your* consequences going to be for touching my shit, huh?” I glance at Leo and Ezra too, both of which keep their mouths shut, and it pisses me off even more that they can’t see how shady and messed up this is. “Do you think this is okay? To control me like this, like I *belong* to you?” I ask the room, but I know the twins won’t bat an eyelash, so I keep my attention focused on Ezra, praying at least someone here will see sense.

He pushes his glasses up his nose as he clears his throat and sits taller. “Well, he is right. It’s not a safe car for winter.”

Oh my God.

Fuck all of them.

I need to get out of here. Go to school and put some distance between us before I stab them to death with my fork.

“I’ll take you to campus in the SUV,” Leo offers, and I scoff. *He can’t be serious right now*, but before I can respond, Jagger steps in.

“You have a job today, remember?” he says with a raised eyebrow, before turning his attention my way. “I’ll take you on the bike,” he says casually, standing from the table and heading for the door.

“I’d rather fucking walk, so thanks but no thanks, asshole,” I say sarcastically, turning my glare to Jameson as the front door slams shut. “This isn’t over. You’ve gone too far. I thought you would have realized how much I hated people making decisions for me with how David dragged me away and Jagger lied. Yet here you are, joining them on my shit pile. I hope you enjoy the consequences.”

Grabbing my bag, I don’t offer them another glance as I head for the door. I need to pick my pace up if I’m going to make it on time now, since these fuckers distracted me.

The instant I step outside I hear the rumble of Jagger’s Harley Davidson. Usually I love it, but right now it makes me grind my teeth in irritation.

My eyes fall on my beautiful baby, who looks exactly the same on the exterior, but I know it’s no longer working with the battery gone, and it hurts my soul knowing they fucked with my most prized possession.

“Hurry up, Luella, I haven’t got all day!” Jagger shouts over the engine, and I give him my middle finger as I saunter past him and start making my way along the sidewalk to campus.

The noise of the bike doesn’t soften as he slowly crawls beside me, and I have to bite my bottom lip not to turn and look at him.

Any other time and I would be climbing on the back of that Harley without question, but I’m too pissed off right now. Which means I don’t care if I cut my nose off to spite my face, I’m going to be a stubborn ass bitch and own it.

When I turn onto the main road, the campus up ahead, Jagger revs the Harley before speeding off into the parking lot, and I relax a little, slowing my pace so I hopefully don’t have to run into him again.

Maybe the dorms would be a better place for me after all. I don’t like feeling like I’m under their thumb, and that’s what I am right now; my life is at their disposal.

Motherfuckers.

Stepping under the arch and onto the campus, I try to shake the bad attitude off and channel some positivity, but it's harder than I hoped, so a handful of deep breaths will have to do.

Heading toward Salvatore Hall, I catch sight of Jagger leisurely heading toward me from my left, and Vince waving at me straight ahead. Before I can think about what I'm doing, I pick up my pace and come to a stop right in front of Vince who smiles down at me with raised eyebrows.

"Hey, I messaged you over the—"

"I know, I'm so sorry. Things have been a little hectic, and I'm not that good at texting, I prefer to chat in person," I interrupt, but he seems pleased with my response as I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"I can get down with that," he responds with a smirk, putting his hands in his jeans pockets as I feel tingles at the back of my neck.

"What the hell are you doing, Luella?" Jagger grunts from behind me, and I take a deep breath, refusing to turn and face him. I was hoping he would just piss off since I didn't wait for him to catch up.

"Hopefully, she's agreeing to that date I mentioned the other day," Vince answers, his gaze fixed on mine as I find myself in a sticky situation.

They've warned him more than once about the consequences of speaking to me, yet he's still coming back again and again asking for more.

Do I want more from him? No, not really, but I *really* want to piss the guys off right now to prove a point, and Vince doesn't seem to care about the repercussions. Game on.

"I would actually. Tonight at six?" I respond with a smile, and he nods as I turn to finally glance over my shoulder to find Jagger glaring at me with his jaw tense and his forehead crinkled with anger. "You," I pause and point my finger directly at Jagger, "can leave. Everything we do has

consequences, remember?" I sass back at my nemesis, before turning on my heels and heading up the steps to class.

Vince is hot on my heels as Jagger says nothing in response, but I feel his gaze on my back right up until I step through the doors.

A part of me knows I just made things worse.

But fuck them.

They deserve a taste of their own medicine.

Jagger especially. Maybe Vince could give me head while *he* watched. See how happy that makes him.

JAMESON



Anger boils beneath the surface as I watch this motherfucker swagger to his car like God's gift to mankind, laughing and joking with his friends as he climbs into his silver Mercedes A-class.

I've waited almost an hour for him to show up, but it's totally fucking worth it. Jagger's message to me still lingers in my mind from earlier this morning, and I know I messed up. Especially when Leo and Ezra chimed in on the group chat.

Jagger: Luella just arranged a date with Vince. Said it was our consequence. This is on you for taking the battery. Fix it.

Leo: She is NOT going on a date with him, Jameson. Fix it.

Ezra: If you motherfuckers try to fix this without offering her something in return, the kind of redeemable action all of your shit requires, then don't fucking bother. You keep making it worse for the rest of us.

How do I fix shit like this that'll also make me redeemable? I think I'm beyond that. Besides, I'm Jameson fucking Izaro, love me or hate me, I'm true to myself.

Most of the time.

Focusing back on the group before me as they climb into the Merc with Vince, I recognize Tommy and Poppy, but the other girl with them is unfamiliar. She climbs into the front seat with Vince, leaning across the console to press her lips to his cheek and he offers her a sultry glance.

Motherfucker.

Don't try and take my girl from me while also fucking around with others. Ella isn't one of many. Never. She's your everything. The air you breathe, your dreams, and your fucking hopes.

Why would she even agree to a date with him? I know she still feels the same way about us as she did three years ago. I see it in her somber, blue eyes and the tension that can be seen in her body language every time I hurt her.

This is what I've caused. Or *we've* caused, as a collective. Pushing and pulling her to mold her into someone she shouldn't be, for reasons she isn't aware of. She is always fire, and she sees us as controlling her, not the protective place we are coming from. It was never going to work, I should have known that.

Vince reverses out of his parking space, the radio blasting some pumped up beat, and I waste no time following after him. I don't hide or keep it a secret, revving the engine of my Nissan GTR as a statement as I keep hot on their heels.

He takes a left out of the parking lot, while I would usually go right, but I put my foot down, forcing the traffic to stop behind me in the middle of the road, and honk their horns in distress at me as I make sure to keep close to him.

The commotion has Vince glancing in his rearview mirror, and his eyes find mine instantly. My knuckles are white, gripping the steering wheel like it's his goddamn neck.

A sneer takes over my lips, and he quirks his eyebrows in challenge. I'm going to ruin this motherfucker.

I've never been the best at keeping my emotions under control, especially when it involves Ella, but I need to stop

dancing around the inevitable. I'm sinking into her trap without any effort, just like before.

No matter how I feel about how shit went down three years ago, I can finally breathe now she's near me again. She knows I'm overbearing, that hasn't fucking changed. I'm destructive, manic, and an adrenaline junkie, hence my love for fast cars and race tracks.

The traffic lights ahead turn red, and I stop just shy of his bumper.

"Come on, fucker. Show me what you've got."

There is something not right about him, I know it. His whole vibe is suspicious. No one, and I mean *no one* pushes back on us, not even once. But to do it multiple times? You've got to have a death wish; not unless they've been ordered to or have something to prove.

Fuck, he can't be linked to...

Don't be ridiculous, Jameson. Not this idiot.

Still, I need to speak with Ezra to dig deeper into whoever this Vince Monroe guy is. The crazy gleam in his eyes right now is never there when Ella is near. There's a reason for that, and I want to find out what games he's playing, but I'd rather cut him off before he even gets the chance.

I'm going to put a stop to it now.

When the lights change, he slams the pedal of his Mercedes, peeling off down the road, but this fucker doesn't know his cars because I easily keep on his tail with my 3.8L V6 engine. Making our way through town, I slow when he pulls over to the side of the road and all of his friends climb out near a diner.

I don't pull over, I sit in my car in the middle of the road without care as I hold up traffic. The sound of the horns beeping and assholes shouting do nothing to move me, until Vince sticks his head out of his window and signals with his hand for me to follow after him.

This guy really is serving me his own death on a silver platter, and I'm going to take it. The smirk on my lips only grows with his stupidity.

Waving my hand for him to lead the way, I follow behind him for a couple of minutes, letting him lead us toward the old docks. There is definitely something shady about this motherfucker, I know it. The docks are no man's land for gangs in the area, but only people in the fucking know, would know, and why else would he pull me out here?

It's drag race central, the dark corner of Emerson Grove where all hell can break loose.

He pulls over to the right where no one else is around us, and I pull up beside him this time, my passenger window already down as I glare at him.

"You okay, bro? You seem a little lost. Or did you hear about how busy I'm going to be tonight, fucking your girl."

My jaw tightens as I try to calm my breathing, but it's no use. This cunt is trying to get a response out of me, and fuck me if it isn't working. I make sure to keep my clenched fists out of view, I refuse to give this motherfucker the pleasure.

"She's not available tonight or any other night for that matter. You'll have to find someone else to pass your herpes on to," I say calmly, my heart pounding in my chest, begging me to mess his face up as he smirks at me like he knows he's gotten under my skin. But he has no idea that my actions speak louder than my words.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't give a shit what you seem to think is going to happen, Izaro. I'm going to take her. From behind, on top, fuck, all of the angles," he says with a shrug. "I'll even race you for her," he offers, but I'm past the point of seeing the fun in his offer.

I'll cream this asshole without question, what I want to know is how he knows to tempt me with a race? If I race him, I'll be gone in moments, giving him the chance to slip away and be ready for Ella.

Over my dead body.

“Gentleman’s agreement happens after we’ve checked each other’s car over,” I state, leaving the car running as I unclip my seatbelt and step out from my car.

He frowns at me slightly but does the same, standing a little awkwardly against his car.

“What now?” he asks, tucking his hands in his pockets with swagger, and I sigh.

“How are you offering to race me without having any experience, man?” I ask, rounding the back of my car and popping the trunk. “You’re trying to take my girl without even understanding the terms of how this operates.”

“I don’t give a fuck if she’s your girl or not, when I’m deep inside her, it’ll be my name she’s screaming,” he responds cockily, and I have no control over the rage that consumes me at his words. My blade to his throat didn’t work last time, so this is all his own doing.

Wrapping my hand around the metal baseball bat in my trunk, he doesn’t see it as he takes a step toward me, and lightning fast I take a step back from my GTR and swing the heavy weight at his legs.

The crack at the contact is like music to my ears as he screams in pain.

“Ahhh, fuck. What the hell,” he growls, in a heap on the floor as he grips his legs, but the sneer on his lips tells me he’s *still* not getting the message.

My switchblade screams for me in my pocket, to take it out and show this fucker my creative carving side, but I know that’ll cause more issues than solutions right now, so I force myself to turn my attention to his car.

Wielding the bat above my head, I round the front of his Merc, and smash it down on the hood, the sound of caving metal heightening my adrenaline. I do it again, quickly lifting the bat and doing the same on his windshield; watching as the glass shatters around me.

“Hey, motherfucker. Stop,” he hisses, trying to stand back on his feet, using the trunk of his car to balance himself and

the second he lifts to turn my way, I have the bat pointed in his direction.

“What did you say? I couldn’t hear you around all the bullshit spilling from your mouth,” I bite out, jolting the bat, and I chuckle like a madman when he flinches at the movement.

“I fucking own this car,” Vince grunts, and I frown at his words, what does that have to do with anything? Why would he *not* own it?

“Well, you shouldn’t think you own what’s mine. I’ve warned you far too many times to stay away from her. Your stupidity leaves me no choice, I have to change tactics,” I state, slowly drawing out my words.

His hands clench at his side as his chest heaves with each breath, and I see the second his attention switches to my car, the engine still running, and I know he’s going to make a play for it.

The second he steps to the left, I bring the bat to the back of his legs again, gripping tightly to the little control I have left, which is stopping me from smashing it against his fucking head.

His cries ring out again as he topples to the ground, and I use the moment to smash every light and window on his car, loving the sound of the glass shattering as it releases the pent up energy inside of me.

“Last warning, motherfucker. Next time I’ll cut out your fucking tongue,” I growl, crouching down in front of him, and he spits at my feet. “You’re never going to learn.”

Refusing to be disrespected like that I throw my bat back in the trunk, and lift him up off the ground with my fingers gripping the front of his t-shirt.

“I’ll send Ella your regards when I’m making her scream, Vince,” I state, before pulling my right arm back and punching him square in the face.

His nose bursts instantly, but I drop him to the asphalt without care. This dickhead is lucky that’s all I’ve done. I take

one final look at my handiwork, a pleased grin on my lips as I dust off my hands.

Climbing into my GTR, I don't even bother to clip my seatbelt as I peel out of there. I'll need to make sure Ezra checks that this derelict road has no surveillance, but I couldn't give a fuck either way.

That cunt fucking deserved it.

Now to give my gorgeous Ella the good news.



I let the front door fall shut behind me as I stalk into the house, and Ezra pops his head out of the games room with a raised eyebrow, questions about where I've been clear in his eyes.

"If he doesn't understand that message, I get to use my blade next time," I state, and he rolls his eyes at my dramatics. "You might also want to make sure there's no surveillance down at the docks where the drag races happen."

I don't offer him any further explanation as I swipe a hand through my hair and move straight for the stairs. Ella has done nothing but hide away in her room, and after this morning, I don't expect this evening to be any different.

I hate it, with a passion, but we're the ones responsible for that too. So we're in a lose-lose situation.

A quick glance at my Tag watch tells me it's almost six, which means she'll be getting her hot ass ready for this non-existent date.

Not bothering to stop by my own room, to clean my slightly scraped knuckles or change, I pause right outside the princess's room. Slamming my fist against the door, I brace my hands on the door frame as I count to five, waiting for her to answer. I take a deep breath, readying myself for the argument I know is going to come.

I should never have let Leo convince me to let her keep the lock. It's times like this, when I want access to her right away

and can't get it, that it pisses me off.

Although the memory of her fucking herself in the shower the last time I took it off has me considering it again. When she met my gaze and continued, I about came in my pants. I've always loved her confidence, but fuck, now it's on another level.

I'm not sure whether it's a blessing in disguise because she swings the bedroom door open before I can mentally say five. Any thought of what I was going to say when she answered completely leaves my brain as I stand and gape down at her.

Ella stands facing me in a white jumpsuit, covered in crystals and a one-shoulder strap that ties into a bow. Her blonde locks curl around her face, with bright red lips beckoning me closer.

Holy motherfucking orgasm.

I could burst right here just from looking at her.

She should be illegal.

"What the fuck do *you* want?" she grumbles with her eyebrows raised, folding her arms over her chest.

Her harsh words yank me from my thoughts as I wet my lips, slowly perusing her body from head to toe before I even consider answering her.

"You all dressed up for me, Ella?" I ask with a grin, taking a step toward her, and to my surprise she takes a step back, giving me the opening to fully move into her room and slam her door shut behind me.

"Of course not. I—"

"Your *date* can't make it, he's a little... preoccupied right now. But I'd be more than happy to step in and take you out," I offer, leaning forward to stroke a finger along her exposed collarbone, and she shivers at the touch. A move that has my cock pressing against the waistband of my pants.

"What did you do, Jameson?" she says with a huff, batting my hand away, and I shrug, stuffing my hands in my pockets before I continue exploring her body. "Don't just shrug,

Jameson, because *I know* you did something to Vince. So answer me.”

Walking past her, I take a seat at the bottom of her bed, watching as she turns to glare at me, and I smile. “That fucker is shady as hell, Ella. You aren’t going anywhere with any guy that doesn’t live in this house,” I state, and she shoots daggers at me as she takes a step toward me with her hands on her hips.

“Cut the bullshit, Jameson. You don’t get to tell me what to do. I won’t allow it.” She prods her finger against my chest, but I grip her hand before she can move away.

“You’re doing this to be spiteful over the ‘stang. What do you want me to say, Ella? I’m sorry? Because I’m not. If you ask nicely I’ll let you have one of my cars that will be better suited to your safety for the winter.”

She frowns at me, contemplating my words as I pull her a step closer until she’s standing between my legs, and my dick jolts at the fact she isn’t fighting and pulling away from me.

“You could have had a civilized conversation with me about car safety,” she retorts, and I shake my head.

“Baby, when has that ever been my style?” I can feel the pulse at her wrist increase, and it makes my cock twitch with need.

“First of all, I’m not your *baby*, and second, I don’t *know* your style anymore, Jameson. We’re all different people now it seems,” she murmurs, still not trying to pull her wrist from my grip.

I lean forward resting my head on her stomach, and my eyes fall closed at the contact. My breathing instantly relaxes and my soul calms.

No one has ever been able to calm my rage but her, and I’ve spent the past three years basking in the carnage. So to have it dissolve around me so easily leaves me lightheaded.

She doesn’t move for a moment, and I mentally prepare myself for her to take a step back, but to my surprise, I feel her

fingers stroke through the hair at the back of my neck, soothing me.

“Fuck your date, Ella. Be with me,” I mutter, giving her a glimpse of the Jameson she once knew as I peer up at her with pleading eyes. Just like she keeps giving me flickers of my Ella, I want her to know I’m here too, among all the shit, and I hold my breath as I wait for her response.

“We can’t keep doing this back and forth shit, Jameson. I could handle it when we were younger because I was still in the fold with you guys. But now, this is different, and I’m not the same anymore. I’ve had to have my own back, and I like how independent I can be,” she admits.

I release her wrist as I blindly drag my hands over her hips, the crystals on her outfit rough against my skin.

“I can’t change, Ella. I’m a dick, not as much as Jagger, but still a dick like I used to be, and I won’t apologize for it.”

She leans back, tilting my chin up and forcing me to see her, watching as her eyes look deep into mine and skim over my soul.

“Who the fuck asked you to change? I didn’t. I just don’t like all these secrets, and decisions that are apparently being made *for* me but don’t include me at all,” she responds, tightening her grip on my hair, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip at the action.

I don’t know what to say to her. There’s a shit ton of secrets closing in around us right now, and she doesn’t know about them for a reason. Reasons that keep her safe, but she’s too stubborn to understand that.

With a huff she takes a step back, tucking her hair behind her ear as she looks down at herself. “As if I did all of this for nothing,” she murmurs to herself before sauntering into the bathroom, disappointment laced in her voice.

Like fuck.

She didn’t dress like this for that asshole.

She did it for herself, and to piss *us* off. Instead she has me filled with so much pent up need, and a desperate desire to slowly peel her out of it.

Not considering the consequences, I follow after her, stepping into the bathroom to find her standing in front of the mirror, pulling her hooped earrings out.

She catches sight of my reflection, tracking my every movement as I come to stand right behind her, my front brushing against her back. I keep my hands at my side as I wait for her initial reaction, and when I watch her eyes widen with need, I grin. I love that she always wears her expressions on her face. She's far easier to read than she thinks. She always has been.

"I've already had one Izaro brother fuck me and leave without a word. I can't, and I *won't*, go through that again," she says quietly, swiping her hair over her shoulder.

I shake my head as I meet her gaze in the glass. "Ella, we just established that I'm a dick, but not Jagger's level of dickishness. I promise to kiss your pretty little kitty before I leave," I say with a slight smile, and she rolls her eyes at me, but I continue before she can interrupt me. "I've never forgotten the taste of you on my tongue, Ella."

A blush creeps over her chest as she wets her lips, and I know I just gave away my role in that night all those years ago, but it seems she hasn't forgotten either.

Repeating the move she made, I sweep her hair over her right shoulder and slowly drag my lips over her neck, my cock clenching when a moan slips past her lips.

I squeeze her hips, moving her a step forward toward the vanity as she braces her hands on the countertop.

"Tell me I can, Ella," I murmur against her ear, our gazes locking in the mirror, and her mouth falls open before she nods. "Good girl. Now tell me what you desire right this very second," I add, wanting to fulfill her needs above my own.

"I want you all to remember what we could have been. We're all sabotaging ourselves right now, when all I want is to

feel you all against my skin again.” Her confession goes straight to my dick as it strains against my jeans.

“I could definitely be on board with showing the others I have you right now and they don’t,” I say, pushing my luck, but the gleam in her crystal blue eyes makes me pause.

“Show me what that looks like,” she breathes, leaning back and brushing her hands slowly up my thighs.

Fuck.

She’s all woman now. Not the fifteen year old girl who thought she knew everything. Now she knows what she wants, and she’s not afraid of asking for it *or* taking it.

It makes me want to drop to my knees at her feet.

My own ego even loving the idea.

Without a word, I spin her around to face me, and lift her up into my arms. She moves willingly, locking her legs around my waist, and it’s my turn to groan, loving how good she feels against me.

I’m ready to worship her here and now, but I remember what she asked for before I blow it all to hell now.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I quickly open her bedroom door and shut it quietly behind us before pulling my phone from my pocket.

“What are you doing?” Ella asks, leaning back to glance at my face, but I simply wink as I lift the phone to my ear, and three voices greet my call.

“What’s up?” Jagger, Ezra, and Leo say in sync, and I take a second to put a serious expression on my face.

