



*Wangled
Minds*

HARKWRIGHT SERIES BOOK TWO

BC MORGAN

MANGLED MINDS

OceanofPDF.com

THE HARKWRIGHT TRILOGY BOOK 2

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First edition

Note From The Author

Mangled Minds is book two in the Harkwright Trilogy, it is a 150k full length, reverse harem, dark academy romance. This means there will be multiple love interests and dark moments throughout the book. That being said, non-con does not take place within this book. However, there are scenes that can be upsetting and can verge onto a non-con setting.

Although I am a British author, my team and I have worked hard to Americanize this and I hope you enjoy it.

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For everyone who's ever tried to change who they are, you're perfectly imperfect just the way you are.

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Angels and devils always fight over me -

— *AVRIL LAVIGNE*

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Harkwright Dossier

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PROLOGUE

A LEGACY, that's what they both said to me. The King and the Prince of the Academy. But what does it mean? How can I be a legacy fit for a prince, or am I misunderstanding him? It's likely, seeing as I was half asleep when Emmet appeared in Aeron's room, and proved to me just how versed in deception and trickery he really is. I will be kicking myself over how he made me believe and fall for a guy who never existed. How not only Emmet tricked me, but so did Tucker. He must have gotten a kick out of questioning me over the cleaner knowing it was Emmet the entire time, and what about Maddox? He saw him at my door, but I remember his face and his demeanor after, how he would only come into my room to work but never to just talk. I think he fears Emmet, and although, I wish he had told me the truth, I can't blame him. This place is just as hard for him as it is for us, only he can never escape it. Unless he pulls a Cole and renounces his hold on the name.

That's not even to mention Carly being found in the center of the maze, and nearly everyone is saying Emmet did it, or they were until Sir threatened to obliterate anyone who even dared mention Emmet being involved in the 'incident'. So much has happened, and as I prepare to say goodbye to my first year here and hello to the second, I realize, they may play a dangerous game, but I will not shy away.

There's a lot I have to do to prepare myself for my next year, but with two months left to go, all I can do is pack my bag and get ready for the retreat. I should have known that being claimed by Aeron would earn me an instant invite, but I wish it hadn't. I don't want to spend God knows how long with the Harkwright men, but at least Daria will be there. Aeron has been true

to his word and hasn't left the Academy for the last two weeks, but tomorrow, he'll be leaving, and I won't see my claimer until I arrive at wherever the retreat is being held.

I can't say I'll miss him, but I know things will be even harder this year, because these last two weeks, Emmet has been in full attendance. I've watched as he's taken girl after girl to his room, never the same one twice, I've seen girls shove their hands down his pants while he's been staring right at me in the mess hall. Oh yeah, the sweet Liam is well and truly gone. The Prince they warned me about has arrived in his place.

If he wants to play a game and mess with my mind and heart, then all I can say is, let the games begin. One thing is for sure, I have no intention of losing *anything* to him. I once said I would never give my heart to a Harkwright guy, and all Emmet has done is prove to me how true those words have to be.

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SOME QUESTIONS SHOULD NEVER BE ASKED

THE SOUND of a shower running filters through the bedroom as I crack my eyes open and stretch my arms above my head. I always feel a little disoriented when I wake up in Aeron's room, but that's usually because I don't fall asleep in his bed. He's a sneaky one, that's for sure. Although I feel even more out of sorts when I wake up in mine, because it's rarely happened since that night. Today is the day. The only reason I would be in my room is if Aeron is leaving today.

It's been two weeks since Shane got the shit pummeled out of him in the garden and since they discovered Carly within the maze. Two weeks of watching the guy I was falling for acting as though it never happened, that none of it was ever real. I can't help but wonder though, was it all fake? The many times he warned me off the Prince, off himself in reality. The times he opened himself up to me, or at least, I believed he was. All the things I said to him, about the Harkwright men and about himself, and he used it. He took the things I told him in confidence and used it to make Shane pay. He questioned Aeron that night in the kitchen, and I don't doubt that he did more than lay down a decree that no one was allowed to touch me.

Funny how everyone seemed to listen to it, other than Tucker and Aeron. Although, if Tucker was in on the deception, then why did he pursue me the way he did? Then again, pursue is probably the wrong word. He showed me kindness and made my body sing to the rhythm he wanted and then he threw me away like the discarded trash he thinks I am. Yeah, I can believe he knew all along what Emmet was doing, but I doubt Emmet is aware of what Tucker was doing with me behind the scenes. Using me, fracturing what little sense I

still possessed. Although, maybe I should be thankful, because I can feel in myself that with each shot these guys take at me, I keep coming back. A little wiser and a lot stronger than before.

The shower shuts off, and it takes no time at all for Aeron to stroll into the room with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. Droplets running down his chest, over his pecs, and across the plains of his stomach. Rolling all the way down until it meets the towel. *Ahem.*

My eyes snap up to meet his sparkling hazel eyes and I know he has caught me ogling if his cock sure grin is anything to go by.

“If you want a better look, come closer.”

“With the way you’ve been lately, you’ll probably walk away,” I mumble, and I watch with downcast eyes as he steps closer, his towel brushing against the bedsheet.

“If you have something you want to say, go for it, Little Zero. No punishment from me. I think I have it in me to give you one more free pass before I leave,” he’s smirking and I don’t know if I want to slap him or kiss him. *Fuck, can’t I just do both, and in that order?*

“Why did you claim me if you want nothing to do with me, I s-should b-be happy, I guess? I just don’t understand i-it. You c-could claim any girl and yet, you go f-for o-one you don’t w-w-want to touch.”

He grips my chin and lifts my head so I’m looking at him. I watch as he places his hands on my shoulders and a gasp escapes me as he pushes me down onto my back. He uses his knee to part my legs before settling himself between them, his towel, my satin shorts and panties are the only things separating us. My top grows wet as his chest pushes against mine and the covers are lying crumpled on the floor, one less barrier between us.

“Oh, Little Zero. You can’t be that naïve, surely.” He rolls his hips against me and I can feel every hard inch of him, I bite my tongue when I feel something a little extra. Although it was probably the towel... right? “Look, playing the gentleman isn’t my usual thing and to be fair, it royally sucks. However, I saw how you were after Shane and I thought I’d play nice. But if you’re ready for me to go back to normal, then that can be arranged.” His head drops to my neck and I feel as he runs his tongue along it. His teeth then follow the same path.

His hips roll with more force and I can’t keep my moan in, I know for a fact that my panties are soaking and I wonder if he can tell. He props himself up with an elbow, while tracing his finger around my hard nipple through the

light satin of my top. His mouth feels so good, too good. I shouldn't be enjoying this so much. Shouldn't want him the way I do. Is this wrong? Should I stop before it goes too far? Could I stop him? I don't know. His mouth feels too damn good to ever stop.

He lowers his mouth and draws me in, capturing me fully, and I'm wishing the satin wasn't in the way of his tongue. He releases me with a loud pop before using his chin to drag my top down, as my hands fall on his chest, one catches against his nipple before connecting with the barbell he has in place. He hisses and rolls himself down harder, capturing my nipple once more and dragging his teeth across it, no pesky fabric keeping me from feeling him this time.

I drag my fingertips down over his abdomen, reveling in the way his muscles contract under my touch before I brush against the hair on his lower stomach right as I meet the towel. He locks his eyes on mine as he sucks, nips, and licks at me. His other hand gliding down over my stomach until it reaches the waistband of my shorts. I can't breathe as he dips below, skating under my panties and... there's a knock at the fucking door.

"Aeron, hurry up. You don't want to keep her waiting," someone shouts. He stiffens against me, then pulls away and disappears back into the bathroom.

What the fuck just happened? Better yet, what did I want to happen? Because for a scary moment, I almost asked him to show me what it would feel like to be utterly filled by him.

He comes back out and barely even glances at me as he heads out of my room. I don't know why I have the compulsion to follow him. I stop myself in the doorway of my bedroom, bracing my weight on the frame. He stops in front of the door that will take him out of my sitting area, and away from me.

"I claimed you to keep you safe from Shane and because I'm a greedy bastard who wants as much as I can get from you," he white-knuckles the door frame as his other hand curls around the handle. His back is taut, and he draws his shoulders up. "Aside from all that, I did it because Emmet demanded that either myself or Tucker claimed you to make sure it didn't happen with the wrong man."

"You mean like Shane?" He has to mean him, or at least Scott.

"No, they would have been bad, but Emmet was more concerned that a different guy would claim you and would then refuse to give you up when the time came for him to collect his prize. He didn't fear that happening with me

or Tucker, so you've got me until I either decide it's no longer worth it, you choose who to give yourself to, or Emmet orders me to release you."

His words leave me feeling cold and I can't help but curl my arms around myself. Even though it doesn't make any difference at all.

"Sometimes the best questions are the ones left unanswered. See you at the retreat," he says as he pulls the door open and leaves me standing here, wishing I had feigned sleep and missed this fucked up goodbye.

I FEEL ALMOST RELAXED as I walk down to the mess hall, knowing that I won't see Shane there. Turns out, Emmet and Tucker did more damage than I thought and, God forbid a Harkwright ever look anything less than perfect. According to Daria, he's having facial reconstruction done on his nose to hide the fact that they ever broke it. *Pompous prick, just fucking own it.*

"Homegirl, I got you your favorite," D calls from our table, waving like a crazy person.

If they hated me before because of Emmet, it's only grown since Aeron claimed me. He's one favorite amongst the girls and they're not happy that they haven't been able to take a crack at him lately. I almost want to stand on a table and tell them their wasting pointless energy by hating me. He'll be free and untied in no time, besides it isn't as though he will stay true to me. This is Harkwright Academy. Just because I can't be with anyone else, doesn't mean he can't.

"Hey look. It's the girl with the magic pussy," says One, she juts her chin up as I pass her on my way to the table.

"Haven't you heard? She's still a virgin," says Eight, and an angry squeal passes from the top girl.

Yeah, as far as I can gather, there's only two virgins remaining in this place, but I don't know who the other one is. Maybe she can come join our table too.

"Hey, D. How's it going?" I drop onto my seat and get started on my pancakes with maple syrup, bacon, and eggs.

"It's good. Bradley had to leave this morning, but he promised he'd be back before the retreat starts."

"Wow, you guys are serious, huh," I say with a genuine smile on my face.

I'm glad she's getting the best of this place.

"Yeah, I guess so." She seems a little off as she moves her eggs around the plate, and I want to ask her what's wrong. I'm just not sure what the protocol is.

She looks up at me and opens her mouth to say something, but quickly closes it again when a shadow falls over our table, and I look up to see the swimmer standing there. I can't believe I forgot his name *Jake*. I'm lucky Daria saved me from revealing my indiscretion. She seems to know a few of these guys on a personal level.

"Thirty-Four, Three. I heard your claimers have left you alone," he says with a smirk, but I don't feel scared or threatened by him.

"That's right, but Bradley will be back soon. He said he wouldn't be gone long," D replies, biting on her nail before I pull her arm down. *She never bites her nails.*

He braces his forearms on the table, bringing his head close to ours. "I'm here if anyone causes either of you any trouble. Shane is gone, but Scott and Craig are still very much present." He gives us a wink before pulling himself back up and walking away.

"That was weird," I say, trying to work out why he would suddenly approach us like that.

"Jake's always been that way, even when we were kids, he was always there to protect whoever needed it. Mainly whoever fell short in Craig's eyes. He's never been as bad as Shane, but he's definitely not one of the nicer Harkwright's," she says in a low voice. I can't help but look around to see if anyone has overheard her.

I nod in response, unsure of what to say as the mess hall goes dead silent. Not a single fork hits a plate as Emmet strolls into the mess hall. He's alone, for now. No doubt he won't stay that way for long. Not with all the girls fawning over him, hoping to become Mrs. Emmet Harkwright.

He walks toward us and I'm finding it hard to separate him from Liam; a big part of me still gets excited when I see him. Looking forward to spending time with him and talking about anything and everything. Then I remember how he tricked me and who he really is, and I feel nothing but confusion and an ache in my chest that refuses to go away.

"Three, how strange to see you without Bradley glued to your hip. I was thinking we would need to get a surgeon in to separate you two." Awkward laughter fills the room, but he isn't laughing. He isn't even smirking. His face

isn't giving anything away, even his eyes seem darker than they did before.

"We enjoy each other's company, some people are content with only being with one person," D says, and if I thought the room was quiet before, it has nothing on the atmosphere in the room now.

"How right you are. Although, there is a reason people rarely stay with the first person they fuck." His eyes are on me now, and his words are making butterflies flutter in my stomach. It isn't a welcomed feeling. "How can you know how well matched you are if you've only ever been with one person? It's like only trying one type of ice cream or alcohol and deciding right off the bat, it's your favorite one. That you will never try another flavor or brand for the rest of your life? Sounds boring to me. What do you think, Thirty-Four?" His voice is a mixture of the one that called me pathetic, Liam's kindness, and something that equally pushes me away and pulls me closer at the same time.

"A decision over who you stay with shouldn't rely on how hot you are between the sheets," I take a deep breath, holding onto my nerves and trying against all odds not to stutter with such a vast audience. "Maybe you shouldn't resign yourself to the first person. But then again, if you love them, then what does it matter?" My heart is in my throat and my nails are digging into the palm of my hand, as I try to stay composed.

"Love. How could I forget about something like that? Although, surely you can agree that puppy love and being in love are two different things. You may think you feel one, but then after finding the right person, you can see that you never knew what love could really be. Why confine yourself to a life of mediocrity when you can experience the more exquisite, finer things?" His eyes aren't as dark now. I think he's enjoying himself, and I'm finding myself forgetting about our audience as I rise to my feet and lift my head enough to meet his eyes.

"Exquisite and beautiful things can sometimes be deceptive. Just because you believe to be in the presence of true beauty, it doesn't make it so. It could be the ugliest thing you have ever come upon. You speak of mediocrity and love as though those two things can't ever go hand in hand." I move away from the table, stepping closer until all I would need to do is reach my hand out and I could run my fingertips across the light stubble over his chin. "Sure, some people may find it hard to tell the difference between puppy love and actual love, but that's only because they've never experienced it."

"Have you experienced it?" His voice has dropped low and I can't miss

the way his head has lowered, bringing him even closer.

I look him straight in the eyes, draw on all my strength I have within me to say the only thing I can. “No, but I’ve gotten close.” I move away from him and return to my seat and play with the rest of my breakfast. It’s starting to feel as though this place really doesn’t want me to eat the most important meal of the day. *Go figure.*

“See you soon, ladies. And prepare yourselves for some big changes in your lives.” His smile seems almost sinister as he steps away and takes the head spot on the Harkwright table. No girl approaches him today, but somehow, I’ve accumulated even more stares. Every look feels as though a thousand little legs are crawling over me. I hate every fucking second of it.

THE REST of my week seems to pass in a mind numbingly boring blur. Emmet is still taking whatever girl catches his eyes, and then discarding her like yesterday’s trash. He’s the only one I never seem to hear them whispering about or trading tips on how to handle him. Aeron comes with a warning that you better drink copious amounts of coffee if you want to keep up with his stamina. Shane likes you to call him ‘Sir’ in the bedroom and degrade you with his words while he does you from behind. Tom likes to have fun while being outside or anywhere he could be caught and Tucker, well, I have no idea what Tucker likes other than what I’ve experienced firsthand. The same goes for Emmet, Maddox, and Jake. No rumors have surfaced so far, and I can’t help but wonder why.

I push into the changing room for the swimming pool and I can hear someone crying while someone else is making shushing sounds. I don’t want to intrude on whatever is affecting her, but I seem to be out of luck when a head pops around the corner and a girl stares at me before grabbing my arm and pulling me into a changing cubicle where the crying girl is. I think she’s Twenty-Eight and if my memory is right, then she’s also one of the girls that Emmet has been parading around the place.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude,” I say, holding my hands out in a placating gesture, I really do not want to get involved. Crying people make me ridiculously uncomfortable.

“You’re Luna, right? The girl who the Prince is obsessed with?” asks

Twenty, and all I can do is nod and notice she has yet to let go of me.

“Then you need to be here.”

“What are you talking about? You girls avoid me like the plague and now, you want me to help console her? I’m the worst person you could ever pick for something like this,” I say. My eyes dart around, and I wonder if this is another trick to get me alone so they can try to do what Candice failed at.

“Emily, show her. You said that you felt sorry for her and she needed to know what she had in store. Well, here’s your chance.”

Twenty-Eight, or I guess Emily, looks at me through her endless sobbing - yeah, I really hate myself for thinking of her crying like this - before sliding her sleeves up her arm and revealing red marks around her wrist.

“The P-p-prince t-took me to his r-room, he wanted to have s-s...”

“Oh, for crying out loud. He took her to his room, tied her wrists up with rope, and then they went at it. She said it was fine at first until he put his hand around her throat, and she freaked out. Do you know what he did?” Twenty asks, and I’m not sure I want to know. I know Liam was all pretend, but I can’t believe he would do something like that.

“Do I want to know?”

“He got angry, started tightening his grip before pulling off her and walking out. Left her naked, tied to the bed, gasping for air. She couldn’t get free until he came back a couple hours later. He set her free and pushed her out of his room. He didn’t even give her time to get her clothes back on. Told her to keep her mouth shut, or he’d pay her a visit one night and finish what he started.” Emily is crying even harder now, and I can’t even fathom what I’m supposed to say back to something like that.

Although I’m sure it shouldn’t be what came out of my mouth. “Oh.”

“‘Oh’? Is that all you can think to say? Don’t you see the problem here? He’s obsessed with you. What do you think will happen when he orders you up to his room? That he’ll be gentle, maybe even loving?” she says so mockingly, my cheeks flame despite themselves. There’s no need to be so cruel, and all because I didn’t say whatever she was hoping for.

“I’m sorry this happened to you, Emily. I wish there was more I could say.”

“It’s okay for you. You and Daria are getting off lucky. You wouldn’t survive the full Harkwright Academy experience.” Her tears seem to end instantly as she pushes past me, disgust written across every feature.

“Just wait. You won’t last as their favorite. Eventually, you’ll be just as

disposable as the rest of us. Can't say it won't happen to a more deserving person." Twenty looks me up and down before following Emily, and to say I'm speechless would be a fucking understatement.

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WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY

"I CAN'T BELIEVE the school year is finally over," Caitlyn says as she sits at our table, and I'm not the only one sitting here slack jawed, staring right at her.

"What are you doing?" D asks, and I'm glad she hasn't lost the ability to speak or ask questions.

"Shane isn't here, and Sam said it would be okay to sit with you until he returns." Her cheeks are blushing and she's wringing her hands. But I'm not hit with the urge to make this easier for her.

I don't hold any anger toward Caitlyn, but I don't think I can pretend we haven't been apart for the last six months, maybe even longer.

"That's great, but why are you? You've got plenty of friends, you weren't the one alienated by everyone. Maybe you should go back so it stays that way. I've got nothing against you, but Lu doesn't need any more trouble being thrown her way."

Caitlyn looks at me, I guess she's hoping I'll argue to keep her sitting with us, but I won't stop her from leaving or ask her to stay. Instead, I'm eating my breakfast because I'll be damned if I miss this one as well.

"Okay, I get it, I do. I'll see you girls around," she whispers before walking away, and taking her seat at the Forty table. It twists my stomach up in knots as guilt slams me hard, I don't think my mom would approve of the way I handled it. I'm just so sick and tired of having everything placed on my shoulders. Why can't I decide something for myself without being forced into it?

"Hey, are you okay?" Daria asks, placing her hand on mine and I'm hit

with the urge to thank Maddox and Bradley for kick-starting our friendship all over again.

“I’m fine. I guess, I just realized that as long as you have one good friend, you’ll never be alone. I have that in you.” my face is flaming, and I don’t look at her even as she throws her arm over my shoulder and pulls me to her.

“Hey, I’m going to head to the gardens for a bit. Do you want to come?”

“No, I think I will continue avoiding that place. I’m not ready after what happened with Shane and then there’s the maze,” I say. A shiver works its way through me, and she strokes my arm, before pulling back and starting on her own breakfast.

I look up as that Emily girl walks in with her long sleeves well in place, and I don’t miss the way her eyes shoot over to the guys’ table. Her shoulders slump forward, and she hurries over to the Twenty table.

It’s been a week since I walked in on her crying in the changing rooms, and I haven’t been in there since. I just wear my suit under my clothes and walk back with a towel wrapped around me. I don’t miss the stares it earns me, but I really can’t bring myself to focus on it too much. I really don’t need to hear any more about the guys and what they get up to.

“I’ve got to pop down to see the doctor anyway. So, shall I meet you out front in about an hour?” I ask and her smile falls at my words.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to come with you?” Her eyes are darting around, and I don’t know why.

“No, it’s fine and don’t worry, there’s nothing wrong. Just girl problems.” Her eyes turn sympathetic as she pats my hand and visibly relaxes. What is going on with her today? *She’s up to something.*

I really hate my inner voice, but I also think it may be onto something. Her reaction just seems weird to me. I hope everything’s okay.

THE NURSE SUMMONS me into the room and my hands are clammy, as Cole looks up at me from behind his desk.

“Please close the door behind you, Thirty-Four,” he says dismissively, and the nurse’s eyes linger on him for longer than necessary. Especially as I know for a fact, she was the one going down on Aeron that time in the other exam room.

I close the door and look up to see Cole rounding his desk. He rushes to my side, clicking the lock in place before his arms fall around my waist. I wrap mine around his neck and I can't fight the smile pulling at my lips.

"I'm so glad you're okay. I hate that I wasn't here for you when you needed me." His tongue slides between his lips, and all I can think about is placing mine over his and tangling our tongues together.

"You can't help that it happened on your time away. How's Poppy?" I ask, releasing him and stepping back, trying to hold off on the inevitable for a little longer.

This is the first time I've seen him since I told him to wait for me, and although I want to wrap myself up in him, I need to know we're something real. Unlike this place, which will only ever be about lust and a claiming that will leave you wrecked when all is said and done.

"She's okay. I thought she was trying to communicate a couple of times. Every time your mom came in, she would blink more than usual when she was shown a picture of you. Unfortunately, that is the limit of it so far, but it could be promising." I don't know if he really believes it, but I appreciate it.

"I miss them, I just can't think about them too heavily otherwise I won't make it in this place." A deep sigh passes through me and his arms are back around me in moments.

"They miss you too, but they're doing okay. Just focus on you and do whatever you need to come back to me." He lowers his head and I can't resist any longer.

He brushes his lips against mine and I thread my fingers through his hair, bringing him closer, and making it so much more than a sweet kiss. My tongue tangles with his and our moves turn frantic as our teeth clash together and his hands grip my ass, lifting me against him so my legs can wrap around his waist. He walks, and it isn't long until I'm perched on the exam table with him nestled between my thighs. I can feel his excitement brushing against me, growing impossibly hard, and straining against his zipper.

We break apart and his mouth trails down my neck, as I tilt my head back, giving him more access. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, and I need to feel his hands and mouth everywhere. I can barely remember why this is a bad idea. His fingers skim along my ribs and my hands slide over his shoulders as I pull him closer. Until I'm leaning back on the table, and he's hovering over me.

The weight of him against me as his mouth devours mine is almost too

much and a knock at the door has us springing apart, even though we both know it's locked and no one is about to walk in and discover what we are doing. Although, it's more than enough to douse cold water over us and bring me back to my senses.

"It's okay," he breathes. Cole steps closer once more as I right myself and drop off the table.

"I know, but I should go. If I stay too long, people will start asking questions, especially certain nurses." I bite down on my bottom lip as his eyes soften.

"Hey, I don't even notice them. You have nothing to worry or even be jealous about." My lip pops free as a laugh bubbles up, and I have to cover my mouth to keep it in.

"I'm not jealous or worried about that, Cole. But I can't risk any rumors starting up about me and the young doctor. I'll see you later, okay?" I drop a soft kiss on his mouth before walking over to the door. "I'll see if I can stop by again." I open the door to find a nurse standing in front of it. I don't even say anything as I move past her and head toward the maze. *What am I doing?*

I CAN'T BRING myself to step foot into the gardens, so I sit down on the steps leading up to the main doors of the Academy and wait for D to come out. My eyes are trained on the entrance and I haven't even realized that someone is standing next to me.

"I hear you're going to the retreat," Tucker's voice washes over me, and I risk a glance up at him.

"I thought they expected it, now that Aeron has claimed me," I mumble, as I toe the ground and flick stones up.

"It is, but that doesn't mean it's a given. Take me for example," he lowers himself down beside me and I can't resist looking at him. "I'm not taking anyone with me."

"Why not?" Although, maybe I should really ask him why he's telling me, and while I'm at it, I should ask myself why it's making me want to smile. *Girl, you are so messed up right now.*

"I have little interest in the girls up for offer. What about you, Thirty-Four? Are you happy with your Harkwright?" His voice has dropped low,

and his timber is doing strange things to me that I can't explain. Why do I react to him so easily?

"It c-could have been w-w-worse." My voice cracks on the last word and I can feel my hands shake. All because I'm thinking about what could have happened if Shane had claimed me that night.

"You're right, but then again, maybe it could have been even better." I can feel his finger snake up the side of my thigh and I'm regretting not wearing stockings. The feel of his skin on mine excites me, and I could do with a barrier right about now.

"See you at the retreat, Thirty-Four. Who knows who you could end up alone with... accidentally, of course." He gets to his feet with a smile on his face and I can't help but wonder if that was a promise of more to come? Although, it can't be... *being claimed stops that, doesn't it?*

I look up to see D coming out of the maze and she's checking all directions before stepping forward. She looks... nervous. Looking all around and playing with her necklace, I think this is the first time I've ever seen her like this.

"Hey D, over here," I call and her head snaps to mine as she rushes forward, but she keeps glancing back toward the entrance to the maze.

"Hey, homegirl, How did the doctor go? You good? Come on, let's go see if we can book the ping pong table." She grabs my arm and she isn't even giving me time to answer as she drags me toward the front doors.

"D, is that Jake?"

She stops instantly, her back going ramrod straight and her breathing is coming out more rapidly as she slowly turns around and watches Jake come out of the maze.

"So it is. I must have just missed him. What a small world it is." She laughs and continues to drag me back into the Academy. But one thing for sure. D is a terrible liar, and I'm wondering why she would want to hide the fact that she was in there with Jake?***

The week has passed in a blur. Although, I couldn't help but notice how D was actively avoiding Jake. If he was in the swimming pool, she suddenly wanted to play tennis. If he was outside the mess hall doors, she realized she left something in her room. It's been like that all week, and she's refusing to admit that anything is going on. I know I can't make her tell me, but I'm worried about her. If I've noticed, then someone else must have. I don't want her to get into trouble. I just wish she would let me help her.

I'm running on the treadmill when Jake jumps on the other one, and I wish I was confident enough to ask him outright, but I can't. Fuck, I can't even bring myself to say hello.

"Hey, Thirty-Four," Maddox says from behind me. I didn't even realize he was here. I switch the machine off and wipe my face with a towel before getting off and walking over to him.

"Hey, I haven't seen you around lately. Y-you okay?" I ask with a small smile, and he returns it easily.

"I am now, I've been spending a lot of time in the north wing. I'm not big on socializing," he says as his eyes flick over to Jake, who isn't even trying to hide the fact that he's listening in.

"Don't worry about me, guys. I won't say anything if you've got something going on. Just be careful."

"It's n-n-not like that, we're friends." Jake's eyebrows rise at my words, before he shakes his head with a smile.

"We're not here to make friends, Luna, remember that. Now, I know Mad here is one of the more honest ones out of the fools in this place, but that doesn't mean that everyone will believe him. You don't want rumors to start up about you." It feels like he's threatening me, but what am I supposed to do?

"D said you're the type to help people, or at least, you were when you were younger." Why did I just say that? *Think before you speak next time.*

His face falls before he turns his back to us. I share a look with Maddox, and he looks as perplexed as I feel.

"Sometimes, the only way to help someone is to make them realize how wrong their choices or actions are. In all honesty, no one here will think anything is going on between you two, but they haven't got to believe it to use it against you." His shoulders are tight and pulled up to his ears, and I feel bad for making him feel this way.

"I'm sorry if my words upset you, I don't know why I said them. I just... I didn't think."

"Yeah well, don't speak so carelessly. You may not get someone so friendly next time." He turns to look at me with narrowed eyes and I take a step back without even thinking about it.

"Come on, Luna. We should go," Maddox says and I'm not even going to argue it.

We head down to the pool and I'm glad to see that it's empty. I quickly

change and join him in the water. He's swimming laps, but all I want to do is lean my arms on the side of the pool and float.

"Jake is one of the good guys, Luna. He's just upset," he says as he comes to rest beside me with his mouth turned down at the sides.

"Why wouldn't anyone believe that something was going on between us?" *What is wrong with you? That question is pointless and does not require an answer.* Such a smart inner voice. Shame she's always two seconds too late to stop me from speaking.

"Do you want them to?" he says each word slowly, as though I'm asking something beyond sense and reason.

"No, but I don't see why it would be so absurd. You're amazing, Maddox, and anyone would be lucky to have you." My cheeks are heating and I'm hoping he won't notice.

"Because you're not my type and they all know it. They never let me forget it, either. If I'm honest, Luna, I don't want any of the girls here, but eventually, I must choose someone to take to my room, and I don't know if I can handle that."

He looks so defeated, his shoulders slump and his eyes are shining and staring down at the water. I don't enjoy seeing him so sad, but I'm not great at offering comfort either.

"I'm not the best person to have around when you need comfort, but I am your friend, i-i-if I-I can help, t-t-then I will."

"Thank you, Luna. I'm glad it was you who saved my life. I never would have approached you otherwise." He's speaking softly, but our heads are close enough that I can still hear him.

"I'm glad too. It's nice to be around a guy who doesn't want to use me. You're a sweetie, Maddox, and I will always try to help you wherever I can." We share another smile as footsteps sound and I lift my head to find Emmet staring daggers into Maddox, and his smile falls away instantly.

"Out, now," Emmet orders.

Maddox mouths, "sorry," before swimming to the steps and climbing out.

I'm floating here, staring up at the deceiver, and I have to fight every instinct to move away when he crouches down and brings himself as close as possible.

"Get dressed, Luna. We're going for a walk," he says with a smirk and a glint to his eyes, and I can't stop the idea forming in my mind.

I watch as Maddox stands at the door, staring at us helplessly, and I shoot

him a smile before returning my attention back to Emmet himself.

“No.”

His eyes flash and his fists clench at my words, before he grips my chin and brings his face closer to mine.

“Did you just say no to the Prince? Hmm, I like the confidence, Luna, but I don’t take rejection well. You should remember that.”

“I do not h-h-have to take o-o-orders from you anymore. Not now that I belong solely to Aeron. I may r-r-re-refuse you and I may not be alone with a Harkwright without y-y-you getting Aeron’s written permission first.” I jerk my head free of his grip and push away from the pool’s edge.

“You were alone with Maddox.” His smile is almost sinister, and I don’t like it, mainly because I’m scared about what it means for my sweet friend.

“I have permission,” Maddox calls from the door, before running off when Emmet spins around and roars. There’s no other word for it, it’s too low to be a scream, but a shout doesn’t quite do the sound justice.

“That is a minor technicality and I will rectify it,” he says through clenched teeth, narrowing his gaze on me, and all I can do is turn from him and swim away. *It feels empowering to tell Emmet no. I look forward to doing it again. Hopefully next time, I won’t stutter.*



IT’S BEEN three days since I told Emmet no and a toxic atmosphere has taken over the place. No girl has been chosen to go to his room, he’s barely set foot within the mess hall and when he has... well, not even the men have been safe from his anger.

“What did you do to him?” D asks over dinner and I don’t miss the way others seem to lean toward us, begging for any morsel of information I can give.

“I told him no,” I say, as I push my food around my plate, but I don’t say it quietly. What’s the point in trying to keep my voice down?

“You are such a liar. No one would say no to the Prince,” One shouts from the top girls’ table and I don’t see any point in defending myself. What do I care if they believe me or not?

“I agree, you are so full of shit,” comes from Twenty as she wraps an arm around Emily, who’s shooting daggers at me.

A hush suddenly descends as the doors open, and Emmett walks in with Tucker and Tom beside him. I keep my head down, but I can't seem to stop my eyes from tracking their movements.

Tucker has a scowl firmly set on his face and he's looking right at our table. I don't know what I've done to anger him, but I'm sure he'll get over it, eventually. Tom just looks bored, but he always does, even when he's pounding into a girl from behind, he still has that same look on his face. Does nothing excite him? *Why am I thinking this?* Emmet, however, he looks... like the cat who finally got the cream. And now I can feel myself starting to shake, and my hands are turning clammy.

D takes one of my hands in hers and rolls her shoulders back as they slowly make their way toward our table, and I don't know what's about to happen. The fact all three of them are coming over can't be a good sign.

He walks over with purpose, leans one hand on the table and then slams a piece of paper down with the other. His smirk is well and truly in place, and I'm struggling to believe I ever spent any time with Liam. He really is gone, and I can feel that loss bone deep.

"Signed permission from Aeron himself. Now, get up and come with me." His smirk falls as a laugh bursts free and even D is looking at me as though I've lost my mind. *Heh, maybe I have.*

"No." I probably shouldn't be smiling, but I can't help it. Damn, it feels good saying no to that self-entitled dick.

Tucker is smirking and I think my answer has made him happy, although I'm probably wrong. It's hard to get a read on this guy, and Tom... well, he still looks bored. Emmet, however, looks like he's about to blow and I'm not planning on sticking around to witness the fallout.

Nausea is bubbling up inside, even though I'm trying to act as though I'm not scared or filled with regret that I may have just made a big mistake. *I shouldn't poke the bear.*

"Come on, D. Let's go bake something," I say as I rise to my feet, and Emmet is getting redder and redder in the face.

"I have the written permission. What the fuck do you mean no?" His voice promises dark things to come, and a shiver passes through me as I link my arm with D's and step around the table.

"If you c-c-clench your jaw any h-harder, you will break it. Also, you may have Aeron's consent, but that d-d-doesn't mean I have to say y-yes. Remember, Emmet," I draw in a deep breath, trying to keep myself from

stuttering anymore, “I don’t have to take orders from you. So, if I want to say no, then that’s what I’ll do.” I hold my head up high as I pull D out of the mess hall, and I don’t fall apart until we make it to the kitchens.

My heart is hammering against my chest and I can’t seem to draw enough air into my lungs, my entire body is shaking, and my stomach feels as though it’s about to revolt.

“It’s okay, just breathe through it. You’ll be okay,” D says as she strokes my back, but it isn’t helping. I’m feeling light-headed and her face looks terrified.

“What’s happening?” I gasp out, and she crouches beside me as I fall down to my knees.

“I think you’re having a panic attack. I’m sorry, Lu, I don’t know what to do.”

She sounds as though she’s on the verge of tears as a voice says, “I do.”

One minute, I’m struggling to breathe and the next... I’m being kissed. I’m not kissing him back. To be fair, I can’t even think right now. None other than Tom fucking Harkwright is kissing me. He pulls away and my eyes are on his and everything seems to come back into focus, the way one of his hands is cupping the back of my neck. The taste of him on my lips, and the fact that he no longer looks bored.

“Why did you do that?” It comes out on a whisper, but I can breathe again and it feels as though I’ve got through the worst of it.

“When I had a panic attack, holding my breath helped to settle it for me. I didn’t think instructions would register for you, so I did the next best thing. You held your breath when I kissed you.” He releases me and stands up before offering me his hand.

I can’t help but look at it for a moment, before accepting the help and he pulls me to my feet. He doesn’t release my hand until I’m standing strong, and D finally snaps her mouth shut and rushes to my side.

“Should she go to the medical center?” she asks, and Tom stares right at me before shaking his head.

“No, she’ll be fine now. Just keep an eye on her and find me if Emmet tries anything stupid.”

“Why were you standing with him? I thought he was your least favorite person,” D states, and he grinds his teeth before focusing his stare on her.

“It doesn’t matter, Daria, but what makes you think I was there for him?” He gives us one last cursory look before leaving the kitchen.

I stare down at my shaking hands before declaring, “Let’s make a coffee cake.”

D gives me a strange look, but she doesn’t argue. We spend the next hour getting covered in flour and trying to keep me thoroughly distracted.

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RETREAT FOR THE ELITE

“I CAN’T BELIEVE they brought the retreat forward. I need more time to prepare myself for it.” Yes, I’m whining. But what else can I do?

“The men are unpredictable, but this has Senior written all over it. You’ll be okay, homegirl, I’ll be right there with you,” D says as she goes through my suitcase to make sure I have everything I need and it’s within the guidelines. *I really can’t wait until I can pick my own clothes again.*

“Yeah, but we will be away with the Harkwrights and I doubt Aeron will stay celibate the entire time. So what happens then, do I leave the room until he’s done or will he make me watch?” My breathing is growing fast, and D is in front of me in no time.

“Lu, for crying out loud.” Her palm connects with my face and I can’t help but look at her, slack jawed. “Well, I wasn’t about to kiss you,” she says with a smirk and it doesn’t take long for both of us to laugh.

“Now, listen to me. I don’t know what Aeron will do, but I think everything will work out fine. Besides, Maddox will be there. I’m sure he’ll keep you company while Aeron does whatever he does to drive you away. There isn’t anything you can do but accept it and try to distract yourself.” She passes me my bag before leading me out of my room.

When I come back, I’ll find out what my new number is and I probably won’t see this room again. After almost a year, it feels strange that I won’t come back here or to this wing of the Academy.

“Don’t get all nostalgic on me, girl. We’ll be back in no time. No doubt the second year will be just as eventful.” She rolls her eyes and we head downstairs to the waiting car. Top girls don’t need to collect their bags, they

get the valet service. Another thing I refuse to use when I get in the top ten.

We enter our limo and I'm dreading who we will carpool with today. No doubt yet another group of high numbers who like to remind us just how hated we really are.

"Ahh shit, just our fucking luck." I have no idea what D has seen, but as Tucker, Jake, and Tom slide into the car, I'm understanding her cussing.

I don't know what is going on with her and Jake, but she can't avoid him any longer.

"At least Emmet isn't with them," I say as I gently jab my elbow into her ribs, but she doesn't react. Instead, she's just staring at the ground as though it holds the answers to the universe.

"He gets his own car, although I will pass on your commiserations to his absence," Tucker says with a smirk as he pulls out his phone, and starts tapping away at the screen.

"Watch what you say, homegirl."

"Yeah, don't count yourself lucky that you got us instead," comes from Jake, his eyes locked on D, and I don't think anything can remove them.

"Where's Maddox?" I ask softly and Tom loses his usual look as he leans a little closer. I think I prefer bored Tom. He's looking at me a little too curiously right now.

"They assigned him a different car. Would you swap one of us for him, if you could?" he asks simply, but there's an undercurrent of a warning there.

"I thought Bradley was coming back before we went on the retreat," I say instead, choosing to ignore Tom and his curiosity.

I can see Jake's jaw tightening and the left side of his face develops a twitch. I don't think he likes my comment; the mystery surrounding these two is growing more perplexing. Although, it feels as though it's a lot simpler and I'm just overthinking everything. *Maybe if you stop, you'll see what is right in front of you.*

"He was supposed to. I guess bringing it forward ruined his plans. Although..." her eyes flick up, but she doesn't finish her sentence and I don't think she needs to.

He was due back a few days ago, the fact that we're going on the retreat early shouldn't have affected it. So the question remains, why didn't he come back like he said he would?

WE'VE BEEN in the limo for well over an hour now, the atmosphere is filled with tension and I feel as though I'm about to burst free from my skin. Daria won't look anywhere close to the direction of Jake, Tom takes the time to look between all of us, his bored facade back in place. Tucker hasn't put his phone away the entire time and doesn't even bother trying to talk to anyone, and I'm just sitting here. Staring out of the tinted windows and waiting to arrive so I can get out of this car, and leave all the tension in my wake. That may be a dream, but anything has to be better than this.

"Let's play a game," Tom suddenly says, rubbing his palms together in what I assume is glee.

Tucker puts his phone away and Jake stops grinding his jaw and looks up at him. The only one who isn't looking at Mr. Bored is D.

"What game? If I hear even a suggestion of dares, then I'll open the door and throw you out of it," Tucker growls, and Tom only smiles more.

"Let's play truths." Everyone, apart from me, is rolling their eyes now and I don't understand why it would cause this reaction.

"We're not in high school anymore, Tom. I'm not answering a stupid question just because a game says I have to," Jake says and Tom shakes his head, almost mockingly.

"No questions, we move around in a circle and supply a truth of subsequent worth to the one before. The more trivial the first is, the more the rest can be. Unless you feel brave."

"It sounds moronic, count me out," Tucker slides his eyes closed, and I guess that's the end of his participation on this joy-filled car ride.

"Who goes first?" I ask, before Tom points at me.

"You asked, so you can go. Make it a good one, Thirty-Four." His eyes are sparkling and it's almost mesmerizing.

"O-okay, I'm adopted."

"Boring. Daria, your turn." Although Tom always seems to be around when I need help, I really can't think of a reason to like him.

"This is stupid, but what else is there to do?" She rolls her shoulders back and takes a few moments to think about a truth to share. "My mama threatened to disown me if I came to the Academy."

Shit! I was not expecting that.

"That's some heavy shit right there, your go, Jakey boy."

"Fine, I think Bradley is a dick, and that makes you one in association." He's looking right at D and her cheeks are flaming as she holds his stare,

before being the first to look away.

“That’s just weird, okay. I resent the fact the Senior makes us fall into the same field as our respective parent.” Tom may look bored but he doesn’t sound it, and I can’t believe he just said that about Sir Harkwright.

“I wish I had chosen a different car,” Tucker grumbles before cursing when Tom claps with glee.

“You’re playing now! Okay, missus, you’re up. Let’s not make it such a boring one this time.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, I’m an honest person. Everything is a truth with me,” I reply and I earn myself a whole round of eye rolls.

“There must be something. You can’t be that boring, surely. Just a disappointment,” he mutters before turning his stare to D and I can’t stop my mouth from opening.

“Emmet is a deceitful idiot, and I hope I never get claimed by him because I love telling him no.”

A pin could drop, and I would know exactly where it has landed by how quiet this car has become.

“Okay, new game,” Tucker says as he leans forward, all attention is now on me. “Why do you enjoy telling him no so much?”

“I thought we wouldn’t b-be a-asking questions.” I sound lame even to my own ears, and everyone but D is smirking or rolling their eyes.

“Yes, but it’s a new game now. Come on, Thirty-Four. Tell us why.” Tom is almost gleeful as he says this, and I should have kept my mouth shut.

“I guess, b-b-because no one ever does, and it’s about t-t-time he realizes he can’t mess with people’s heads and n-n-not have anything come back to him.” Is it just me or is my voice rising?

“Aww, did the Prince hurt your feelings?” Tucker asks mockingly, and I can feel my face flame, and spread down across my neck and over my chest.

“What did he do? I mean, the list of possibilities is endless,” comes from Jake, and D goes rigid every time he opens his mouth.

“He pretended to be a cleaner and became one of my first friends in the Academy. He comforted me when I cried and gave me a reason to smile. Oh, and warned me off the dreaded ‘Prince’ every chance he got. He didn’t even react if I spoke about him or any of the Harkwright men other than to agree with me. He fooled me, so many times I should have seen it, but he blinded me.” D takes a hold of my hand and I release a shaky breath.

“Fuck, that’s messed up. Didn’t you ever get suspicious when your room didn’t get cleaned?” Jake asks, and I honestly believe he had no idea Emmet was doing any of this.

“He cleaned it. I’d sit there talking to him while he did his work. Anytime I offered to help, he would tell me it was his job. He said he wouldn’t want to get in trouble if anyone found out I did it myself.”

“Wait, you’re being serious. Fuck, I would pay good money to see Emmet doing something like that. He really wants to claim you, girl. I’d watch how far you push him. Aeron will let you go real soon and then you’ll be at his mercy.” Tom looks almost pensive as he says that last part.

I already know that I’m playing a dangerous game with him, they don’t need to keep reminding me of that fact. Besides, I didn’t start it. But I refuse to just roll over and let him get away with everything. Just because he’s the heir to the vast Harkwright fortune does not mean that I’ll bow to him and treat him like the royalty he pretends to be. *Arrogant jackass.*

“In this new game, am I the only one who has to answer the questions?” I ask carefully, keeping my head slightly downcast.

“No, but it doesn’t mean that any of us will answer though,” Tucker replies and my eyes lock with his for a few moments.

“Why don’t you like Bradley?” I don’t even have to say his name for everyone to know who that question is posed at.

“Because, like Emmet, he gets everything he wants. Regardless of whether he deserves to. He doesn’t care how he affects anyone else, eventually, though he’ll grow bored with what he has and go after something else. Steamrolling over anyone who stands in his way, so yeah, I think he’s a dickhead and I won’t apologize for it.” He folds his arms across his chest and his body seems to vibrate with pent up rage.

“You just don’t know him the way I do. You make him out to be the villain but you’re wrong. Eventually, you’ll realize that, and he’ll forgive you like the kind-hearted guy he is,” D spits out, leaning forward and baring her teeth at him.

“Trust me, Daria. You’ll be the one seeing Bradley in his true light... not me.”

I'VE NEVER SIGHED SO hard in relief as I am right now, I might not have wanted to come to this retreat, but I am beyond ecstatic to be out of that fucking car!

Jake said that we would stay in a beach house and I guess he was telling the truth, but I don't know why I expected anything other than a mini mansion. *These pretentious asses can't ever do humble, can they?*

Our driver and the retreat staff carried our things into the place and I'm just standing here, staring up at the looming house. It would be almost quaint if it wasn't so large. The wooden paneling and shutters across the windows give it a beach like feel, but that is where it ends.

"Word to the wise, Luna." Tucker's breath stirs the hairs on my neck, I didn't even realize he had gotten so close to me. "Aeron has been stuck with his bitch of a mother ever since he left, so I doubt he'll be in a good place. Add that to the ridiculous restrictions Emmet keeps placing on him. Well, I don't think we'll see him sober soon."

"What restrictions?" I ask quietly, and I feel his front press against my back as he steps closer.

"No touching you when you're alone together. Since barely any of us kiss you girls, that would never be an issue. But to claim a girl and not even be able to touch her, it's an extra kick in the teeth. I'll think he'll release you even sooner than I thought." He moves away and a chill sweeps through me before I take a step forward and close the distance between me and my claimer.

I don't know what room I'll be staying in or where I'll find Aeron, but I can't stand out here for the rest of the day.

D comes up beside me and links our arms before steering me inside to see one big open space, with doors leading to... well, I don't know. But there are large sectionals placed around a glass coffee table, with a flat screen TV on the wall and a set of stairs off to the side of the space leading up to a balcony, overlooking the sitting area and I'm guessing that's where the bedrooms will be.

The whole of the space is dark oak with a sand color wood for the flooring, and I can't get over how open it is. Are we all expected to be together and play games or watch movies or something? God, I hope not, I do not want to be around all fifteen of them at one time. *It will be torturous, I'm sure.*

"Welcome to the retreat." Goosebumps travel down my skin. The menace

in those four innocent words has my stomach bottoming out, and I refuse to turn around to face him.

“Hey, Shane. How’d the surgery go?” comes from Tucker and there is no point in waiting to turn around now that he is here. Not that he would protect me, but I can always hope.

“Fuck you, Tucker. You’ll get yours, believe me. You and the fuckwit everyone calls a Prince.” His eyes are spitting fire. His mouth purses so much, it looks as though he’s been sucking on a dozen lemons.

“Fuckwit? Surely you can come up with a better insult than that,” says Emmet, who seems to appear out of nowhere.

“Forgive me for not suddenly quaking in my size elevens now that you’re here. Unlike the rest of these dickheads, you don’t scare me. Don’t worry, Zero, I’ll get my go on you, eventually. You’ll be ruined for life,” he sneers at me, and I feel as though I’m about to puke.