“I think Vince is trying to get in the backyard,” I growl, making Ella frown in confusion, but just as expected, the call ends, and the sound of their footsteps pounding through the house heading toward the backdoor sound out around us.

I stuff my phone in my pocket and move as quickly as I can down the stairs, making Ella grip my hand tighter as she

giggles. Dashing into the kitchen, Ella follows my line of sight to the three idiots scanning the perimeter of the backyard.

Fuck, Ezra even has a goddamn gun.

Before my plan goes to shit, I move to the open patio door, and quickly slam it shut, flicking the lock from the inside before pushing Ella's back against the glass.

I move my hands to the globes of her ass, meeting her gaze before I bring my lips down on hers. Her soft lips mold to mine instantly, and my heart soars at the contact.

Vince's plan was to wind me up and put more distance between Ella and me, but that definitely backfired, because it only made me realize how much I need her above all else. I need to stop fighting the inevitable, and reap the benefits of having her so close.

Teasing my tongue along the seam of her lips, they part easily for me to delve inside and taste her sweet mouth. Ella's fingers rake through my hair before settling on the back of my neck, dragging me closer, and my fingers dig into her ass.

I slowly lower her to her feet, keeping my mouth glued to hers before I lean back, finding the zipper of her jumpsuit, and leisurely pull it down.

She looks up at me with a heated gaze, her hands trailing under my shirt and touching my abs as I feel three sets of eyes looking at us through the glass.

Yeah I am the lucky motherfucker who is redeeming himself by feeling up the girl of his dreams in front of his brothers to make a statement.

I pull at the bow sleeve on her shoulder, and the whole outfit falls to the floor. My jaw drops right along with it as Ella stands bare in front of me.

"Holy fuck," I say under my breath, my eyes scanning every inch of her body as I take her in, undecided on where to start. Until she drops her right hand from my chest, and moves to draw slow circles around her clit.

Her red lipstick is smeared around her mouth, her eyes flashing with desire, and she looks fucking sinful.

I pull my jacket and t-shirt off, discarding them beside me before unzipping my jeans and revealing my solid cock that begs for her attention.

“The fuck, Jameson,” she says, licking her lips as I kick my shoes off and remove my jeans with her gaze on me the entire time. “Damn, you’re today’s new favorite,” she murmurs, stretching her hand out to stroke the length of my dick, and I jolt under her touch.

I remember how competitive I used to get over being her favorite, so it makes my body tingle when she says it out loud.

Wanting to remain at the top of that list, I plan to put all my effort into making her scream.

Dropping to my knees, she slips her legs apart without prompting, and I bite back the groan desperate to escape. I look up through my lashes at her, watching as her teeth sink into her bottom lip, and her hands find their way to my hair as I lean forward and drag my tongue from her entrance to her clit.

“Fuck,” she says with a happy note in her voice, so I repeat the movement again and again, loving how her hips lift off the glass door behind her to meet my thrusts.

I grab the globes of her ass, forcing her pussy against my face as I run my teeth over her clit, and she cries out as her body squirms beneath me.

“Please, Jameson,” she begs, and I love that she calls my name out even though this little show is more for them than me. It lets me know she’s present, here with me, and she wants this as much as I do.

“I want you to come on my fingers before I fuck you, Ella,” I say with a groan, my cock desperate to be touched as I thrust two fingers into her core, circling around with precision as she tightens her grip on my hair.

“Don’t stop. Don’t stop. I’m—I’m gonna, ah, fuckkk, Jameson,” her words become lost to her moans as she

orgasms, her pussy clenching my fingers within an inch of their life, and I fucking love it. Especially the taste of her sweet release on my lips.

Making sure to keep my pace until her hips stop moving, she sags back against the door slightly, and I rise to my feet.

Her eyes stare at my lips, seeing them glisten with her juices, and she doesn't hesitate to lean forward and plant her lips on mine, my own moans filling the room around us.

Desperate for more, to feel her around my cock, I spin her around and she plants her hands on the glass as I push her fully into it, and I hear her sharp intake of breath.

Looking around her, I see Ezra, Leo, and Jagger watching with their jaws wide open and rock hard cocks visible beneath their fucking sweats as they stare at us. I make quick work of grabbing a condom from my wallet, before discarding it and rolling the condom down my length.

"You still want to give them a show, my Ella?" I ask against her ear, dragging my fingers over her stomach as her tits push into the glass, and she nods.

Dragging my cock against her wet folds, I tease her lips for a moment, watching as the guys clench their jaws in jealousy. *Perfection.*

I brace my hands on her hips, before lining my cock up at her entrance and slamming deep into her core.

My vision blurs as I succumb to her hot pussy.

This is heaven or hell, either way, it's everything I wanted but never knew I *needed*.

Moving one hand to the glass, I hold position for a second, giving Ella a moment as she pants in front of me. I lean forward to pepper kisses over her neck and shoulder, and I love how she shivers at the contact.

Movement on the other side of the glass catches my attention, and I look up to find Leo standing directly in front of us with his hand raised to the glass, touching exactly where

Ella's tits are pressed, and she fogs up the glass when she moans in approval.

"Make me come again, Jameson," she begs, grinding her hips as she moves slowly up and down my length, and I shake out of my awe-like state and give her exactly what she wants.

Pulling out I thrust straight back into her core, again and again as I watch Ezra and Jagger move closer too.

"Look what you're doing to them Ella, baby. You're bringing us all to our knees even when we don't want to submit," I murmur, and she moans in approval. She's always loved wielding her natural control over us.

I drop my hand to circle her clit as I fuck her hard from behind, finally relishing in her sweet pussy like I've always wanted.

"Open the fucking door, Jameson," Jagger growls, his eyes fixated on our girl, and I shake my head with a grin.

"How mad do you think we can make him?" I whisper in her ear, and she giggles, giving him the finger as she ups her movement to meet my thrusts, making me grin along with her.

I watch as a storm swirls in Jagger's eyes, a challenge working its way forward as he grips Ezra's arm and pulls him closer to the glass.

"You ready to see how they push through the pain of missing you, Ella?" I ask, tapping the glass in their direction as Leo continues to keep his hand plastered on the door while the other finds its way into his sweats.

"Holy fuck, yes," she cries, and it makes my own thrusts increase as excitement tingles around her.

Jagger moves to position them both so we have a side profile of them, his eyebrow quirked as he glances back at Ella. I don't know what he expects, but when she nods, his eyes widen in surprise before he turns back to face Ezra.

"Baby, I fucking love how you push him. But the question is, who's going to blow who?" I ask, bending my legs as I adjust our angle and thrust deeper into her pussy.

Sweat trickles down my back as Ella's eyes scan over the pair of them. "I think Ezra will blow—"

Her words are cut off as Ezra drops his gray sweats and boxers, revealing his cock.

"Holy fuck," she breathes in surprise, watching as the all mighty Jagger Izaro drops to his knees and swallows Ezra's cock in one swift move.

Hammering into her pussy with determination, I hit at her g-spot like it's my job, and her moans continue to get sweeter as she watches Ezra coming apart at Jagger's touch, and Leo shoots cum across the glass.

Everything combined together is sensation overload for our girl as she explodes before me, plastered against the glass for them to see, and the tight grip of her pussy as she rides her waves of pleasure tip me over the edge with her.

My thrusts become jagged as I climax, groaning into her ear as my world shatters right along with her.

I pull her back off the glass, letting her sag against me as she catches her breath as she watches Ezra throw his head back, ecstasy claiming him too as he comes down Jagger's throat.

Fuck.

This isn't where I thought this evening would go when I went on a rampage, but one thing's for sure.

There's no coming back from this.

We need a new game plan, one that keeps her at our side while we protect her with everything we have.

It's laughable that we thought it would ever be any other way.

LOU-LOU



I blink my eyes open, confused by the fact I'm waking up in the living room. At least I'm not acting like a pouty bitch stroking the empty bed beside me again like the other day.

Swiping at my face, my nose scrunches as I try to recall the last thing I remember before I fell asleep.

There's a blanket thrown over me, and the red and black tartan pattern instantly jogs my memory, as my cheeks flush.

Jameson Izaro.

I let him work my body like a fucking expert last night. God, I felt heights I didn't even know were possible, and I know the visual of Leo jerking off, and Jagger blowing Ezra was definitely hot as fuck. The sight of them only pushed me farther over the edge. My skin buzzes with the memory of my orgasm tearing through my body, and when I squirm I realize I'm still naked.

Pulling the blanket tighter around me, I recall what happened after I came down from my high.

To my surprise, Jameson had quickly lifted me into his arms and carried me into the living room, laying me down on the couch while the guys pounded on the glass. I remember him kissing my forehead delicately, telling me he wouldn't be a minute, before I closed my eyes, succumbing to the exhaustion I felt.

What time is it right now?

Brushing my hair back off my face, I pin the blanket to my chest as I sit up, searching for a phone or clock, and I startle when I find Ezra sitting in the chair to my left. His legs are thrown over the arm, a blanket over him too, but he's wide awake. His thick rimmed glasses are firmly in place, and his curly hair is an utter mess, making him look extra delicious.

"Hey," I murmur quietly, still unsure of the time and not wanting to wake anyone else up.

"Hey," he says back, his eyes traveling over the length of me before returning to my face, and my skin heats under his gaze. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. What time is it?"

The curtains are drawn so I can't even guess by the light outside, but Ezra pulls his blanket off before glancing at his phone.

"It's just after five," he responds, and my eyes widen in surprise, just as my stomach grumbles, which makes Ezra shake his head. "Don't let Leo hear that grumble. He was reluctant to let you sleep since you hadn't eaten, but Jameson insisted," he stated with a shrug.

What is this alternate universe I've woken up in? Where I feel like we're suddenly all on the same page.

When is the rug going to be pulled out from under me?

"I think I need to quickly get dressed and eat then, because I'm starving," I say with a smile as I stand, wrapping the blanket around me. Ezra moves to stand in front of me, tucking his hands into his pockets as he looks me over, his teeth nervously raking over his bottom lip, with his eyes searching mine. "What's wrong?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

His gray eyes almost turn charcoal as his features darken, but he clears his throat and locks his gaze on mine before responding. "Last night, Jagger and me, I—"

"Was hot as fuck," I interrupt, lifting my hand to his chest, and his lips fall open as he studies my eyes, making sure I'm not lying. I smile gently at him as I move into him, my chest

touching his as I look up into his eyes. “Hot. As. Fuck. Ezra.” I repeat, before rising up on my tiptoes and kissing the corner of his mouth ever so slightly, and I feel his body relax beneath my touch.

Ezra nods at me, relief relaxing the frown that had formed on his face, and he wraps his arm around my shoulders, leading me toward the kitchen instead of upstairs as he holds me close against his chest.

“If we’re talking about hot, Lou-Lou, I can’t tell you how furious I was to be on the other side of that glass watching you. Fuck, I think Leo would have smashed the glass where his hand rested if it wouldn’t have put you in danger,” he says with a grin, and I chuckle with him, blushing under his gaze.

He drops his arm from my shoulder, suddenly grabbing my hips and lifting me up to sit on the counter as he opens the fridge, and I tighten the blanket around me.

“Leo’s working out, but I can make you some waffles if you’d like?” Ezra offers, and I nod eagerly. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask for a coffee too, but as if reading my mind he flicks the machine on, and I let my shoulders relax as I get comfortable.

I could get used to this, the past twelve hours have been immense, but I force myself to tamp my giddiness down, knowing all too well getting my hopes up with these fuckers at the moment is a losing game with all this back and forth.

“What are your plans for the day?” Ezra asks, glancing over at me as he mixes the batter, and I shrug.

“Apart from classes I don’t really have anything else planned except maybe doing homework,” I answer honestly.

“You haven’t had a relaxing day since you showed up in Emerson Grove, Lou-Lou. I think you deserve that,” he says softly, and my eyebrows rise in surprise.

“I *definitely* deserve that,” I confirm, and his lips tilt up with a knowing grin.

“Don’t sass me, I’m being serious. This is a lot to deal with. I’m aware of that, *we’re* a lot, and you’ve faced nothing

but issues, walls, and anger from us. So I may have booked you an appointment at the nail salon in town for later this afternoon,” he says, turning his gaze from mine.

“You did what?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as my throat dries. “Why would you do that?”

I’ve forgotten what it feels like to have people do nice things for me, not without consequences or for their own gain.

He pours the mixture into the waffle maker, before turning his attention my way, and when he sees the suspicion clearly etched on my face, he quickly moves toward me.

Ezra stands right in front of where I’m sitting, his palms flat on the counter top on either side of me as he looks deep into my eyes. “Remember when we had less than nothing, Lou-Lou?” His question hits me square in the chest. Of course I fucking remember. It’s all that haunts me. I never want to go back to that. *Ever*. Forever absent parents, with no money for a loaf of bread some days. Unable to respond I simply nod. “Well, I remember one afternoon when you were probably fourteen, and you were super sad that all the girls in your class were getting cute nails, fancy dresses, and heels to wear for the winter formal. I couldn’t do anything to make it better then, but I promised I would shower you with all the girly shit when our time finally came.”

His words completely floor me. The fact that he remembers that day so clearly blows me away.

God, I hated that homecoming dance. The first one where everyone is shedding their baby skin and wanting to do the grown up shit, pamper and preen themselves, and we had nothing. I wore the same dress from the year before. The pink material was sitting much too high on my thigh and squeezing around my chest since my body had filled out a little.

“You don’t have to do that. I can pay for it myself,” I respond quietly, and he shakes his head as he tucks a loose tendril of hair behind my ear.

“I want to take care of you, Lou-Lou. Always have, always will.”

I don't know who moves first, but in the next second our lips collide as my heart pounds in my chest, completely overwhelmed with Ezra's magic touch. His mouth glides delicately across mine, and I melt into him as his words continue to wash over me. Ezra's hand cups my jaw as the other grips my hip, and my fingers run through his curly hair.

"Yes. Please."

Leo's voice booms around us as his excitement zings through the room. I pull Ezra's lips from mine just as the waffle machine timer goes off.

Fuck.

My fingers glide over my swollen lips as Ezra offers me a wink and moves to sort out the waffles, and my gaze finds Leo as he casually leans against the door frame.

"What are we going to do with you, Lucy?" Leo asks with a quirk of his eyebrow, and I refuse to blush under his gaze. Instead, offering him a two-finger salute, making him grin as he steps into the kitchen. "Oh, I could do that with my fingers deep inside your pussy, knock the smirk straight off your face and make you squirt all over my hands if you'd like," he offers, wagging his eyebrows as he grabs a mug and fills it with coffee, before handing it to me.

His other hand grazes over my knee, and I shiver at the contact, more affected by his words than I care to admit.

"Ezra, Jameson's waiting to spar," Leo says without moving his gray eyes from mine, and it's only then I see the sweat at his temples, his hair damp, and his navy t-shirt is wet too.

Leo post workout looks hot as fuck.

God, I need to cool my lady parts. I'll end up with friction burns if I keep touching myself after every interaction with them.

"I'm going. Make waffles for our girl," Ezra states, leaning in to kiss my cheek before sauntering out of the room casually.

Our girl.

Ezra said *our girl*.

Shit.

I'm a goner.



I step down from the SUV before Leo can make it to my side, and he fakes a glare at me as he slings his arm over my shoulder and shuts the door behind me.

“Why do you have to be ‘little miss independent,’ huh?” he grumbles, and it reminds me of the night Jameson locked me in the Mustang until he reached my door.

I pout a little since I didn't get to see him this morning, and Jagger was a no show too. But left in Leo's company, I had a relaxing and satisfying breakfast.

Now I'm going to be late to class if he doesn't up his pace.

It's quite mild out today, and there are plenty of people lining the walkway between the parking lot and the courtyard. The gentle breeze that floats around me is actually quite refreshing.

“Why do you have to be slow as shit?” I retort, a grin on my lips, and he ruffles my wavy hair.

Digging my elbow into his side, he grunts, dropping his arm from around me. I pick up my speed, walking through the campus parking lot, and spy Naomi up ahead outside the Falls building.

“Girl, what the what?” she asks, pointing between Leo and me, and I roll my eyes, linking my arm through hers and continuing toward Falls Hall where my first class of the day is.

“Don't even,” I respond, hearing Leo call out my name from behind, but I don't stop. He's already caused enough drama in public so far this term, I don't need anymore right now.

Naomi glances over her shoulder and her pace slows. “We’re good. He seems content to walk behind you and stare at your ass in those tight jeans,” she says with a chuckle, and I can’t stop myself from looking over my shoulder at him. My hips sway a little more at the attention, and he grips his cock through his gray sweats.

Fuck.

How is someone such a tease in a white tee, gray sweats, and a baseball hat? It’s not fair. After last night you’d think I would be satiated, but clearly not.

Turning back to the Falls Hall building, my steps falter as I see Vince standing at the top of the steps with a glare on his face, paired with bruises and a sneer on his lips.

Holy fuck.

I didn’t even question what had happened last night, I got so lost in Jameson I didn’t even consider reaching out to see where he was or what had happened. Then I fell asleep, consumed by the orgasms from Jameson’s touch.

Guilt sits heavy on my chest, but the way he’s looking at me now, makes me glad he didn’t show and even more grateful that Jameson handled him.

Naomi’s hand tightens on my arm, and body heat at my back tells me Leo is right there behind me as Vince starts to move down the steps.

“Not a fucking chance,” Leo grinds out, moving to my side to put himself between Vince and me, but I throw my arm out quickly, holding him back. If Vince has something to say to me then I do not want to hide behind Leo.

I know I don’t have the strength to do it, but he appeases me, remaining by my side as Vince stops in front of me.

“Why are you still walking around with these fuckers, who think they’re gods, when they left me like this for wanting to take you out?” Vince spits out, pointing a finger at his face and I frown. I’ve seen people look much more worse off, fuck I’ve been in brawls and looked worse than that. I get being hurt, jealous, embarrassed or whatever else he’s fucking feeling, but

don't attempt to cause a scene in front of everyone for attention. It's not how I work, and I thought he would have known that from the situations I've avoided when Leo tried to pull that shit.

"Watch who you're speaking to, motherfucker," Leo hisses, bouncing on his feet ready to attack, when a baseball bat suddenly flies straight over my shoulder, coming to a stop an inch under Vince's chin as a body presses into my back.

I don't want to take my eyes off Vince when he seems like a completely different person off the handle like this, but I can't stop myself from glancing over my shoulder to see Jameson standing behind me. Anger and fury burn in his deep brown eyes as the cords in his neck are locked with tension.

The bat is in his hand, but he doesn't look down at me, his focus straight ahead, and I follow the bat all the way to Vince's face again.

"This is the bat I used, and I didn't go anywhere near your fucking face, I punched you once. Once doesn't cause the state of your face. I hit you in the legs, sweeping you off your feet, twice, before giving your shitty A-Class Merc a fucking facelift. Did you forget, or do you need a friendly reminder?" Jameson seethes, and my pulse quickens at his words as I glance to my right to find Naomi staring at the whole scene with wide eyes too. While Leo on my left is more than pleased with Jameson's actions if the smirk on his lips is anything to go off.

There goes my attempt at a quiet day. My shoulders sag as I release a sigh.

"All these bruises didn't just magically appear on my face, asshole," Vince retorts, taking another step toward me so we're almost toe to toe, but Jameson lightly jabs the bat against his throat enough to send a message, causing Vince to splutter.

"I actually watched the footage Ezra managed to find before he deleted it from the docks surveillance system, and he really didn't hit your face until he was about to drive away. So, who did? Daddy dearest? Your mama, or the girl you were all

over when you left campus yesterday?” Leo interjects, and I groan at how out of hand this is getting.

As hot as it is that Leo and Jameson jumped to my defense, I can take care of myself.

Leo’s words register in my head, but I was never really into this guy to be upset about him being with another girl. None of that matters to me.

As much as I love the feel of Jameson behind me, I take a step forward, dropping my arm from Naomi’s, knocking the bat down as I push against Vince’s chest, pleased when he stumbles back a step, and I point my finger in his face.

“This isn’t a pissing contest, and I’m a fucking grown woman with my own mind and choices. *You* don’t get to disrespect me and cause a scene.”

I straighten my jacket, hitching my bag over my shoulder as I move to take a step around him, avoiding the gazes of everyone now gathered to watch this shit show unfold, and he grabs my arm tight.

Anger bubbles instantly below the surface of my skin. This motherfucker didn’t just put his hand on me without permission.

I hear growling from behind me, likely from Leo and Jameson, but I don’t give them a chance to respond as I drop my bag at my feet, clenching my fist at my side before punching him in the face. Dick.

Vince’s grip on my arm drops instantly as his hand rises to his face and he gapes at me in surprise.

“Don’t *ever* fucking touch me again, you coward. Otherwise I *will* lose my lady-like demeanor, and I’ll drag your sorry ass through the town straight to your motherfucking grave. Have I made myself clear, *Vince?*”

Not waiting for anyone’s response, feeling far too many eyes watching my movements, I walk up the steps quickly without looking like I’m running away. I can feel my heart pounding wildly in my chest with adrenaline.

I hate having to prove myself, especially to handsy men, but I'll do it again and again if it lets them know I'm untouchable because of my own actions, and not because someone else is protecting me.

LOU-LOU



I relax back in my seat, the chair massager working out some of my knots as I daydream, letting the nail technician do her thing as my feet feel amazing in the pedicure spa.