“You don’t get to lay a finger on my claim.” All I hear is the husky timber of Aeron. All this testosterone in one place should be illegal. Especially with how they all look, *it isn’t fair to the rest of the men of the world.*

His arm snakes around my waist and D steps away from me, as I’m pulled back against his hard chest, and his other arm snakes over my shoulder. His hand splays over my collarbone, while his thumb strokes against the hollow of my throat.

Emmet is glaring at us, and I can’t fight the small smile playing over my lips as I lay my hands over the arm on my stomach and hold it in place. I should stop antagonizing him, but I can’t. It’s just too fun, especially if it involves Aeron. My body is already thrumming with something that feels both electric and terrifying. It shouldn’t feel this right being held by him, so why does it?

“Come on, Little Zero, let’s go to our room.” It’s sinful the way he speaks against my ear, and I can’t help but catch my breath and nod my head. Like fuck, can I say actual words right now?

“Remember what I said, Aeron. I’m the only one who can give you what you want.” Emmet isn’t even trying to hide the underlying threat. I just wish I knew what he was talking about.

Aeron spins me around until we’re facing one another. Everyone else fades into the background as his hands fall to my ass, and in one smooth move, he lifts me up against him. My legs wrap around his waist

automatically, and I don't miss the wink he sends in Emmet's direction before carrying me up the stairs.

Forget about damp panties. He has obliterated these.

I can't focus on which way he walks us or what door we enter through, all I'm aware of is his firm body pressing against mine and a sudden softness as he pushes us forward. My back is hitting a mattress, and he's lying on top of me. "You know, I just got used to not having your warm, tight little body next to me when I sleep. I guess it was all in vain seeing as we won't be spending a single night apart during this fucked up retreat." His nose grazes against mine as our eyes lock together.

"You almost s-s-s-sound as t-t-though y-y-you missed me," I reply with a shaky breath and a devilish grin forms on his sexy mouth. *Can a mouth be sexy? I mean it can because everything about Aeron screams sex... I mean sexy. Ahem.*

"Maybe I did. What do you think of that?"

"I think I f-feel sorry f-f-or whatever girl you've h-h-had since you've been gone." Yeah, I think my brain has checked out for the time being.

"Go ahead. Although, I wonder if you would believe me if I said there has been no girl, woman, or whatever since I was forced to leave the Academy and spend it with that... it doesn't matter," he growls as he drags a hand through his hair, and I watch the movements with rapt attention.

I think I'm trying to distract myself from the feel of him between my legs. My skirt isn't covering a damn thing, and my panties are too thin to mask the way he feels, as he hardens against me. Straining against the fabric of his jeans, and a part of me wants to roll my hips to see what he will do, but I won't. *Forever the good girl, even if I'm tired of always playing that part.*

"Why don't you order me to do anything?" When is my head going to work and keep me from saying things that I shouldn't?

"Do you want me to, Little Zero?" He rolls his hips into me, but he doesn't move to do anything more than that. "Do you want me to order you to take me into your sweet little mouth, to swallow me as deep as you can go? To show you how I like it, how to work your tongue and teeth to bring me to the point of near madness? Maybe you want me to lose myself down your throat. Are you curious what I would taste like? Maybe you just want to feel me in your hands, against your delectable tits, or maybe even sliding between your folds."

Oh. My. God. I can't even breathe. I think I may even moan at the

imagery his words have put into my head.

“Oh yeah, you like that don’t you?” His voice is getting huskier, which only adds to the sex appeal, and I don’t know how I will survive being claimed by him.

“I bet your panties are dripping and your nipples are probably so hard right now... I will kill Emmet,” he pulls off me and it feels as though I’ve just been given a serious amount of whiplash. *What just happened?*

“Don’t look at me like that, okay? With your heaving chest and lust filled eyes, just stop it.” He paces and I lean up on my elbows. *I feel so confused.*

“What’s going on?” I ask, and he stops moving, but he’s finding his feet awfully riveting.

“I’m not allowed to touch you once we’re alone, and trust me, it’s fucking hard to follow that moronic rule. Sure, I can go fuck someone else, but I’m not a complete ass. I won’t do one girl just to come back to you straight after.”

“Hang on, why can’t you touch me? Why are you letting Emmet dictate everything? He can’t tell you what you can and can’t do with a girl you’ve claimed.” Why am I arguing for him to do what he wants? *This is a good thing, it gives me more time to prepare myself for being with someone who isn’t... Cole.*

“There’s something I need to happen and only he can do it. Or at least, he’s the only one willing to help me. As long as I do as he says where you’re concerned.” I’ve never seen his eyes so dark before, and it’s oddly captivating.

“Just putting this out there, Aeron, but how would he know? I sure as heck won’t tell him anything,” I say it quietly, but I can see his nostrils flare before he takes a step to bring himself closer to me.

“I’ll think about it, but damn, Little Zero. You must be hard up for it if you’re trying to plead your case for me.” He’s smirking but I just feel mortified. I’m sure my face is telling him that enough for me though, I won’t need to spell it out.

“Don’t be embarrassed. But I said I’m not a complete ass, that doesn’t mean I’m not an asshole. I want to watch you.” He’s even closer now and his eyes are trailing over my body.

“Watch me... do what?”

“Touch yourself. I want to watch as you bring yourself to the brink and tumble over the edge. Fuck yourself for me, Little Zero.” Oh fuck, if a guy

could make me come from his words, it will definitely be Aeron.

“I-I-I...”

“It’s not a request. You wanted me to order you to do something, well, here it is. Remove your clothes until you’re bare to me, and then play with yourself.” His tongue darts out to wet his lips and I sit up fully, knowing I’ve brought this on myself.

I slip my thumbs into the waistband of my skirt and panties, but I can’t seem to get my hands to move any further. All I need to do is push them down and my skirt will fall away, but... *I don’t think I can do this.*

“Come on, Little Zero. Take them off.” It’s so easy for him to say it, but that doesn’t mean it’s a simple thing for me to do.

I stand up from the bed and squeeze my eyes closed before I drag my skirt and panties down, I’m shaking so hard, I can barely push it over my ass. Warm hands encompass mine, and his breathing tickles my ear.

“Open your eyes, Luna. I want you to watch as I help you.”

It’s not his words that are causing me to open my eyes and look at him. *No, it’s the fact he used my name.* He’s never done that in the entire year I’ve spent around him. My eyes fall down to where our hands connect, and I watch as he guides my hands down past my ass, along the length of my thighs and down my calves.

My hands spring open when his fingers thread between my own and I watch as my clothes fall to the ground, gathering around my ankles.

He guides my hands to the bottom of my top, but he isn’t letting me grab a hold of it. Instead, he pushes my hands up underneath, skimming my fingers over my ribs and up to my chest. I can’t catch my breath as he guides me up to my breasts, and presses my palms against them, using his own hands over mine to get me to squeeze. The funny thing is, even though I know they’re mine, it doesn’t feel as though I’m the one doing the touching.

He lowers my hands before lifting them above my head, my eyes are on him as his fingers skim down the inside of my arm causing electricity to travel up my spine. He doesn’t touch me anywhere else, all he does is grip my top and slide it slowly up over my body. The minute it hits the floor, he steps back and drags his gaze over me, so strong he may as well be touching me with the way I feel right now.

“Remove your bra. I want to see everything.”

I nod slowly before lowering my arms and holding my fingers against the clasp at the front. I snap my eyes closed before trying to remember how to

open the damn thing. *It didn't feel this hard to put it on this morning!* It's almost impossible to take it off now. Despite my shaking, it seems to click. After what feels like hours, the straps of my bra are gliding down my arms and it soon joins the rest of my clothing.

My eyes are still shut, but my hearing is working fine, which is why I can hear other things hitting the ground. Just light thuds that shouldn't be happening, I risk a peak and a soft gasp escapes me as I take in Aeron, standing before me in nothing more than his tight boxers. I can't take my eyes off him as he turns around and climbs onto the bed, resting his back against the headboard and leaving his legs open wide.

"I want you to sit right here," he says as he pats the spot between his legs, and I swallow hard, as I make my way to him on shaky legs.

I can feel his eyes on me as I crawl over the bed, but he says nothing and he doesn't try to touch me. Even as I settle down in front of him, he's dead silent and his arms are firmly resting by his sides. He doesn't look relaxed by any means. To me, he looks like a tightly wound spring. *I'm a little worried about what may happen when the spring suddenly snaps.*

"Rest your back against my chest, Luna. You need to be comfortable," he whispers in my ear, and I slowly relax into him. Although 'relax' may be a stretch, as he does things to me. Things I don't even want to try to decipher, but I don't think I can ever truly relax in his presence.

His hardness is pressing against my back and his thighs are hard and firm against my own, I don't know what I'm supposed to do now but I'm beyond nervous, and maybe even a little scared.

"Touch yourself, Luna. Show me how you get yourself off."

"I d-d-don't... Aeron." I arch my neck to look at him, and I think he can see what I'm trying to say because shock and even a little understanding play out in a blink of an eye, before his usual cocksure smirk returns.

"Have you never played with yourself, Little Zero? How is that even possible? What do you do when you get horny?" Why is this so confusing for him? Surely not everyone has toys or feels the urge to play with themselves.

"I g-g-guess on the o-o-odd occasion that it h-happened, it didn't last long. I never really got e-excited until I came here." I really did not need to add that last part, and my head falls forward until my chin is resting against my chest.

"Okay then, I guess I'll just have to teach you." He sucks the lobe of my ear into his mouth before nibbling on it. My eyes roll back as a soft moan

breaks free.

He places his hands over mine before guiding one up to my chest and the other rests against my lower stomach. He moves his fingers over mine until I'm pinching my nipple between my finger and thumb, rolling it between my grip.

"I want to hear all of those little moans you make," he growls as he pushes my other hand lower, causing one of my fingers to slide between my folds.

"Close your eyes, Luna. Imagine it's my finger gliding through your wetness. That I'm the one rubbing against your sweet little clit, causing your breathing to speed up and your hot as fuck tit to push further into my hand. Does it feel good?" How can a voice hold so much lust and why is it getting me more and more excited?

"Y-y-yes, so good," I moan, as he pushes my hand to rub more furiously, until he guides my finger down further and uses his own to push my finger inside.

I move faster, sliding in as far as I can go while my thumb rubs against my clit, causing more warmth to pool in my stomach, but there's no release or relief. Not until a second finger slips inside and this time, it isn't one of mine.

"Aeron," I moan loud as he bites down on my neck before pushing me forward and moving away. I want to cry from the fact that he pulled away so quickly, and the warmth is suddenly missing.

That is until his hands are on my shoulder blades and he's pushing my back down into the mattress. My eyes are dragging over his face and I can't get over the intense look written across it. There isn't a smile or smirk to be found. He hovers over me as he snakes an arm down between us, moves my hand away and pushes two of his fingers inside. I feel myself tighten instantly as he moves harder and faster inside me, while dropping his head to my breast and sucking my nipple into his mouth, hard. I barely even notice the fact that one of my hands is still playing with my other nipple, all I can focus on is the way he feels inside me and... I'm scared by how much I wish it was something other than his fingers.

"You're so wet and tight, I want to feel you come, Luna. Come for me," It could be the way he says it, the look in his eyes as he lines our heads up, or just how damn good he feels, but either way, I do as I'm told.

I cry out as wave after wave passes over me; I writhe beneath him,

wanting him to stop and to never even think about stopping.

He pulls his hands free, and he watches me as he slides his fingers into his mouth and sucks on them, even moaning at the taste. I don't even care that I'm blushing. I can't bring myself to look away.

He climbs off the bed and offers me his hand and I'm just lying here, looking at it moronically. Although, how am I supposed to understand his actions when I can barely recall what my name is?

“Come on, Luna. I want a shower and you're coming with me.”

My heart stops and I can't respond. I don't know why I slip my hand in his or let him lead me to the bathroom. Maybe because I want to see what's barely hiding within his boxers or curiosity over why he suddenly wants us to wash together. All I know is that I don't really know anything.

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IN THE ARMS OF THE ELITE

TEN INCHES.

Yep, never going to happen. How can I even contemplate having Aeron as my first when I doubt he'll even be able to fit? Also, why would he get it pierced? I can't fathom a reasonable explanation for that one. Even though it makes a heat pool in my stomach and liquid slide down my leg as I sit on the shower seat and watch him come closer.

I can't even take in the way the bathroom is set up or question why a shower would have a seat set into the wall or why there is more than one shower head? All I can think about is how big he is, and the piercings he has on the head of his cock. *It looks like a cross...*

"Why do you suddenly look paler than normal? I didn't even think that was possible for you," he says with a smirk, but he says it softly and with a warmth to his voice.

"I shouldn't have asked how big you were, it's terrifying," I say without thought, and he laughs out loud as he steps inside the shower and slides the door closed.

"Stay on the seat and do not move," he orders as he fists himself and starts dragging his hand up and down.

Move, why the fuck would I want to move? I don't want to miss this, the sight of him pleasuring himself in front of me just adds to the excitement thrumming through my body. Washing the nerves away and when the shower kicks in and the shower heads at my back starts up, it's so damn relaxing, I never want to leave this shower.

"Open your legs, Luna. Spread them as wide as you can." I do as I'm told

and he drops to his knees before gripping my thighs and dragging me forward until I'm barely perching on the edge.

He lifts my thighs and hooks them over his shoulders before dropping his mouth over my clit and slides his tongue through my lips. I try to grip onto the stone seating, but there's nothing to latch onto. My hands instead land on his shoulders and I feel him tense up before his shoulders relax and he slips a finger inside me. It's so much, maybe even too much, and my nails dig into his skin as I cry out. His tongue replaces his finger as he thrusts inside me and I explode into his mouth. My cries turn my throat hoarse, and when he pulls away I feel as though my body has turned into Jell-O.

"You taste so fucking good, it almost makes me want to taste another part of you," he says as he positions me fully on the seat and brings his face closer to mine.

"What part?" I ask softly and his eyes drop to my lips before he stands up and moves closer. Although all I can think is that his ten inch cock is now standing to attention, right in front of my face.

I look up to see his gaze fixated on me, and I don't even realize I've raised my hand until it hits the warmth and hardness of his cock and I go to snap my hand away, but he stops me. Covering as much of his length as he can with my hand, guiding me up and down until I've got the rhythm he wants and then places his hands on the shower walls. The water trailing over him as I pump his cock, watching the movement, listening to his hiss and moans every time I hit his piercing. Wondering what it would feel like to swap my hand with my mouth, to return the favor and make him come with my mouth like he did for me.

"Stand up, Luna." I get to my feet, but I don't let him go as he pushes me against the wall and drops his head into the side of my neck. Biting and licking the tender skin as his hand slips between my legs for another round. He thrusts in, doing something with his fingers to make me cry out, and brings me close to the edge already. He moves fast and hard, and I time my pumps against his until our moans fill the shower and his warmth pools across my stomach. I come over his fingers in seconds and sag to the floor.

He joins me and passes a washcloth, covered in soap, over my stomach, removing his excitement from my body and washing me. Because he isn't stopping at my stomach, as he guides me back to my feet and sets me against the wall. He kneels before me and washes my feet, ankles, and legs. He drags the washcloth over my sweet spot before passing it over my stomach and

across my chest. He doesn't stop until every part of me is squeaky clean and I'm left speechless because Aeron Harkwright just bathed me, and I do not understand why.

WE'RE HAVING a barbecue down on their private beach for our first night here, but I'd much rather stay in our room and not see another living soul. Aeron, however, won't hear of it. He says we have to show our faces, but he has promised he won't leave me alone. Whether it's for me or him, I don't know, but I still appreciate it.

"While we're down there, try to be the strongest version of yourself. It won't just be the guys and girls. The additional people can smell weakness from miles away, and they'll pounce on whoever captures their attention. Just stick with me and you'll be okay." He slips a pair of board shorts on and a tight tank top that reveals so many muscles.

I have a gold triangular bikini under a red button up dress. I don't know why he's making me wear a bikini. *I will not be taking this dress off if there are unknown people downstairs.*

"What are you going to do about Emmet?" I ask, and his shoulders tighten along with his jaw as he looks at me.

"Well, I won't tell him what happened in here or the shower if that's what you mean. As long as I need his help, I'll be at his mercy. I can't say it appeals to me, but what else can I do?"

"Okay, l-let's go," I mumble as I drop my eyes to the floor. He slips his arm around my waist before guiding me out of the room and down to the beach.

Everyone seems to have already congregated outside and Daria is tucked under Bradley's arm, but she doesn't look as happy as I expected. It probably doesn't help that Jake is hovering nearby with a girl - I've never seen before - wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Who's the girl?" I ask softly and Aeron glances over to them.

"That's April or Eden. I think she's his girl whenever he's around this way. A lot of us have a regular girl when we're close to home," he says it so easily, but it makes my insides burn. How can they be so cavalier about a girl's feelings like that? Especially when they're at the academy.

Then again, why would a girl put up with it in the first place? I know I will not get a boyfriend out of this experience or someone that I'll turn to when shit hits the fan and my life upends. *I'll never speak to these people again, and I'm... resigned to that.* I just can't fathom being some guy's town girl.

"How many girls from the Academy got brought here?"

"You're very curious this evening. However, out of the fifteen of us, only five didn't choose a girl. Do you want to know which five that was?" His tone is sharper now and his eyes are burning into the side of my face. Only I'm too chicken shit to look at him.

"It doesn't bother me, I'm just worried about my friend," I say, and it's only a half lie. Although, it still leaves a sour taste in my mouth, I have never been a fan of dishonesty. I knew coming here that there would be times I would have to bend it occasionally, even if I don't want to.

"Alright, Thirty-Four, you want to lie to me, fine. Just know that I can't stand deceitful people and I won't keep you around for long." He takes his arm away from me and stalks away. Like an obedient puppy, I follow on his heels.

How did he know I wasn't being entirely truthful? I don't know if I feel so bad because I half lied or because it was to him. The latter is ridiculous, however, *as I don't owe Aeron Harkwright a damn thing.*

We walk over to Tucker and Tom, who are standing by a fire pit away from the other revelers. I won't lie, I'd much rather spend the evening with these guys than everyone else.

"What's the matter, Aer? Are Emmet's rules ruining your fun?" Tom asks with a laugh that doesn't quite reach his eyes, before handing both of us a beer.

I guess I should probably mention that I don't drink, and not just because I'm underage. Mom has always been relatively laid back with us, allowing us to make our own mistakes so we can learn from them. The problem is, Poppy sometimes took it too far. I still remember how cold the waiting room felt, just watching the clock as the doctors pumped her stomach. Alcohol poisoning because she, apparently, didn't know when to stop.

That was before she left for college the first time. And I still can't help but associate alcohol amongst the bad in this world. Then again, no one made Poppy drink so much she couldn't even remember her own name. *Maybe one day I'll realize she isn't as perfect as I like to believe.*

The beer is pulled from my hands and a soda takes its place; I look up and watch as Tucker takes a long pull from my beer, and a warm feeling fills me.

“Lighten up, Tuck. The girl can drink if she wants to,” Tom says, looking me up and down.

“Unlike you, fuck boy, I pay attention. Trust me, she’d rather have the soda.” He’s not wrong, and it makes me feel... good that he even noticed.

“Long live, saint Tucker.” Tom mock bows before stepping closer. “Stop trying to be someone you’re not, seeing as I help more of your cast offs than you do.”

“Enough, for crying out loud. I have had the worst few weeks and all I want to do is have some fun. So, either lighten up or fuck off,” Aeron says a little too loudly, before tossing his bottle onto the sand.

“Okay, you want to have fun. Let’s blow this fucking place then, we’ll have to leave now though before the parents arrive,” says Tucker. The Harkwright parents being here, well, it makes me want to run away and hide.

“What do you say, Little Zero? You can either come with us or go back to our room. Just make sure you keep the door locked if you stay.” Aeron is looking at me with kind eyes as he skims his hands up and down my arms. My little half truth seems to be forgotten.

“You mean I can choose?” A choice that doesn’t involve spreading my legs? Yeah, I like those choices.

“Just because you’re stuck with Aeron over there, doesn’t mean that this can’t be a holiday for you, too. Come on, Moonbeam, choose to have some fun.” I don’t know why I have so many nicknames, but I like that Tom has one for me and that’s all kinds of fucked up.

“What the heck? You only live once. I’ll come,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster.

“Not yet, but later you will,” Aeron all but growls in my ear and my cheeks heat for a whole other reason.

I THOUGHT I got off lucky when Tucker claimed shotgun in Aeron’s car. Who better to ride with than the guy who had kept me safe so many times? I mean, in my mind, Tom is the safest bet... I really need to stop making rash judgements because I’m white knuckling the ‘oh shit’ handle with all my

might right now.

“Will you relax? I’m an excellent driver,” he says with a smirk as the speed picks up, and there’s an excitement shining bright in his gaze.

He doesn’t look bored now!

“Can’t you just slow down a little?” I plead, and he does, dropping the speed down from ninety miles an hour to eighty-five.

“We will not crash or get arrested. I just need to have a little fun before we join up with the others,” he says easily as he drops the speed, before taking a sharp turn that sends me hurtling toward him.

“How is this fun?” I snap, as I right myself right before we come to a stop in the middle of nowhere.

I can still hear the sea, so we couldn’t have gone too far, but all I can see is grass, the odd tree, and a few flowers lit up in the headlights.

“Come on, Moonbeam. Do you not know how to have fun? You’re with Aeron, of all people, and I can’t imagine he’s boring,” he says lazily as he relaxes back into his seat, and turns his head to look at me.

“My idea of fun is baking, shooting something with a bow, or spending time with D. As for Aeron, well, he’s something alright,” I mumble the last part but I doubt he missed it.

“That’s fine and all, but where’s the fun?” He places his hand over my mouth to stop me from responding. “Baking is pretty much life to you, Moonbeam, you live to bake and create. Archery is alright, but it’s done in a controlled environment, where’s the excitement? The risk? As for D, she’s good people, but you can’t always trust her judgement, but at least she takes a risk. What do you do? Name one thing you have ever done that held even an element of danger. And then tell me, if at any time, did it excite you?”

His eyes are blazing and I understand it now, he gets off on the adrenaline. No wonder he always looks bored, he probably is. Although, I wonder how I’m supposed to answer with his hand still over my mouth.

“Come on, Moonbeam... do something.” There’s a shadow lurking in his stare, something dark that calls for me to do something reckless. The only thing is, reckless isn’t in my nature.

So, all I can think to do is lick his palm and his answering laugh as he pulls his hand away makes it worth it.

“The only real risk I have taken is deciding to come to the Academy. Every day since has just given me more. I may not be exciting in your eyes, Tom, but I still do things that are hard. The only difference is, your decisions

don't have any consequences. I bet all these risks you take aren't even really risks in the grand scheme of things." *For fuck's sake, Luna, I give up. Stop forgetting yourself when you're around these guys. They are not safe.*

Okay, despite my inner voice, I wonder if I can take a second right here and pat myself on the back. Not just for saying it, but for not becoming a stammering fool - as the bullies used to say.

"You think everything is easy for me, Thirty-Four? For all of us Harkwrights?" No nickname this time, I guess I've annoyed him, or at least insulted whatever view he has of himself.

"N-n-no I n-n-never s-said that." Damn it, I was doing so well.

"Look, I know it can't be easy to sign yourself away for three years, especially with the attention you've garnered. The thing is, you chose to enter the Academy. No one forced you into it. So, think what you will about me, but I face more consequences than you'd ever realize. You chose to sign your life away, I wasn't that lucky." His eyes are on fire for a different reason now, the excitement is long gone. Hot anger has been left in its place.

"I didn't mean to judge. I guess, I just assumed the Harkwright guys come here and have their fill."

"The thing about assumptions, they're rarely true. Well, my good mood is shot to shit. Anything else you want to ruin? How about Aeron? I'm sure you can rub a good heaping of salt in his wounds too."

"I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to make you feel bad. Do you not understand how hard it is to be around you guys? Half the time I'm being told what to do, and the other half, I'm being told I can make some choices for myself, but even they have stipulations. I can choose who I give myself to, but Emmet has decided it can't be to Aeron. I can say no to other Harkwrights, yet all it does is award me more animosity from everyone else. What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to think when it comes to all of you? And I'm sorry I made assumptions about the person you are, but..."

His mouth is on mine before I can say anything else. Everything is gloriously blank, I can't think, all I can do is feel.

He pulls away slowly before unclipping my belt and hoisting me onto his lap. I can't protest or even say anything before his mouth is back on mine and my fingers are threading through his hair. My nails drag across his scalp, and he moans deep in his chest before fisting my hair and pulling my head back. He isn't rough; it feels so fucking good, it's as if he knows my limits better than I do.

He pulls back once more and places his hands on my lower back, holding me close enough that my chest is pressed against his.

“Why did you do that?” I ask quietly, and his eyes are staring deep into my own. Not a hint of boredom to be found.

“You were talking too much.” He smirks at me before slipping a hand onto my ass and pushing me down against his hardness. “Besides, I’ve wondered how it would be ever since I kissed you in the kitchen. Maybe I should enter the race to claim you myself. What do you think, Moonbeam? Do you want to be claimed by me?”

“I couldn’t say, but I’m sure you’d grow bored with me pretty quickly,” I reply before sliding off his lap and returning to my seat. He isn’t even denying it, as he throws the car into drive and rejoins the road. I guess we’ll be joining the guys now.

“I don’t know what I want anymore.” I don’t mean to say it, but I can’t take it back now it’s out there.

“If I offered you a free pass to leave and never look back. Would you take it?” His hand closes over my thigh closest to him, and he squeezes gently before brushing his fingers across until they rest on my inner thigh.

My eyes are on the side of his face as I open my mouth, and with no thought all, I can say is, “no.”

WE PULL up to a club and I am so far out of my element; I don’t even know how I’m supposed to get inside when I’m underage.

“Stop worrying, no one will say anything to you when they realize you’re with me,” Tom says as he climbs out and walks around to open my door.

His act of chivalry is throwing me off a little, even more so as he offers me his hand and pulls me up to my feet when I place mine inside his.

He leads me to the door and they don’t even glance in my direction as they open the door and let us in. I guess being a Harkwright really will open doors anywhere you go. We walk down a set of steps before entering the club, and Tom leads me to the center of the floor before spinning me into him and resting his hands on my waist.

“I didn’t know we’d be dancing,” I say foolishly, and his eyes sparkle as he pulls me flush against him and moves to the music. Guiding and bending

my body to his will, and I forget all about Aeron and Tucker the entire time we bump and grind.

By the time the third song ends, I'm a hot sweaty mess, and I can't even hide my relief as he steers me over to the bar and orders us both water.

"I won't drink when I'm driving us back. Wouldn't want anything to happen to you, would we?"

"Thanks, I guess. Out of curiosity, where are the other two?" I ask as I look around, trying to see if I can spot them.

"They're here, just in a different part. What's the matter, Moonbeam, missing your guy already?" He gives me a mock pout, and it's aggravating more than I thought it would.

"No, why would I miss any of you?" I snap and his smile falls as he grabs my hand and starts leading me away from the bar, and toward a door with no sign to say where it leads.

"Why indeed, Moonbeam. Why indeed." He opens the doors before leading me inside and I can see Tucker over by the far wall playing a game of pool with someone I don't know. While Aeron is sprawled out on a chair with a joint in one hand and a girl in nothing more than a bra and panties dancing in front of him.

"Looks like he hasn't been missing you. how does it feel?" Tom breathes in my ear as I stare at them.

She isn't even trying to keep away from him as her tits are almost pushed into his face, and a furious rage burns through me as I watch him, watch her. My fingers start to twitch, and Tom lets go of me before joining Tucker at the table. He lifts his head up and looks at me, but the only one I can focus on is Aeron. Should this bother me? No. Does it? Hell fucking yes and I do not understand why, or at least, I don't want to question why it's having this reaction on me.

"I guess I know what your idea of fun is then," I say, and it sounds hollow to my ears as he looks up at me through lazy, hooded eyes. He does nothing other than smirk at me and shrug his goddamn shoulders.

My fingers continue to twitch and I'm struggling to stop myself from marching over to them and ripping the bitch's extensions right out of her hair.

"Why the fuck not? I'm a Harkwright. If I want a dirty little bitch to strip her clothes off and grind on my dick then I will. I don't have to explain myself to you, Thirty-Four," he drawls. This version of Aeron? Yeah, I fucking hate him.

“Good for you,” I grind out as Tucker walks toward me and takes my hand. “What are you doing?” I shouldn’t snap at him, but I can’t seem to help it.

“If Aeron wants to be a dick to you, then I’ll just have to make sure you have fun tonight,” he says as he leads me over to the pool table and stares down at the guy he was playing against, until he hightails it out of the room.

“Tom, be a pal and lock the door.” He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he grips my hips, and lifts me onto the pool table.

“Don’t speak, Tiny One,” he says as his fingers start to slowly undo the buttons of my dress.

My eyes flash to Tom, who is leaning against the door and watching the show, while Aeron sits in his chair with his eyes closed and the girl now grinding herself against him. My rage is still boiling just below the surface as Tucker undoes the last button and slides my dress down across my arms.

“Lay down,” he says it through a thick voice as I do as I’m told, and he picks a bottle up from the floor. Tequila.

He smirks at me as he unscrews the cap and takes a swig before lowering the neck to my belly button and pours the cool liquid into it. He licks his lips before he lowers his head and laps up every drop with his tongue. A moan slips free as he pours it over my chest and down the center of my body, before following the trail with his tongue. Leaving me sticky, wet, and so turned on, I think I may blow if he even gets close to my sweet spot.

I look over at Tom once more and his eyes are hooded as he watches Tucker drink from me, and his look only heats further as he slides my bikini bottoms down my legs. I close my eyes, I can’t bring myself to watch him watch me any longer. *I’m not brave enough for that.* I feel more liquid being poured over me before a mouth closes over my clit, and my back arches off the table before a loud crash fills the air. I jolt up to find Tucker sprawled on the floor, and a furious-looking Aeron standing over him.

“She’s my girl,” he shouts, his face growing redder by the second.

“You don’t want her, not if you’re going to sit there and get a lap dance from a walking STD,” he replies with a smirk, as he picks himself up off the floor.

“I thought I could do what I want,” Aeron says as his hands shake, and I’m not wasting any time to put my dress back on, as I do the buttons up with quivering hands.

“Then release her. Let someone else claim her, or do the right thing and

just fucking be with her when she's in the room. Because this kind of jealousy wouldn't happen if you were only doing this because of fucking Emmet," Tucker shouts before he retrieves the bottle, and takes another swig before throwing the bottle at the wall.

"It doesn't matter. He's got me by the balls, and he knows it," he screams back before walking over to the girl and pushing her out of the door before slamming it closed and relocking it.

"Find a way to do it without him. It's about time you did something for you. Because you wanted to do it," comes from Tom as he walks over to me and helps me off the table. "You two can sort yourselves out, I'll make sure Moonbeam gets back safe. Don't bother coming back until you've calmed down," he says before leading me out, and I cannot wait to get back to my room and say "screw you" to this day.

THREE AM. who the fuck in their right mind wakes someone up at that time? Cracking my eyes open feels impossible, but I have little of a choice as Aeron gets louder.

"Go away, I'm sleeping," I mumble and a laugh sounds before an arm wraps around my waist, and pulls me against a warm, hard body.

"I'm sorry, Luna. I'm so fucked in the head, but you didn't deserve that. I won't do it in front of you again." His words don't make me feel good. All they do is tell me he'll definitely be getting some.

"You don't owe me anything, Aeron, but please don't do them in the same room. I know I don't have any right to tell you not to, but p-p-please." I'm suddenly on my back and I can feel him hovering over me.

I open my eyes to look at him, and there's something so raw in his eyes, I can't push the breath out of my lungs. His eyes drop to my lips before returning to my eyes.

"I don't want to fuck anyone but you right now, Luna. One day soon, I will bury myself to the hilt within you, and I will swallow up every moan you have to give. I can't wait to feel that tight little pussy of yours exploding around me and milking my cock. Believe me, it will happen. Also, you're right. I don't owe you anything, but I find myself being drawn to you and no matter how hard I fight it, it just keeps happening." He looks at my mouth

one last time, before dropping his head to my neck and trailing scorching kisses up and down the column of my throat.

I don't think I'll ever understand him. He trails his hands down my sides as mine thread through his hair and I hold his head in place. One of these days, I don't doubt that Aeron will do exactly as he says, but I don't think he'll be the one I give myself to. Although, I'm not sure who it will be yet. *They keep changing their cards the minute I think I have them figured out.*

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SOME JOKES AREN'T FUNNY

IT'S BEEN two weeks since the club and we've swum, gone to the movies, and even been ice skating. We also never seem to socialize all at once, which means I've been able to avoid Shane, which has been an immense relief to me. That guy scares the living daylights out of me.

Today, we're having another barbecue, and a lot of the parents are going to be here, including Emmet's, or at least his mother. I can't help but wonder if she's as bad as Sir or if she has a shred of decency left within her. Hopefully, I'll be able to avoid her like I have her son, but I can't see myself being that lucky.

I'm in the bathroom getting ready when the door clicks open, and I don't see the point in looking when it's only going to be Aeron.

"Hello, my Star." The sinfully dark voice of Emmet has my back going ramrod straight as I pull my hair back into a loose ponytail before I slowly turn around to face him.

"Emmet, what are you d-d-doing in h-here?" I ask, nerves filling me at the fact that I am well and truly alone with him, and no one knows.

"I was wondering if you would take a walk with me along the beach? I was hoping if I asked, then you may not be so quick to refuse." His voice screams with sincerity, but I don't know if I can trust it.

"It doesn't feel right being alone with you, Emmet. Besides, I still can't forgive you for the whole Liam thing. You tricked me and I hate to admit it, but you hurt me and I still don't know why." I want to drop my eyes, but I don't want to show any weakness or even any more of myself to this man.

"If you walk with me, I'll tell you why I made you a Zero."

My mouth drops open, and I run through my options before giving a quick nod of my head. *How can I possibly refuse?*

He offers me the crook of his arm, and I place my hand on it before he leads me out and down through the house. I can feel the stares coming from those who are already down here, but I don't acknowledge them as we step outside and walk down to the beach.

We slip our shoes off and carry them as we walk barefoot on the sand, close enough that the waves lap at our feet every time they come in.

We're not saying anything and I'm reluctant to admit it's nice to walk with him, I can listen to the ocean and the seagulls flying high above, and feel the sun kissing my skin. I'm wearing booty shorts and a cotton cami, and enough sun block to cover a family of four. He's wearing a pair of board shorts and a fitted tank. I can't help but appreciate the way he looks, but as I've said before, looks are meaningless if they're not backed up by a personality that shines above it all.

"Do you ever miss me, Luna?" he asks suddenly, breaking me free of my thoughts and startling me enough, that I stop walking for a moment and just stand here to look up at him.

"I miss the person I thought I knew, but he never really existed. Did he?" I don't know if I want him to say yes or no. A no will be easier for me to let go of the pesky emotions that arise every time I look at him, but a part of me wants to believe that Liam was the real version. That the Prince is just a persona he feels he has to adopt to survive in the world he was born into.

"I am Liam, at least that's one side of me. I have many faces, but I've yet to meet a person who can handle every one of them. I know you think I deceived you, and I did, but it was real to me, Luna." He looks and sounds so vulnerable, but I won't allow him to suck me back in.

"Why did you do it? You warned me off you so many times. You even took me to your room and revealed the file you had created on me. None of it makes any sense, so why bother? Was it even worth it?" Why do I find it so easy to speak to him? Maybe it's because right now he reminds me of the guy I was falling for. The guy I may have refused Cole for, if I'd had the time to fall for him completely. If he hadn't ruined the way I saw him irrevocably.

"I wanted to know the person you were. Honestly, it shouldn't have gone as far as it did. The thing is, the more time I spent with you, the more I wanted to be Liam. I knew it couldn't last, but I thought if you liked Liam enough, then the truth wouldn't have mattered in the end."

“That’s ridiculous. How could I ever be okay with something like that?” My hand falls from the crook of his arm and I start to walk again. Mainly because I know I shouldn’t have said that. *What is wrong with me?*

“I don’t know, I don’t think the same way others do. I’m not conventional and I do things differently. I wanted to test you and I did, the problem was it made me want you more. I already knew I couldn’t be the one to fuck you for the first time, but I planned on being the last Harkwright to have you. I don’t know what I feel for you, maybe it is an obsession like everyone else thinks, but I’m determined to find out. If it is, then it will vanish once I’ve had you, and I can find another woman to hold my attention for a while.” He sounds so unaffected, like we’re discussing the weather. *Who the fuck is this guy?*

“Why did you make me a Zero?”

“You could have been in the top ten straight away, but your deception had most of the adults refusing you entry. Except for my father. He was as curious about you as I was. The minute I saw your face, I knew I had to meet you, I had to have you. So, I made you a Zero, and decided to find out just how much of a liar you truly were. The thing is, you are so fucking honest, it became clear that you truly didn’t know anything about your legacy. It’s amazing how little you truly know about yourself.” He shakes his head at me, and I am just as confused as I was before. “I wondered if you would have the strength to make it into the ranks and then you saved Maddox, and I realized that not only are you honest, you’re also decent. It’s a weird concept for us Harkwrights, and it only piqued my curiosity even more.”

“Both you and your father have called me a legacy now, but I still don’t know what you mean,” I say, only just refraining from stomping my feet through frustration.

“I want to see if you can figure it out for yourself first. It’s no fun if I give all the secrets away,” he says and I wonder which version of him said that.

“You said I can choose who I give myself to, and that you don’t want to be my first. If that’s the case, why can’t Aeron touch me? He claimed me, so surely he can do whatever he wants to my body.” I watch as his jaw ticks and his eyes narrow. He breathes more deeply before he grips my hand and starts walking faster, dragging me further down the beach.

He doesn’t stop until we come across a hut, and he pulls me around to the side of it and slams me against the wall. The air whooshes out of me under the force, and my back aches slightly from the impact. One of his hands is resting on my collarbone, close enough to my neck that I can’t help but recall

Emily's tale of when he took her to his room. His other hand grips my ponytail in a tight grip as he pulls my head back until it tilts up and exposes my neck.

"I know what I've said, my Star. It doesn't mean that my body doesn't burn and my vision doesn't turn red every time I think about one of those fuckers putting their hands on you. I can't be with you until you've experienced more, and I know I said you could choose, but that doesn't mean I want it to be Aeron." His jaw is growing impossibly hard, and I keep expecting to see steam shooting out of his ears. "The idea of him touching you sends me into a blinding rage, and I can't handle that. If he sinks inside you, he may never let you go, and then I'll never get to claim you for myself. Because believe me, Luna, once I claim you, I will not relinquish my claim for anyone."

I swallow hard as I look into his eyes, I can't find any hint of my guy. This is one hundred percent Emmet, and I don't know what to make of it.

"You are mine, Star. Let me remind you of that." His mouth connects with mine, hard. His lips are bruising, and his kiss is scorching as his tongue delves into my mouth and takes full control.

My hands slide up his top and claw down his back, no doubt leaving marks in their wake. He growls into my mouth as he pulls harder on my hair, sending pain shooting through my skull, but it only adds to the excitement that the kiss is awakening in me. His teeth join in the game as he pulls my bottom lip into his mouth, biting down on my lip before licking the sting away. Over and over again he does this, and I can't contain my moans or the way my body seems to move into his reactively.

He breaks the kiss and slides a hand down over my chest, across my stomach, and into the waistband of my shorts. His hand dips into my panties, and my teeth sink into my bottom lip as he runs a finger through my folds before pulling it back out and sucking my excitement off.

"Your body doesn't lie. You might not be willing to admit you belong to me, but your body already knows. This is only the beginning, Star. I hope you're ready."

I JOIN Aeron the moment I get back. He slides his arm around my waist, and I

don't even stop myself from stepping closer into him. He looks at me with a question in his eyes, but I can't bring myself to say anything. I don't belong to Emmet and I refuse to let that change, but I don't know how to convince him of that. *Maybe I should just fuck him and then he can move on to his next obsession.* Maybe it will be easier if I just give in and give myself to whoever is willing to take it, but could I live with myself after?

Aeron tenses beside me, and I follow his gaze to see a woman immaculately dressed, but her style is a few years too young for her to effectively pull it off. Add that to the fact that it looks as though she owns shares in all the Botox companies, and she's definitely not my kind of people. I don't like this judgmental person I've become, but she's a Harkwright, so maybe I can forgive myself just this once.

"Aeron, darling. This must be your little claimer, how cute. I do hope you aren't planning on only having her though. You should aim higher if you're looking for something more long term," she says as she looks down her nose at me. *What a bitch.*

"Mother, you needn't concern yourself with what I do within the Academy. I'll be sure not to cause you any further embarrassment," he replies coolly, and the air has dropped a few degrees, just from the ice in his tone.

"Now that would be a pleasant change, don't forget that I require you to come to New York in a few months. I'd suggest you bring a 'toy' with you to keep you occupied, and relieve all this stress you seem to carry." I don't like the way she looks at me as she says 'toy'.

"I won't forget," he replies bitterly, and she pats him twice on the cheek before tottering away on her ridiculous high heel.

"Are you okay?" I ask, looking up at him through my lashes, and I watch as he squeezes his eyes closed tight for a few moments before opening them to look at me.

"Not really, but I will be," he replies and I don't like the dark, haunted look that now fills his eyes. I want to help him feel better.

Although that thought gets moved to the side for a moment, when a flash of white passes in my peripheral. I spin around to search for the cause, when my eyes land on the back of a woman with the same color hair that I have. I can't seem to form a cohesive thought as I take her in. Our body shapes even appear similar, although I can't be certain unless she turns around.

"Come on, Little Zero, I need something a little stronger," he declares as

he tightens his arm and steers me away. I can't take my eyes off the woman, as I silently plead for her to turn around and look at me. She doesn't though, and we soon disappear inside the house.

He leads me down a set of stairs leading into the basement, but I guess they have turned it into some kind of den. Sam is here with Thirty-Eight, I guess Caitlyn didn't make the cut. *I wonder if she cares.* Daria is sitting next to Bradley, but her shoulders are pulled up tight and her fingers seem to dig into her palms. He's sitting there gazing at his phone. Jake is with April/Erin - *I really need to find out what her name is* - and Scott must have brought One with him because she's doing everything but fucking him right now. Surely he can't enjoy being pawed at like that?

"Your other guys aren't down here yet. No doubt scouting around for some girl to help pass the time." He chuckles darkly while dropping onto a loveseat, and pulling me down onto his lap.

He doesn't waste any time in pulling out his joint and sparking up. The smoke is thick as it clouds around us, and I can't help the coughs it brings out in me.

"Your go, Little Zero. I think you've run out of passes where I'm concerned." His eyes are blazing as he holds it out to me and everything is screaming at me to refuse. Even though I can't.

My hands are shaking as I take it from him, and my eyes are tearing up as I bring it to my lips and take a drag. I all but swallow the smoke down, which wastes no time in choking me, and Aeron lazily pats me on the back until it passes. My tears slide down my cheeks as I pass it back to him, and stare at a blank wall.

I can hear as he takes another drag, and a few moments pass before he releases his breath and, to my shame, passes it to me again. He keeps a hold of it this time, and places it against my lips, I take another drag and release it with a shorter coughing episode this time around. *It doesn't matter how much it makes me cough, right now, I really fucking hate him.*

"Why is your face wet?" He asks as he turns my head so I'm facing him, and it's taking all my energy to even meet his eyes. "Shit, are you crying?" He strokes his fingers down my face, and I can't help but flinch away from his touch.

"I'm an asshole, Luna. I'm going to hurt you so fucking much before I let you go," he whispers in my ear before taking another drag. However, instead of blowing it out, he captures my mouth in a slow and surprisingly gentle

kiss.

I don't want to return it, but his tongue still parts my lips and before I know it, he's passing the smoke to me, but not once breaking the kiss. By the time he pulls away, everything feels... different.

He pulls me around so my back is to his chest, my knees hanging over his spread thighs, and my head is resting back on his shoulder. I still feel sad and angry with Aeron, but I'm struggling to care about that right now. I can't help but lift my hand up and watch as it moves, it's so slow and that seems so funny to me right now. I can't help but start giggling as I touch my hand but don't feel it, before realizing I touched Aeron's instead.

I can hear him chuckling behind me and it's such a pretty sound, *Aeron is so pretty.*

"I think I prefer sexy," he says, and it turns my giggles into full-blown laughter. *He's so random.*

"What's got into her?" Tom asks, appearing out of nowhere, and I can't help but peer up at him.

I like his red hair. It's so bright and I really want to touch it.

"Moonbeam, are you feeling okay?" he asks, crouching in front of me and steering my head off Aeron's shoulder so I'm leaning forward. Only I don't seem to have much control of my body as I tilt too far and end up falling into Tom until we're both lying on the floor.

My ribs are hurting from the force of my laughter, and he's just staring at me before a pair of hands guide me up and back onto Aeron's lap. Tom climbs back to his feet before returning to us and placing his hand on my chin, he's so close right now.

He's almost close enough to touch. I push my hand out and bop him on the nose. *It's like I really touched him.*

"For crying out loud, I think we should get her back to your room," Tom says, while narrowing his eyes at Aeron, as his hands slide up my top, his fingertips dancing across my stomach.

Aww, Sunbeam, doesn't look happy. Maybe he needs to be stroked like Aeron is stroking me. I mean, it sure makes me happy.

"Shit, yeah, maybe you're right. Come on, Sunbeam, let's get her up there." Aeron slides me off his lap and Tom takes me in his arms and starts carrying me off.

Aeron called him Sunbeam. How does he know what I'm thinking? Ooh, can he read minds?

“She really has no idea she’s saying all of this out loud,” Tom says as he shakes his head with a blinding smile on his face.

I can’t stop my hand from rising to trace the planes of his face, his eyes meet mine, and I can’t look away.

I NEVER WANT to get high again, and I can’t help but wonder just how badly I embarrassed myself. The only problem is, Aeron and Tom won’t say anything about it. It’s as though it never happened, but I have a feeling that I said something once we got back to our room, because things have been different. It’s been a week since Aeron made me smoke pot, and I keep finding him staring at me as though I’m a mystery. He hasn’t tried to touch me at all, and whenever Tom comes in the room, he leads me somewhere else.

What the fuck happened when we went back to the room?

“Tiny One? What are you doing down on the beach by yourself?” Tucker asks, coming to stand next to me as I watch the waves, and the boats moving on the horizon.

“Aeron had to go and see his mom, and I just felt like being alone.”

“Fair enough, I’ll leave you to it then,” he says, and I don’t know why I turn around to look at him, but I don’t think I want him to go.

“You can stay, if you want to. I can be alone with you here,” I say like a moron, and a smile twitches at his lips.

“I’m questioning if you know what being alone means, but I will stay. I’ve had enough of this place already, and I don’t think I’ll be sticking it out for an entire month.”

“Why didn’t you bring anyone with you?” I ask, keeping my eyes on the ocean instead of where they keep wanting to go.

“If I brought a girl here, she would have stayed in my room, and I won’t sleep next to anyone. Fucking is one thing, but sleeping next to a girl, even kissing one, is more intimate than I’m willing to be. There’s a reason most of us fuck from behind or look anywhere but at the girl, we just don’t care enough.” His words leave me unsettled but it also makes me wonder why Tom and Emmet have both kissed me. *Maybe they don’t have the same issue with kissing like Tucker seems to have.*

“I think I’d prefer it like that too, emotions don’t need to be brought into it,” I reply, and I mean every word.

“You’re a smart girl, Luna. Although, I have to ask... do you think I’m pretty too?” He’s full on grinning as I turn to face him head on, and I slap my palm against my face as I shake my head. *How many people know?*

“I was high, okay? I can not be held responsible for what I said.” It sounds weak even to my own ears, but I’m going to stand by it.