Fuck. Ezra was right. I really do deserve this.

Especially after today. Well, this morning. The news definitely did travel around campus quickly. Everyone is very aware I punched a motherfucker for putting his hands on me, but no one said anything to me directly. If Naomi heard any rumors she didn't share the gossip, and I appreciate it.

Even Leo kept quiet, not making the situation any worse, but he sat beside me in every class we had together. I avoided the campus food hall on my lunch break, opting to have a cake and coffee from the little coffee shop Naomi recommended on my own instead.

Leo offered to bring me to the nail salon, but I brought it up on my maps app and saw it was only a twenty minute walk from campus. So I walked the entire way with my headphones on, listening to drill beats like my life depended on it.

Naomi offered to come with me, but I really just needed a minute to myself. I'm literally fucking drowning in drama, not of my own doing and it's exhausting.

"Have you decided on a color?" the technician asks, and I nod, leaning over to point the example out on the tray, the sound of the salon buzzing around us.

“Can I go for all black on my toes, and black with copper foiling on my fingers, please?” I ask, and she nods, smiling as she runs off to grab what she needs.

My phone vibrates on the arm of my seat, and I roll my eyes when I see my brother’s name flashing across the screen with an incoming message.

David: Are you happy yet?

What the fuck?

I told him not to message me after I first arrived in Emerson Grove. I’d contact him when I’m ready to talk, and I’m still mad at *them*, never mind *him*. And what the fuck does his message mean?

Lou-Lou: What?

David: I was doing you a fucking favor. I don’t deserve the silent treatment from you. Not after everything I’ve done for you!

I glance around the nail salon like he’s about to jump out from behind a corner or something. What the hell has brought this on? And what the fuck does he think he did for me?

Lou-Lou: I’m living my life, David. I’m not specifically giving you the silent treatment. But please, enlighten me, what have you done for me?

I place my phone upside down as the technician returns, closing my eyes and letting the natural chatter of the salon

surround me as she starts painting my toenails. I relax as I move my brother and his usual shit to the back of my mind. He's probably high and looking for a fight again. It's his usual MO and after all of these years, I know better than to engage.

"All done, miss."

I blink my eyes open, my gaze instantly falling to my nails, and I love them instantly. They have fall vibes while looking badass at the same time.

"They're perfect, thank you," I say, tossing my phone in my bag as I get ready to leave.

I follow her to the cash register, but she instantly waves me off. "No, no. It's already been paid for," she says with a smile, which I return, murmuring my thanks once again before I step outside.

The sun is setting, and it's times like this I get pissed because I don't have a fucking car right now, which makes me instantly mad at Jameson again.

"Hey, pretty lady!" Leo hollers from the SUV parked across the street, and I raise my eyebrow in surprise as I spot him grinning with the passenger window down. "Get the fuck over here it's getting cold out," he adds, and I smile, quickly doing as he says and climbing in beside him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, clipping my seatbelt as he pulls out onto the street and starts heading home.

"We didn't want you walking home at this time of night, and I may have purposely parked my SUV in front of their vehicles so I could be the one to come get you," he states casually with a shrug, and I grin at his antics.

"Sure," I murmur in response, relaxing back into my seat as he grabs my hand to look at my new nails.

"Nice, this looks hot as hell, Lucy," he says, kissing my knuckles, and my eyes widen at his move.

"Honestly, what the fuck happened overnight where you're all daring and caring with me all of a sudden?" I ask, unable to contain the curiosity.

“Oh, this has nothing at all to do with anything overnight and everything to do with the smooth as fuck punch you gave Vince today,” he says, kissing my knuckles again, with his voice filled with awe and his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Stop,” I say with a roll of my eyes, pulling my hand back as he glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Did you see the magic you created? I was hella proud of you. I love that you put him in his place, but everyone, including *Vince*, needs to know you’re under our protection too.”

What the what?

Glancing at him, it irks me that his expression is so casual. “Why would anyone need to know that? I can take care of myself, Leo, which I made perfectly clear earlier today,” I state, but he shakes his head.

“That’s irrelevant, Luce. There’s bigger stuff at play here, and we don’t want a target painted on your back.”

His words make me pause, my eyebrows knitting together with confusion and a hint of annoyance as we circle back to the same argument over and over.

“Ah, yes, now I remember. Those secrets no one wants to tell me, how silly of me to forget,” I sass with a roll of my eyes as I cross my arms over my chest and Leo sighs.

“It’s not as simple as that, Luella, you should know that by now. Don’t we always put your safety at the top of our priorities?” Exasperation is etched into his voice as he pulls onto our street.

Fuck. No Luce, no Lou-Lou. It must be serious if he’s using my full name.

“Maybe you could do all that while keeping me in the loop because I know absolutely nothing, and that’s going to end up putting me at a disadvantage,” I respond with irritation as the SUV comes to a stop outside the house.

Leo turns to stare at me, a mixture of emotions I can’t decipher running across his face. It’s like he wants to explain

all of this shit to me, but a small part makes him hold back still and whatever that reason is, it outweighs his desire to tell me.

Nope.

I'm not letting this shit get to me again when I've just spent the past couple of hours relaxing and calming down. I need a night off from all of the fucking drama.

With another roll of my eyes, I climb down from the SUV, tossing my bag over my shoulder and heading inside. I hear Leo's footsteps behind me as I step over the threshold, the smell of bolognese instantly tickling my nose, and I groan with joy.

"I knew the food would work in my favor," he murmurs from behind me, but he quickly clears his throat and takes off toward the kitchen when I glare at him. "It's Ezra's birthday next week, what do you think we should do for him?" he asks, changing the subject, and it fucking works because it's all I can think about now.

I completely forgot about birthdays, which makes me feel bad, so I quicken my pace, catching up to Leo as ideas swirl around in my head.

Dropping my bag on the dining table, I join Leo as he switches the stove back on, my mind still going a mile a minute. I want his birthday celebration to have meaning, especially after he gifted me this today. Getting my nails done is something so small now, but once upon a time it was all I wanted and everything I couldn't have.

That's when the idea comes to me. "Laser tag," I blurt out, throwing my hands in the air with excitement.

Leo grins at me as he glances my way, and he nods. "Fuck. You two have started a memory lane trade now," he says, flicking his gaze to my jazz hands with a grin, and I clap with giddiness.

"Hell yeah. This was sweet, and as much as you guys are total assholes, I can appreciate the thought he put into this. He deserves that level of attention too, especially for his

birthday,” I explain, remembering the pain his birthday used to always bring.

When we were younger, he always wanted to go play laser tag, but again, it was never available in our town, and we *never* had the money to go.

I’m determined to do this for him now, even if he thinks we’re too old, it’s the perfect idea to offer in return for today.

“It sounds like a fun plan and I’m sure he’ll love it,” Leo says, turning the stove off to start plating up the food.

“Perfect, but don’t tell him. I’ll organize it for Saturday. Even asshole Jagger can carve some time out of his shitty day to join us,” I grunt, and he raises his eyebrow in question at me.

I’m still salty over Jagger. That’s not going to change when it feels like more and more distance is placed between us with each day that passes. Even after last night.

“Done. You set the table and I’ll tell the others dinner is ready,” he states, leaning forward to plant a kiss on my forehead before rushing from the room, leaving me lightheaded and intoxicated by another one of their little touches.

My heart pounds a little in my chest, excitement getting the better of me as I consider Ezra’s birthday, and I practically bounce over to the dining table, pulling out the placemats and grabbing the cutlery, making five places to eat.

When everything is set, I move my bag, placing it on the floor near where I’ve been sitting, and I pull my phone out to find a response from my brother from earlier.

David: Are you kidding me?

David: What did I do for you?

David: I kept you alive.

David: Why don't you ask those motherfuckers exactly what I'm talking about.

What the fuck?

A rock settles in my stomach as I read his words over and over again. What does any of that even mean?

My feet move before I can even acknowledge what I'm doing as I go in search of the guys in question.

"Leo?" I call out, hearing nothing in response. A quick glance in the games room and living room tells me they aren't there either.

What the hell?

The cupboard under the stairs is open, and it wasn't earlier, but as I go to close it, the door catches on something. Peeking inside, my eyes widen in surprise when I see the floor open, and a staircase leading down to a basement.

Those little secret-keeping motherfuckers.

I can hear their voices in the distance, and I slowly take the stone slabs one at a time as the dark space is illuminated by a soft glowing light at the bottom.

The guys' voices get louder as they come into view, but I'm so shocked I'm not fully listening to what they say.

My jaw hits the floor when I reach the bottom, the entire space is massive. There's a punching bag and mats set up in the far right corner, computers and a whole load of tech shit straight ahead to the left, while a variety of weapons take up the complete space to my direct right.

The guys are over by the huge screens set up, watching whatever's happening, completely oblivious to my arrival as I'm drawn to the variety of guns secured onto the walls. A couple of handguns are casually laying on the tables, and I

can't even comprehend the fact this shit's been down here while I've had no fucking clue. Crowbars, bats, blades, and even steel pipes are propped against the wall. It seems they have the facilities for a wide range of situations.

There really is a lot of mysterious shit going on at the minute and finding this space is just the beginning.

I run my fingers over the metal on the table in front of me, the barrel of the gun carved and shaped with sharp edges.

“What in the fucking hell are you doing?”

Jagger's deep rumble makes me jump, and in sheer panic my finger slots into the trigger of the Ruger 9mm as I grip the handle with both hands and turn the gun on him.

He quirks his eyebrow, a desperate laugh on his lips as my throbbing pulse is deafening in my ears.

“Don't fucking do that,” I hiss, still frozen in place as he rolls his eyes. He holds all of my attention as I try to calm my racing heart. Fuck, when guns are around, I instantly go into protective mode.

“You shouldn't be down here. Put the fucking gun down and get the hell out before you hurt yourself, little girl,” he sneers, pissing me off, and I find myself needing to prove a point once more today.

Lightning fast, I make sure the barrel is secure by clearing the chamber and checking the safety lever is on, before unclipping the magazine and redoing it all back together. All with my gaze fixed on his. Once I've finished, I place it on the table beside me, the challenge clear in my own eyes as I see a hint of surprise in his. I smirk, far too fucking pleased with myself as I place my hands on my hips.

“Holy fuck, I don't think you can get anymore badass, Ella. My dick definitely approves,” Jameson groans, his hand cupping his crotch as I raise my eyebrows at him. I look past Jagger to see the other three staring at me like I grew a second head, and when I glance past them to the screens, it's my turn to be surprised by the fact they're watching me hit Vince this morning from five different fucking angles.

Clearing my throat, I glance at the four of them hoping one of them will respond. “What is all this?”

“No way, baby cakes. First you answer my question, what the fuck was that?” Leo asks, pointing between me and the gun with an expectant look, and I sigh.

“I had to grow up when I left Nevada.” I don’t offer them anything else in response, simply shrugging casually. They keep enough to themselves, it’s my turn to not give them everything they want with a snap of their fingers.

“Who the fuck even are you?” Ezra murmurs, rubbing the back of his neck, and I roll my eyes at his dramatics.

“Please, I’m Luella motherfucking Carter. A badass bitch. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m starving so I’m going to go eat, but you can bet your ass I’ll be training down here whenever I please. And when you consider the explanation for all of this, you’re going to need to explain in great detail,” I state, pointing behind me at the guns as I continue moving back toward the stairs. “Also consider the fact that my brother just said he saved my life, and that you guys would have the answer to that too. Time’s running out on all of your secrets.”

With that, I turn on my heel, swaying my ass as I take the steps, the sound of curses surrounding me as I leave them down there.

I’m the queen of burning bridges, constantly sabotaging myself, and I know this is a defining moment. We’re standing on opposite sides of the bridge right now, and we’ll either meet in the middle, or torch the whole fucking thing.

Either way, I’m not willing to be anything but myself. I know my worth, and it’s about time they were reminded too.

EZRA



I can hear her little, quiet footsteps as she approaches my bed, and I force my eyes to remain closed for a minute longer. I knew she wouldn't let me get away with doing nothing today.

If it were anyone else, I'd be cutting myself off from everyone and running for the hills, needing a little quiet, but that's impossible with Lou-Lou. Not that I'll complain at the fact she's here and under my skin again.

Since she caught us down in the basement, everything has been calm, but the elephant in the room is growing as we struggle over where we stand with the situation we're in, and Lou-Lou's limited knowledge of everything.

Now, it's Saturday morning and she's sneaking into my room.

Any other time I would be intrigued to see what it is she wants, but not today. Not on my birthday.

It's always a hard time for me, fuck, even now my heart races as I think about it, but I push through, focusing on her presence as she stands beside the bed.

She clearly wants to check on me, knowing how messed up today always is, but now I feel awkward since I'm *not* actually asleep.

"Ezra Campbell, your fucking eyelashes are fluttering. Pretending to be asleep doesn't suit you," she grouches, and the bed dips beside me as I open my eyes to look at her. With

her knee bent and propped up on the bed beside me, she looks down at me with a knowing gaze.

Beautiful.

She's dressed in a black tracksuit, with a cropped hoodie, and her face is make-up free. I love Lou-Lou's natural beauty, I always have. I can see her rawness like this. With her blonde hair piled up on top of her head in a bun as well, she looks like perfection.

"I didn't hear you come in and I was resting my eyes," I respond, swiping a hand down my face, trying to cover the white lie, and she scoffs at me.

"Fuck off, Ezra. That's a bag of bullshit. You'd have heard me coming before I even touched the door handle," she states, and I grin, knowing how true that is. "How are you holding up?" she asks, and my heart sinks at the reminder, but it's not her fault, and truthfully, I appreciate her coming in here to check on my well-being.

"I'm holding it together," I murmur, running my fingers through my unruly hair as her eyes search mine.

"You know I'm always here for you if you need someone to talk to," she adds, and my heart warms as I nod in acknowledgment.

Hurt comes in all different forms. There's *always* someone worse off than you, but that doesn't make your pain any less real, any less heartbreaking.

My pain, the pain we're tiptoeing around here, is the fact my older sister, Genie, took her life on my fourteenth birthday. She was only two years older than me, the whole world at her feet, and completely gone in the blink of an eye.

The memory of finding out sears my heart as I try to keep my emotions in check, but Lou-Lou leans forward, softly stroking her knuckles down my cheek in comfort as I clearly do a bad job of keeping my shit together.

I'd been down by the river bank, with Lou-Lou and the guys, laughing, joking, and doing whatever twelve and thirteen year olds do, and when the sun went down we reluctantly

made our way home. Only, my house was surrounded by police officers.

There was no note, no explanation, no comfort from my parents, just a huge gaping hole in my heart and that wound bleeds inside me a little more as each year passes.

Fuck.

Silence falls over us, and with each passing moment her eyes darken with sadness. She nibbles on her bottom lip, clearly wanting to make things better, but not knowing how to approach the situation or how to approach *me*.

Without thinking, I pull the blankets back, silently inviting her to lay beside me, and to my surprise, she does so with a relieved smile on her face.

Once she's comfortable, her head on my arm and her leg hitched over mine, I take a deep breath as her hand rests on my stomach.

My dick aches with how close she is to me, need coursing through my veins just from having her near, and when she lets out a soft exhale, her breath brushing over my skin, I think I may have gone straight to fucking heaven just being in her presence.

"What's that?" Lou-Lou asks, breaking the silence as she points to the tattoo on my bare chest, and I tighten my grip around her.

"It's a crown."

"Well, obviously, but what does it represent?" she asks, my heart pounding as she glides her fingers over it ever so softly.

"Who says it has to mean anything?" I murmur, and she props herself up on her elbow looking down at me with a pointed look. Even without my glasses on I can see her perfectly with her pouty lips giving me an expectant look.

"You're my Ezra. You never do anything for the sake of it. It *always* has meaning," she states knowingly, and I grab her hand, moving it to the bottom left corner of the tattoo.

"Then you should look closer."

Her eyebrows knit together slightly as my fingertips tingle at the contact with hers, and she leans forward to see what I'm hinting at. I watch her blue eyes intently as I wait for the realization to dawn on her, and the second it does they fill with unshed tears.

"Fuck, Ezra," she breathes, tracing over it again, but I know every inch of the design by heart.

The delicate crown is the size of my palm, a bold black outline which happens to spell Lou-Lou along the bottom with splashes of pastel colors surrounding it like water paints.

Jagger designed it, and one of his tattoo artist friends did it after she left. We all have it. Even the biggest asshole out of all of us.

She looks up at me through her long lashes, so many questions dancing in her eyes, and I'm ready to fuck it all to hell and give her the answers she wants, when a short knock at my door is followed swiftly by Leo waltzing into my room like he fucking owns the place.

"Hey boo, have you told him the plans for the day?" he asks, boycotting mentioning my birthday as he flops down on my other side, completely ruining the *could have been* moment as she looks down at me with a soft smile.

"We're going out for your birthday," she mutters, wetting her lips nervously as I nod in acknowledgement, not sure if that's a good idea when Leo continues.

"We're losing him, Lucy. Tell him what *you* planned for him before he thinks up an excuse to hide away from us for the day." He swirls his cap round so it sits back to front as he mirrors how she's lying on my other side casually.

Asshole.

"What are these plans? Please tell me it includes cutting Leo's fingers off," I grumble, trying to pull my arm from under him, but he leans down harder, and I roll my eyes at his annoying behavior.

Lou-Lou clears her throat, flicking her gaze between us for a moment before she takes a deep breath. "We're going to

laser tag.”

My heart stops in my chest as I glance over at her, my eyebrows touching my hairline with surprise.

Laser tag?

For me?

For my birthday?

Holy fuck. I’ve always wanted...

“You remembered,” I say quietly, intense emotions swirling around in my mind as she nods hesitantly.

Using more force, I lift my arm from Leo, nudging him to the side as I cup Lou-Lou’s face and get lost in her eyes. I tilt her chin up, kissing each corner of her lips as I try to convey how much it means to me, how much *she* means to me, when she leans in more, capturing my lips with hers in a slow, languid kiss.

I feel her fingers in my hair as my eyes fall closed, basking in her touch as Leo grumbles under his breath about it being his turn.

“It’s not your birthday, asshole,” Lou-Lou says with a grin, leaning back and standing beside the bed before I can pull her in tight again. “There’s secrets around here, remember? The only person getting a free pass today is Ezra because it’s his birthday. You’re still in the fucking doghouse,” she states with a shrug, making me smile slightly.

“So, I’m today’s favorite, huh?” I ask, swiping a hand down my face as Leo sulks beside me and throws his arms down on the bed in a dramatic fashion.

“Maybe,” she answers with a wink before turning for the door. “But only if you hurry up. Otherwise, we’re going to miss our time slot.”

Her ass sways like a pendulum, making my hands clench as I groan, and Leo laughs.

“She has us by the fucking balls, right?” Leo states with a laugh, and he’s right.

She fucking owns us.

LOU-LOU



“**Y**ou motherfucker’s are going down,” Jameson says with a grin, swinging his arms out wide as he tries to show off in front of me, and I roll my shoulders.

We look like a set of dickheads, all wearing black tracksuits, but fuck do they look hot as hell in them. I just wish they were wearing gray, it always outlines the peen better than black. Fuckers. I should have dressed them for my own entertainment.

His stance draws my attention to the tattoos on the top of his hand, and it makes me annoyed at myself for not looking at the ones that cover his body in more detail when he was naked the other day, but my focus was on his dick.

God, Ezra’s tattoo almost had me crying, seeing my name so intricately scrawled into his perfect skin as part of the crown had my heart thundering in my chest. Fuck, it makes me feel like a damn queen, more specifically, *their* god damn queen. And I’m far too intrigued to know if the others have the same.

“I’m going to make you regret saying that,” I respond, inspecting the laser gun in my hand as I do, and Jameson laughs in response.

We opted for a lottery for the team assignments. I think we are more keen on shooting each other than anyone else; I know I am. It was easy enough to get here, just off the highway near the mall, and it’s fairly quiet still at this time, which I’m pleased with.

“Ella, babe. Just because you worked that gun like a pro the other night doesn’t mean you’re as experienced with a weapon as I am,” he says, coming to stand toe to toe with me, crouching down so we’re eye level as I stare at him with wide eyes. He’s fucking intoxicating, trying to get under my skin, but I shake my head.

It takes him a moment to recognize his slip up, but I’m locking that information away for a later date.

What experience does he have?

A sheepish look washes over his face as he swipes his hand over the frown lines forming as Jagger shoves him to the side.

“Motherfucker, she’s still on my team, and I’ll destroy the fuck out of you,” he grunts, ignoring me, and I brush it off. It’s all he’s fucking done since I arrived anyway. I’m done being hurt by it. Jagger seems far too content to hate me, and his attitude is never going to improve.

The other people here are pre-teens, and we have five members on each team. Jagger and me against Leo, Jameson, and Ezra with the pre-teens sprinkled between the two teams.

We’re going to lose, but it’ll be fun at least. As long as the smile on Ezra’s face remains there for a little longer then it’ll all be worthwhile.

“If everyone’s ready, you can line up at your respective color’s door,” the staff member announces, and I can’t help but give Jameson the middle finger before moving to the yellow side, not checking to see if Jagger is coming, while they move over to the orange door.

I let the younger kids in front, not wanting to spoil their fun with our own challenge that settles over us. A quick glance to my right and I spy Ezra, the smile still in place as he laughs with Leo, and it settles my soul.

“You may be a bitch, Luella, but at least you’ve managed to brighten his day,” Jagger murmurs from behind me, his words both cutting me to the core and elevating me at the same time. It’s always a double-edged sword with this asshole.

I glance over my shoulder, taking him in, with his hair pulled back off his face, a scowl firmly in place as he holds the laser gun in one hand, and taps away on his phone with the other. If I hadn't felt the emotional response from his words, anyone would have called me a liar for believing he spoke at all.

"It's like being a dickhead, but still managing to make Ezra come on your tongue, right?" I sass back, his gaze flicking to mine with my retort, but I quickly turn to face the front of the room as the siren sounds.

We have thirty minutes to have fun, let our hair down, and be kids again, and I'm going to make the most of it. Game on.

"Don't let the team down," a snotty little kid says in front of me as he runs into the smoky darkness through the open door, leaving me to gape after him for a moment, but when Jagger shoulders past me, it kicks me into motion too.

Following them, the yellow lines on the laser gun in my hand, and the yellow markings on the target strapped to my chest stand out with the UV lighting. The doors slam shut behind me, and for a moment I feel disorientated as darkness really does take over.

I blink a few times, adjusting to the smoke as well, and when I turn to the right, I'm surprised to find the dark room illuminated in different neon colors. There are walls, barriers, bridges, and rocks laid out over two floors offering a huge course.

A short simple beep sounds out around the room, and the scoreboard to my left on the wall flickers to show the orange team already has a point.

Fuck.

I need to get a grip and hunt these motherfuckers down.

I move farther into the room, opting to take the ramp up to the higher floor, knowing full well I'll have a better vantage point from there.

I try to keep hidden behind the random shield walls placed strategically around the room, not seeing anyone around me

until I reach the top when I see one of the kids glancing around too. Not caring, I take aim and hit the target straight away.

“What the fuck, bitch?” he hisses, before running over the bridge that leads farther into the room, leaving me to stand and take his insult without being able to toss one of my own back at him.

Little shit.

I move to the right side of the bridge, looking down to see if I can see anyone below me, when my target goes off, flashing and whirling with a sound that makes me jump. I quickly glance around, but I have no idea where that shot came from, so I decide to hustle over the bridge, not wanting to be an easy open target.

When I get to the other side, I find a stand with football sized holes cut out for me to aim through, with excellent views around me. I angle my laser gun as I crouch slightly behind the shield, spying an orange target to the left.

Their target goes off with my shot, and the groan that sounds out is definitely Leo’s, and it makes me grin.

Take that, sucker.

When I’m sure he hasn’t seen me, I stand tall, moving to the hole further to my right, when a hand on my shoulder quickly spins me so my back is pressed against the board.

My heart pounds wildly with adrenaline in my chest, and I look up to find Jameson standing before me. Chest to chest, his gun is at his side while his other hand grips my hip where my stomach is exposed, and it makes me shiver.

“Jameson, you made me—”

My sentence is cut off as his lips crash down on mine with a rough, punishing kiss. I instantly melt into him, desperate for more as his teeth rake over my bottom lip sending a jolt of pain through my body.

Holy fuck.

I barely manage to hold on to my laser gun as my other hand grips the back of his neck, fighting him for control as I

turn to putty in his hands. Pulling my lips from his, I pant as my pulse beats unevenly in my ears.

A smirk covers his lips as he goes to take a step back, and before I can even process what's happening, he raises his gun to my target and shoots me. My jaw hits the floor in surprise as he offers me a wink and runs off.

That motherfucker.

Fuck though, that kiss was totally worth the point loss. My lips are still tingling with the aftershock.

When I come to my senses again, I continue to move around the area, having fun as I laugh along with everyone, and when the bell rings I know our time is up. I slowly make my way to the exit, loving the hype of the game running through me, even though the scoreboard tells me the orange team won by one point.

As I step out into the lobby area again, I'm surprised with how sweaty I am, my hair clinging to my forehead as Leo unclips my target. I instantly spot Ezra as he walks out side by side with Jagger and a huge grin on his face. He instantly spots me, patting Jagger on the arm before rushing toward me with his gear still on, and lifts me clear off the floor, spinning me around.

"Holy crap, Ezra," I giggle, clinging to him as he slows and places me back on my feet out in the lobby area.

"Thank you, Lou-Lou. I needed this more than you'll ever know," he murmurs, kissing my forehead before moving to the desk to get rid of his shit.

I feel like I'm floating, consumed by these guys and the happy vibe that surrounds us for the first time since I got here, but it's as if the universe turns against me, feeling my happiness and wanting to destroy it. My happy vibe is killed when the redhead I remember very vividly giving Jagger head at one of his parties walks in with two other girls.

I hate to admit it, but watching as she approaches Jagger, placing her hands on his chest, my jealousy rises, and frustration bubbles under my skin.

He doesn't acknowledge her right away, even though she's fucking touching him as he continues to speak with Jameson. The other two girls just standing around talking among themselves.

I watch as Jameson swipes a hand down his face, his eyes flicking my way, and the guilt on his brother's behalf is like a punch in the gut.

Jagger's gaze follows his brother's settling on me, and I notice the question burning in his brown eyes. Is he challenging me? To do what? I'm not going to go over there and claim him, he would take a lot of joy out of knocking me back, and we all know it.

I want out of here.

Turning for the door, an arm slings over my shoulder, falling into step with me, and I glance up to see Ezra beside me, pushing his glasses up on his nose with a gentle smile on his lips.

"Wanna ride home with me?" he asks, and I nod immediately.

I came with Leo in the SUV after we ran to get a birthday cake for the party later, but Leo can handle that. I need to get out of this room because the air I'm breathing in suddenly feels suffocating. I feel sick.

"Lead the way, birthday boy."

LOU-LOU



I can't stop looking around Ezra's black Tesla, completely fangirling over his fully electric car. I love my mustang, muscle cars are totally my idea of the perfect ride, but admittedly, this is cool as shit.

The sleek dashboard, everything sitting on the dash screen at the center console instead of behind the wheel, and the relaxed seating has me impressed. It's the perfect distraction from the mood Jagger left me in after celebrating Ezra's birthday.

"I should have known you'd be all for the gadgets," I murmur, glancing in his direction and he grins. "I mean, once upon a time I didn't think we'd drive anything but pedal bikes, but here we are," I add, a sense of nostalgia washing over me. I will forever love and appreciate everything I have, since I once had nothing at all.

"Do you remember when we used to race up and down the old track lines?" Ezra asks with a grin, and I giggle at the memories that flood my mind.

"Fuck, we pedaled like our lives depended on it," I respond, almost feeling the strain in my legs like I did every day we rode those rusty bikes. The tracks were on the outskirts of our hometown, and as kids we spent forever and a day down there having fun.

"It was fun though, right?" The serene smile on Ezra's face melts my heart as he continues down the highway.

“Hell yeah it was. Fuck, we had no worries or cares. Just time, fun, school and... each other.” I wet my lips, watching as the cars zoom past us, a weird vibe washing over me. “I miss the sense of family we had between us back then.”

I feel Ezra’s eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to look over at him.

“We still have that now, Lou-Lou,” he says softly, and I shake my head in disagreement, biting back the scoff desperate to escape.

“No, Ezra, you guys still have that. Now, I’m just an outsider looking in,” I say with a sad smile as I keep my gaze focused ahead, before shaking my head to clear my thoughts. “But, I’m not ruining today with the same old boring shit I keep moaning about,” I add dismissively before he can respond.

“Lou-Lou—”

“Nope, you’ve seemed happy today and we’re not ruining that because we’re all at an impasse. Especially when you have a party to attend later,” I interrupt, and he rolls his eyes, reluctantly giving into my request.

“I mean that’s very true. Today has been an amazing day, and I have you to thank for that.”

Ezra leans across the console, squeezing my thigh, and my hand instantly falls on top of his, stroking his knuckles as I bask in the small contact between us. My skin tingles where his hand rests, his fingers dangerously close to my apex, the knowledge of him being the one taking my virginity instantly pushing to the forefront of my mind.

“What’s that look on your face?” Ezra pulls my attention from where our hands are joined. One look at his quirked eyebrow and I’m close to blushing. “No way, Lou-Lou, you don’t get to keep tight-lipped, I can tell it’s something juicy,” he continues, giving my thigh an extra squeeze.

I facepalm at how ridiculous I’m being, before relaxing back into my seat with my gaze still fixed on him. “I was just thinking about the fact I gave you my virginity. It feels like

forever ago, but like it was only yesterday all at once,” I admit, watching as his eyes widen in surprise.

I don’t know what he was expecting me to say, but I know for a fact it wasn’t *that*.

“That was by far the hottest night of my life,” he admits, casting his eyes my way, and his words from the other day bounce around in my head.

No one but me. He’s never touched another girl but me.

His finger draws delicate circles on the inside of my thigh as he focuses on the road ahead, and my nipples tighten. The vision of his cock in Jagger’s mouth a few nights ago adds to my visual, and I feel like I’m ready to combust.

“Fuck, Lou-Lou, you can’t moan like that while I’m driving,” Ezra grinds out huskily.

Moan? When the fuck did I moan?

“Ezra, you’re squeezing my thigh while I have the night I lost my virginity swirling around in my head, add in the fact you said there’s been no other girl but me, *and* the sight of Jagger blowing you. I’m needy as fuck right now,” I state, my skin heating as I say the words out loud.

“Fuck.” Fuck is right. “I feel it too,” he adds, releasing my thigh as he grabs my hand and brings it to his crotch.

Ah, shit.

I gape at him slightly as I test my grip along his lap, watching his reaction morph his face as he focuses on the road.

He’s like steel through his sweatpants, and I can’t stop another groan escaping my mouth, even as I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

“I fucking need you, Ezra,” I murmur, not afraid to admit my skin is pleading for his touch as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and shakes his head.

“I’m not fucking you in the car for the first time again, Lou-Lou,” he states, and like a fucking little bitch, I pout.

“I don’t know how you expect me to control myself, Ezra, I’m struggling already,” I admit, pulling my hand from his sweats as I stroke over my throat, the heat of my skin like lava.

A moment ticks by, the outside world becoming a blur as I try to regain some control, but it’s useless.

“Show me.”

Those two words fall from Ezra’s lips effortlessly, and when I glance in his direction again, I can see him watching for my response out of the corner of his eye as he wets his lips.

Ezra fucking Campbell just set a challenge, and I’m wound up so tight right now, I can’t bring myself to even consider declining. If he thinks he’s going to call my bluff, then this man is truly mistaken.

Kicking my sneakers off, I keep my gaze fixed on the side of his face as I shimmy my joggers and panties all the way off, leaving me sitting in my seat in just my cropped hoodie.

“Fuck,” Ezra moans, and it makes me grin, knowing I’m affecting him just as much right now.

Without hesitation, I slowly trail my hand down my exposed stomach, leading all the way to my clit, and a tingle shoots through my body at first contact, making me gasp.

“Is this what you wanted?” I ask, watching as his gaze continues to flicker between the road ahead and my core on display, and he nods. “Eyes on the road, Ezra. This was your idea, and I don’t want to be a distraction while you’re driving,” I breathe, my voice a little raspier than usual, before a groan passes my lips.

Parting my legs, I tease two fingers inside of me, my head tilting back against the headrest at the pleasure weaving through my body as Ezra continues to curse beside me. I let my eyes fall closed, my fingers playing with my pussy to perfection as Ezra’s hand clamps down on my thigh again.

My mouth falls open, but I keep my eyes shut, loving the sensation overload I’m getting as he cruises down the highway.

“You’re fucking stunning, Lou-Lou. I’m going to show you how much in five minutes when I get you home,” he declares, just before he finds my clit, drawing slow circles around the tight bud.

The combination of both of our hands only heightens the ecstasy building inside of me.

“Ah, fuck,” I mutter, my eyes falling open to glance at him as we take the next turning off the highway, and I grin when I realize we’re only minutes away, but I don’t want to wait that long.

I’m an orgasm queen, and I want them all, starting now.

I up my pace a little, flexing my hips as I circle the walls of my core, and when Ezra slows at a red light, he quickly moves so his lips are pressed against mine.

His tongue delves past my lips as he adds more pressure to my clit. “Come for me, Lou-Lou. I want to see you fall apart multiple times, and that starts right now. Come. For. Me.”

Like a good little girl, my body breaks at his words against my lips, my orgasm ripping from my toes as I tense, riding wave after wave of pleasure. I know I’m crying out in ecstasy, but the ringing in my ears dulls the sound.

It’s like the world goes dark around me, leaving me completely lost in what I feel, until the sound of a car horn bursts my little bubble, and my eyes open to realize the light has turned green.

“Fuck,” Ezra curses, moving back to continue driving, but his hand stays on the inside of my thigh.

As I try to catch my breath, the rush of coming apart in his car, with the potential of being seen, has my heart pounding in my chest. These guys continue to push my voyeurism out there, and admittedly, I love it.

It doesn’t take any time at all for us to turn on to our street, and I see Ezra press a button as we approach the house which opens the garage door as we arrive. The second we’re tucked inside, with the door closed behind us, Ezra is up and out of the car in a flash.

He takes long strides around the front of the Tesla, before coming to a stop at my door. He swings it open with determination, leaning over me to unclip the seatbelt, before effortlessly lifting me into his arms.

“What am I going to do with you, Lou-Lou? Hmm?” he asks, my legs going around his waist, his hands gripping my thighs as he presses me against the door that must lead into the house.

I grin, swiping my loose hair back off my face. “Exactly what you fucking want, Ezra. I’m needy, we know this.”

His lips crash into mine as his hard length presses into my pussy through his sweats, and I moan at the contact. I don’t know whether he’s teasing me on purpose or not, but it’s fucking working.

“Shit,” he hisses, leaning back, and I frown in confusion,

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my pulse quickening.

“I don’t carry condoms on me because I’ve never needed to. We’re going to have to take this inside,” he mutters, moving for the handle, but I wrap my fingers around his.

If what he said is true, he hasn’t been inside anyone else, except Jagger’s mouth, and I was tested before I got here. If I trust anyone to do this with, it’s him, and now I don’t want it any other way.

“I’m on the shot, Ezra. If you trust me with this like I trust you, then you’ll fuck me here and now,” I whisper, feeling surprisingly vulnerable as he searches my eyes, seeking the truth to be sure I mean it.

When he sees nothing but need in my gaze he groans. “Fuck, Lou-Lou,” he bites out, before tilting his hips to drop his sweats enough to reveal his engorged cock.

Before I can find something sassy to say, his dick is nudging at my entrance, and he slowly slips between my folds, stretching my core with every movement, leaving me gaping at him in awe.

My fingers intertwine at the back of his neck, his glasses fogging up with our mingled breaths between us, before I press our lips together again, needing that connection.

I'm on fire, the feel of his bare cock pulsating at my center as he hits deep in my pussy has me ready to fall apart again.

"Fuck, Lou-Lou," he repeats, and it makes me grin.

He takes a moment, flexing inside of me as he remains deep, until I'm begging him to move. "Please, fuck me. I'm going to combust," I plead, trying to grind my hips against him, but he has me pinned too well against the wall.

Grabbing his frames, he tosses his glasses aside carelessly as he leans in close to press his lips against mine, before his hips start to move. Pulling out slowly, he's quick to snap back straight to my core, my breath hitching with every thrust as sweat beads down my spine.

With the little space I have, I grab the hem of my cropped hoodie, and pull it over my head, revealing my bare chest which makes him groan, before his lips capture my taut nipple.

"Oh, God," I cry, clinging to him like my life depends on it as he fucks me into the door, the entire thing shaking and rattling with our movements.

He hits my g-spot with such precision, I almost question the experience he has, but the pink flush that creeps up his chest and neck has me far too distracted.

The tattoo on his chest sits prominently, and when I see my name again, my pussy clenches, pleased that he marked himself with my name, claiming him as mine.

"Lou-Lou, fuck, you feel so fucking good on my cock," he grinds as I slip a hand between us, circling my clit again, and he fucking loves the show. His movements become erratic, his eyes fixed on where we join as I feel another climax racing to the surface.

"Ah, Ezra, fuck," I moan, my fingers and toes tingling as my orgasm takes over again.

Ezra's pace slows but hardens as he finds his climax too. My pulse pounds in my ears as my skin prickles with goosebumps.

Holy fuck.

Heaven.

He just sent us to fucking heaven.

Blinking my eyes at the sudden bright light that surrounds us, I startle when I realize it's the garage door opening. I regain all my senses at once which leaves me overwhelmed as the sound of Jagger's Harley Davidson rumbles around us.

I frown when he parks at the other end of the garage, and I realize in my dick-needing state, I didn't even acknowledge any part of the garage and what lay inside.

Ezra's lips trail over my neck as we remain obscured from full view of the open garage by the cabinets at our side, but I can sense Jagger's eyes on us immediately.

Hating that this asshole is pulling my attention from Ezra, I force myself to ignore him, and cup Ezra's cheek.

"That was unreal," I admit, exhaustion coating my skin, and Ezra chuckles.

"Lou-Lou, you have no idea. I'm in awe of your body right now, but I don't think we considered how we're going to move and clean this up," he states, and it takes me a second to remember that he was bare, and when he pulls away, his come won't remain inside me.

Fuck.

"I'm glad you finally managed to get your dick wet, Ez," Jagger states as he turns the engine off on the bike, and casually strolls toward us. His eyes swirl with something I can't quite put my finger on, but once again his comment leaves me looking for an insult toward me in his words. I'm just thankful the redhead isn't with him.

We both tense, but I don't lower my head, instead I lean forward and press my lips against Ezra's again, not wanting to ruin the moment. Today of all days.

“It got really wet, especially without the condom, right, Lou-Lou?” Ezra states, and a little giggle falls from my lips. That’s my level of sass, and the grunt that comes from Jagger tells me he knows it too. “But we’ll get out of your way,” he adds, twisting the door handle and carrying me into the house.

I feel completely disorientated, but he slips us into the downstairs bathroom in a blur before separating us. I groan at the loss, but the way he appears within seconds to help clean me up first warms my heart. The magnolia walls and cream tiles make the light in here seem harsher for some reason. It feels clinical, but I don’t need anything but Ezra right now, the setting is irrelevant.

Jagger could take a lesson or two from him.

A serene sigh falls from my lips as I glance up at him from my spot on the vanity. “What does the birthday boy want to do with the rest of his day before the party tonight?” I ask, and he grins, tucking my hair behind my ear as he wets his lips.

“It depends if *that* is going to be on offer again, because if not, I’ll be quite happy to relax and play some video games since you’ve already showered me with all the attention I needed,” he states, kissing the corner of my mouth, and I smile.

“I could get down with that,” I murmur in response, not wanting to break this moment we have going on between us, and his smile widens.

“I could get down for you,” he responds, dropping to his knees and trailing his tongue over my sensitive clit, and I shiver.

Fuck, I feel insatiable as I lean back on the counter top, spreading my legs for him to feast on me.

Definitely heaven.

LOU-LOU



I run my fingers through my tousled blonde waves as I check myself over in the mirror.

If my face doesn't say I've been well and truly satisfied, I don't know what does. The little smattering of blush I added when doing my make-up was barely needed since I'm still flushed from Ezra's need to watch me O repeatedly.

Ezra blew my mind. So much so that I spent the rest of the afternoon napping while they all played video games. Leo had to nudge me awake when people started showing up for the party, and I've been up in my room getting ready ever since.

I don't know where I stand with them, not even a little bit.

Jagger... well, he just hates me, and there's not much I can do with that.

Jameson literally rocked my world, and as much as I'm an independent queen, I love that he's always ready to go to bat for me without any questions asked. Literally and figuratively.

Leo is chipping away at my soul with his kind gestures, making sure I'm fed and the need for him to slip into my bed again is off the charts.

Ezra forces me down memory lane, wanting to shower him with everything we couldn't have, just like he does to me, and it fills me with fire that there's been no girl but me.

There's some form of intimacy with each of them, but when it comes to what I need beyond that, then I'm shut down.

I know I got lost in Ezra today, but that's because I set all of our group issues aside to help occupy his mind on his birthday. It was totally worth it though, to have that moment with him, and see him smile.

Although, not one of them has offered any further information about the shit that's going on down in the basement, and I'm going to stand my fucking ground on that.

They can't have any more of me until they're honest about all the random shit, and the sneaking around that's going on. Fuck, there's so much shadiness, I don't even know what my priority is with regards to them.

A yawn passes my lips, and my still sleepy state even had me opt for a drama-free outfit for the evening. In a plain white tank top, paired with leather pants, and heeled ankle boots, I look much more relaxed.

I grab my phone off the bed, tucking it into the front pocket of my pants, before I slowly make my way to the door, where I pause.

A part of me doesn't want to go down there and party tonight, not when things seem so complicated. I know I'll get jealous if I see someone flirting with any of the guys, Jagger included, and I really don't want to put myself through that. It's fucking exhausting.

The other part of me refuses to give into such bullshit. I'm a badass bitch, and I have a subconscious need to make sure everyone knows that, including me.