“No, you just didn’t have a filter. I’m sorry I missed it, I would give a lot of money to find out what you truly think of me.” His eyes are sparkling and I can’t tear myself away.

“What do you mean?”

“You really don’t remember what happened after the den, do you? Damn, I think the guys believe you are just playing dumb. This is so much better.” He’s almost gleeful as he rubs his hands together.

“I have no idea what happened, will you tell me? Please.” His eyes soften at my words and his smile turns gentle as he takes one of my hands and strokes his thumb across my palm.

“As far as I can tell, you have no problems cussing when you’re high. You told Aeron you think he’s a selfish bastard for making you smoke, but you still wanted to feel his fingers and mouth on every inch of your body.” My cheeks are flaming at his words and I want to call him a liar, but I don’t think he’s making this up. “Then, you started telling Tom you hated how much you enjoyed being kissed by him, and if he wasn’t a Harkwright, you could probably even like him. Then, you started mumbling something about stupid boys who do not understand what they are doing, and how you wished you really could just hate us all.”

“Okay, well, that’s pretty mortifying. But it doesn’t explain why Aeron is avoiding Tom like the plague.”

“Trust me, it does.” He releases my hand and grips my shoulders, bringing his nose level to mine. “Tom doesn’t kiss *any* girl. So, the fact he kissed you is screaming volumes at Aeron, and I don’t think he likes how much it’s bothering him. You’re supposed to be nothing more than a task to him, but the lines keep getting blurred. He wants you, Luna, but he can’t have you, and he can’t allow himself to keep wanting you.” His eyes are burning into mine and I can’t help but wonder if he’s only talking about Aeron now.

“I hate how much power Emmet holds over everyone.” It falls free and I don’t regret it. For some reason, I feel as though I can speak my mind around

Tucker. That's a dangerous way to feel.

"It would be better if people would stop giving him more. Maybe they should take more notice of you, Tiny One. You don't seem to give him any power."

Oh, how wrong you are, Tucker. How wrong you are.

I STAY by the sea for a little while longer before I head back up to the house, I'm near the patio doors when I hear shouting coming from around the pool area. *Why they even need a pool is beyond me. Fucking rich people.*

I walk around to see Shane pushing Maddox into the water, and I don't miss the blood pooling from his nose as he hits the water and falls under. I can't stop myself from hurrying over, even though it's the last thing I should do. Shane drops into the water, followed by Ashley - another of the Harkwright men - when he shoots him a look.

I make it to the pool edge as Maddox resurfaces, and Shane wastes no time in making his way to him, a deadly look in his eyes that is freezing me to my core.

"No," I scream as he punches him in the face before he grabs his shoulders and forces his head beneath the water. Ashley places his hands on Maddox's head and helps to keep him under.

"Let him go," I scream, as he thrashes beneath the water, trying his hardest to get out.

"Shut her up," Shane barks out as an arm comes around my chest, and a hand comes over my mouth.

"Keep still, Snow. Believe me when I say you'd rather have my hands on you than Shane's," Scott whispers in my ear.

I don't give a fuck what he thinks, I won't just stand here and let them kill him. I relax against him until his arm loosens, and then I pull forward enough to make us stumble closer to the pool edge.

"Stay still," he growls as I bite down on his palm. He lets me go before backhanding me across the face.

Stars float in front of my eyes as he forces me down onto my knees. He uses one hand on my shoulder to keep me held down, and another on my throat as he forces me to watch. Tight enough that I can't get a word out, but

loose enough that I can still get a little air into my system.

Maddox is moving slower now, and I cry out one more time as the sound of footsteps fills my ears. Barely a minute passes before Tom jumps into the pool. Ashley quickly lets go of Maddox and swims to the edge, but Shane doesn't relent until Tom sends his fist flying into his jaw. His head snaps up as he lets go of Maddox and it gives Tom enough time to help him get to the surface, and then he guides him to the edge.

"Help me get him out," he orders Ashley, and surprisingly, he does as Tom orders.

"What the fuck is going on? Get off her," comes from Tucker as he pulls Scott off me, and helps me to my feet.

"What were you thinking?" Aeron seethes, and I guess he must have arrived with Tucker.

"It was just a joke," Scott has the audacity to claim as he smirks at me.

"Jokes are only funny until someone gets hurt," Aeron says, as he shoves Scott and sends him falling into the pool.

He resurfaces only moments later, nowhere near under long enough considering what he just helped the others do to Maddox.

He looks up at us, smirking. "Actually, I think you'll find that's what makes a joke even better." He glides through the water before climbing out, and he doesn't even look back.

Not at Maddox who is puking up pool water, not at me who has his hands marked across my body or Aeron who looks as though he's one move away from killing everyone who had a part to play in this.

I thought last year had been rough. I guess I really haven't seen anything yet.

IT'S JUST ANOTHER NUMBER

It's no surprise they cut the retreat short after what happened to Maddox. Not that they did anything about it. It's disgusting how little they value their own family.

My shoulder is still sore from where Scott held me down and dug his fingers into me, but at least I'm okay. Maddox has closed himself off from everyone. I wish I could help him, but he won't let me, and I can't make him.

I step into the Academy to be met with more stares than I can handle. So much hate is being aimed at me from the higher numbers, and I can't fathom why. What could I have possibly done this time? *I haven't even been here.*

"I hope you're happy, you conniving little bitch," says Five as she storms up to me, and shoves her hands into my shoulders.

"What did I do?"

"As if you don't know. You can play innocent all you want, but it will only get you so far. You won't get half as much attention when they realize what you're really like. Just another two-bit whore out for herself." Her hand lashes out, but it's caught mid-air before she can connect with my face.

"Watch it, or you'll lose more than just your number," Emmet says with deadly intent, and his tone sends chills down my spine. But it also calls to somewhere deep inside of me that I do not want to acknowledge.

"It isn't fair, I worked hard for my place," she sobs as her eyes fill with tears, but I'm not buying it for a second. She may be able to put on the waterworks at will, but she's not a good enough actress to pull it off.

"If you were looking for fair, then you've come to the wrong place. Don't forget what she did to Four, I would do a lot worse than that," he promises,

and I watch as she winces and her eyes shoot to his hand still gripping her wrist.

“There’s an assembly, I suggest you run along,” he moves his lips to her ear and although I can’t hear what he whispers, her face paling tells me that it isn’t anything good.

“Thirty-Four, with me,” he says and just this once, I don’t think I’ll argue with him over it.

I walk up to his side as he turns around and heads for the stairs. I guess we’re not going to the assembly just yet. The idea of turning up late has my stomach twisting, but what choice do I have?

He leads me down the north wing and we don’t stop until we make it to his room. I don’t feel right going in there. I don’t trust this version of him, and there’s this darkness shadowing him right now that is keeping me on edge.

He pushes on the door and holds his hand out. I guess I’m going first. *Oh, fuck me sideways, I am royally screwed.*

I take a deep breath and step into the room where Liam brought me to further the charade where I told him I wouldn’t judge the Prince when I didn’t even know him. I still don’t, but I have been judging him. *Haven’t I?*

I hear the door click shut behind me before the hairs on my neck rise, and I know he’s close behind me. I’m sure if I stretch my arm back, I’ll brush against him, so I lock my arms to my sides to stop that from happening.

A fingertip brushes down the back of my bare neck and a full body shiver courses through me. A deep chuckle fills the air as he steps around me, his finger not breaking contact. Sliding around the side of my neck until it comes to rest on one side of my throat, and his thumb on the other.

“Things are going to get even harder for you now, my Star. Your new number is about to be announced and a lot of people are going to be angered by it. Say the word and I’ll protect you from them.” His voice washes over me, it’s almost hypnotic and I can feel myself wanting to sag against him. *I knew I shouldn’t have come in here. What is it with me and damn voices?*

“What if I d-d-did? W-what would b-be the c-cost?”

“I love how you think. You don’t see it yet, but we really are perfect for each other. You take my protection and all you have to do is give me everything you have. No more refusing me, denying what your body wants, what you want.” I can’t help my trembling as he drags his hand down between my breasts, and further still until he reaches my lower stomach.

“You want me as much as I want you, stop fighting it, Luna. Give in to your desire.” He brings his mouth close to mine, and I squeeze my eyes closed.

“Open your eyes, Luna.” I hate that they spring open at his words, and his hand slides down to my thigh, lifting my skirt until he’s cupping me through my panties. “Give in to me.” His mouth is mere millimeters away from me when the door handle turns, and I jump back.

He bares his teeth at the intruder and all Aeron does is wink before he walks up to me, pulls me into his arms, and cups my ass. He massages me as he slips his thigh between my legs, and rubs it against me. A stuttered breath escapes me and I don’t miss the way he looks at Emmet with the biggest shit-eating grin I’ve ever seen from him.

“Stop trying to get her to ride your leg. We have ten minutes before we need to get to the assembly. Let’s not waste it,” comes from Tucker, as he and Tom step into the room and close the door behind them.

“W-what’s going on? What a-a...”

“Don’t worry, Little Zero, it will all make sense in a minute,” Aeron says, as he pulls his leg free and tucks me under his arm.

“Come on then, Emmet, get on with it. I’d rather not be in here for longer than I need to be,” Tucker says as he pulls his damn phone out again. *It’s like he’s obsessed with the fucking thing.*

“Can’t you stay off that damned thing for a fucking second? It isn’t going to kill you,” Aeron says, and it sounds rather harsh coming from him. *He seems so different this year.*

“For crying out loud. Look, Moonbeam, we’re here to enlighten you about a ‘situation’ that has arisen. Just try to keep an open mind, okay?” Tom says and I nod my head. It’s not like there’s anything else I can do.

Emmet is glaring daggers at Aeron and he’s just smirking back as he places his hands on my stomach, pulling my top up so we’re skin to skin.

“Sir has taken an interest in you, one that isn’t sitting well with any of us. Especially his golden boy,” says Tucker as he looks at Emmet.

“He’s keen to have you attend all the outside functions, so you haven’t just been made Ten like most would have expected.” He comes closer as his eyes fix onto mine, and I’m trying to slow my breathing as my heart beats rapidly in my chest. “You’re now Five, the number that belonged to the girl who pushed you downstairs. She thought she would take Four, seeing as you beat the shit out of the previous owner of that number, but she didn’t.”

“W-why n-n-not?”

“Because Sir wants it left open, he wants to cause a little chaos and see who will claim it. That’s his official reason. Honestly, he wants you to take it.”

“No, he wants her to become One and to be claimed by his son. Then she’ll be even more available to him,” comes from Aeron as my hairs stand on end, and goosebumps break out across me.

“Why does he care what number I am or who I’m joined to?” I’m not entirely sure what I’m feeling, but a ball is forming in my stomach and I feel as though I’m on the verge of puking my guts up. *What am I saying? I know how I feel, I’m fucking terrified.*

“Find out how you’re a legacy and then we’ll talk,” comes from Emmet, and I take my eyes off Tucker to look at him instead.

“Okay, I’m sure it should be obvious to me, but I’m not connecting the dots. So, how am I supposed to find out?” I step away from Aeron and walk up to Emmet, not thinking as I jab my finger in his chest.

The room is deathly quiet and I hold still as his fingers circle my wrist, and he holds my hand against his chest. He steps even closer, the tips of our shoes touching, and I can’t take my eyes off his. *No matter how hard I try.*

“You’ve got some balls on you, Star. I don’t know which version of you excites me more. Innocent and meek or feisty and strong. I could devour you and I can guarantee you’ll never want me to stop.” His voice is low and gravelly and my brain has vacated the premise.

“Enough!” shouts Tucker as he grips the sides of my arms and pulls me away, Emmet refuses to let go for a moment and my wrist is tender when he finally does. “Just give her the fucking file so we can get this over with. You want her to figure it out, then give her a helping hand.”

He releases me and storms over to Emmet’s bedside cabinet before pulling out the manila envelope and placing it in my hand. I can see the Prince grinding his teeth as his jaw works furiously, but his dislike will not stop me from taking it. *I guess I didn’t see enough last time.*

Honestly, no matter what I say to them, I think I know who makes me a legacy. I mean, of course I do. I may not be book smart, but I’m not an idiot. The thing no one seems to realize, I don’t give a damn about my past or that of my birth mom. I don’t want to know anything about my blood family, so why can’t they just let it be? It takes all my effort to not wonder about it, and he’s only making it harder.

Aeron steers me toward the door, and his hand hovers over the handle as

Emmet's voice cuts through the tension-filled silence. "I may enjoy your feisty nature, Star. But I wouldn't advise you to pull a stunt like that again."

I look over my shoulder at him and his stare is enough of a deterrent; I think the safest thing to do is to go out quietly.

ENTERING the hall for the assembly feels almost surreal, so many heads have turned to face us. I really do not want to enter with the guys, but they don't really care what I want. *Why should they?* I shouldn't feel resentful, but I can't help how I feel. I mean, Emmet isn't with us, but fuck knows where he's disappeared to. *Stop worrying about Emmet.*

Even my alter ego is tired of me, and the school year hasn't even started. Yeah, I think I'm off to a great start.

"You're with me," Aeron whispers in my ear before he nibbles on my neck and grips my hip, leading me onto the stage.

At least Daria is up here, but she looks as uncomfortable as I feel. Bradley is beside her, but even though his arm is around her shoulders, it looks... limp. I hope they're okay. Those two give me hope that love can be found in the strangest places. *Like a hospital, for instance, right?*

"Are you okay?" D asks, as I take my seat, Aeron may be in between us but that won't make me ignore her.

"Not exactly enjoying being up here, but other than that, I'm surviving," I reply, hugging the envelope to my chest, before slipping it onto my seat, and sitting down on it.

"I know. Apparently, there's a big announcement, and it's better for us if we're up here. We'll be okay, homegirl," she says with a smile before leaning into Bradley, and he drops a kiss onto her forehead.

A pair of heels start clicking on the floor before the woman who first showed me to my room when I was made a Zero takes the stage. Miss Martin? Where the hell is Ms. Vanderbilt?

"What's going on?" I whisper to Aeron but he just shakes his head, his eyes are narrow and he scrunches his face up. He looks as confused by this as I am.

"Something's wrong," Tom says from next to Aeron, and Emmet chooses this moment to make an appearance and takes his seat at the end of the row.

Miss Martins bats her eyes at him, and she has a full on starry-eyed expression going on. I also don't miss the way she licks her lips. It isn't bothering me. *Nope, not at all...*

"Ms. Vanderbilt is unavailable this afternoon, so I will make the announcements. As you are aware, an incident took place during the ball where a girl was unfortunately injured. Since then, we have put extra measures in place to prevent it from happening again." She looks around at us, and I can't help the snort that escapes me. My hand is over my mouth quicker than I can blink.

"How dare you interrupt me? Are you stupid enough to have forgotten the rules that are implemented during an assembly?" Her eyes are burning into me and my palms are growing clammy as my knee bobs frantically. *I am such an idiot.*

I keep my mouth squeezed shut as I shake my head vigorously.

"You need to show me some respect, you insolent child. I hope you've enjoyed your time here because you'll be gone by tomorrow." She's smirking, and I can feel myself deflating.

"She won't be going anywhere, you two-bit whore. Make your announcement before I cut your tongue out and shove it down your throat. Don't forget your place, Crystal, and you needn't worry if she knows hers." Shit. Emmet sounds like he means it. Her chest is moving rapidly, and I think she believes him too.

"Y-yes, sir," she stutters, and he turns his stare onto me instead.

"Thirty-Four will now from this point on be known as Five, and it will move the previous Five to Twenty-One. However, the previous Five will now live in Thirty-Four's room and vice versa."

"Bullshit, if I'm Twenty-One, I should be in with the Twenties," she shouts from the crowd, and I don't fancy her chances. It isn't as though she has the backing I seem to have gained.

"You will go to the room that has been assigned to you or we will remove you from the premises. I know I may not be Ms. Vanderbilt, but I am not to be taken lightly. I..."

The doors are flung forward, slamming into the wall as one of the workers rushes into the hall and runs toward the stage.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demands, looking down her nose at the gardener.

"It's happened again, we found another... person in the maze," they

reply, and it doesn't take long for everyone to rush out of the hall. We don't even wait to be dismissed.

Daria has a death grip on my hand as she pulls me out into the hallway, the guys are shouting at me to wait but something is screaming at me to get outside and see this person for myself. Before they have time to spin a tale and feed us fables from their hands.

We keep pushing until we make it out of the doors, but there isn't a chance in Hell of us making it to the maze with the crowd that has already gathered. We get as close as we can when a scream pierces the air, and the sound of someone puking soon follows.

"Oh fuck, I can't listen to that," D says, and she looks a little green right now.

"Everyone, move out on the way," comes the booming voice of Tom and everyone moves as one. As space is cleared, it reveals the body. Ms. Vanderbilt, and there's no way they can claim that she'll survive this. *Not if her lifeless eyes are anything to go by.*



WE'RE all ordered to retreat to our rooms and the men disappear to God knows where. Daria takes me to my new room, and it's no surprise to find that they have already moved my stuff in. As though I've always been here, I already feel used to this lack of privacy, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

"Can I stay with you for a little while?" she asks, and I can't miss the way her bottom lip quivers or the wetness in her eyes. As if I'd even think of saying no.

"Of course you can, you don't even need to ask," I reply with a gentle smile. As I lead her to my sofa, I notice just how different this room is to my previous one.

For one, I have a damn kitchenette, more than suitable for my nighttime baking sessions, as long as I can get a hold of some ingredients. My sitting area has the same furniture, but with a bigger TV screen and some sort of console.

I can look at my bedroom later. As long as it has a bed, I'll be happy, and the en suite can wait. D needs me, and I think the best way to help is to find a

way to distract her.

“D, how do you feel about mysteries?”

“Umm, well, I’m no Sherlock Holmes but I do like figuring things out. Although, if it’s about Ms. Vanderbilt, then I’m keeping out of it. I don’t even want to think about that,” she replies as she trembles, and I can’t help but wonder why I’m not reacting in the same way?

I just saw a dead body for fuck’s sake. *Girl, you are so messed up.*

“No, that would defeat the whole point in distracting you,” I say with a weak smile that definitely falls flat.

“Then go for it, what mystery do you have for me, homegirl?”

“The reason I’ve been called a legacy. At least two Harkwrights have said it to me now, and I need to know why.” Her mouth drops at my words, and her eyes are impossibly wide.

“You’re a legacy? Then why the fuck were you made a Zero? Even better, why are you only a Five now? It makes little sense.”

“Emmet said it was because they thought I was being deceptive. I guess they felt I was keeping it from them, but I wasn’t. How was I supposed to know if I was a legacy or not? As for being Five, girl, it’s just a number.” I can’t help the blasé tone or roll of my eyes. I just don’t see what the big deal is.

“You may feel that way, but barely any of the other girls will. They want into the top spots, and they’ll destroy you if they have to. How can you be so unaffected by this? You realize the extra benefit that comes with it, right? And the increased cash prize that you’ll be given come graduation?”

“I’m not.” I blow out a deep breath and decide it’s better to just tell her the truth. I know she’s the one person I can trust, and it’s about time I acted like it. “I don’t want to admit I’m a better number because I’m still waiting for someone to pull the rug out from under my feet. I can’t see myself staying this high up, and I don’t want to get my hopes set on what I could have.” My voice shakes slightly at the end, and she looks at me with soft eyes.

“You still don’t see it, do you? Homegirl, I can’t see anyone kicking you out of the top spot. You know what? Fuck it. Let’s figure this bitch out,” she says with a roll of her shoulders, and with that I open the envelope and spill the contents onto the coffee table.

Daria looks through the photographs, and I go through the letters and documents that have been gathered. My adoption records and my birth certificate. My eyes are drawn to my birth mother’s name and the fact that

my father's isn't listed. I've never wanted to know my birth parents, but the lack of a name piques my curiosity a little. I'm too scared to go down that rabbit hole now, though.

"D, I can't do this. I don't need to know the reason I was adopted, I don't want to know anything about my biological parents either." I already feel defeated, and I can hear it coming through in my voice.

"I don't think you have much of a choice in that, homegirl." I look over at her and her eyes are soft but her mouth is pulled into a frown. "It's because of your mom."

"What do you mean? She hates the Academy, she never would have come here. It has to have been someone else, but who else could it have been?"

"Not your adoptive mama, sweetie, she would never make you a legacy. The Harkwrights don't care about that. They value blood and your mama isn't yours by blood. It might not make a difference to you or me, but it does to them. You're a legacy because of your mom. Luna, your birth mom was an Academy Girl."

UNRAVELLING A MYSTERY

2AM AND I can't sleep. All I can think about is how my mom came here. Does that mean she met my father here? Because if that's the case, then I have to drop out. It would mean I'm related to these guys, and I feel sick just thinking about it.

I can't stop looking at the picture of her, Selene Starr. My birth mom, and the woman who died when I was only four. Nothing more than a distant memory, a fantasy I never wanted. There's a reason I never wanted to know about her, and why I was so set on my mom not telling me anything when she tried to reveal the truth about my adoption. It's because I remember things sometimes, like fragments of a dream that I can't fit together. I know it's of the day she died, I can still remember the fear I felt and the desperation. I can remember looking and calling out to her, begging her to get up and to make everything better. I didn't know she was dead, at least, I didn't know the word, but I could feel I had lost her. I didn't know how to make her better, and to get her to hold me again.

I don't want to know why she died or who was responsible; it doesn't matter. All I remember is the dream of a woman who I think loved me more than anything else, and the people who came and took me away from her. Hours after she had died, I think I screamed when they took her away and then nothing. The house they took me to is barely a memory or the people who looked after me until my mom came along.

Daria took the adoption papers with her. She offered to look into it and I jumped at it. I'd rather it was her than me, I can't handle it. I don't need to know about her death or the pieces I'm missing, I just need to know about her

time here. Despite my feelings, I need to know who my father is, or at least, was.

A noise filters under my doorway and I lie the picture down on my night side table before I slip on my dressing gown and walk over to the door. I rest my ear against the wood and wait to see if anymore noises come from there. I am half expecting Aeron to make an appearance, but I'm not sure how I feel about that. What if we are related? Oh God, all the things they've done and I've enjoyed it too. *How fucked up is that?*

I can hear what sounds like cupboards being opened up, and I don't know what to make of it. I slowly open my door to see a figure hunched over and peering into my fridge.

"W-what a-are you d-d-doing?" I ask, and I watch as Tucker straightens up, before turning around to face me.

It's hard to make out his features with the lights off, but neither of us are making any moves to turn them on. Instead, he slides his hands into his pockets, and rocks back on his heels.

"I thought you'd be asleep."

"Oh, sorry to disturb you. Sure, just come into a girl's room while she's sleeping. That isn't shady or creepy," I say with sarcasm dripping from my tongue.

"You're in the Academy. We can come and go as we please." He sounds so detached and I don't like it. My fingers are itching to hit the light switch so I can see how his face looks.

"No, you can't, only Aeron has that right." It's a stupid thing to say and as arguments go, it's weak.

"Well, I won't tell if you won't." His voice holds a promise I don't have the courage to question.

"Why are you here, Tucker?" I feel so tired, emotionally drained, and I just want to sleep the night away. *If only my mind would shut off.*

"I got you some bits so you can do your baking in the comfort of your room." I hit the switch now and I see a vulnerability in his eyes for a moment before it's gone, and I have to wonder if I imagined it.

"You did that for me? Why?"

"We know you like to go down to the kitchens at night, especially if you've had a stressful day. I would feel better if you didn't do that for a little while, so I thought I would give you a reason not to have to." Be steps a little closer, and my mind is struggling to make sense of his words.

“It’s because of Ms. Vanderbilt, isn’t it? You’re worried that it could happen to someone else. Are you doing this for all the girls?” Why do I ask these ridiculous questions? I’m never going to get a straight answer out of these guys.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Tiny One. I’m just making sure you’re always accessible.” His voice drops lower, and his eyes are filled with unrestrained fury as his hands clench, and he steps even closer.