With a deep breath, I step out into the hall, locking the door behind me, before I head for the stairs. A dance track plays through the speakers downstairs, making the whole house practically shake from the bass.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, the bouncer moves the red rope before I get there, avoiding my gaze once again as I join the sea of people in the foyer. To anyone else this just looks like a regular party, no indication it's Ezra's birthday at all, and I know that's been done for a reason.

I plaster on my best smile, my eyes twinkling with sass in comparison to the resting bitch face I was previously wearing as I make my way to the kitchen. I'm not familiar with anyone here, but I'm not paying enough attention as I find myself glancing around to search for one of the guys.

None of them are in the kitchen, the room quieter than the foyer as I opt to grab a Desperado from the table filled with beers and liquor, and have a low-key night. I spot Tommy, Vince's friend, across the room with Poppy, and my heart rate increases with worry wondering if Vince actually has the balls to make an appearance, but I thankfully don't see him.

Moving outside, I instantly spot Leo and Ezra playing beer pong to my right with a couple of guys I'm unfamiliar with, and a small smile creeps over my lips as I watch them laugh and joke around.

Straight ahead, there is a group of people dancing to the music without a care, and on the opposite side of them I find Jagger with the redhead from earlier hanging off his arm again.

I *hate* that it makes my heart plummet. My teeth biting at my bottom lip to stop me from going into overdrive and charging across the yard to punch her in the fucking face. Forcing myself to look away, I try to spot Jameson, but come up blank.

Then like a freaking savior, Naomi steps outside, and my shoulders sag in relief.

I felt like a fucking idiot on my own for a minute, and I hate that they invoke that kind of feeling over me. I keep pushing back on the control they try to wield over me physically, but allow them to mentally control me with ease. I'm Lou-Lou motherfucking Carter, the life of the damn party all on my own, and I need to remember that as much as they need to know it.

She waves as she walks toward me. Her dark hair is pulled up in a bun on top of her head, while she rocks a Kiss t-shirt, and ripped jeans. It seems we both went casual today. Perfect,

now I don't feel like I'm sticking out like a sore thumb since I'm not dressed to impress.

"Hey!" she shouts over the music as she comes to stop in front of me, a Desperado in her hand too, and we clink them together in greeting, before walking farther outside so we're closer to the dancers. I put my back to Jagger, not needing a reminder of that shit show right now.

"Hey, is it bad I didn't message you because I simply assumed you'd show up?" I ask, a grin on my lips which she returns, taking a sip of her beer.

"Girl, I only wouldn't show if you asked me not to, or there was pussy on the line then I'd drop this shit in a heartbeat," she admits, making me chuckle as I down almost half of my beer in one.

I can feel eyes burning into the back of my head, but I refuse to turn around to confirm who it is.

"I can understand that," I say with a laugh as she nudges her shoulder against mine, moving so we're standing side by side, looking over the crowd.

"It feels calmer here this week," she murmurs, leaning in to whisper in my ear, and I nod in agreement. There's the same amount of people here, none of them any more familiar than they were last week, but they seem intent on making an appearance every week.

"Which is likely because I don't have any drama unfolding in front of everyone for once," I reply, voicing the truth, and her eyes widen in surprise at my honesty, which makes me laugh. "I saw Tommy and Poppy inside, but as long as Vince doesn't make an appearance, it'll hopefully stay like that. Drama fucking free."

She clears her throat, glancing around the space before looking back at me. "Have you heard from him at all?"

My brows crinkle. "Why the fuck would I hear from him? I was hoping that after the little exchange on Tuesday he would have gotten the message loud and clear," I reply,

thankful I hadn't crossed paths with him on campus again since I punched him in the face.

"Oh, no, I just... it seems strange that he would flip his character like that so suddenly, then drop off the face of the earth where you're concerned," she states with a shrug, making me pause, but I shake my head, before downing the rest of my beer.

I don't have the effort to deal with that stress right now.

Not when I have enough on my plate for the day already.

"Are we dancing?" I ask, swiftly changing the subject because I need something else to do, and Naomi thankfully nods in agreement.

Placing my empty bottle in one of the random recycling bins around the yard, I grab Naomi's hand, and weave our way to the center of the dancers that has grown since I first came out here.

My eyes flick over to the beer pong table again, and I find Ezra glancing in my direction, a grin on his face as he licks his lips, and offers me a wink.

Oh, he thinks he's so smooth now, huh?

He waves his hand for me to go over to him, but I shake my head. I'm really in the mood to dance right now, I'll join them in a while.

Turning to face Naomi, *Sweat* by Myles Erlick comes through the speakers, and my hips instantly sway. I love the fucking chorus to this song so much, it's the perfect track to dance your problems away to.

I fall into sync with Naomi as my arms lift above my head and my eyes fall closed, letting the lyrics distract me from my crazy fucking life. It feels amazing to let loose and unwind.

Lost in the movements, I startle when I'm shoved from behind, my arms stretching out in front of me to break the fall I know is coming, but Naomi manages to catch me before that happens.

“The fuck?” Naomi blurts out as I move to stand tall again and glance over my shoulder, my hands still braced on Naomi’s arms.

I turn to find Jagger’s redhead behind me, the sneer clear on her lips as a few of the dancers step back, giving us room in case she goes off again.

“Do you have an issue?” I shout over the music, releasing Naomi to swipe my curls back off my face as anger bubbles beneath the surface of my skin.

The bitch scoffs, folding her arms over her chest as she looks me over like I’m shit stuck to the bottom of her shoe, and I can’t stop my eyes rolling at the complete look of disgust on her face. Dressed in a skin tight royal blue dress, with sky high heels, admittedly, she looks hot, even if I hate to think it, but the fury in her green eyes instantly makes her ugly show.

“I’m trying to figure out what you’re still doing here, hmmm?” she states, wiggling her arms so they nestle under her breasts, pushing them higher as I frown at her.

“What the fuck has that got to do with you?” I ask, resting my hands on my hips as I quirk an eyebrow, waiting for her to air whatever shit she’s got going on in her pea-sized brain.

“Bitch, Jagger is mine, and you walking out here with whore scrawled across your forehead only makes you look desperate,” she bites, jabbing her finger into my chest, and my anger quickly changes to pure fury at her prodding.

“Then go be with him, I don’t need your shit,” I respond, waving my hand dismissively in the direction she was in earlier, but I can’t take my eyes off her to see if Jagger is actually still there or not. She seems like a loose cannon, and I don’t want to give her the upper hand by being distracted.

“Bitch, count your friends. One... uh, is that all? Please, you’re already done at Emerson U *and* Emerson Grove. The guys don’t want you. No one wants to be your friend. You’re a loner, and a fucking loser. Go back to whatever fucking gutter you crawled out of,” she hisses, leaning in so we’re almost

nose to nose as she pokes me again, and I quickly move to grip her finger tightly in my hand.

“Don’t. Fuck. With. Me.” The words are laced with venom as they leave my mouth, the threat clear, but I’m done with her pushing me.

She tries to pull her hand back, but I adjust my grip to her wrist instead. I press my fingers hard, being a real bitch, to make sure I leave a fucking mark as a reminder.

“Where the fuck is Jagger? He needs to put his redheaded bitch on a leash,” I yell, still not removing my gaze from hers, watching as her eyes widen with fury, and I grin like a sadistic bitch as I grip tighter.

I really want to beat the shit out of this skank to teach everyone a fucking lesson, hopefully then people will back the fuck off and leave me alone.

“He’s never going to be yours, you know,” she growls in my face.

“I’m never going to be yours either, you dumb bitch,” Jagger booms, interrupting the conversation before I respond as he comes to stand beside us.

I release my grip on this cunt, not before shoving her and knocking her back a step, and Jagger gives me a pointed look like I’m the shit starter here.

He can fuck right off too.

“I don’t need this catty shit in my life. I have enough bullshit to deal with,” I state, meeting Jagger’s glare as his dark brown eyes sparkle with amusement.

He fucking loves to get a response from me, even if it’s in the form of my anger.

Before either of them can say shit in response, I turn to find Naomi who is watching the scene with wide eyes and a manic smile on her lips, and I roll my eyes at her too.

I can feel everyone looking at me, so I make a huge deal of swaying my hips to the music blasting around us with my fingers raised in the air sending a big ‘fuck you’ message.

Giving Jagger and his stupid bitch my back, dismissing them, as Naomi stalls for a moment before coming back to dance with me. Their presence isn't allowed to affect my mood or good time. They've done that one too many times.

Screw them.

Facing this direction, I instantly have Leo and Ezra in my line of sight, both watching it all unfold with their arms folded across their chest, looking as though they were ready to jump in. I shake my head, turning away from them too.

A part of me wonders where Jameson is right now, but Jagger's little whore has put me in a bad fucking mood which of course affects how annoyed I am with all of them.

Fuck it.

Jameson is my favorite right now, simply for not being here.

The song fades out, and Maroon Five suddenly pumps through the speakers, and a grin spreads across my lips as *Moves like Jagger* starts to play.

Like the true bitch I am, I turn back to search out Jagger and the redhead, only to find the redhead storming off toward the kitchen while Jagger remains in place, his eyes falling to me as my hips move.

Recognition instantly registers in his eyes as I let the rhythm dance through my body, and as much as he's glaring, I don't miss him adjusting his crotch.

Ha.

Take that motherfucker.

Turning back to Naomi, I throw my arms over her shoulders and dance my ass off, and she grins, knowing full well we are putting on one hell of a show for Jagger.

When the song comes to an end, I don't bother to look over my shoulder to see if he's still there. Instead, I lean into Naomi and whisper in her ear.

“I need liquor, and to get the fuck out of here,” I admit, and she nods instantly.

“You head up to your room and I’ll get the drinks. Pick a movie, but bitch, it better be a good one with a hot chick or two in it,” she states, making me smile as the party continues on around us.

Deal.

That is exactly what I need right now.

LOU-LOU



The sound of my bathroom faucet running wakes me, and I have to take a minute to figure out who the fuck it is as I stare at the closed door, before last night quickly comes back to me.

Naomi.

God, it was an absolute drama fest as per usual, but the second we came upstairs, locking the door securely behind us, I instantly began to relax. Being in my own space makes all the difference.

There was no girly chit chat, gossip, secrets, or even random shit. It was simply two friends, lying in bed, watching movies, sipping liquor and eating candy. I think that's what I like most about Naomi, there's no expectation there for me to live up to. We're quite happy just to breathe in each other's company and call it a day.

I stretch out, my muscles groaning in protest as I reach for my phone to check the time. At almost eleven in the morning I feel surprisingly well rested. Even though it was almost four in the morning when I last checked the time.

Apparently all this stress with the guys, and constant back and forth with them will leave me riddled with insomnia until something gives.

Let's hope it's just a one off. Placing my phone back down on the nightstand, I reluctantly climb out of bed to choose my outfit for the day while I wait for the bathroom.

I barely take two steps across the room when the sound of my phone vibrating has me turning on my heels instantly and heading back for it.

Blindly grabbing it, I look to see what the notification is.

Text Message from Vince.

Wait, what?

Why the fuck would he be messaging me? And I hadn't even saved his number.

I frown down at the phone in confusion, and when the little padlock on the screen jiggles, not recognizing my face, it deepens even farther.

Turning the phone in my hand, my eyes widen when I suddenly realize that this isn't my phone, it's Naomi's.

Instantly feeling intrusive, I drop the phone on the nightstand like it burned me just as she steps out of the bathroom with a smile on her face, fully dressed with wet hair.

I try to return her smile, but there's now a million questions running through my mind, but ultimately, the main question is, why the fuck is Vince messaging *her*? I didn't think they were close? Or she hadn't mentioned it at least.

I know she asked last night if he'd reached out, and I instantly shut her down because I thought he was nothing but a blip on the radar. I'm desperate to ask, but ultimately, it's not my fucking business, and I have enough drama already I don't need to add this on top too. Maybe I just need to be a little cautious going forward.

"Morning, sorry, I hope you don't mind me taking a shower," she says, and I nod, releasing the breath I'm holding as I try again to force a smile to my lips.

"It's totally fine. I was just picking out something to wear," I murmur in response, turning to walk into my closet.

I can hear her moving around in the bedroom as I pull a gray sweater, some skinny jeans, and a pair of ankle boots out. I have to admit, leaving her on her own in my room suddenly has me on edge.

As I step back into the bedroom, I hear her curse under her breath.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, watching as she quickly pockets her phone and glances back at me over her shoulder with slightly widened eyes and a tight smile.

“Oh, everything’s fine, I just forgot I had plans today, and someone just sent me a friendly reminder,” she states, running her fingers through her hair.

It takes everything I have to keep my face neutral, knowing the person who just sent her a message was Vince.

“No worries,” I reply, placing my clothes down on my bed. “I’m going to quickly shower and head into town for some groceries anyway.” I flash her a smile again, hoping it reaches my eyes as she nods, already moving toward the door.

“Perfect. See you Monday?” she asks, unlocking the door as she waits for me to answer.

“Of course. See you then.”

The door quickly shuts behind her, and my eyebrows instantly knit together in confusion. What the actual fuck just happened? That was awkward as shit.

Taking a seat on the side of my bed for a moment, I swipe a hand down my face, trying to take five seconds to process what the fuck just happened, when my phone vibrates on the bedside table. Picking it up, I actually make sure it’s mine this time, even though I just watched Naomi take hers, but still. And thankfully, I find Ryan’s name flash across the screen with an incoming message.

The phone unlocks, and I instantly roll my eyes as I read his text.

Ryan: Hey. It's just me, Ryan Carter, your long lost family member checking in to make sure you aren't actually dead since you never bother to let me know you're still breathing.

Ryan: Don't make me come up there and embarrass you because you know I fucking will.

God, he's *so* melodramatic, but admittedly, it makes me smile. He cares, which is completely bizarre, but he feels like what you would expect from a brother. Fuck, he's already a better brother than my *actual* brother.

Lou-Lou: I'm here, still breathing. Would you like me to breathe my morning breath into a jar and ship it to you?

Lou-Lou: Everything has been a little crazy here. Sorry. I hope you guys are all okay. Well, definitely Beth and my boy Cody, you... well I hope you're not choking on your own crappy dad jokes.

I don't have a chance to place my phone down on the nightstand again before it's vibrating with an incoming call this time, and it makes me grin.

Swiping the green button, before I can say hello, he's talking a mile a minute down the line.

“You think you're so funny. My jokes are hilarious and you fucking know it. Besides, my theatrics got you to respond, didn't they?”

Brushing my hair back off my face, I smile, my body relaxing as he chuckles through the phone.

“Are you done?” I ask, forcing a bored tone, and he scoffs.

“Betty, Lou-Lou’s being mean. Tell her to be nice,” he complains, and I can hear Beth laughing in the background.

“Girl, I’ll supply an alibi if you off this mothertrucker,” she says with an infectious chuckle, and I find myself giggling along.

Fuck, I forgot how care free I could be, even just for a fucking minute, and I bask in it. Their banter, and ability to make those around them relax is like magic.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I reply, hearing Ryan murmur some shit about women supporting women and ruining his life, and it makes me laugh even louder.

“Well as long as you’re okay,” he states seriously. “I hated leaving when that guy seemed like a douche, but you looked like you knew how to handle him.”

I sigh, but if that’s not a statement and a half I don’t know what is. I used to be able to handle them. Fuck, I loved it, but at the moment, and only to myself, I can admit it’s not as I remember. All this back and forth is fucking with my head. I used to be an equal contributor, but that’s not the case anymore.

“Yeah, it’s been a hot minute, but I trust these guys,” I reply vaguely as Ryan clears his throat.

“If that changes, you let me fucking know. Understand?”

“Yeah,” I reply easily. As much as he can be kind of annoying, I love our new connection and easy banter, and knowing he has my back, Beth included. “I’m going to go now,” I add, rising from the bed.

“Sure thing. I had better shit to be doing than speaking to you anyway,” he responds blandly, and I roll my eyes again even though he can’t see me.

“Of course you do. Tell Beth I said bye, and give Cody a squeeze from me. Speak soon, bye,” I murmur, ending the call before he can respond like a child, and it makes me chuckle to myself.

Rounding the bed, I step into the bathroom, closing the door behind me as I turn on the shower. I quickly cleanse my face as I wait for the water to heat up, before jumping in and letting the water cascade over me.

I love it when a shower completely refreshes me, it's like the water washes away all my stress. The smell of the floral body wash enveloping me as I lather it over my skin. Closing my eyes, I zone out for a minute, letting myself forget all about my troubles, until my fingers start to wrinkle.

Shutting off the shower, I wrap a fluffy towel around my body, and step back out into my bedroom, only to stumble over my own feet when I find Leo casually lounging on my bed.

“What the fuck?” I blurt out, holding my hand to my chest as my heart beats erratically at his unexpected appearance.

He turns to glance at me with a smirk on his lips as he uses my remote to flick through the channels on the television.

“Hey, Luce, you took ages. I almost came in to check if you were working yourself over like that time Jameson caught you,” he says with a grin, making me glare daggers at him.

His blond hair is a mess, sticking out in all directions on his head as he rests his cheek on his palm trying to look like he's the innocent boy-next-door. With no t-shirt on, in only his tight, black boxers, he looks like a fucking model sprawled out on my bed.

I spot three scars on his back, and instantly take a step toward him, but he quickly lies flat so they're no longer in view.

“Not today, Lucy, okay?” he murmurs, raising an eyebrow at me as his facial expression pleads for me to let it go.

Fuck.

I want to bargain with him. Agree to let it go for now if he gives me something else, but I can tell by the darkness in his gray eyes that this goes deeper than I know, and is a difficult subject for him. Whatever the story is here, it happened after I

left because I would know if one of my guys had been hurt like that before.

So instead, I roll my eyes and nod in agreement. “Okay, so what are you doing in my room, Leo?” I repeat, and I watch as relief washes over his face before he smiles.

“I missed you, and as soon as I saw Naomi leave I thought I would steal the chance to jump in here... alone,” he states, patting the bed beside him.

“Well, I’m about to get dressed so...”

I let my voice trail off as I move to the bottom of the bed where my clothes are, but lightning fast he rushes too, beating me to it. He grabs my sweater and jeans, tossing them over his head so they land on the other side of the bed as he grins at me like the Cheshire Cat.

Motherfucker.

Glaring at him, I start to walk around, trying to avoid him like the plague, but I’m not quick enough as he moves forward, grabbing my waist before he tosses me on to the bed.

My mouth is frozen open as I gasp in surprise, landing on my back, I stare up at him as he hovers above me with a sultry glint in his eyes.

Fuck.

I already know I’m screwed.

His hand strokes my wet hair back off my face, placing his right above mine as my hands instantly lift to his chest. I’m not trying to push him away or put distance between us, I’m quite happy just to feel his pecs flex beneath my touch.

“I’m sorry, that bitch started shit yesterday,” he murmurs, and I frown for a moment, confused with what he’s talking about, before I shake my head.

“It’s not you who needs to apologize. Plus, it was nothing, so there’s no need to worry about it,” I reply, wetting my lips as I focus on his.

“Well, I reminded Jagger this is your home too, and other people aren’t allowed to show up here and treat you that way,” he states with confidence, pulling my gaze to his.

“So only the people actually living here can fuck with me then?” I ask for clarity with a quirk of my eyebrow, and he shakes his head with a grin at my sass, not even offering me an answer as his focus shifts to my chest.

I watch as his Adam’s apple bobs, his eyes flaring with need, and when I glance down to see what suddenly has his attention, I find my towel has slipped open, revealing my peaked nipple.

I feel like I’m his snack, and he’s been starved for an eternity.

His gaze meets mine again for a split second, searching for something, but I don’t know what. He must be happy though as he glances back at my chest, leaning closer before his tongue brushes across my tight peak.

Fuck.

My body instantly stiffens, tension rippling through me as the move makes my pussy throb with anticipation. In the next second, his lips wrap around my nipple, sucking, nipping, biting, and my body races with pleasure as my back arches off the bed.

“Fuck, Leo,” I gasp, my fingers digging into his skin as he moves a hand to cup my breast and continue his onslaught of my body. “Oh, God,” I moan, my mind a complete mess at the quick change of direction this moment has taken. But the surprise only seems to be amping up my climax.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Yes please, you can call me God forever now,” he breathes over my skin, making me shiver, and I shake my head at his fucking ego.

His fingers continue to stroke my breasts as he lifts his gaze to mine again.

“Would you like God to make you orgasm?” he asks with a grin, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip.

It’s a little too fucking late to be asking that now.

“If you stop now, I’ll rename you fucking Lucifer,” I hiss, my thighs rubbing together in desperate need of friction as he grins.

“As my lady wishes,” he says far too over the top, but before I can grumble my complaint his lips are crushing into mine as he pulls the rest of the towel off my body. I shiver under his gaze as he takes his sweet ass time looking my body over, his hands gliding over my skin and teasing my upper thigh without parting our lips.

Fuck.

My fingers run through his wild hair, gripping the back of his head as he pulls his mouth from mine, and I reluctantly let him go as he begins to trail kisses down my chest.

“You’re a fucking tease, Leo Cooper,” I complain, my breath hitching as his finger swipes over my clit, while his tongue circles my belly button.

“It’s not teasing if I follow through, now shut up and enjoy my mouth,” he states boldly, looking up through his lashes at me before swiping his tongue between my folds.

My back jolts up off the bed as my body tingles from his touch, and a groan slips from my lips. My hands clench the sheets at my sides in desperation as my mouth forms the perfect O.

I can feel my skin heat as he laps at my clit and circles his fingers at my core.

Fuck. I want to play with him too.

Without warning, I sit up, shuffling back, and his face crinkles in confusion until I beckon him closer with a crook of my finger.

“Lay down, Leo,” I murmur, watching as his eyes widen with excitement, and he moves so quickly, getting comfortable in the center of the bed.

I waste no time moving to hover over him as he wets his lips, but when I lift my thigh over his head and face down the length of his body, he soon realizes what I want, and a groan falls from his lips.

“Holy motherfucking God, you were sent from heaven, Lucy,” he moans, as I quickly drag his boxers down his thighs to reveal his thick cock jutting out for my attention.

I lean forward, dragging my tongue over the length of his dick as he squeezes the globes of my ass, his hips instantly rocking up into my touch with eagerness.

Fuck. We’re both as desperate as the other, and that only makes me want it more, want *him* more.

His tongue laps at my core, teasing and swirling as I stroke my fingers over his balls while I suck on the tip of his cock, and another spew of curses fall from his mouth. His reaction only makes me feel more confident, spurring me on to take him deeper, and as I swallow him down, he thrusts two fingers inside me.

“Fuck.”

We both curse in unison, my mouth vibrating around his cock as I slowly work him deeper to the back of my throat, loving the feel of his veins against my tongue.

My hips begin to grind on their own accord, dragging from his chin to his nose as his hands move back to grip my hips, letting me ride his face how I want.

The light hint of his stubble mixes pain with pleasure as I swallow his cock right to the back of my throat. My eyes well with unshed tears with how full I feel, but I can’t help but try to take a little more each time.

He’s my new favorite brand of lollipop, and I can’t get enough.

“Fuck, Luce. You’re going to make me fucking explode like a twelve year old with your hot mouth,” he groans, flexing his hips up, and I moan around his thick length, desperate for him to do just that.

My grinding increases as I want to find my own release too.

“Ah, fuck. That’s it, let me taste you. I want it all,” he breathes against my core, my folds heating at the friction from his stubble, and my pussy becomes sensitive as hell.

“Mmmm,” I moan around his cock, my movements stuttering as I feel the start of my orgasm in my fingers and toes. As if sensing how close I am, Leo bites down on my clit, pushing me over the edge of ecstasy.

Wave after wave of pleasure ricochets through me as I tighten the suction on his cock, and in moments he’s pulsing in my mouth, his hot, thick cum, shooting down my throat as my tears finally trickle down my face.

When there’s nothing left to taste, we collapse in a heap of arms and legs, panting for breath as we come down from the pleasure we just rode together.

I feel like jelly, my body still singing with delight as Leo manhandles me to lie in front of him, before wrapping me in his arms, making me the little spoon.

Basking in his arms for a moment, I enjoy the serene calm that washes over me, and when he finally breaks the silence, he completely slays me.

“I hope you know how much you mean to me, Lucy. Which is why I won’t rush this. Once I’m inside you, *really* inside you, it’ll be forever. I need you to be prepared for that.”

LOU-LOU



I grab my bag off the floor as soon as the professor calls time on the class, dropping my laptop, notepad, and pen inside with a sigh. It's Monday afternoon, and after a full day of lessons my brain is fried.

“What are your plans for the rest of the night?” Naomi asks as I head toward the door, linking her arm through mine, and I plaster a smile to my face.

I don't know why, but the fact she got a text from Vince and left soon after has put me a little on edge around her, my trust quickly evaporating as I mentally question every little thing she does.

“I'm probably going to raid the snack cupboard and hole up in my room to get a head start on these assignments,” I reply, nodding toward the board with the latest coursework listed. I'm just managing to keep my head above water with all of this work, but if my drama gets any worse I'm going to lose focus.

“Need a study buddy?” she offers, stepping through the doorway with the rest of the class, and I shake my head.

“I have a bit of a headache to be honest, so I think I'll go solo,” I lie, offering an apologetic smile.

“No worries. If you change your mind you know you can always text,” she says, glancing over her shoulder, and I have to force myself not to track her line of sight.

Vince is in our Psych 101 class, but he thankfully kept his distance, even though Leo didn't show.

Stepping outside, I pull my coat tighter around my waist as I shake my arm from hers discreetly and move down the steps.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I call out, glancing over my shoulder briefly with a slight wave, and she nods, returning the wave, but I see the slight crinkle of confusion on her face. I catch sight of Vince walking through the main door to the Augustine building, his gaze flicking between Naomi and me, and I force myself to get the hell out of here.

Making my way through the thankfully quiet courtyard, I rub at my temples, my brain hurting from all the different layers of shit that seems to surround me at the minute. There has to be something between them that I don't know about, and after the last time I spoke to Vince, he gives me all the *wrong* vibes.

Do I need to be cautious of them? I don't know. Maybe I should ask one of the guys... but would that make me look weak?

Fuck.

I hate this mind fuck that Emerson Grove seems to create.

If I can't ask them, who else am I going to speak to? Ryan? Shit, he'll send a full fucking team in to wipe them out without question. Asking no questions and dealing with the consequences after. The current situation doesn't warrant that type of reaction, it's really not that bad. It's probably all in my head.

I don't catch sight of any of the guys on campus as I head toward the arch entryway, the wind blowing through my hair, and I remind myself I'm going to need to get a hat and gloves soon. Fall is definitely here with the pretty orange and yellow leaves scattering the ground, and I know for a fact winter isn't going to be far behind it.

Shit, I really need to discuss the car situation with Jameson too. I miss my Mustang, but I'll take a safer car just to cool the drama between us all at the moment. I just need four wheels

and an engine asap. I've had enough of the pain I let these guys inflict on me.

My relationship with them is the definition of insanity. I keep going back and expecting different results, yet nothing changes. But yesterday with Leo, felt like a breakthrough.

His words somehow managed to heal something inside me, just a little, but it was enough for me to let my defenses down with him. Which resulted in us binge watching movies all day.

I fell asleep in his arms, loving this new level of intimacy between us that felt closer than sex, but he was gone this morning when I woke up. Although, the fucker got into my phone to save his number, leaving me with a topless photo of him as my lockscreen, and a cute text to wake up to.

Leo: I'm sorry I had to go. I made food and left it in the oven for you.

I mean, it would've been better to wake up beside him for sure, but the mention of food was like a love call straight to my heart. I didn't realize his message meant he wouldn't be at school either, and I almost felt pouty over it. It pisses me off that I'm still not fully in the loop, and I almost feel like I'm giving in too easily by letting him sweet talk me.

Holding my hair down to try and stop it from flying around my head, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out to take a quick glance, to see Leo's name flash across the screen with an incoming message.

Leo: We'll be out late. There's lasagna in the freezer. Preheat the oven and follow the directions I wrote on the lid.

This fucking guy.

My fingers fly across the screen, hitting enter before I can reel in my sass.

Lou-Lou: Leo Cooper, are you turning into a fucking feeder?

Lou-Lou: Supplying me with delicious food still doesn't change the fact you're keeping shit from me.

I keep my phone in my hand as I make my way down my street. It has the suburban feel I always dreamed of. Porches wrap around some of the properties, pristine cut lawns line the sidewalk, and the perfectly placed trees blow an array of leaves across the street.

I love it, but I really don't want to get used to it. Not when I know how easily the things I love get taken away from me.

My phone vibrates again, and I instantly roll my eyes when I see the message.

Leo: Luella Carter, food is my love language, so shut the fuck up.

Leo: It's for your own good, I promise. Why won't you accept that?

Nibbling my bottom lip, I consider my response as I unlock the front door, slamming it shut behind me as I take shelter from the wind. I lean back against the wood, wanting to figure out a way to voice my opinion that doesn't result in an argument. As much as I love to sass them, this is serious now, and I need them to understand that.

Lou-Lou: I can't accept it, Leo, because I respect myself too much to be a damsel in distress, and that's what you're making me feel like. Even when I don't know what the fuck the problem is that's causing the "distress."

"I should have known you'd be here, snowflake."

My blood runs cold as the dark voice washes over me. I flick my gaze up, my heart pounding in my chest as I find myself face to face with Robbie fucking Izaro. He's leaning against the bottom bannister, a fitted gray suit covering his wide frame as he runs his fingers over his shaved head. He looks nothing like the twins, they're all their mother.

I wet my lips, trying to find a response as my fingers dance over the screen of my phone before I pocket it.

Clearing my throat, I feel his eyes size me up as I stand tall.

"I didn't realize you were looking for me," I reply, hitching my bag up on my shoulder as he swipes his hand over his mouth.

I have hated this man with every fiber of my being for as long as I can remember. There was never a good childhood memory where this man was involved.

Ever.

He's toxic and fucking manipulative. Poison. Slicing through your veins with his wicked ways until you fall under his spell, all before he ultimately ends you. He's deadly, literally, and I can't believe I hadn't considered his presence in all of this.

"I'm always watching my assets, snowflake. Aren't you happy to see me?" He throws his arms out to the side, an icky grin on his lips, and it makes my insides squirm.

Do not show my father fear, Luella. Ever. Do you understand? He fucking eats it for breakfast like it's a feast and he's a goddamn king.

Jagger's words reverberate in my mind from when we were kids, and my hands clench at my sides as I keep my face neutral.

"I can't say I missed you, Robbie. I actually forgot about your existence until this very moment," I state casually, not moving from my spot, all my energy going into acting unfazed while I remain frozen in place.

I'm not embarrassed to admit I'm scared of this man, I've seen what he's capable of, but now, it looks like he can do a hell of a lot more.

He scoffs, taking a step toward me as his smile drops into a sneer, but he stops himself quickly as he pauses halfway across the distance between us.

"Am I to guess you're the reason there was an issue last weekend with the job?" His voice is harsh as he grunts at me, and my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I have a feeling my blindness to the situation will only fucking please him. So I shrug. "Not that I'm aware of," I state, relaxing my facial features as my pulse thunders in my ears, and he scoffs.

"Are you sure about that? I got word that the boys showed up to handle the situation, only to leave abruptly, and only three of the guys returned. You're a fucking liar if you think it didn't have anything to do with *you*."

With each word he takes a step closer, and I notice the dark circles under his eyes as he glares at me, his teeth bared as he looks at me in disgust.

Fuck. He must be talking about the night when I followed the guys to the house.

So they were there for *him*.

Why the fuck are they working for him?

Even as kids, they opted to run in street gangs instead of following his lead, but now, here we are and the situation has changed.

I've clearly missed something huge since I last saw them. Three years is a long time for things to go to shit, and I almost understand why they were keeping me in the dark if it involves Robbie, but it doesn't justify it. Not when I have this dickhead before me pointing fingers and accusations in my direction. The air growing thicker and colder as he gets closer.

"Is there anything I can actually help you with today, Robbie?" I ask with a sigh, stuffing my hands in my coat pocket so he can't see the slight tremble, and he barks out a laugh.

"Snowflake, the only thing that'll make me feel better is if you miraculously drop a million dollars at my feet, or you can kneel if you'd like, taste a real man's cock," he says with a short laugh, leering at me, and it chills me to the bone.

He used to always make comments when I was younger, snarky remarks about how one day my tits would grow and all that shit, but now I'm fully grown and he's enjoying making me feel uncomfortable.

"Unfortunately in your case, I can't offer either, but let me know if there's anything else," I say, reaching out to grab the door handle behind me, and swing it open.

Please let him take the fucking hint and just leave.

Robbie moves toward me, my mouth going dry as he stands almost toe to toe with me, but I don't back down, holding his gaze as he glares daggers at me.

He reaches his hand out, his finger moving toward my chest, and I quickly grab his wrist, pausing his movement, which causes his eyes to widen in surprise.

"Better watch yourself, old man. I feel like you're old enough for someone to have told you not to touch without permission. I highly recommend taking that advice right now," I bite, my fear completely gone when I have to step up and defend myself.

I've spent enough time around fuckers like him, and although my insides may cower away in fear, I won't physically. I'll protect myself to the fucking death.

“Someone’s gotten a little brazen, snowflake. I always thought you’d be gobbled up by the wolves,” he says with a grin, his brown eyes stormy as I release his hand, and to my surprise he takes a step back yet my body remains tense. “But I think all that time away has you forgetting who the fucking boss is,” he tsks, and I have to force myself to not roll my eyes at the bullshit coming from his mouth. Before I can tell Robbie how fucking wrong he is, he continues. “Pass a message on for me. Tell Jagger, second round, and for *your* little mouth running off, he can fucking forfeit,” he hisses, before waltzing through the door, and I slam it shut and lock it quickly, my heart racing wildly under my palm as I try to catch my breath.

Double checking the lock, I waste no time rushing upstairs, disregarding my bag at the door as I pull my keys from my pocket and fumble to unlock my bedroom door. I quickly slip inside, locking it behind me before I release the breath I was holding.

As I wet my lips, I pull my phone out to see the line still open, and Leo’s name still across the top.

“Someone better have some fucking answers for me,” I growl, my head falling back against the door with a loud thump as my emotions crash over me.

I’m fucking sinking.

“The twins are on their way, Ezra and I are a little caught up. Where are you now?” Leo demands, his voice filled with anger, but I know it isn’t aimed at me. He just got to listen to every ounce of my exchange with that motherfucker.

“In my room,” I breathe, and he sighs in relief through the line.

“Good, stay there.” The call goes dead, and it makes my blood boil.

Screw that. I’m giving it five minutes then I’m going down in that basement to try and piece it all together for myself. Fuck these assholes telling me to *wait* like a good little girl.

Anger slowly creeps through my veins, Robbie always has a way of bringing out the worst in a person, and his words

bounce around in my head.

A scoff falls from my lips when I remember his shitty comment about being eaten by the wolves. It's fucking laughable. He has no idea who I am and what I can do if needed but if he wants to test me, then game on, motherfucker.

Throw me to a pack of wolves, I won't be torn to shreds or eaten. I won't even overthrow the alpha, I'll be their goddamn queen.

LOU-LOU



I lift the hidden latch, which is far heavier than I first anticipated, pushing it up with all my strength so it props up against the wall, to reveal the dark and dingy steps leading down to the basement.

Using the hair tie on my wrist, I twist my hair up into a bun and secure it on the top of my head. I shed my coat, placing it on the hook under the stairs at my side, before swiping my hands down my jeans.

Kicking my boots off, I straighten the hem of my sweater, before taking my first step into their fucking lair. I squint as I move farther down the steps into the basement, trying to feel around the wall for a light switch, but as I reach the bottom step, the entire place illuminates on its own. The LED lights are bright as hell.

Fuck.

It makes my heart skip a beat with surprise as I glance around the open space.

The last time I was down here I had joked about coming to use the facilities, but I didn't, and that's not what I'm here for now.

I wanted them to explain all of this to me first. I hated how intrusive I felt when I came down here the first time, but now I have zero fucks to give because I need answers.

After coming face to face with Robbie Izaro, who I'd hoped had found his way to hell already, all cards are off the

table, and I'm in defense mode. Protecting myself always comes first.

The large punching bag hanging from the ceiling begs for me to go and work it over, but controlling my emotions isn't on the top of my priority list right now, getting answers is. Although, I definitely won't leave without taking a swing or two at it.

The guns and weapons are still spread out to my right, while the surveillance and cabinets are to the left. I need something from the weapon wall now. I don't feel safe without something.

He was a menace when we were younger, but Robbie carried himself differently today, almost fucking regally, and it doesn't sit well with me. He feels even more threatening than he did when we were kids, and I hate it.

Moving to the left, I opt to make sure I grab some kind of weapon before I leave, but for now, I want to delve into all of this, I just don't know where to fucking start.

I stop in front of the monitors that are secured to the concrete wall, all of them off at the moment, but I want to get them on to see what has the guys' attention. I move in closer, leaning over the desk to try and grope underneath and behind the screens to find the individual 'on' buttons, but none of them have one.

What the fuck?

I consider calling Ryan, to see if he knows anything about technology like this, but I immediately dismiss the idea. If I get him involved in this I could put his family in danger. I love Ryan, Beth, and Cody far too much to put them on Robbie's radar. I know Ryan could destroy him with a snap of his fingers, but this isn't his battle, and if I thought he would destroy Naomi and Vince, he would obliterate this motherfucker in comparison.

Looking for an alternative to the monitors, I cast my eyes over the desk as I rest my hands on my hips, but there's

nothing out of place or on display that might offer me any kind of information.

I lean forward, bracing a hand on top of the desk as I pull open the top drawer on the right side first, finding nothing but a fucking stapler and pen. How typical. Quickly slamming it shut, I move on to the second drawer, to find more meaningless stationary, and I start to get frustrated.

This is a front. It *has* to be. They *must* have something here that will offer a glimpse at what the fuck has been going on, what they've been doing but when I open the last drawer, I find envelopes.

With a huff I slam it shut, and rush to the left side, doing the same and coming back with absolutely nothing.

I swipe a hand down my face, annoyed and desperate as I frantically scan my eyes over the four tall metal cabinets lined up to the left.

“Give me *something, anything*,” I plead to myself, moving closer I try to see if any of the drawers are labeled, but of course, every single one is blank.

I go to the far left cabinet first, pulling at the top drawer which is head height, but it doesn't budge. Quickly moving to the next it doesn't open either.

I try every motherfucking drawer, and not a single one moves a goddamn inch.

My chest heaves as anger courses through my veins. I deserve answers, especially after earlier when I had my unpleasant run in with Robbie, and I can't get my hands on anything. Any. Fucking. Thing.

Swiping a hand down my face, I glance around the room at a complete loss, until my eyes fall on the crowbar mixed in with the weapons, and my feet are carrying me toward it before I even realize I'm moving.

I grab the heavy metal bar, grinning like a mad woman at the weight in my hand, before turning back to the cabinets. If they won't open naturally, I'll *pry* the fuckers open.

Bouncing the end of the crowbar in the palm of my other hand, I move right up to the cabinets, trying to see which will be the best one to go for first. Opting for the bottom drawer so I can have more leverage, I try to wedge the crowbar into the top of the drawer, but the seam is far smaller than I initially thought.

Fuck.

I move along the entire bottom row to no avail.

Unshed tears prick my eyes as anger consumes me.

How is *any* of this fair?

I stand tall, trying to take a calming breath, but it's useless as I lift the crowbar over my shoulder and swing it out, smashing it into the side of the cabinet. The movement alleviates a small drop of the frustration I'm harboring, and when I do it again, my shoulders relax a little.

Letting the crowbar clatter to the floor, I swing my gaze toward the bag hanging from the ceiling, rushing toward the mats quickly, wanting to feel the vibrations of my anger through my knuckles as I pound into it.

I don't bother wasting time wrapping my hands as I launch myself at the punching bag. Hitting it repeatedly, before swinging my leg out and throwing every ounce of my strength at Robbie's invisible head.

Lost to the pit of emotions I'm floundering in, I have no idea how much time passes as I whip my sweater and jeans off, since they're drenched in sweat, before I continue beating the fuck out of the bag in just my red lace bra and pantie set.

Every muscle in my body aches as sweat beads at my temple and trickles down my spine. I brace my arms on the bag, leaning my forehead against it as I try to catch my breath, but my body isn't ready to stop yet as tears of frustration escape my eyes.

God. Why do I fucking feel so much all at once?

I scream against the bag, before pushing off it to go again, when a hand gently touches my shoulder, sending me into

overdrive as I reach back grabbing their wrist and shoving into their chest with my back. Naturally, the momentum makes them push back to keep their balance, and I use that to plant my feet firmly into the mats, tightening my grip on their arm as I pull forward.

The body falls over my shoulder as I flip them, their momentum carrying the weight as I keep my grip, twisting their arm as they land on their back with a thud at my feet, and a bark of laughter sounds from behind me.

Panting, I glance down to find Jagger flat on his back before me, eyes wide in surprise as I quickly release his arm and take a step back. A quick glance over my shoulder has me coming face to face with Jameson as he stands by the entryway, a grin on his face as he clearly enjoys the scene before him. Although I don't miss the tension still in his shoulders as he pants.

“What the fuck, Luella?” Jagger grunts, jumping to his feet with a glare as I brace my hands on my hips and gape at him in bewilderment.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Why the hell did you come up behind me like that?” I hiss, trying to take a deep breath, but my heart is pounding way too fast for that right now.

“That. Was. Intense. Do it again, Ella,” Jameson says with a clap, and I roll my eyes as I swipe the loose hair back off my face, and lean forward, bracing my hands on my thighs as I try to fucking calm myself down.

“Shut the fuck up,” Jagger and I both say in unison, making Jameson scoff.

“Ella, if I knew you trained in your lingerie, I would have invited you down here sooner,” Jameson states as Jagger rakes his eyes over me, and that's when I remember I stripped down. But fuck them, I'm confident in my skin. I'm just not confident in all the lies and secrets going on around here, and that's how I ended up in this state.

The reality of the situation washes over me, and I feel the seriousness change my facial expression as I stand tall,

keeping my eyes fixed on Jagger's as I'm finally able to take a deep breath.

"Why the fuck did no one tell me Robbie was around?" I ask, and Jagger instantly shakes his head. "Don't dismiss me, Jagger, he was here, he—"

"Leo had you on speakerphone, I fucking heard," he bites back, his hands clenching as he cuts me off, and my eyes narrow at him.