“I don’t be-believe y-y-you,” I force out as he closes the last few feet separating us. I hate how he towers over me, and I strain my neck to look into his eyes.

“Why should I care what you believe?”

“Because you do... You care.” The realization suddenly hits me, and it’s like a film has been over my eyes, but it’s finally been taken away.

“Don’t be absurd, why would I care about you? You’re delusional,” he says dismissively as he turns around, and my hand shoots out to grab his arm.

He looks over his shoulder at me, his eyes narrow and are spitting fire, but I don’t care. I move around to his front once more, my hands flinch as they fall on his chest, but I let them rest there. He isn’t trying to stop me either.

“The knives, the food. You wouldn’t do that if I was just another number. I don’t know what you feel, but you must care, even just a little. Honestly, I’m glad because right now, I’m terrified. Someone is out there hurting girls, and he’s upped his game to murder.” My voice is getting close to hysterical, and he presses his hand over my mouth to silence me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, no one has been murdered. Nothing happened, Five.” His eyes are hard, but I’m not nervous. For once in my life, I have complete clarity, and I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“Are you kidding me? Someone just died,” I say as I pull his hand away from my mouth. “You can’t just brush that under the table, the police are going to want to know what happened.”

“I will only say this once, Luna. The police will never find out. As far as the Academy is concerned, Ms. Vanderbilt had a heart attack and passed away peacefully in her sleep. It’s a tragic incident but they happen. She isn’t the first person to lose her life, and I doubt she’ll be the last. Nothing happened then, and nothing will happen now. None of you can say a damned thing, and we’re as tied to those rules as you are.” His teeth are clenched and he’s baring them at me right now.

“That’s so messed up. So we’re supposed to just watch as we get picked off one by one?” My voice is growing higher in pitch, no doubt I’ll start cracking glass soon if I’m not careful.

“Nothing will happen to you,” he shouts as his fingers fly into his hair, and he tugs hard.

“You can’t know that.” I shake my head, and I don’t know if I feel more disappointed or dejected. Maybe a mixture of the two.

He pulls his hands out of his hair, grips my shoulders, and lowers his face until our noses are touching.

“You listen to me, Tiny One. Nothing is going to happen to you. Just don’t go out alone and make sure you stay within the Academy building when night sets. Even better, just stay in your room, unless you’re with one of us. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Why do you care?” *Even better, why do I keep asking him this?*

“I don’t know, that’s the only answer I can give you,” he sighs hard, and I’m struck with a sudden urge to do something crazy.

Don’t do it, don’t do it. I’m gonna do it.

I slide my hands around his neck and his eyes flash with something that looks like confusion, and maybe even worry. I wonder if he knows what I’m thinking, if it’s written all over my face for the entire world to see.

I need to stop thinking for once and just do what I want, no more second guessing or wondering if I should. Just this once, I’m going to do it and say fuck it to the consequences.

I grip the back of his head and pull him hard. I guess I’ve taken him by surprise as he stumbles forward and I crash my mouth against his. His eyes widen in shock and he just stands here, staring at me. I guess he won’t kiss me back. He isn’t even moving. I drop a soft kiss against his mouth and a growl reverberates through his chest before his hands are in my hair, and his mouth is moving over mine.

Neither of us are willing to relinquish control as our tongues battle for dominance, twirling and exploring. He’s pulling my hair and I’m pulling his right back, our teeth clashing together as we lose more and more control. Until I’m pushed up against the wall, and his hips are against mine. He groans as I roll mine, and then he pulls away. I can’t help but lean forward, but he’s already too far away, and he gives me one last look before he goes to the door, pulls it open, and leaves me alone. Aching and wanting something that maybe only he can give me.

I FEEL like a zombie as Daria drags me down to the mess hall. She wouldn't even hear of me making something in my room. Can't she let me wallow for a little while longer? I guess not. I guess this is the cost of having a best friend. Yeah, I'm feeling a tad bitchy today, probably from only getting two hours of sleep last night.

"Come on, grumpy. Go grab a seat and I'll get our breakfast," she says, steering me to our table, and I narrow my eyes at her but do as she says.

The minute she walks away, I fold my arms on the table and rest my head on top of them.

"What's the matter, whore? Too many dicks last night?" comes from Shane, and he can get fucked if he thinks I'm going to look up or even acknowledge him.

"Bitch, look at me when I'm talking to you." His hand grips my hair and pulls, and I shoot my head up, narrowing my eyes and baring my teeth at him.

"Screw you," I all but growl at him, and his eyes widen before they fall to slits and the next thing I know my head is being slammed into the table. Stars are pretty much floating around my head, as my vision blacks out for a second.

"You fucking asshole," someone shouts before his hand is ripped out of my hair, sending me toppling backwards out of the chair, and the back of my head ricochets off the ground, leaving pain in its wake.

D is by my side in no time at all, but all I can focus on is the wet feeling coating my face, and running into my eyes until red is shrouding my vision.

"Shit, homegirl. Come on, we need to get you to the center." She sounds worried, and I feel so fucking woozy.

She helps me get to my feet, but I stumble before a set of arms slide under my knees, and I'm picked up bridal style.

"It's okay, I've got her," Tom says as I snuggle into his chest and whimper at the pain it causes to shoot through my skull.

"I'm coming with you. Hopefully, Aeron kills the motherfucker," she says, and then we're moving, and I can feel myself floating off into unconsciousness.

"No, Moonbeam, I need you to stay with me. Come on, talk to me, sweets." He sounds desperate, but I can't think about why without my head

hurting even more.

“I’m tired,” I mumble and his mouth presses down on top of my head.

“I know, but just talk to me. I’ll order it if I have to.”

“Orders, is that all you guys are good for?”

“Damn, she’s bitchy when she’s tired, isn’t she?” he says, and I can hear D snickering from somewhere off to the side of us.

“I like this side of her, it’s entertaining.”

“It’s got nothing on her when she’s high, that was fucking fantastic,” he says with a chuckle that lulls me further.

“I hate that we’re related,” I mumble, and I think my words are bleeding into one.

“What the fuck? Why would you think we’re related?”

“Because my mom came here and I don’t know who my dad is,” I reply, but I don’t hear his response as I fail to stay awake, and finally succumb.

SOMEONE FLASHES a bright light in my eyes and I can’t contain the loud groan as I flutter them open, and come face to face with Cole. *Is he ever away from this place?*

“Five, welcome back. You gave us quite the scare there, but you’re going to be okay,” he says as he helps me to sit up, and my stomach threatens to revolt on me.

“Oh, I don’t feel so good,” I groan, as an arm comes around my shoulders.

“Not surprising after what Shane did. He gave you a fucking concussion. I can’t wait to return the favor, if Aeron hasn’t already done it,” says Tom, and I can’t help but lean into him. I just can’t look at Cole while I do.

“Where is Aeron?” I ask in a weak voice, as he runs a hand up and down the top of my arm.

“I’m not sure. D has gone to find him for me, though. That took some persuading. That girl didn’t want to leave your side,” Tom replies, and a faint smile appears on my face.

“Neither did you,” Cole grumbles as he walks around his desk and starts writing up a prescription. “I’ll get this sorted out for her, but I would recommend she isn’t alone for the rest of the day.”

“Not a problem. I can think of a few ways to keep her busy,” he responds easily, and his words send excitement roaring through me. Even though I don’t think I’m up to anything too exciting right now.

“Tom, could you get me a drink, please?” I ask quietly, and he springs to his feet before heading to the door.

“I’ll be right back,” he says before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

“Fuck, Luna. I was terrified. This place is going to kill you, I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Cole says as he drags his hand through his hair.

“How do you think I feel? I’m not going anywhere, though. I’m seeing this out ‘til the end.”

“I know, I just wish you didn’t have so many enemies in this place and I wouldn’t trust your allies as far as you could throw them. They’re Harkwrights through and through, which means you cannot trust them.”

His words don’t sit right with me. Sure, I’d say it’s true of some of them, but not all. I feel safe with Tom, Tucker, and Maddox. The only thing at risk is my emotions, but I can survive that... I think. *Or at least, I’ll do my best to.*

The door opens before I can reply, and Tom comes back in with a soda, and the smile I’m giving him is definitely genuine.

“I was meaning to say, Five. Your sister has shown some signs of improvement. She spoke a couple weeks back.”

My eyes shoot over to Cole, and I want to slap him for not telling me sooner, but that can wait right now. I’m just so overjoyed, it seems to make me forget all about the pain I’m still in.

“What did she say?”

“She said your name. It’s a great sign, and I had to tell you,” he says with a kind smile and all thoughts of Shane, the murder, and Emmet’s mind games slip away. Thoughts of Poppy replace them instead and hope that she will make a full recovery one day.

I DON’T KNOW what I expected Tom to have planned when we got back to my room, but this was not it. I’m lying on the loveseat with Tom and Aeron

sitting on the floor looking through the Academy records. Just so they can prove to me we are, in fact, not related to one another.

It probably isn't helping that I refuse to let Aeron anywhere near me, and I'm happily surprised because he's respecting my refusal. He doesn't have to, but he is so I don't feel too uncomfortable. *It's nice to see that he isn't a total asshole.*

"Can't you just take our word for it?" Aeron asks, rubbing his face and scowling at me, and I'm biting my bottom lip to keep my smile in.

"Nope, show me proof and then I'll believe you."

"I found it," Tom says smugly as he passes me a photo, and an official-looking document.

"What's this?" I ask, trying to get my eyes to focus on the writing.

"It's the marriage proposal she received when she reached the end of the Academy. She turned it down, Moonbeam. She left the Academy as a free woman. I'm not sure who proposed. The name has been redacted, although that is unusual. If that isn't enough for you, then we could always do a DNA test. But she didn't stay with a Harkwright man, Moonbeam, I promise." Tom sounds so certain, but I don't understand how he can be.

"Hang on, do you know who my dad is?" I ask, sitting forward too fast, and making my head spin.

They share a look that screams guilt, but I can only push them so far. I know this, and it's making frustration well up within me.

"We know the two guys it could be, records show it has to be one of them," Tom replies as he drops the papers down on my coffee table, and sets his eyes onto me.

"Who?"

"Mario or Deacon Cannery. They were twin brothers who worked here during her stay. They left the same time she did, and there was a case where she almost got thrown out when she was accused of sleeping with one of them. No one could prove it, so she got let off. But one of those is your father, Little Zero. Apparently, the one who proposed had someone track her down, and she was found living with one of them. The PI couldn't say which brother it was, because they were identical, but it was enough, and apparently, she was pregnant when he tracked her down. It had already been a year since she left, so it couldn't have been a Harkwright," Aeron says. His hand trails across my thigh, but I barely feel it.

Mario or Deacon, which one of you is my father, and are you still

around?

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TWO PLUS TWO EQUALS FIVE

A WEEK HAS PASSED since I found out what my father's name could be, and for some reason, I've been summoned to the front office. I'm nervous as hell, considering people only seem to get called in there when it's bad news. I can't think of anything I've done, but that doesn't mean I haven't been accused of anything. I seem to be public enemy number one at the moment. Considering there's a killer around, it just proves to me how narrow minded these people really are. Everyone is just out for themselves, and I feel sorry for whoever gets stuck with them when they leave this place.

I take a seat on a chair outside of the office and wait for someone to call me in, I'm surprised when Tom comes to take a seat beside me. That being said, surprise turns to fear when I recall Millie being called in here. What if something has happened to Poppy or my mom?

"Relax, it's good news," he breathes as the door opens and Crystal calls me in, and Tom follows closely on my heels.

"Really, Mr. Harkwright? Your presence isn't required," she says, and he just stares at her until she fidgets, and takes her seat behind the desk.

"You are being offered a weekend pass to leave the Academy. If you accept, you will need to pack a bag and be ready to leave within the hour. Your sister is presenting moments of coherency, and you are being offered the chance to visit her."

"If you say yes, you will have Darius with you and we will require you to stay in a hotel until it is time for you to come back. You can't talk about your time here, Moonbeam, not even in passing with your family," Tom adds on, and I take a moment to think it through, but what is there to think about? As

if I would even dream of turning this down.

“I’ll go pack my things,” I reply, and I don’t wait to see if there’s anymore to be said as I race from the room, and straight up the stairs.

Poppy’s speaking, and I get to see her and my mom? Add that to the fact that Cole is off rotation here, which means I could even see him while I’m away. Could this day get any better?

I don’t waste any time throwing my clothes into a bag, and I love being able to select my comfiest ones. No more pencil skirts and booty shorts. *I can finally be me again.* It doesn’t stop me from putting on my navy, button down dress that Tucker got for me, but it’s one of the few items that I genuinely love, so it at least fits the comfy aspect.

I’m bouncing on my toes as I give D a hug goodbye, and she holds me for longer than necessary. It just makes me laugh.

“It’s only for the weekend, I’ll be back before you know it,” I say.

“I know, but I’m going to miss you,” she snuffles in reply and I squeeze her one last time before pulling back and smiling widely at her. She leans forward quickly and I’m not sure what to do. “We need to talk when you get back.”

“Okay, sure. I’ll see you soon, D, and you know that I’ll miss you too,” I reply and she nods her head before Bradley comes and guides her away.

“Behave, Little Zero. I look forward to our reunion,” Aeron says as he drops his head down to my shoulder, before grazing his teeth up my neck.

“I’m sure,” I reply with a slight smirk as Darius retrieves my bag, and loads it into the blacked out car.

“I guess I’ll see you in a few days,” I say with a small wave, as I take a few backward steps before leaving the Academy, and hurrying down the steps.

“Don’t I get a goodbye?” Emmet asks, stepping in front of me, and I can’t help the little shriek that he brings out in me.

“You scared the life out of me,” I say, clutching my chest as my heart thumps rapidly in my chest.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I didn’t think it m-m-mattered, but n-n-no I didn’t plan on seeking you out. Is that answer enough f-f-for you?” I reply, and he smirks before sliding his fingers across my hip.

“Maybe if you have a good enough time, you’ll come back to me, ready to be mine. I look forward to it,” he says as he drops a kiss on the corner of

my mouth, and leaves me standing here, dumbfounded. That is, until I can shake it off and make it to the car.

I take one last look at the Academy before I climb into the car and release the breath I didn't even realize I was holding. I'm going home for the first time in over a year. *It feels so fucking surreal.*

"Feeling nervous?" Darius asks, as my hands shake while I try to click my seatbelt in place.

"Just a little, it seems so long ago since I saw them last, and I don't know how to feel about it."

"Be happy that you're being given this chance. Just face it one step at a time. It will make it easier to deal with," he says, and I'm surprised by how wise he sounds.

"That's very profound, mountain man," I say back and a smile breaks free on his face before it falls back into a straight line. I have to say, I think I prefer the smile. It makes him look less daunting and intimidating.

"We'll be going straight to the hotel. We are scheduled to go to the hospital first thing tomorrow. We can stay until Monday morning, and then we must head back," he tells me matter-of-factly, and I nod my head trying to take it all in. It's Friday today, which gives me two full days with my family. It's the best thing I've been given since I arrived here, and I will always be thankful to whoever pulled this off for me.

If only I knew who was responsible. I wonder if I ever will.

WE PULL up to the hotel a few hours later, and I'm not surprised by what greets us, or the fact that it has doormen waiting outside the doors to hold them open for the residents. There are even bellhops just inside, ready to take our bags. Darius breezes past them, and bares his teeth when they try to take them from him, and they soon back off. Giving us a wide berth as he checks us in, and then we head off to our room.

The hotel is a five star affair, and it is owned by the Harkwrights, that family owns everything it seems. If I remember correctly, I think I recall reading that he even owns air rights in some parts of America, England, China, and Japan. It's fucking crazy.

"There's a door in the bathroom that leads into my room, just make sure

you lock it before using the bath or anything, so I don't see anything I shouldn't," Darius says as he drops my bag down by the bed.

"I'm sorry you're stuck babysitting me again," I mumble as I stare at the floor. I feel weird having him standing so close to my bed, and I feel like an idiot for feeling this way.

"Don't be. You're nicer than the last girl I had to watch. Besides, if I'm not here then I'll just be waiting around for my next job. At least you're keeping my life interesting."

"Can I ask how you came to work as a bodyguard and glorified babysitter?" Because that's what he is. They may say it's to keep me safe, but I think it's more likely that he's here to make sure I don't do or say anything to breach my contract. They're already down by two girls, I'm sure they don't want to lose anymore.

"It would be better if we don't grow too familiar with one another. I'll leave you to it, and remember to lock the door when you use the bathroom. If you need me, just knock and I'll come, and do not order room service unless I'm here for the delivery," he says before turning around and disappearing through the bathroom, and into his own room.

This is going to be a long night, I flip down onto the bed, and switch the TV on but nothing is appealing to me right now, and I'm nowhere near ready to eat anything. I feel so... alone. I miss D, and I even miss Aeron, which is all kinds of messed up if I think on it for too long. I shouldn't be missing any of the guys, but I am and it isn't just Aeron. I've been missing Tucker ever since I kissed him, but that's mainly because he's been avoiding me. And then there's Tom. Perpetually bored, but he's always been nice to me, or at least the Harkwright version of nice.

Then you have Maddox. He's just avoiding everyone, and I hate it. If I could, I would march over to his room and refuse to leave until he let me in. But I'm not allowed to go to the north wing without one of the guys, and I don't know who would be willing to get me in to see him. Aeron's too selfish to help me with such a task, Tucker is a no go, and I don't know how far Tom's kindness will go. I mean, I could ask Emmet, but he's so possessive and asking for any kind of favor will only leave me indebted to him. He already views me as his; I don't need to give him anymore ammo for his weird little cause.

Nope, not a single one of them is trustworthy enough to reveal just how worried I am about Maddox, and how much he means to me. It could lead to

him getting even more hurt, and I don't think they'd ever understand that my feelings for him come from a deep part inside of me. That although it is utterly platonic, it's just as strong as what I imagine love is. Hang on, did I just think that? I love Cole, so why would I need to imagine anything? Great, now I'm confusing myself.

I shake my head as I get back to my feet and find my comfy clothes before heading into the bathroom, and I triple check to make sure that Darius can't just walk in. That would be beyond mortifying. I can just imagine the look on his face if he walked in on me in the shower. *There wouldn't be an inch of me that would not be red.*

I have a quick shower before changing into something that makes nostalgia run rampant through me, and I quickly get changed before unlocking the door and walking back into my room.

I've got on a pair of cotton shorts that fall mid thigh, and my oversized sweater that falls off one shoulder. I feel like I can suddenly breathe again, but I don't feel how I thought I would. I think I may as well try to eat something at least, so I rap on our connecting door twice before going over to my bed and sit on the edge, and cradle my head within my hands.

"Miss Carter, are you okay?" He asks as his footsteps go quiet, I guess he's met the plush carpet covering the floor.

"I'm fine," I sigh as I run my hand over my face before sitting up, but I can't stop my shoulders from slumping.

"You don't look fine," he says as his eyes narrow slightly, and he stares at me as though my secrets will suddenly make themselves known to him.

"I thought I would feel differently and I guess... I feel confused." I get to my feet and I watch as his eyes track me from head to toe, and linger slightly longer on my legs.

He clears his throat and takes a step back as his eyes meet mine, and I think he feels uncomfortable, I wonder why? Maybe he feels weird about being alone with an eighteen-year-old girl. Fuck, I'm nineteen next week, time really is flying by. It's easy to forget once you're in that place, the outside world all but ceases to exist

"How did you expect to feel?"

"If we're supposed to avoid familiarity, it's probably best I don't say. Anyway, I thought I'd order some food, and you said not to do it without you. Will you at least eat with me?" I ask and he hesitates for a moment before nodding his head, and my chest feels a little lighter. I don't know what

kind of company he'll be, but at least I won't be alone.

The food doesn't take long to arrive, and Darius inspects it before handing it over. *He really takes his job seriously.* I mean, it isn't as though someone is going to try to poison me, is it? Oh no, I dislike where that line of thought is taking me, I'm going to end up paranoid if I don't get a lock on it.

"Your girlfriend or wife must be an understanding person," I say lightly, as I take a bite of my hunter's chicken, and his eyes flick to me before returning to his pulled pork sandwich.

"I have neither," is all he says, and I'm thinking although he is here, I still feel lonely.

"Really, that seems so strange to me. You seem nice. Although, I don't know a thing about you, so I guess I could be wrong," I trail off as he levels me with a hard stare. I swallow hard before lowering my eyes back down, and I don't dare look at him again.

I hear his sigh and the clinking of cutlery being placed on a plate. I guess he's going to leave now. I'm starting to think it's probably for the best.

"People can be rather judgmental as a whole, and I refuse to go into a relationship without being honest regarding my past. I may not be able to tell them who I work for, but I believe they have the right to know how I ended up working in the security industry. Most can't handle it, and others just use me to fulfill some bad boy fantasy they never got to outgrow as a kid." He sounds so despondent. Even though I know I shouldn't, I still place my hand over his, and gently squeeze before pulling away.

"What was that for?" he asks. He sounds confused, and his mouth is pulled down into a frown.

"I just wanted to comfort you. I'm not used to doing it, so I apologize if it was weird or uncomfortable," I reply with a nervous laugh. He smiles at me and it nearly leaves me breathless.

I THROW on a pair of leggings, a tank top, and my sweater before I knock on the door and wait for Darius to open up. I don't feel right just walking into his room, but I'm beyond eager to get to the hospital and see my family. I hope if I get there early enough then I may get some alone time with Poppy. There are things I need to say and ask, and I won't feel right doing it in front

of Mom. I knock again, but there's no answer, so I leave the bathroom and close the door behind me. I don't know what he's doing in there, but I need to get a hold on my frustration before I do something stupid.

I can't even ring the hospital to see if she's still coherent, because I'm not allowed to use the damn phone. I'm going to end up wearing a hole in the carpet with the way I'm pacing, and I'm not even paying attention as I open the bathroom door. The steam registers a little too late as my eyes fall on the steamed glass of the shower door. It doesn't hide enough though, as Darius fills my eyes. The way the water runs down his hard, muscled chest and trails down over his stomach. It tangles with the hair that starts on his stomach, and travels past his V. My eyes wander further until they rise at the same time as his head shoots up, and our eyes connect. My senses return a little too late, and I backpedal out of the room and close the door.

For someone who told me to lock the door on my end, he really should have listened to his own advice. Because as I close my eyes, all I can picture is the way he looks naked and wet.

My skin is growing flushed and I can't believe I'm having this reaction to him. What the hell have those guys done to me?!

I hear the water shut off and I know I'm in the wrong for not realizing it was even running. Well, I'm definitely going to be paying more attention in the future. Although...

He really does look yummy when he's wet.

Yeah, my cheeks are flaming right now, I really need to stop thinking about my bodyguard naked, wet, and hard. Fuck!

The door opens and I turn around and hurry over to the other side of my bed. I look out the window, trying to put off looking at him for as long as I can.

"I'm sorry, Miss Carter. I should have made sure I locked the door. It is my fault, but I hope you won't tell those at the Academy of my indiscretion." His voice sounds strained, and I'm fighting myself to turn around. *I really don't want to look at him.*

Despite my embarrassment and reservations, I turn around and stare at his feet, I can't have him taking full responsibility for this.

"I won't say anything, but it wasn't just your fault. I should have paid more attention and I definitely shouldn't have stayed in there for as long as I did." I can feel a lump form in my throat as I risk a glance up at him.

He rubs the back of his neck before meeting my eyes, and I have a feeling

he's just as embarrassed as I am.

"It's fine, but it's probably a good idea to pretend this never happened, and never speak of it again."

"Oh, y-yeah. T-that's good with m-me." I don't even care that I'm stuttering this time. I'm just relieved this conversation is over, and hopefully, I'll be able to act normal around him again soon. *Well, as normal as I can be.*

"Okay, well then, good. Shall we go?"

I look up at him, and I don't know why, but I laugh, and it isn't long until he joins in. He goes from imposing and hard, to carefree and stunning in a matter of seconds.

"I'm ready to see my family," I say as my laughter fades, and he settles back into his reserved manner as he holds the door open for me.