Turning to Jameson, I widen my eyes in disbelief. "Jameson, you can't think I'm happy to be caught off guard like that, right? I fucking deserve to know what's going on because it involves *me*."

Silence settles over the room as my chest rises and falls with each heavy breath I take, and I can feel the frustration rising inside of me again.

Goddammit.

"Calm down, Luella, you're going to give yourself a fucking heart attack," Jagger grunts as he places his palm flat on my stomach and pulls my back against his chest. It's on the tip of my tongue to give him another piece of my fucking mind, when his other hand grabs mine and places it over my chest.

Fuck, my heart is beating rapidly in my chest. Screw him for being right.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, trying to calm my erratic mind, but it's harder than I anticipate.

Jagger doesn't move, holding me against his chest, like he's almost trying to soothe me.

Welcome to whiplash central, Lou-Lou. Get ready for a bumpy ride.

A finger trails down my cheek, making me blink my eyes open, and I find Jameson standing right in front of me, his chest almost touching mine as he looks down at me.

I can't quite place the look in his eyes, but he's not angry like I expect him to be.

“Ella, I promise you, he will *never* come near you ever again, do you understand?” Jameson says quietly, his other hand falling to my hip as I look up at him. His eyes flare with emotion, the tiny red heart in his eye beckoning me closer. Like a moth to a flame.

“No, Jameson, I don’t. I don’t understand, and I don’t accept your promise. I want the truth. Do you know how it felt to think I was walking into a safe haven only to have *your father* here. What the fuck is going on with him anyway? He used to be a nobody, and now he’s running around in fucking tailored suits,” I question, placing my hand against his chest as my other remains encased in Jagger’s huge palm against my chest, and I can feel my heart rate increasing again.

“You’re doing it again, Luella,” Jagger grumbles, stating the obvious, and I whirl around, sandwiched between them to face him. He raises his eyebrow expectantly, waiting for the onslaught of words I have brewing inside of me, and he shakes his head. “What the hell do I have to do to calm you down before we can even consider having a serious conversation here, Luella?” he growls, getting angry with me.

“Nothing will calm me. Screw you, Jagger. For treating me like shit as if you’re doing me a favor. Screw you for fucking with my emotions and feelings. Screw you for—”

My tirade is cut off with the press of his lips against mine. I freeze, feeling the warm press of his mouth catches me completely off guard, especially since I remember his demand from when we first hooked up.

No mouth on mouth.

His hand lifts to my throat as he swipes his tongue along my bottom lip, and before I even make a conscious decision my mouth molds to his, completely surprised by how soft his lips are.

I feel another set of hands on my waist, and a hard cock pressed between my ass cheeks which tells me Jameson’s not going anywhere as Jagger seems to break his sinful rule.

That’s definitely one way to shut me the fuck up.

Refusing to let him keep control, I push back, demanding more from him as our tongues brush against each other. My fingers wind up in his hair, pulling hard at the long strands held back in a hair tie as his hand around my throat squeezes harder.

Fuck.

Lips press against the top of my spine, my skin prickling with goosebumps as the touch makes me tremble. They're distracting me. Dissolving my pent up anger and frustration, and giving me an alternative outlet. I approve. I shouldn't. I *really* fucking shouldn't, but I totally fucking approve.

Holy fuck.

I push my ass back into Jameson, relishing the feel of his hard length as he groans, raking his teeth over my skin just as he unclips my bra, letting it fall loose over my arms. I blindly shrug it off, desperate to place my hands on them again as Jagger releases my throat to literally tear my panties off my body and toss them aside.

Standing bare and exposed between them, I no longer feel hot with rage and anger. Instead, I feel close to boiling with desire.

"That's it, Ella, show us how hot you are," Jameson whispers against my ear, before trailing kisses down the side of my neck.

Jagger watches his every move, his brown eyes turning to pits of darkness as he wets his lips. His tattooed fingers wrap around my breast, his gaze fixed on the tight peak as Jameson's fingers find my folds, circling my clit with precision while remaining at my back.

I need to feel them, both of them.

I need the Izaro twins to rewire my fucking brain right now before I combust.

"Please," I whimper, no longer able to remain in the role of a tough and demanding Lou-Lou. I'm giving into my needs for a moment, desperate for it all.

“Did you hear that, Jameson? Luella knows the word please,” Jagger says with a slight grin to his lips, and I roll my eyes, unable to sass him back right now.

“Jameson, if you stick your dick in me right this very second you’ll be today’s favorite,” I state, keeping my gaze focused on Jagger’s as he glares at me.

“Fuck yeah,” Jameson murmurs over my shoulder, his hands fall away from my body, and I almost protest, until he’s stroking a hand down my back to tilt me forward with one, while the other lines his cock up at my entrance.

“Brace her, Jagger,” Jameson orders, not giving Jagger even a second to comprehend what he just said as he thrusts into me with one swift move.

A groan falls from my lips as I stumble forward slightly, grabbing on to Jagger’s arms as he stares down at me.

Jameson’s hands find my hips as he wastes no time finding his momentum and plows into me with short, fast bursts. My legs already feel weak from the pleasure vibrating through my body, and I don’t know how long I’m going to survive in this position.

As if reading my mind, Jameson pulls out of my center, making my thighs rub together in protest as he leans forward to whisper in my ear. “On your hands and knees, Ella.”

I drop to the mat instantly, thankful for the slight cushioning to take the brunt of my weight as I go. I don’t have to beg or plead for Jameson to continue. The second I turn to glance over my shoulder, he’s right there behind me with his dick back at my entrance.

He grips my ass cheeks as he thrusts all the way home, and my body sags in relief as I glance up at Jagger. Hovering over us, his cock outline visible through his joggers, I wet my lips, desperate to ask for even more.

I don’t know what is written across my face, but I know I’m too far gone to school my features, and whatever Jagger sees makes him grin.

In slow motion, he slips his hands into the waistband of his joggers, revealing his pulsating cock as he pulls long and hard. “So Luella wants a taste of my cock now she’s had a taste of my lips, huh?” he murmurs, angling his cock in my direction as a shiver shoots down my spine.

The tip of his cock runs over my lips, teasing me as Jameson continues to piston in and out of me like a man on a mission. My tits bounce with every thrust, and I can see Jagger’s eyes track the movement.

“She wants you to shut her up properly, Jag,” Jameson goads, but I can’t deny it, and that’s all Jagger needs to slip his cock between my lips and let me taste the salty drop of pre-cum leaking from his dick.

Jameson slows his pace as they alternate thrusts, consuming both my pussy and my mouth, and I feel myself almost slip into another universe. Looking up through my lashes at Jagger, I relax my jaw, watching as his jawline tightens with each thrust that leads him deeper into my mouth.

I bounce against Jameson’s cock, while bobbing my head along Jagger’s length, and my pussy clenches every time he hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck, Luella, your mouth really *is* good for something other than riling me up,” Jagger grunts, wrapping his fingers tightly in my hair, and I hum against his cock, making him curse as Jameson reaches around to pinch my clit.

I attempt to yelp, but it comes out muffled around Jagger’s cock as my skin almost sets on fire, and without warning my orgasm rips through my body. Wave after wave of ecstasy crashes through me, bringing tears to my eyes as my pussy milks Jameson’s cock.

The tightening of my core has Jameson cursing as he follows me over the edge, finishing inside me with strong, hard thrusts.

“Shit, shit shit,” he chants as Jagger’s grip on my hair tightens and his cum spills down the back of my throat.

My body goes limp between them as I crash to the mat, the pair of them slipping out of me as I pant, trying to catch my breath.

Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck.

My eyes fall closed as I feel my pulse pounding between my thighs, and I give myself a second to familiarize myself with reality again.

A few moments later, a warm cloth is brushing against my skin, and Jagger's voice breaks through the foggy brain I'm currently dealing with.

"I've got you, Luella. Lay back for me." If I didn't know his gruff voice so well, I would have believed those soft words had been spoken by someone else.

Blinking my eyes open, I do as he says, and they both hover above me with what almost looks like adoration in their eyes. I bask in it, in this feeling of calm and being carefree, for a split second, before opening my mouth and demanding as always.

"You either take me to this fight and tell me what the fuck is going on or I'm gone. Forever."

JAGGER



“You either take me to this fight and tell me what the fuck is going on or I’m gone. Forever.”

I hate ultimatums with a passion, especially when they’re aimed at me, and I don’t like either outcome. But I can see the rage and truth in her eyes.

Gone is my sassy as fuck little minx, and in her place is a tough, hurt woman who requires some goddamn answers.

Fuck.

I pull my hair tie out, raking my fingers through it as I turn, giving her my back so she can’t see the emotion on my face. She’s worming her way deeper under my skin, I can’t let her see it.

Shit.

Why can’t she see this is all for her? When Leo had an incoming call from Luella as we were just pulling up to my father’s office, my gut knew something wasn’t right. The second he answered the call and didn’t have her screaming down the phone at him with her sass, my suspicions were confirmed.

Then my father’s voice came through the line, loud and clear, causing my blood to run cold.

I didn’t think he’d show at the house, he never has before, but I should never underestimate the lengths he will go to, to make sure we’re aware of our place in this fucked up world.

Luella is my father's version of a stark reminder that we're under his thumb and to do as we're fucking told.

Rage consumed me when I heard him make a comment about her dropping to her knees for him, and before I even realized it I was out of the SUV and fucking running home. We could have driven, but the whole reason we were outside the office was to try and get surveillance setup to get evidence on the man making our lives hell.

We still needed that, it was vital if we ever wanted to get out of this mess, so I didn't think about staying, I just ran.

It wasn't until I was turning onto our street, the house up ahead, that I realized Jameson was hot on my tail. We stumbled into the house, finding the basement door open, and it was obvious where she had gone, but when I found her beating the fuck out of the bag setup above the mats, I knew things had gotten too far out of hand.

I really was worried she was going to have a fucking heart attack with the way her heart pounded. I just wanted to distract her, and my mouth crashed against hers naturally, setting my world on fire.

No one had brushed their lips against mine since that night three years ago. It seems I really am just as fucking sappy as the others.

"Don't fucking ignore me, Jagger. Don't turn your back," Luella demands, and when I turn to glance at her I find Jameson wrapping his jacket around her shoulders. "And why was your dad telling me to pass on a message? What are you doing for him?" Her brows knit together, and I desperately want to smooth them out, hating to see pain on her face knowing that my dismissal and silence is causing it.

"What message did he say to pass on?" I ask, swiping a hand down my face as she raises an eyebrow at me.

"You didn't hear?" she asks, wrapping the jacket tightly around her as Jameson squeezes her arm, remaining silent as he comforts her.

“No, we were already running,” I state with a shrug, internally stressing over whatever message there is and what I need to do.

“Running?” Her gaze flicks between us both as she searches for the truth, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, running, Luella. My father was here, the guys had something really important to do, and there was no time to consider the options. So we ran. Now, stop interrupting me and tell me the message.”

I keep my voice calm as her eyes soften at the truth, before she wets her lips and sighs. “He said you have a fight tonight,” she says quietly, and I nod. “He said because of my sass you had to forfeit in the second round. I’m so sorry, Jagger. He was... I wasn’t going to let him threaten me and touch me, but I didn’t realize it would impact you. I didn’t—”

I close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her while Jameson strokes his fingers through her hair as he stares wide eyed at me too. My heart pounds wildly at the feel of her in my arms.

“It’s just another of his games, Luella, it’s not your fault.” I take a deep breath, leaning down slightly so my lips brush against her ear as I murmur the next part. “I’m sorry, Luella. I’m sorry he was here, and there wasn’t one of us home to protect you.” Determination ripples through my veins as I stand tall again, taking a step back and missing her warmth instantly. “It won’t happen again. From now on, you’re not to be left alone.”

I glance at my watch, noticing there’s only about forty minutes until my fight is due to start, so I turn to the steps in a hurry.

“Wait, Jagger. That’s ridiculous. I want answers, not fucking security,” she growls, and I shake my head.

“You’ll gain more power when you learn to control your emotions, Luella,” I state with a quick glance back over my shoulder, watching as she fists her hands in anger, and Jameson still keeps quiet.

Motherfucker.

He's keeping his fucking mouth shut so I'm the only one who looks like the bad guy. Ezra and Leo are excellent at that too, agreeing with what I'm saying but keeping their mouths shut in front of our fucking girl.

"Stop talking shit and help me, Jagger," she pleads, and I sigh, my shoulders sagging with the weight of keeping all of our heads above water.

"Get dressed, we'll be late for the fight. I don't have long, we can discuss things further after that," I state, climbing the steps without a backward glance.

I hear Jameson soothing her as I race up to my room, rushing in a blur to grab the gym bag on my bed that I'd already prepared, before quickly heading back downstairs.

Slipping into the garage, I ready my Harley. I need to feel the vibrations beneath me, wield the control of the beast before I have to see my father's face and act unaffected after everything that happened today. When all I want to do is rip his head from his body, and crush it with my bare hands.

I secure my gym bag in the top box, before grabbing two helmets. I take my seat on the bike, flipping up the kick stand before wheeling it out onto the drive. I click the button on my keys to let the garage door fall shut again, just as Jameson and Luella step out of the front door.

Fuck.

She's a complete vision.

Her hair is scraped back into a high pony, her blond curls falling around her face as she rocks a cropped white tee, and a leather jacket, with a pair of jeans and heeled boots. God, she's always been stunning, but she's definitely grown into herself over the past few years.

I wet my lips, giving myself a moment to just take her in and appreciate the fact that she's in our lives again, as Leo's SUV pulls up at the bottom of the driveway. Ezra's riding shotgun, and the little nod he gives, tells me they were able to plant the cameras.

Thank fuck.

We need something to go right.

Luella looks between the SUV and me sitting on the bike with two helmets. I can see the uncertainty in her eyes, and I don't know why, but it reminds me of when I showed up at White River.

Was she dancing with some guy? Yeah.

Did it fucking piss me off? Yeah.

But I would never let that be the reason I left her behind. That's what I did though, *I left her behind*.

Not because she was finding a guy to make all her troubles go away, fuck, I can understand that, I've been doing the exact same thing.

No.

It was because as I went to take a step toward her, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and as much as I hate to admit it, I'm glad the text message made me stop and pause. Clicking the message from my father revealed an image of my beautiful girl.

Right then. In that exact moment.

He was there with me.

The text beneath it was simple.

Robbie: Leave. Or I'll make you regret it.

So like a coward, I did. For her own good.

But things have gone to shit since then, and when her brother said she needed somewhere to stay that was as far away from him and his shit as possible, I jumped at the opportunity.

My father has enough shit to hold against us, I felt like we were brushing with death every day we tried to get by, and if I

was going to go out, I was selfishly going to do so with the light of my life beside me.

Shaking my head, I focus on the here and now, watching as Jameson slips into the back of the SUV, leaving the door open for a second as Luella contemplates where to go.

I get ready to put my helmet on and get out of here, and to my surprise she moves toward me, grabbing the second helmet without a word. My heart fucking soars as she effortlessly climbs on the back of the bike behind me, her body pressing up tightly against mine.

I nod at the guys before securing my helmet and they take off. I can't help but take a moment to sit and bask in this moment with her. It feels like she's giving me a second chance, like the others, and I can only pray I'm right.

Turning the throttle, the bike comes to life, the rumble instantly kicking in, and Luella's arms tighten around my waist, making me grin like a fucking kid.

Without a word, I slowly turn off the driveway and make our way toward the end of the street. The second the coast is clear for us to pull out, I floor it, loving the way she holds on, but trusts me enough to know what I'm doing as we tear through the dark streets.

We travel the twenty minutes to Detroit, sadly not taking the scenic route, but the vision of her spread out on my bike plays on my mind the whole ride. I definitely need to rectify that situation.

I feel my body start to tense the closer we get, and when I see the warehouse up ahead, I sigh, pulling into the parking lot, and stopping the bike.

Fuck.

He's going to be here, so I'm going to need my brothers to fucking protect her while I'm in the ring. The guys move into the parking space beside us as I pull my helmet off, and Luella releases her hold on me.

I hold a hand out, which she takes, swinging her leg off the bike to stand at my side. Her cheeks are flushed, and the

uncontrollable smile on her lips tells me she enjoyed that, and it makes me grin too.

Definitely need to schedule a ride for just the two of us.

I pull my gym bag out of the top box, grabbing my phone, to find a message from my father waiting for me, and anger instantly washes over me. He always has a way of shattering any sliver of happiness I try to have, even if it's just a moment of hope, he's there with a sledge hammer to make it crumble.

Reluctantly pressing on the message, my blood runs even colder at his stark reminder.

Robbie: I hope you got my message. I wouldn't want this to get out of hand with Luella. Otherwise I'll move her to Lockwood too. You've already gone against me by having her here, don't push me, I'm already on the edge. She wouldn't like to learn the monsters you all are now, would she? Round two. Don't disappoint.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip with anger as I flick my gaze over to the guys, closing the message and pocketing my phone, and it's only then that I realize Luella is at my side.

Fuck.

Did she see the message?

My heart pounds in my chest, but her gaze is glancing up at the warehouse, and I can only assume if she saw the content of the message she would definitely have questions that would require answering immediately.

She doesn't need to know about Lockwood.

Ever.

I place my hand cautiously on her back, moving toward the guys as we all head inside together.

I'm so screwed.

After this fight, I need to decide what information to share,
because she can't leave.

Not us.

Not me.

Not ever.

LOU-LOU



Lockwood. Lockwood.

Where and what the fuck is Lockwood?

I didn't mean to glance down and snoop at Jagger's messages, but the scowl that formed on his face had me instinctively following his line of sight.

Now, I need to fucking know what that means like my life depends on it.

Jagger's hand burns at my back as he leads me inside. The parking lot is lined with an array of expensive cars, which instantly tells me the kind of creeps I'm going to find inside. Leo and Ezra take up the front as Jameson falls into step behind us.

The way Ezra glances back over his shoulder and offers me a soft smile, tells me Jameson caught them up to speed on the ride over, likely detailing how fucking broken I was when they found me in the basement.

I try to force a smile to my lips, but it's difficult. I'm done being taken for a ride, and if I have to take things into my own hands to get some fucking answers, then I will.

Leo pushes the door open, completely dismissing the bouncer at the door as he steps inside, and I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the pounding music and the amount of people actually fucking in here.

It's like a rave for old men or something.

Men in suits fill the room, a few women in barely there outfits flirt around them. It's darker on the outskirts of the room, the main lighting sitting perfectly in the center, highlighting the ring and the current fight underway.

Ezra's fingers intertwine with mine as Jagger keeps his hand on my back, guiding me through the crowd as Leo leads the way and Jameson continues to protect us from the back.

They have me completely surrounded. Protecting me instinctively.

Drunk attendees try to reach over and touch Jagger, the whole place packed like a can of sardines, and it's already irritating me.

My pulse spikes as the music shuts off and the winner of the current fight is announced, followed swiftly by the fighters in the next fight.

Grunts and cheers fill the room as each fighter takes to the ring, and I realize Jagger is going to have to do that too. *Perform* for these fuckers, and throw the fight, just like his father wants, and it makes my blood boil with anger.

We walk past a makeshift bar area, easily six people deep with people trying to get a drink as we head for the locker room. Leo holds the door open for everyone, and I gape a little when I see Jagger's name on a dark wooden plaque stuck to the door.

How often does he have to do this for his father to have his own dedicated room?

My mouth dries with worry at the thought, my mind and body completely out of control after my run in with Robbie earlier. Was he here the night he came to my room? Is this why his knuckles were busted?

I step into the locker room, moving toward the center. It's not massive, but the right side is lined with wooden benches and clothes hooks around the outside walls. There's access to a shower on the left, but it all looks a little gross in there to me, like it hasn't been cleaned in ages.

Jameson slams the door shut behind him as Ezra's hand slips from mine and Jagger moves over to the bench, tossing his bag down beside him, before standing with his hands on his hips as he faces the wall.

Everyone holds still, giving him some space, and I nibble on my lip nervously as I shift from foot to foot.

I can feel the tension and anger radiating off him from where I'm standing, and it consumes me too, but it doesn't distract me from what information I want to know either.

"Hey, Ella," Leo murmurs, wrapping his arms around me as he crushes me to his chest before I can even process what he's doing, but I relax in his hold. "I'm so sorry Robbie showed up. After Jagger's fight, we're going to change all the locks and check the cameras to see how the fuck he even got in," he murmurs in my ear, and I nod numbly along with him.

I clear my throat, and he reluctantly releases his hold on me as I turn to face Jagger because I'm unable to stay quiet any longer.

"You can't do it, Jagger. You can't throw your fight," I state, my voice holding a lot more conviction than I expect, and he glances back at me with surprise.

"It's not as easy as that, Luella," he mutters back as Jameson comes to a stop at my side and throws his arm over my shoulder.

"It's really not, Lucy," Jameson adds, and I shake my head, anger and annoyance at the situation and their responses getting the better of me.

"Then explain it to me, because the Jagger I knew would *never* throw a fight, especially not for fucking Robbie," I shout, watching as he rakes his fingers through his hair.

I can feel Ezra and Leo staring between us, but like always, they all keep their mouths shut, and it's at this moment I know what I have to do.

Steeling my spine, I place an exaggerated smile on my lips. "I'm so done with your games, but fine, have it your way. Since I'm not allowed to be alone, who's going to escort me

out to the ring so I can watch the fight up close?” I ask, casting my gaze over the four of them.

“Ezra and Leo. Jameson is going to stay ringside tonight,” Jagger states, and I shrug out of Jameson’s hold.

“Shall we?” I ask, turning to my left to find Ezra and Leo gaping at me, but they reluctantly leave the conversation as I left it, and the storm swirling in Leo’s gray eyes tells me he fucking knows I’m not satisfied with how the conversation ended.

Without another word, I turn for the door, and Ezra quickly steps in front of me to open it before I can. He steps out into the madness first, Leo hot on my heels as they move us directly to the left. There’s a small platform in the corner that no one else is using, blocked off with a black rope.

Ezra unclips it, and I follow them into the tight space as the winner of the current fight is announced. It’s quite a good vantage point from here. You can see the entire room, the ring is close enough to watch the impact of every punch, probably see every blood splatter too, and there’s a fire exit directly to our left.

Why do I feel like this spot is blocked off specifically for them?

Leo closes the rope after we’re all inside, and I fold my arms over my chest, watching as the ring is cleaned up and music plays through the speakers for the interval.

“Jagger’s up next,” Leo states, and I nod.

I hate that Robbie clearly has something over him that has him forfeiting fights. Jagger Izaro is the motherfucking king, and he’s always been happy showing that to people inside and outside of the ring, so I just can’t wrap my head around it.

“We’ll figure all of this out, Lou-Lou, I promise,” Ezra whispers in my ear, stroking his hand over my hair, and I have to close my eyes so he can’t see the emotion in them.

Why do they keep promising shit that they don’t want to follow through on?

I've been very clear with my ultimatum about what I want and what will happen if I don't get it, and so far all I've been met with is even more protective, overbearing bullshit.

"Don't make promises that you can't keep, Ezra," I reply, blinking my eyes open as the music switches off again and the cheers pick up. Jagger steps out of his locker room first, his gaze quickly flicking in our direction before he focuses on the ring. He's completely void of any emotion, looking every inch the cold-hearted motherfucker he always was.

Jameson is right behind him, and lifts the rope of the hexagon for his brother to enter. Why is there no cage? All of this shit, and it's not even a proper cage.

My mouth dries at the sight of Jagger. Barefoot, with his hands wrapped, in only a pair of black MMA shorts, he looks every inch the fighter he's always been. His hair is pulled back into a bun at the top of his head, his tattoos on clear display, and I can't stop myself from wetting my lips at all the dips and curves over his stomach.

Then his stormy brown eyes flicker in my direction, anger burning in his irises as he looks to the right. I follow his line of sight and spot Robbie instantly.

My stomach drops as I watch him bask in the turbulent energy around him. Every fucker there is definitely betting on his word, knowing full well Jagger has been ordered to throw the fight, and it only makes me angrier.

It angers me more that the men surrounding him aren't the friends he used to surround himself with. Fuck, we were all trash, but he was lower than low. Whereas these men look like they belong on billboards, or in the court room, fuck, like respectful men of society if caught in the right light. I hate that he's made a name for himself among them.

As if sensing my gaze, his grin widens as he looks me over, blowing a kiss in my direction, and I shiver as Ezra steps in front of me slightly to block him from view.

The cheers quieten, and I turn my focus back as Jagger's opponent steps into the ring, not getting anywhere near as

much backing from the crowd. He's tall for sure, not as tall as Jagger, and much leaner, which only makes it much more unrealistic for Jagger to lose.

Fuck.

In a complete blur, the first bell rings, and my eyes jump back to the ring, watching as Jagger and his opponent dance around each other, testing the distance and throwing light swings to see if they connect. If this was a *real* fight, Jagger would be pounding the fuck out of this guy already, and taking the win. The grinding of his jaw as he lifts his fists shows me how much he's really holding back.

My own hands clench as Jagger lets his opponent land a hit, and I fucking know he lets it happen on purpose because his movements suddenly slowed, his arm dropping slightly, allowing this asshole to land a punch straight to Jagger's cheek. It's not even hard enough to cut him, and his aim is pure shit.

I don't know how much more of this I can even fucking watch.

"This is a fucking joke," I hiss, feeling Ezra squeeze my shoulder.

"I know, Lou-Lou, we all hate it, but it's out of our hands," he murmurs in my ear, doing nothing to calm the irritation inside of me. If they would just fucking tell me *why* he has to throw the fight, *why* they are under Robbie's control then I might understand, but clearly I have to get the answers for myself.

"I can't watch this," I grumble, turning my back to the ring as I move to stand in front of Leo. My hands wrap around his waist as I rest my forehead against his chest. He instantly wraps me up in his arms like I hoped he would, rocking us side to side slightly, which makes it even easier.

Leaning back, I blow the loose tendrils of hair out of my face as I flick my gaze between the pair of them. "I need some fucking air, this is too much. Can someone take me?" I ask, swiping a hand down my face, and Leo nods.

“Ezra keep watch, I’ll take her through the exit. We’ll just be a few minutes,” he states, and they clap hands as I unhook the rope myself and make my way to the fire exit.

Leo quickly falls into step with me, wading through the thin crowd on the outskirts of the room, before pushing the door open. The cool air washes over me quickly, making me shiver, and I glance around the empty parking lot, trying to get my bearings.

“Are you okay?” Leo asks, coming to a stop in front of me as he braces his hands on my shoulders, his gray eyes filled with concern as I take a breath.

Chest to chest, I let my body relax as I offer him a sad smile. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper, his brows crinkling with confusion. The question is on the tip of his tongue, but before he can breathe a word, I lift my knee, smashing it into his dick and watch him crumble to the floor in agony, grasping at his crotch.

I cringe, hating the move instantly, but I don’t have fucking time, and these motherfuckers have hurt me too. Maybe not physically, but they’ve done a lot of damage emotionally.

Running across the parking lot, I glance down at my hand, revealing the SUV keys I swiped from his jeans when we were inside. I unlock it when I’m a couple of steps away, climbing behind the wheel and starting the engine before I chance a glance back toward the fire exit.

I startle when I see Leo covering the ground between us far quicker than I expected him to, and I quickly put the SUV in drive and peel out of the parking lot. I see the panicked look in his eyes as he watches me drive off, but I have to focus on getting answers.

Blending in with traffic, I wait until I’m a good mile or two away before I pull over and pull my phone out of my pocket, googling the one word that’s been rolling around in my mind since we got here.

Lockwood.

It feels like an eternity before the search engine gives back any answers, and at first there's nothing showing up. So I search again, adding Michigan into the search bar too, and my heart stops when the screen fills with a variety of hits on the same subject.

I quickly transfer the location to the GPS system in the SUV, taking a deep breath as I rejoin traffic. I'm heading toward what will hopefully give me some answers.

But what the hell is at an old, abandoned mental facility?

JAMESON



My hands clench at my side as I watch this cunt slur his attempt at smack talk at Jagger, who completely ignores him. It angers me as much as it does Ella that he has to throw the fight. This is his fucking future in that ring, and because of my father's orders, he has to toss it away.

It's not like this set up is fucking official, but still, it leaves an imprint on your fucking soul and our father knows it too.

Thankfully, street racing hasn't fallen on my father's radar yet, otherwise, I'd have to perform tricks on demand too.

As much as Jagger is a cold, hard-faced asshole, he loves us with everything he has. His family, my family, *our* family is the center of everything we do, and that includes Ella, even if she can't see it.

I glance over my shoulder for the hundredth time, watching as she slips down off the small platform, and I tense, standing tall as my pulse quickens in response, but I relax as soon as I see Leo jump down with her. Flicking my gaze to Ezra's, he offers me a swift nod that everything's okay, and I turn my attention back to Jagger. I just want to get to the second round already and get this shit over with.

We have a lot of shit going on right now, and playing my father's pawns in this exact moment is just an added issue we could *really* do without.

His laughter booms around the area as he stands just behind me to the left, with his fucking bigwig friends. The

election rally starts in the next few weeks, and we're going to have a lot of fucking shit to handle then too.

Which is why we made a point of getting into his office today, setting up some of Ezra's tech so we can fucking watch and listen to everything he has going on. Especially now Ella is here and he knows she's living with us, we need him gone from his influential top spot, and from our lives.

Fuck, if these fights were the only thing we were handling I wouldn't be bothered as much, but the blood on my hands that infiltrates my mind on a nightly basis is the reason why we loathe him.

Shaking my head, I block out the noise coming from his direction and glance over my shoulder to check for Ella and Leo again, flicking my gaze a few times from where Ezra still stands to the door. I almost turn back to Jagger when Leo comes stumbling in the fire exit.

His eyes are wide, and I can see the panic from here as he frantically scans the warehouse, slightly bent over with his hand cupping his crotch.

Fuck.

Something's not right. I can *feel* it in my gut and it has to do with Ella.

Ezra jumps down from the platform, rushing to Leo as I glance at Jagger. I can't fucking pull his attention right now, but my shoulders sag in relief when the first bell rings.

Claps, cheers, and curses fill the warehouse around me as Jagger storms in my direction. Before I can even attempt to explain that something isn't right, he's growling. "Where the fuck is she?"

My hands go out wide as I come up empty handed, turning to see where the other two are as they approach.

Leo swipes a hand down his face, and Ezra takes over, fidgeting with his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "She said she was too warm and needed some fresh air, so Leo took her outside. When they got out there she kneed him in the nuts, jumped in the SUV and drove off."

She did what?

I look up at Jagger as he still stands tall in the ring, beads of sweat gathering on my brow as I try to process what the fuck is happening right now. Why would she do all of this? Is it to prove a point?

“Where’s she heading?” Jagger grunts, and Ezra turns his phone to show us the screen, which is tracking a little blue dot along the map.

All our vehicles have been installed with tracking devices, and it’s this exact moment that makes me thankful we went to the effort.

Turning the screen back to himself, Ezra runs a hand through his hair, raising his voice as the crowd around us gets louder. “I don’t really know, but she’s currently heading toward Rushton,” he states, which means absolutely nothing to me at all.

“What’s that face for, Jagger? What are you thinking?” Leo hollers, his eyes still wincing with pain at her blow.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” Jagger grunts, swiping the sweat and spots of blood from his face with the crook of his elbow as my heart pounds rapidly in my chest.

“Spit it out, Jagger,” I add, and his eyes swirl with anger as he turns his gaze to me.

“I know where she’s going. I got a threatening text from Robbie as we got here, I didn’t think she saw it. She didn’t react as if she had, so I left it alone.”

Fuck. What does that mean?

I rack my brain, trying to connect the dots, and it dawns on me in slow motion, my jaw dropping as my eyes round. “Lockwood. She’s going to Lockwood isn’t she,” I say as my heart sinks, and Jagger nods solemnly.

Shit.

“What do we do?” Ezra asks with worry crinkling his forehead, pocketing his phone as we all instinctively look to Jagger for direction.

“I’m going to get this fight over with, while Leo goes and grabs my shit. Ezra, keep your fucking eyes on that tracker, and brother,” he says, turning his steely gaze my way. “I need you to get us a fucking ride.”

A menacing grin takes over my face as I rub my hands together.

Yes. Fucking. Please.

I saw some of the big spender cars outside, probably belonging to our father’s rich asshole friends, so I’m going to have fun deciding whose night I’m going to ruin.

“Ezra, you stay ring side until he’s done,” I state, squeezing his shoulder as he nods, and I start pushing my way through the crowd to the fire exit. I take a look at Robbie, but he’s not paying us any attention.

The bell sounds from the ring, and I look over my shoulder, watching in slow motion as Jagger’s opponent makes one step in his direction, before Jagger reels his right arm back, and hits him square in the face with a right cross. The motherfucker drops to the mat like a sack of shit, and the adrenaline building inside of me spikes as realization washes over me.

I don’t need to see anymore to know that the guy isn’t getting up, and for the first time in three years, *Jagger just fought back.*

I can’t even comprehend the shit show it’s going to bring, fucking with our father’s money, but there’s more important things at play here, and getting to Ella is top of the list.

She can’t walk into Lockwood without us explaining at least *something*.

Fuck.

Stepping outside into the night air, I run my fingers through my hair as I cast my eyes over the choice of cars and SUVs laid out for me like a fucking buffet.

It takes all of two seconds for my gaze to zone in on the Porsche Panamera in the far right of the parking lot. Not

wanting to waste anymore time, I run toward it, thankful it's quiet out here tonight as I flick my switchblade in my pocket.

I crouch down on the passenger side of the car as I approach, pulling out the small attachment on my switchblade that I know works perfectly at getting into the lock on these cars.

I jam it in, giving it the perfect wiggle for a minute, and as if by magic the fucking thing opens. I take a deep breath, prepared for the next part when I know the alarm is going to go off, and like expected, it whirls to life when I enter the car.

Quickly slipping into the driver's side, I pry my switchblade into the edge of the fuse box and flip it open. I squint in the dark, fumbling with my phone for the flashlight to be able to see what I'm doing, when I spot what I'm looking for.

Pulling the fuse linked to the alarm, I sag in relief as the noise cuts out, just as the other guys come barreling toward me. I guess I didn't need to find a way to let them know which car I chose when the fucking alarm did it for me.

Ezra and Leo climb into the back quickly as Jagger squishes into the front. Maybe I should have considered a bigger car, but we need speed as Ella has a good headstart on us, and if I'm being honest the engine on this baby called to me.

"Do your thing, Ez," I murmur, glancing over my shoulder at him, and he fiddles with the device in his hand for a moment, before he nods.

Internally praying, I press my foot on the break, hit the start button, and the fucking thing purrs to life.

Thank fuck.

"Is she still heading toward Lockwood?" I ask, glancing at the others who all nod in frustration.

I'd know my way there with my eyes closed, even if I was on the other side of the world, I would fucking figure it out.

We don't need to stick around here and feel the repercussions of my father's shit on top of whoever fucking owns this car. With that in mind, I slam my foot down on the gas pedal, and the car takes off. Fuck the speed limits, we've got places to be.

I just don't know if we'll be able to make it there in time.

LOU-LOU



My heart pounds so hard and fast in my chest I really am concerned for my well being. It's worse than earlier, and that was already bad enough. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I deserve answers, and that's all I keep telling myself on repeat as I get closer to the red flag on the GPS.

I barely saw the rest of Jagger's fucking message, but I saw that *one word*, and for whatever reason, my gut tells me that's where I'm supposed to be. That the answers I'm looking for are housed in that building.

It's eerily quiet in the car and I can't even bring myself to put the music on, too focused on the roads as uncertainty threatens to consume me. I'm already riddled with guilt from hurting Leo like that, but what else was I supposed to do? Staying there meant learning shit on their terms, and I was done with waiting. Who was to say they'd even give me the full truth? I am over it.

Well and truly over it.

My phone vibrates in the passenger seat, and I quickly lean across the center console to turn it over so I can't see the screen. Seeing Leo's name and photo is not helping the situation right now.

Not when I'm a mere quarter of a mile away from my end destination.

Lockwood.

The roads are quiet as I come to the derelict building which is surrounded by overgrown shrubs and bushes. I slow to a stop at the entryway, which looks like it was once gated, but now stands permanently open as the rusted steel gates are pushed to each side. It's creepy as shit if I'm honest, driving into the abandoned place in the dark with only my headlights illuminating the place, but the adrenaline inside of me has me turning the car down the driveway and toward the entrance without any hesitation.

It's a small drive, and the second I'm off the road and facing the building properly, I find that there's a few lights on inside.

Not as derelict as I first assumed.

I park the car beside the other cars lined up, taking a deep breath before I quickly climb from the SUV. I've not done all this to back out now.

It's a large one story building, small windows lining the entire level as I approach the glass revolving door at the front. As soon as I step inside the heat washes over me, and I instantly start to sweat with the change in temperature.

Do they have to have it that high? It's fucking boiling.

"Hello there, can I help you?" A small lady with gray permed hair asks, rising from the desk to my right, and my mouth dries as I try to explain what on earth I'm doing here.

"Hi, I, uh, I'm—"

"Oh, dear, with that blonde hair and those bright blue eyes I know who you are, Luella Carter, but it seems your stuttering means you don't know why you are here," her voice is gentle as she quirks her eyebrow at me. I nod dumbly, at a complete loss for words at the fact she fucking knows my name.

Her gaze rakes over me from head to toe, but there's no judgment in her eyes, just a slight frown on her face. It almost seems like sympathy, but why?

"Follow me," she says, running her hands over her pale pink scrubs as she turns on her heel and heads down the hallway to the right. I startle at the sound of a landline phone

ringing, but she doesn't turn back to answer it, she just keeps moving farther down the hall, and I follow behind her.

My palms sweat as I take slow steps after her, and when she reaches the end of the corridor she stops at the door on the left, pulling a key from her pocket as she looks back at me with a soft smile.

“You'll have to be quiet, okay?”

I wet my lips as I take a deep breath. “Yeah,” I respond, my pulse ringing in my ears as she opens the door. Fuck, whatever they're doing this for has something to do with whatever sits on the other side of that simple piece of wood, and it also has to do with *me*.

Trying to force a smile to my lips, I fail miserably as I step into the dimly lit room.

It takes me a second to focus on what I'm seeing, or more specifically *who* I'm seeing.

The woman with blonde hair and tired eyes looks back at me as she lifts the comforter over a small girl's shoulders.

What in the actual fuck?

“M-Mom?” I whisper, confusion creasing my face as I blink a few times trying to clear my vision to make sure what I'm seeing is actually real.

“Luella,” she breathes, tears instantly welling in her eyes as the sound of a tv program plays somewhere in the room, but I can't take anything else in.

I haven't seen this woman in three years, a little over a week before David dragged me out of Nevada. So what the fuck is she doing here?

She moves to take a step toward me, but I instantly raise my hand to stop her, and she pauses mid-step.

“Luella, it's okay. I—”

I wave my hand, making her shush as my gaze falls to the little girl asleep in bed. “Who is that?” I ask. She's so small, she can't be much older than two maybe.

“That’s Lola, your sister.”

“*My what?*” I repeat, balking at what she just said and my voice rises uncontrollably. I’ve always fucking wanted a sister, but this? This is ridiculous. “Wait, you’ve been out here getting knocked up and having a fucking baby while your other kids have had to fend for themselves?” I state for clarification, watching as tears spill down her cheeks and pain washes over her face.

“There’s a little bit more to it than that, Luella. Why don’t you sit down and we can talk things through?” she offers, fidgeting with her hands as she nervously pleads with me.

Why the hell are Jagger, Jameson, Leo, and Ezra helping Robbie to protect my mom?

“What is there to talk through? Do you even know who the *father* is? Because it sure as hell isn’t the same as mine and David’s.”

The little girl twitches her nose, and I wince, feeling guilty for making so much noise as I try to get my emotions under control, but this is *not* what I was expecting at all when I arrived at Lockwood. I almost move toward her, wanting to brush her hair back off her face to see her sleep, but I refrain.

“Of course, I know, Lu—”

“It’s Robbie. Robbie is the father,” Jagger’s voice booms behind me as my heart rate spikes. I whip my head to look at him, only to find all four of them standing there with sadness in their eyes.

“There’s a lot to tell you, Ella, a whole fucking lot, but Lola is your sister, and she’s ours too,” Jameson says as he takes a step toward me, trying to put a smile on his face and keep his body relaxed. “This is what Robbie is holding over us, but it all started around the time you left Nevada.”

And just like that, my heart rate slows, and I try to blink through the darkness that swallows me whole. There’s no escape, no peace as I collapse to the floor. The last thoughts that run through my mind as my earth shatters, getting louder and louder.

I have a sister, a sweet and innocent little sister, but she just so happens to be Jagger and Jameson's sister too.

AFTERWORDS

What the whattttttt <3

Luella motherfucking Carter has well and truly arrived.

Lou-Lou wasn't supposed to last past the first scene in Toxic Creek, then she appears for Eden's birthday in Tainted Creek, then shows up when Eden needed her most in Twisted Creek.

If that wasn't a sign that she had a story to tell, then I don't know what was.

She took me on one hell of a ride, and the guys, oh my daysss!!

I'm completely in love with them, and there is so much more to come from them, I can't wait.

We're going to get deeper, darker, and maybe a little bloodier.

Roll on the rest of their fire story!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Michael, thank you for always being you. For supporting the writing cave and being hands on with running this ship. I love you.

To the crazy kids who know how to support their mama while she's working. You rock, and I appreciate you so much. I love you infinity.

To the bubble for always loving and supporting me! For still being able to write when I sprint with weird fucking faces!

Thank you to my awesome betas on this book, Nicole, Tanya, Jeni, Xenia, Monica, Jessi. For loving these characters as much as I do and for sprinkling your magic all over the place.

Thank you to BellaLuna as always for making my babies look so damn beautiful!

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KC Kean is the sassy half of a match made in heaven. Mummy to two beautiful children, Pokemon Master and Apex Legend world saving gamer.

Starting her adventure in the RH romance world after falling in love with it as a reader, who knows where this crazy train is heading. As long as there is plenty of steam she'll be there.

Come and join me over at my [Facebook group](#), follow my author Facebook page, and enjoy Instagram with me.

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Watch Me Fall

Watch Me Rise - February 25th

Watch Me Reign - April 29th