THIS IS IT. After a year of being apart, I'm returning to my family, but I know I'm not the same girl I was when I left and I can't help but worry. What if mom doesn't like the person I am now? *That thought is terrifying. Man, what I wouldn't give for an hour in a kitchen right now.*

He leads me out of the hotel and down into the car, and I stare out of the window, not really seeing anything until the hospital appears. My hands shake as they grow clammy, and my skin itches.

Darius' hand appears on my arm and I jolt and look up at him, I don't understand why he's touching me, but I find it oddly soothing. *I'll question and obsess over that little fact later.*

"Are you okay?"

"I d-d-d..."

"Take a deep breath, clear your mind, and think about what it is you want to say. Just take your time, you don't need to rush," he says, and it helps to soothe me even more, and I do as he says. Taking deep calming breaths, until I feel as though I have control again.

"I don't know if I can do this. Last night you asked if I was okay and I said nothing. The thing is, I put on clothes that reminded me of the girl I used to be, but it didn't make me feel like her." I take another deep breath. I'm trying to keep my mind as calm as I can get it, as he traces soothing circles over the top of my hand. "I've changed just like everyone said I would, and I

don't know what they'll think of me. What if I've changed for the worse?" My voice cracks, and a few tears break free and trail down my face.

I flinch when his thumb wipes them away, but it doesn't deter him, and he gets rid of every tear that falls free until I get control and just look at him. Every time I think I know what kind of person he is, he does something that shocks me, and it always seems to be for the better.

"I don't know you all that well, I have spent nowhere near enough time with you to claim such a thing. The thing is, I saw the way you were with your mom, and I don't think anything would change how much she loves you. You seem more confident now, and you hold yourself better, and there's a strength that wasn't as clear before. But I don't think you've changed for the worse, Miss Carter. You've just grown."

"Thank you," I say softly, and he gives me a smile that reaches his eyes before it falls away. He exits the car before opening my door and leading me inside.

My thoughts finally turn to the person who should own them. Poppy.

I can't believe she's awake, I mean, she was always awake, but she's talking and moving about. I honestly never thought the Academy would let me leave, but the fact they've given me the weekend means everything to me.

I'm scared to see her, and I have no idea what she'll make of where I've spent the last year, but that has to be insignificant compared to this moment.

Darius is walking by my side. He's quiet and I need that, I can't even tell him how much I appreciate him, and how his words have truly helped me.

We walk down the corridor where Poppy's room is located, and I can't keep the smile off my face as I reach her door, and then everything stops. My heart falters and sputters to a halt, my body freezes at the sight, and my eyes widen so far, the wind would surely dry out any tears that may threaten to fall.

I can't hear or see anything going on around me other than Poppy's arms around Cole's waist, and the two of them are looking at each other with utter joy on their faces. If this was a movie, there would be a heartbreaking song playing, something like *Someone You Loved*. But this isn't a movie, and there isn't a song to show how lonely and bleak everything feels right now.

I always said that Poppy was different from me. Outgoing, beautiful, and someone that garnered everyone's attention. Of course, Cole would want her the moment she could be her true self. I should be used to being the stand in by now, but this hurts more than anything in the past.

I turn around and walk away. I guess Poppy must have spotted me because I can hear her calling my name, but I can't stop. I haven't even realized I'm running until Darius is gripping my arm and pulling me to a halt.

I don't know what he expects me to say, but luck is not on my side today.

"Luna boo, baby, I can't believe you're here." Mom wraps her arms around me, and I can't help but stiffen up at the affection. Either she hasn't noticed my reaction or she's ignoring it, because she refuses to let me go.

"Where are you going? Have you seen your sister yet?"

I don't know how to tell her that Poppy is one of the last people I want to see right now, but I don't know what else I can say.

"Unfortunately, your daughter has to leave. She may not visit with her sister until a female doctor is assigned to her for the duration of our stay," Darius says easily, and I can't help but wonder if it's true. Because if not, he sure is fast on his feet.

"That's absurd, Dr. Stevenson has been on Poppy's case since the beginning, and he's become a good friend to the family. I'm sure Luna would love to see him," she says as she lets go of me, and places her hands on her hips. Giving him the dreaded 'mom stare'.

"I couldn't care less who you consider a friend, your daughter is under contract, and I am here to ensure that she upholds her end. Therefore, no contact with a male who is not a Harkwright without their permission, and they have not given it. I will take her now and we will be back tomorrow. You can tell your other daughter whatever you wish, but you are not to mention the Academy. Although, you should be used to those rules by now." His face is twisted and my mom pales on the spot, right before she raises her hand and moves to slap him.

A gasp fills the air instead of a slap as my hand circles my mom's wrist, and I prevent her from striking Darius.

"Luna?" I can hear the question in her voice, but I'm not sure she'll like my reply.

"Don't slap him, mom. He doesn't deserve it. He's only doing his job, and I won't let you lash out at anyone. I'll be back tomorrow. At least I'll get one day with her." I give her a sad smile as I let go of her wrist, and Darius grips my elbow and starts leading me away.

"I'll get rid of the doctor. Please, don't take a single moment away from me. I need to spend time with my daughter, please." I've never heard my mom beg like this before, and it's destroying me.

“Make sure he doesn’t come back to her room until we leave,” Darius says with a sigh that I can feel down in my bones. He tried, I’m thankful for it, but I can’t leave my mom, not now.

She disappears down the corridor and she’s back within ten minutes. She looks flushed and her eyes are narrow, but she still forces a smile as she gets closer.

“Well, that was harder than I thought. Poppy wants to see you alone for a little while. If your bruiser there will allow it.” I hate the snide tone she has as she speaks about Darius, and it’s getting my hackles up.

“Mom, don’t be like that. He doesn’t deserve your animosity, and I won’t subject him to it. If I have to, I’ll leave,” I say, and both hers and Darius’ mouth have dropped open. I just shake my head and walk toward Poppy’s door.

“I can give you ten minutes,” he calls after me, and I shoot him a thumbs up before I walk into her room, and close the door.

“Poppy, I can’t believe you’re awake,” I say as I look into her hazel brown eyes, and she pats the spot beside her on the bed for me to take, but I can’t.

“It isn’t what you thought. Cole wasn’t...”

“Don’t, Pop. I don’t want to hear it right now and if you try to make me, then you’re being selfish,” I point out and her eyebrows shoot up into her hairline as she stares at me, like she’s never seen me before.

“Luna Carter is calling me selfish. I spend most of my days stuck inside my mind and you fucked off to college. How am I the selfish one?” she demands, and I rear back as though she struck me.

“I went to college to help fund your hospital bills, so our mom isn’t working herself into an early grave trying to make sure you’re well cared for.” Maybe I shouldn’t be shouting at her, but where does she get off saying that to me?

“Moms are supposed to look after their kids. So say what you want, but really, you just wanted to get away and forget about us. You abandoned mom when she needed you the most. how can you be so ungrateful?” She isn’t even looking at me as she says all of this, and I feel so fucking raw right now.

“You know, my entire life I’ve put you on a pedestal. Well done for lowering it yourself. I hope you get better soon, Pop, but I won’t stand here and listen to this.” I turn my back to her with my hand on the door, but Poppy always likes to have the last word.

“The doctor loves you. He was telling me, and that’s why I looked so happy. You put that look on his face, not me, but you don’t deserve him. Go back to your Academy and fifteen guys. At least you’ve got something to keep you bu-bu-bu...”

Her eyes are no longer focused, and she’s completely stopped trying to talk, I call for a nurse but I already know it’s too late. I’ve lost her and our last conversation turned into a fucking argument, I just hope this won’t be our last conversation.

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IT'S TIME TO CHANGE

I FEEL strange being at the Academy after seeing my mom, but what surprises me is how relieved I feel. I'm here, sitting in my room, staring at my closet, and I know I've been holding back ever since I came here. Trying to be the perfect sister and daughter, while also trying to be as fair to Cole as possible, but I'm done. I have never claimed to be perfect, so why do I keep trying to be? No, I need to be a better Academy girl and I need to pick a guy to fuck.

I throw on my satin dressing gown before I leave my room and knock on D's door. I've just got to hope she's not busy in there with Bradley, otherwise, she may not welcome me disturbing them.

"Homegirl, what are you doing knocking on my door?" she asks with a bright smile, and I return it in full force.

"Actually, I need your help. If you're willing?"

She steps out of her room and closes the door and follows me into mine.

"What can I do for you?"

"I need you to teach me how to do my makeup better than just a layer of mascara, and I need to match this outfit." I show her what I've picked out, and once she's picked her jaw up from the ground, she gets to work.

She has me facing the mirror, and she sets out everything we need, and talks me through it step by step. It's a long process, and I make a lot of mistakes, but this girl has the patience of a saint. By the end, the transformation is insane.

I pull my hair back into a loose braid and look at myself. It's always strange to see myself wearing makeup, but it will be even stranger once I get dressed. My eyes are shadowed in gold with black lining them and flicking

out at the sides. I have blush on my cheeks which definitely helps me to look less pale, and shiny deep red lipstick.

I disappear into my bathroom and throw my clothes on, and Daria's face is a picture when I step out.

"Damn, homegirl. You look hot. Ooh, I have the perfect thing to go with this." She disappears out the door before coming back a few minutes later with a leather jacket that I've never seen her wear before.

I slide it on and step in front of the full body mirror and barely recognize myself. The dress I've chosen has a strapless glitter gold top with a sweetheart neckline and a black tulle, layered skirt that falls mid thigh, and would definitely show my ass if I wore this outside in the wind. I have a pair of black lace, thigh-high stockings on with a flower print and a pair of boots. D's jacket completes the look perfectly, and I'm so grateful for her help.

"Not that I'm not digging your new look, girl, but what's brought all of this on?" she asks as I thread my arm through hers and lead her to the door.

"All my life I've been trying to be the perfect daughter and sister and I'm tired of it, D. I want to see what it's like when I stop trying so hard and just let go. My stomach is twisting, and I feel as though I'm about to throw up, but I want to try." I'm feeling a little self conscious now, and I can't help but second guess my decision, but fuck it. If Poppy wants to be a grade A bitch for the first time we get to speak in years, then I can damn well do this.

We walk into the mess hall, and I grab my breakfast before setting it down on the table, D follows suit and takes her seat. Instead of sitting down, I roll my shoulders back and head over to the guys' table.

I can feel everyone watching me, no doubt eager for a show and to see what I'm about to do.

Scott sees me first and a low whistle passes from him as the other guys start to look. Tucker looks curious, Tom looks... well, he doesn't look bored, that's for sure. Aeron is staring at me hard and licking his lips, and Emmet looks as though he's about to blow, if the tick in his cheek is anything to go by.

"Hey, Aeron," I say easily, as I come to a stop beside him and place my hand on his shoulder.

"Little Zero, you look... fuck. You make me want to take you back to my room." It comes out husky, and electricity shoots up my spine.

"What's stopping you?" The entire table goes quiet at my words, and his eyes widen as he shifts in his seat until he's facing me fully, and I step

between his legs. His hands slide up my thighs until they disappear under my skirt and fall on my ass.

“Fuck,” he blows out and I give him a smile.

“Not yet,” I say with a smirk, before I turn around and head back for my table. I’m not brave enough to do anything more than that, but I will be. Look out Harkwrights. A different Luna has returned to the Academy, and she’s ready to experience the other side of this place.

WE LEAVE the mess hall and someone grabs me from behind, spins me until I’m pressed up against the wall, and Aeron is devouring me with his eyes and holding me in place with the full length of his body.

“Bradley’s waiting for you, Daria,” he says without taking his eyes off me, and she hesitates before giving me a gentle smile and joining up with Bradley.

“Can I h-help you, Aeron?” I look up at him through my lashes, and he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip.

“Oh, I’m sure you can,” he replies as he grips my hand and places it on his cock, his pants the only barrier between us.

His hand slides up my skirt until he’s cupping and rubbing the heel of his hand against my sweet spot, making me pool in my panties. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and he uses his thumb to release it, pulling it down before he licks at it.

It’s the closest we’ve ever got to kissing - other than when I got high - and I’m about to lose my mind, when he’s pulled off me and Emmet looks between us furiously. He’s nearly the shade of a tomato and his eyes are more like slits, as he takes us in before he slams him into the wall. He pushes his arm against Aeron’s throat.

“Let him go, please, Emmet,” I plead as I grab hold of his arm and try to pull him off. He levels me with a stare before pulling away. He looks at me as though I’m nothing, before sending his fist into Aeron’s stomach.

“Star, I suggest you run along before I lose what little control I have left,” he growls, I may feel like trying new things, but crossing Emmet any further is definitely not on the list.

“I’m sorry, Aeron,” I say through a broken voice and all he does is smirk

at me before I duck my head and walk away.

I step outside and look up at the cloudless sky, wondering if I'm doing the right thing. Maybe the world isn't ready for a Luna with more confidence. Not with people like Emmet around, undermining every little shred of strength I discover.

"Moonbeam, I have to say. I'm loving the fresh look," Tom says as he approaches me from the garden.

"I don't think everyone agrees with that sentiment," I say with a little too much bitterness in my voice.

"Don't worry about what those dicks think. Just do whatever the fuck you feel like. This is an experience, right? Why not treat it like one? Even if you have to follow an entire list of rules, it doesn't mean you can't have fun and enjoy yourself. Who knows, you may even discover a new you or maybe the real you." His words strike a chord within me, and a small smile plays at my lips as he holds his hand out and I slip mine into it.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to kill some time and have a little fun," he says with a Cheshire cat smile as he leads me through the gardens, past the maze, and to a wooden shack I've never seen before. Not that I've ever ventured this far, but still. It seems so out of place on these grounds.

He opens the door and ushers me inside before following me in, and closing the door behind him. He falls down on a stack of pillows lining the ground before gripping my hand and pulling me down onto his lap until I'm straddling him.

"Why do you have so many rules if none of you will let me follow them?" I ask with a shake of my head, I know I shouldn't be alone with Tom or any of them, So, why do I keep letting them lead me astray?

"I have written permission. Besides, just how well did you read those rules?" he asks with a glint in his eyes, as his palms slide up the inside of my thighs until his fingertips are brushing against my lips through my lace panties.

"Pretty well," I say on a choked gasp as he slides my panties to the side, and with no warning, pushes one of his fingers inside me.

My back arches as he hits a spot inside me that makes my toes curl, and my head drops to his shoulder as he moves faster, curving his finger and hitting that spot every damn time.

"Then you'll know that it says you belong to your claimer and you can

refuse us, but it doesn't say you can't be with us. That you can't touch us or vice versa, that you can't come apart on my hand like you will be any minute now. As long as we have permission to have you and you want it, then there isn't a damn thing stopping it from happening."

I lift my head off his shoulder then my body trembles from the force of the pleasure he's eliciting in me. I stare right into his dark green eyes. As I fall closer to the edge, I slam my mouth onto his and he swallows every one of my moans as I fall apart on his hand, just like he said I would.

"Fuck, Moonbeam, you just kissed me," he says as he slowly pulls away, but keeps his finger deep inside me, curling and straightening it repeatedly.

"I felt like it," I say breathlessly, and his eyes light up as he brings his mouth to mine again.

His tongue thrusts into my mouth, reminding me of what he just did to make me come, and it only makes me more excited as my hips roll and he moans right along with me.

"Damn, woman, if there's anything else you feel like doing, feel free. I'm more than fucking willing."

"Can I..." My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I hesitate, and he slides his hand behind my neck.

"Go on, ask." Excitement and something else is clear to see in his eyes, and I take a deep breath.

"Can I touch you?"

He groans before pulling his finger out of me and lifting me off his lap, I'll admit it hurts a little but I'll get over it. I climb to my feet and his hand shoots up to grip mine. He pulls me back down onto the floor until I'm resting on my knees beside him.

"You can't ask something like that and then leave."

"I didn't think you wanted me to," I say slowly, as I stare over his shoulder until he grips my chin, and drags my head closer to his.

"I couldn't undo my pants with you on my lap." His eyes drop down, and I follow their direction to see his pants open and him straining against his boxers.

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. So, I'm just going to lie back and you feel free to do whatever you feel like." He smirks and shuffles down until he's lying on the floor.

I place my hands on his boxers and lift the waistband up and slide it down until he springs free. And there has to be something in their genes. *Are they*

all big?

I brush the pad of my thumb along his tip, watching in rapt fascination as he bites his lips and stares at my hand on him. I brush across his tip again as I wrap my hand around the base of him, not that I can reach all the way around. I stay loose as I slide my hand up and down, and my tongue darts out to wet my lips as a drop of pre-cum appears. I wipe at it with my thumb.

“Tighter, Moonbeam,” he groans and I do as he says, tightening my grip and moving my hand faster.

He grips my hips and moves me closer so he can slip his hand under my skirt, and I moan loud as he enters me and I match my pace to his. It won't take long for me to come, I can feel it building and warmth is pooling in my stomach. Another drop appears on his tip, and I brush it away again, but this time I slide my thumb into my mouth and suck his excitement clean.

“Fuck, Luna.” He grips my braid and drags my head to his. His fingers pick up their pace and we match thrust for thrust, as our tongues tangle, and I rock as I get closer and closer. Until my breath falters and I tighten around him, crying out. He follows close behind, covering my hand with his shirt as I lean my forehead against his, and just try to remember how to breathe.

“You can touch me anytime you want,” he breathes, and I can't hold back my smile.

“You didn't look bored,” is what comes out of my mouth and I want to slap myself, I just don't have the energy to do it.

He strokes his thumb across my cheek, which makes my breath falter even more. His eyes search mine, and I'm not expecting an answer, but his lips part anyway.

“It's because I wasn't.” He kisses me slow and soft enough that it hurts my heart - another reaction I refuse to dissect. “I'm never bored when I'm around you, Moonbeam. You're the most exciting thing in this place.”

He's wrong, I have a feeling he holds that title, but his words warm me and make me like him just a little more.

I HAVE no idea how long we stayed in the shack for, but I enjoyed every moment. Although that's not to say I'm not enjoying having some alone time in my room right now. I never know how long it will last for, so I'm going to

savor the moment.

Ten minutes pass before a knock sounds on my door and I open it without thinking, mainly because no one ever knocks in this place.

“Aeron, what are you doing here?” I ask, even more confused by the knocking now.

“We’re having a little party up in the north wing and I want you sitting on my lap in that sexy as sin dress of yours. Come on, bad girl, what do you say?”

“Sure, sitting on your lap sounds like a party,” I say back and his smile only widens as he slides his arm around my waist, and leads me away. I only have just enough time to close my door before he sweeps me up in his arms, and my legs wrap around his waist.

“Have I told you how much I love this dress?” he asks, as he palms my ass and I smile against his neck. We just go with the flow as he carries me to the north wing and their game room. I don’t even care about the stares. For once, I’m enjoying myself, and I’m going to hold on to this feeling alive, for as long as I can.

He opens the door and a plume of smoke escapes before he carries me inside, and kicks the door closed behind us. He drops onto a recliner, settling me down so I’m straddling his lap. *These guys really seem to like this position.*

“Seriously, you know you can bring other girls. No need to get whipped on us now.” I can recognize Scott’s voice anywhere, and it grates on me more than it ever did before. Now when I hear it, all I think about is watching Maddox struggle under the water as he held me back and made me watch.

Aeron pulls out a joint and sparks it up, his cheeks hollowing out as he takes a deep drag, and I watch as the smoke slowly filters out of his mouth.

“I claimed the best one here, why would I want to bring anyone else back?” he asks lazily, and I smile at his words, which earns me his patented smirk.

“Because she’s a buzzkill and she’s far from the best. You should know, you’ve already worked your way through at least half the girls,” Scott throws back, and I can’t stop my nose from scrunching up at the visual he’s painting in my mind.

Aeron takes another drag and fuck it, what the hell. I pluck the joint from between his lips, before putting it to my own, and take a small drag. His eyebrows shoot up as my eyes flutter closed, and I slowly blow it out before

rolling my hips against him.

“Just what went down on your trip away?” he asks as he reaches for it, and I bat his hand away before holding it to his mouth and we stay like this. Me controlling the pot, and passing it between us both as I forget about his question, and feel my body relax.

How I haven't realized I'm still rolling my hips, I have no idea. Although, it becomes apparent as his hands come to rest on them and he holds me in place.

“Are you okay, Little Zero?” I want to laugh at the concern I hear in his voice, I just struggle to believe it's real after the retreat.

“I don't want to think, Aeron. Feeling seems so much better.” I drop my head down onto his shoulder before running my tongue up the column of his neck, and then everything feels... funny.

“Okay, I think that's enough pot for you,” he says with a chuckle before lifting me up and turning me so my legs are hanging over the arm of the chair, and my head is resting on his chest.

“Aww, is Aeron going to take care of the lightweight?” Scott asks sarcastically, but his words barely even register.

“Fuck you, Scott. You're just bitter because Emmet made her off limits to you.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I should let him know how close you two are getting. I bet he'd love to hear all about it.” I look up and stick my tongue out at him. His eyes narrow before he takes a swig from a bottle of something and calls for Seven.

“Come suck my cock. Maybe you can teach Five a thing or two. She may as well learn something useful for her future career.”

“That's enough, Scott. Shut up before I knock the ever living shit out of you,” comes from Tucker, and I try to lift my head to try to see him, but it won't cooperate.

Nothing wants to move and all I can do is lie here and ride it out, feel the circles that Aeron is tracing on my thigh and forget every thought that pops into my head as it vanishes; like it was never there.

NIGHTS OF GETTING high and grinding against Aeron have become the new

normal for me this past week. Not to mention the times Tom drags me to the shack and we make each other come undone. I mean I'm enjoying it, but something is missing, or maybe it's someone.

I miss Tucker, but he's still avoiding me since I kissed him and it hurts more than I care to admit, but more than that, I damn well miss Maddox and I've reached the end of my tether with him. It's my birthday and the only present I would like to get is to have him talk to me. Although, this is a birthday in the Academy, so I'm sure a present isn't on the table. I can live with that. I just wish it didn't feel as though I've lost yet another friend. It's not like D isn't enough, but Maddox is different, and I think he needs me, but I don't know how to get to him.

I roll out of bed, trying to shake myself free of the dismal thoughts as I wander into my bathroom and jump in the shower before I search through my wardrobe for what I should wear today.

I decide on a royal blue zip up romper and leave the zip sitting just past my breasts, nowhere near as revealing as all the other girls in this place but enough that you can see a hint of the black lace on my bra. My eyes are smokey with a light blush and I don the red lipstick again, I think it's wearing on me. I'm enjoying this new look I seem to have adopted and I'm not sure I'll go back entirely. Even if nothing more comes out of this little adventure, at least I'm feeling more comfortable in my own skin.

I throw on the leather jacket that D refuses to take back - stubborn woman - and pull open my bedroom door to come face to face with a room filled with flowers covering every surface, and petals all across my floor.

What the hell is going on?

I step into the room and take it all in, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing, but I don't think that's going to happen right now. I move further into the room until I'm next to the love seat, and I find a box lying on it. My hand shake as I pick it up and pull at the bow holding the lid in place. It falls unceremoniously to the floor, as I pull the lid off and drop it onto the floor.

It's a dress and a pair of shoes, I don't even bother to look at them as I pick the lid back up, and shove it back on top before searching every spot in the room until my eyes fall on a white envelope.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, my Star. I hope you have an amazing day and I look forward to seeing you in this dress later. Hopefully, the flowers are to your

liking and I look forward to seeing you over breakfast, you'll be dining with us this morning.

See you soon, my legacy.

Your Prince.

MY PRINCE, yeah fucking right. I don't hold any claim to him and I don't want to either, I'm sick and tired of his narcissistic ways and he's got another thing coming if he thinks I'll be sitting with them. He still doesn't know me. Get ready for another no, Emmet. I have a feeling he'll be hearing that word a lot from me.

I open my door and my mouth falls open when I find Tom standing there, just waiting for me. Can this day get any stranger? I hope not, it's barely even begun.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as he steps closer, his eyes burning me up from the inside, as his hands fall to my waist and he steps me back until he's in my room, closing the door behind him.

"Happy birthday, Moonbeam," he says before his mouth is on mine, devouring every gasp I have to give.

His tongue moves effortlessly around mine as his hands seem to touch everywhere at once. His mouth breaks away from mine before gripping my zipper and pulling it down until he grips the cup of my bra. He pulls it away and sucks my nipple into his hot mouth.

"Tom," I gasp as my fingers thread through his hair and he slides his other hand across my stomach and into my panties. He continues to make me walk backwards until I hit the back of the loveseat.

"Lay down, Moonbeam. It's time for your present," he says as my nipple pops free from his mouth, and I lay myself down. He pulls my romper and panties off and kisses his way across the globes of my breasts, down my stomach, and onto my already sensitive clit.

Pushing two fingers inside, he sucks and licks me into a frenzy. I nearly buck him off when I feel a finger stroke against my puckered hole, but he doesn't push inside, and I lose myself in the way he's making me feel. He brings me all the way to the brink before he pulls away, and I cry out in frustration as he smiles down at me and pulls something out of his pocket.

"What's that?" I ask breathlessly as he hands me a long rectangular box, and he can't keep the smirk off his face.

“Open it, and I’ll let you come,” His words have me ripping the lid off, and my eyes pop as I take in the small vibrator. He plucks it out of the box and flicks it on.

“Do you trust me, Moonbeam?” He tilts his head to the side, staring right at me.

“You may be one of the few ones I do,” I say easily, and his smile stops being cocky and turns more... vulnerable as his eyes soften. He shakes himself off before lowering the vibrator to my opening, and then he slides it inside me.

My back arches up from the seat, he turns the setting up as he comes to the side of me, capturing my mouth in an all-consuming kiss as his other hand rubs and pinches my nipple.

My eyes roll as I grip his pants and pull them down hard, causing him to spring free as I capture him in my hand and start moving my hand fast, holding him the way I know he likes.

His forehead rests on mine as he turns it even higher and I can’t contain my cries as my body starts to spasm and I come harder than I thought possible. He switches it off as he pulls it out, but I don’t relent my hand as I lick my lips and he follows the action before sucking my bottom lip into his mouth.

“Do you want me to taste you?” I ask hesitantly, and he groans deeper than before.

“Fuck yes, but not now,” he grinds out as I cup his balls with my other hand and start rolling them in my palm. Only moments later, he falls apart in my hand, and a sense of satisfaction spreads its way through me.

He pulls away and disappears into my bathroom to clean himself up. I use a makeup removal wipe to clean my hand before I fix my clothes and pull my hair up into a loose ponytail, but my eyes instantly go to his when he steps back into the room. I disappear into the bathroom to clean up properly, before rejoining him in my room.

“Why didn’t you w-want me to?” I ask, but too much vulnerability is in my voice, and I don’t enjoy showing any more weakness to him.

“Because you’re not ready for that yet, Luna, and I’m happy to wait,” is his simple reply and damn my stupid heart for skipping a beat at his words. *What is wrong with me?*

WHAT A SURPRISE

I WANT to rub at my eyes to clear the absurdity that the mess hall is showing me, but I doubt it would change anything. Damn Emmet, because there is no way he isn't responsible for this.

"Tom, why is Emmet sitting at my table?" I ask softly and he smirks and walks toward it himself, leaving me no choice but to follow behind until I take my seat beside Daria, who is staring at me as though I've committed some kind of crime.

"You should have told me it was your birthday," she says with a pout that should look ridiculous but just makes her look cute.

"I didn't think there would be any reason to celebrate it, it's just another day," I reply as I fold my arms across my chest, and glare straight at Emmet who is smiling right back.

"Happy birthday, Star. You're going to be a very busy girl."

"Do I even get a say in the matter?" I ask bitterly, and I know I'm being a brat, but I can't seem to stop it.

"Sure, but if you say no, then I'll just get Aeron to order you to do what I have planned," he says with a smirk that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Who else is joining us for breakfast?" I ask with a sigh of defeat, and his laughter rolls over and through me.

"Aeron, Tucker, Tom, Bradley, and Jake. Get ready, Star. You've got a busy day ahead of you."

Aeron joins us after five minutes have passed and he stares at Emmet and the fact that he's moved to sit beside me. *Did he really expect anything less?* Emmet is so freaking territorial, he'll do whatever he can to keep the other

guys as far from me as possible. A smile plays at my lips as I think about how much he's already failed, considering what Tom did to me before we came down here.

"Happy birthday, Little Zero. I have a little something for you in my room," he says huskily, and my skin flushes as I stare up at him.

"I can't wait to see it, but you shouldn't have gotten me anything," I reply and he just smirks as he sits across from me. Everyone else filters into the room and takes their seats around the table.

"Hey, Tom, can I ask you for a favor?"

Everyone stares at us as he nods his head, but I shake mine. "I'll ask you later. I'd prefer it if we didn't have an audience."

"Sure thing, birthday girl. I'll find you the next time you're alone." He winks, and he gets glares from both Emmet and Aeron.

I look at Tucker, but he isn't even lifting his head from his phone. If I knew kissing him would have done this, then I probably wouldn't have done it. *I guess this is why they say hindsight's a bitch.*

Breakfast passes in a tense atmosphere, but it isn't coming from any of the guys here for me. Oh no, this is from Jake, Bradley, and Daria. A curious triangle that I have yet to see all the angles of.

"How's the swimming going?" I ask, trying to break up the uncomfortable silence, and Jake drags his eyes off my friend, and looks at me for the first time.

"Not too bad. I've got a meet coming up in a few weeks. But luckily, it coincides with when we have to leave, so it won't affect my studying."

"Will you be coming back in August then?" D asks, but she's looking at Bradley, and he's staring back while rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yeah, it's the same as last year. We have duties that we can't fulfil unless we leave, but I'll be back before you know it." He cups her face before drawing her in for one last kiss.

"Look, I don't know what you have planned for today, Emmet. But I have to go to the medical center after breakfast. So, you'll just have to wait." I polish off the last of my plate as his jaw ticks.

"Are you okay?" Tom asks and I can't help but notice that Aeron doesn't ask a damn thing, he just sits here rolling a cigarette.

"I'm fine, just something I need to do," I say carefully. I'm not ready to tell any of them I've decided to get the rod. *I don't intend on telling them as a goddamn group over breakfast, especially when we're in the mess hall.*

“I’ll walk with you, then you can ask me that favor,” Tom says and I nod my head as I climb to my feet, and give D a smile.

“You’re mine after, Star. Don’t forget it,” Emmet declares and Aeron throws his head back and lets loose a loud laugh that draws more than a fair share of stares.

“I think you’ll find she’ll be coming to see me after. You’ll just have to wait your turn.” I’m going to leave, and I don’t need to witness their inevitable fight. No doubt Emmet is furious by what Aeron has said, especially if his clenched fists are anything to go by.

I walk outside and Tom falls beside me as I walk toward the medical center, I’m just glad Cole isn’t on rotation, otherwise this would have been all kinds of awkward.

“What’s up, Moonbeam?”

“I was wondering if you could get me into the north wing?” I ask and he cocks an eyebrow, and I guess he’s waiting for me to elaborate. “I want to check on Maddox. I’m worried about him and I can’t think of anyone else who would help me.”

“Eh, why not? For a minute there, I thought you were going to ask for a pass so you could leave this place for good.”

“What if I had?” I come to a stop, and he turns to look at me, as he searches my face for something.

“Well, seeing as it’s against the rules, I would have had you kicked out of here faster than you can blink.”

I look up at him, blinking furiously. *Are you seriously surprised? What did you expect him to say? You’re nothing to these guys, Luna, stop fooling yourself.*

“I’ll see you around, Moonbeam. Good luck with the doctor.” With that said, he walks away and I stand here watching.

I’M SITTING in front of a desk, waiting for the doctor to come in so I can get this over with, when the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I turn around and come face to face with Cole, and I don’t know if I want to cry, scream, or lash out. *Maybe a mixture of all three.*

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

“No, I asked Matthews to swap with me. I had to see you, Luna, I had to explain. I don’t want to lose you,” he says as he comes to stand before my chair.

“It doesn’t matter, Cole. I never should have said yes to you in the first place,” I say with a long, heavy sigh. I stare down at my hands that are lying limp in my lap, and my heart is thudding dully inside my chest.

“Don’t say that, please, Luna. Poppy was so excited to see you, and she couldn’t stop talking about your visit. I told her I couldn’t wait either, I told her how crazy in love with you I am, and I’m sorry you thought it was something else. But please, Luna, don’t throw us away because of a little misunderstanding.” His eyes are screaming at me to let him back in, and I can feel myself starting to relent.

“I’m here to get the rod,” is what comes out, and he rears back as though I’ve slapped him.

“Are you trying to hurt me?”

“That’s a little self centered, don’t you think? This has nothing to do with you.” My eyes shoot up to his as I dig my nails into the palms of my hands. “It was always going to happen. It has to happen, I’m just lucky enough to make it to my second year beforehand. You can’t make this about you, so either do your job or I’ll get one of the nurses to do it. Either way, I’m not leaving until I’m protected, please just accept it,” I run my hands over my hair and clothes and pick at invisible lint. *Please, don’t let him make a scene, I don’t think I can handle it right now.*

“Very well, I’ll be back in a moment with the supplies, and then I’ll get started,” he says and I nod my head in agreement. He leaves his office and comes back nearly five minutes later.

It doesn’t take long for him to numb my arm and put the plastic tube inside, I can’t help but watch though. It’s fascinating.

“Please, Luna. Don’t give up on us. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Can you really lose something you never had?” I ask and he grips my face before claiming my mouth in a searing kiss that has me holding onto his shoulders.

“You’ve always had me, and I refuse to let you go without a fight. I’m yours, Luna, and when I come back, I’m going to make sure you never have another doubt.” He gives me one last kiss, and I’m too shocked to say anything back.

I leave once he’s placed a dressing over my arm and I head straight for

Aeron's room, although I have to knock on the door that leads into the north wing and wait for permission to enter. I am surprised Aeron opens the door himself, but I'm not surprised by the way he grabs me and drops his head to my neck. He always goes to that spot, and I wonder if it's because he's having to stop himself from kissing me. I mean, if he really wants to, then why not just do it? Tom and Emmet don't seem to mind. *It feels weird thinking like that.*

He leads me into his room and I take in the clothes loitering on the floor, the cherry red wood bed and satin sheets, and the mirrored wall that lines the left of the bed.

"Why so many mirrors?" I ask curiously.

"If I fuck you from behind, then I can still see your face. What do you say, Luna, do you fancy a ride?"

I look up at him and step closer, sliding my hands under his shirt and up to his chest. I flick at his piercing, which causes a whoosh of air to pass from his lips, before I place my lips at his throat and poke my tongue out, tasting him.

"I got you a lingerie set. Put it on," he growls out and I step back and wait for him to hand it over before I disappear into his bathroom. I wonder why he only has a bedroom and not a sitting area like us, but that's a question for another day, as I slip the lace bra and thong on, before walking over to the door. I pause behind it, with nothing more than my head on show to him.

"Come on, Five. I want to see what my gift looks like on you. That's an order."

Wearing nothing but the underwear and my heels, I feel self-conscious but the lust in his eyes makes it easier as I step out, slowly make my way to him, and my eyes fall on his cock. *When the fuck did he get naked?*

"Aeron, what are you planning?" I ask hesitantly.

"I'm planning on eating you out until you're so fucking wet, it drips all over my sheets. Then I'm going to push my fingers deep inside you while you wrap your little hand around my cock. I'll make you come so hard, your vision turns black, and then we'll go again and again until neither of us can remember our own names."

Okay then, I guess that explains that.

BY THE TIME Aeron dismisses me, my legs are like Jell-O, and I just want to lie down and rest for an hour or three. Not that I can. When I open Aeron's door, it's to find Emmet waiting on the other side, glowering at Aeron like he's only moments away from death.

"Wait in the game room, I'll be with you in a moment," he orders, not taking his eyes off him. I nod my head once before leaving the room, and he seals himself inside.

Yes, I should do as I'm told, but I can't resist trying to listen in. If I get caught, I know I'll be in trouble, but I'm finding it hard to give two shits about that right now.

"I told you to keep your fucking hands off her," I hear Emmet say, and he sounds so fucking angry. I feel a little worried for Aeron, and I hope he can handle himself.

"Yeah, well, I claimed her so I can do whatever the fuck I want," is his ballsy reply, and I really think he should be more careful.

"You need me, don't forget it. Luna is mine, she has been ever since her file fell on the Harkwright desk. Don't try to steal her from me."

"Sorry, Emmet, but I think I'm going to find an alternative way to get what I want. Honestly, I want Luna and there isn't a damn thing you can say to change my mind. Just know that you'll be the furthest thing from our minds when I'm balls deep inside her." A loud bang sounds, and I can only guess that Emmet has broken or thrown him into something.

Yeah, I think I'm going to go into the game room now. I'd prefer if they didn't know I'd listened in on that fucked up conversation.

Tucker is sitting on the sofa as I walk in and I'm half tempted to turn around and just walk away, Emmet's tantrum be damned. Until he looks up and his eyes lock on mine, and a thousand different emotions swirl through his eyes. They're moving and changing too fast for me to put a name to them.

"Five, I guess a happy birthday is in order," he says as he slips his phone in his pocket, and I am dying to know what he does on that thing.

"If you say so. It's just another day to me." I drop onto the chair that is off to the side of him. I'm half expecting him to get up and walk out.

"Do you want to go somewhere with me?" he asks out of the blue, and I can't help but just sit here staring at him.

"Emmet has demanded my attention, but otherwise, I would love to."

"Okay, I'll come find you once he's grown bored. See you around, Five. Try not to need rescuing today." He gets up this time and walks away,

leaving me fuming just a little.

Emmet walks in a few minutes later and I'm still stewing over what Tucker said to me, as though it's my fault I keep having people place me in the firing line. *Because I just love having my head slammed into tables.*

"Come on, birthday girl. I have a surprise for you," he says as he stands in the doorway and holds his hand out to me.

I release a deep sigh as I get to my feet and walk over to him; I ignore his hand and wait for him to move. That way, I can follow behind him, and get this debacle over with.

He shakes his head, and it feels like I may be disappointing him, but I don't care. I am so done with his mind games.

"Fine, come on. Keep up, because I won't slow my pace for you," he says, and then he moves and I follow close behind.

I realize where we're going as we walk toward the tower he led me to when he was Liam. He leads me to the top and my eyes almost pop out of their sockets, as I take in the blanket on the ground, and the candles lighting up every surface.

"What is this?"

"I know you prefer Liam to me. So, for the next hour, that's who you'll get. I'm taking you back in time, I hope you enjoy it." My eyes search his as he sits down on the ground. I follow him down, sitting before him, and I just stare at him.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, but I'm not sure what I want him to say.

"I spent so much time warning you of the person I am, and you fought me the entire way. You said you wouldn't judge me because you didn't know who I was, so here's your chance to know me, Star. It's up to you if you take it." His eyes are hard, and I want to know who he is, but I'm scared to find out.

What if he really is the person everyone says he is? Even worse, what if I like it?

"How is this going to prove anything? I don't even know how to be around you. Liam was easy because he was different, a person who didn't own this place like all the other guys, and didn't see me as a number. The thing is, it was all a lie and I don't know how to handle that. You confuse me, Emmet, and I don't like being confused."

"How do you think I feel? I thought I knew who you were, that those six months I spent with you as Liam told me everything I needed and then you

changed. You're more confident now, owning those clothes instead of simply wearing them. Flirting with Aeron and driving me crazy. So which one is the real Luna? The one I got to know, or the one I've been seeing ever since you came back?" He sounds... angry, his eyes are spitting fire and his jaw is ticking.

"I don't know," I shout and he arches back slightly at my sudden outburst. "I don't know who I am, Emmet, but I'm trying to figure it out. My entire life I've been trying to be the perfect daughter, to make everyone proud, but I've never allowed myself to do anything that I want. To do anything that may leave people disappointed in me and I'm sick of it, I want to do things I'll regret, and I want to feel my blood thumping and excitement thrumming through my veins. I want to live, Emmet, for the first time in nineteen years, I just want to live."

My chest is heaving as my words die out. I don't dare stop talking until I say everything that needs to come out. Now that it has, it's just hanging in the air between us.

He stands up and grips my hands, pulling me up to stand before him. He turns his phone on and a song plays as he pulls me closer and starts guiding my body into a slow grind. Dipping me low and running his hand down from my neck, between my breasts, and to my stomach before pulling me back up. He dips me again, rubbing his knee up between my legs, as his hand drags down my body. Taking my zipper with him until my romper lies open in the front, and Aeron's present is in full view.

"What a-are you d-d-doing?"

"You said you wanted some excitement, who better to give it to you than the Prince himself?"

He steps closer, closing me in as I move away, until my back hits the wall, and he stops right in front of me. I don't dare speak as my chest moves rapidly in time with my heartbeats.

"Come on, Luna, it's your birthday. Your move." He doesn't touch me, he just stands there, looking at me and the way my chest is heaving.

Our eyes move side to side, keeping contact and moving in time, as I put my hand flat on his chest and step forward. He watches my every move as I bring my mouth close to his and I brush my mouth against his before pulling back and sliding my zipper back to where it was.

"I need more, Emmet, much more."

"Okay then, challenge accepted." I cock my head to the side before he

grabs my shoulders and slams me against the wall hard, making my breath fall out of me as his mouth slams onto mine, and my zipper falls back down. His hand slides into my panties and his fingers rub furiously at my clit, sliding between my lips, and spreading my excitement over me.

I cry out as my fingers dig into his shoulder blades, and then his hand comes up to my chest and slides around my throat. My eyes shoot to his as he squeezes, not tight enough to hurt or restrict oxygen, but it still makes me freeze. Our eyes are locked, and he suddenly pulls back and turns around before slamming his fist against the wall. I can't stop myself from jumping, and he glares at me before I cover myself back up and run down the stairs.

I don't think he was trying to strangle me, but I still feel unsettled and visions of Ms. Vanderbilt's lifeless eyes swim within my mind. And the marks that had marred her neck. Had she been strangled? Like Carly?

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WHEN THE PAST WON'T STAY BURIED

THE HARKWRIGHTS HAVE LEFT ONCE MORE, off to do whatever it is they do when they have to leave before the school year starts up. I can't pretend I'm not curious, but it isn't as though I can question anyone. Because I have so many questions that, in my mind at least, need to be answered.

Why did Cole come to work here if he turned his back on the Harkwright name? What is Tucker doing on that damned phone of his? Will Aeron be an asshole when he returns? And what is with the fascination that Emmet has with me, and my birth mom? Why does it matter that she came here when I don't even know her? *I never got the chance to.*

My door opens as I pull the cinnamon and orange rolls out of the oven, and I smile as Daria appears in the doorway.

"Luna, it's time." Her words make no sense to me. Time, time for what?

"I'm going to need a little more information, D. I have no idea what you're talking about," I say with a slight smile, but my hands are shaking as I place the tray on the side and grip it for support.

"Homegirl, I've been trying to talk to you ever since you got back from seeing your sister, I need to tell you what I found out." Her hands are on her hips as I turn to lean against the side, and slide my now sweaty palms down across my leggings.

"O-okay, I'm r-r-ready," I force the words out through my clenched teeth and she looks off to the side before closing the door and taking a seat on my sofa.

"A lot of your birth mom's death was redacted, making it so I couldn't read all of it. It's weird, but I can't question why it's like that. All I know is

that your mama came here and was given a proposal. She said no and left without ever looking back, or so the file says.” She plays with her hair, taking it down just to put it back up again. I move to sit beside her and she stills her hands as her eyes take me in. “Five years later and she winds up in what they called a home invasion. You were found cuddled up to her, Lu. I don’t know if they found the person who did it or what happened, but something strange is going on. I don’t know why you need to understand this, but I don’t think you’ll get all the answers you need from that one envelope.”

A breath whooshes out of me and I don’t know what to say. It’s a lot to process, but it doesn’t really tell me anything. It hasn’t explained why Emmet is obsessed with my family history, so I’m missing something and no doubt, just like with Liam, it’s right under my nose, just waiting to be discovered.

“I’m sorry I don’t have any better news,” she says, as she looks at me from under her lashes.

“It’s not your fault, I appreciate you going through it for me though,” I say with a weary sigh and she fidgets in her seat. Her leg bobs furiously and her hands are rubbing across her thighs repeatedly.

“I didn’t go through it all. There are still some pages that may be worth a look. I did what I could, but I just haven’t had the time to look at it all.” She stops fidgeting and I guess she’s waiting for me to say something.

“It’s okay, I guess it gives me something to do while the guys are away.” She passes me the envelope and I wonder why I never realized she had it before. “What did you look through?”

“Pretty much just what happened on the day she died and when you were adopted. I was planning to look through the rest, but I’ve been... distracted,” her voice trails off and I should ask her what’s going on and if I can help but I don’t. I just don’t know why.

Can I really classify myself as a good friend?

I SPREAD the entire contents of the envelope out across my bed, and I don’t even know where to start. I don’t really need to read through what it has on me post-adoption. I’ve lived it, I don’t need to see it in print like some weird memoir.

I pick up the file on Selene and my eyes mist over, I just don’t understand

why. It shouldn't affect me, should it? I was too young to know or remember her, so I can't miss her or be hurt by this, can I?

SELENE STARR, 1982 - 2005

Science major, with aspirations of becoming a microbiologist. Excelled in her classes and was popular amongst the Harkwright men and Academy girls. She was claimed early on, and a proposal occurring was not a surprise. Her refusal, however, was not taken lightly. Once she left the Academy, she could not be located for one year. Once located, another proposal was issued, her condition not seeming to be an issue.

Found dead on the 04/14/2005, suspected hit and run. The responsible party has yet to be located on the date of this report, and her case is no longer active. Due to sensitive information, her case has been sealed, and can no longer be accessed by anyone below the required level.

No proposals were allowed to be issued for six years in respect of Selene Starr and her passing. Her daughter was taken in by the state and was adopted by a Ms. Donna Carter. Recently widowed and mother to Miss Poppy Carter. She seems to be settled and well cared for. No further action will be taken at this time.

NO FURTHER ACTION. What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I would also love to know why the case has been sealed and which brother, if it is either of them, is my father.

I look over the redacted sheet and there are so many black lines, hiding information that I'll probably never be privy to. I don't understand why anyone would bother to do this, unless it's protecting the person who killed her. Although, it feels as though they still don't know who did it, unless it's changed since the report I just read.

I clean the papers off my bed and lie down, staring up at my ceiling and I wonder what tomorrow will bring and if Tucker would allow me to ring my mom again soon. I miss her and I want to ask about Poppy. I know I left her feeling angry and hurt, but she's still my sister and I want to use my time here to help her. No matter what happens between us or what is said, she'll always be my family.

“COME ON, honey pie. It’s time to go.” Mama clicks the straps in place, and drops a kiss on my head before softly ruffling my hair.

“Mama, not my hair,” I giggle up at her. My mama is so pretty, I like her smile.

“Okay, honey pie, I won’t mess it up too much,” she replies with a giggle of her own as she vanishes.

This weird feeling bubbles up inside me, I don’t know where she’s gone and I don’t like it. Until I move and I can see her behind me as I crane my neck and peer up at her.

“Out, mama.”

“Sorry, sweetie, but we’re running late. We don’t want to miss seeing daddy, do we?” she replies with her pretty smile and I shake my head with all my might.

We walk down the sidewalk; I point at the birds flying above us in the sky, and babble on and on about all the wonderful things I can see. Her voice is like music, as she replies to me and asks me questions.

I feel... happy. A huge smile is on my face and excitement is bubbling away at the thought of seeing daddy soon.

A car drives past slowly, and mama stops moving.

“Change of plan, sweetie. I forgot daddy is coming to us today. Let’s get you back home. Then I can make us both something to eat.” She looks at me with a smile, and I reach out to her.

She turns the stroller around and pushes me back home. I get to see daddy; I love daddy.

She unclips me and holds me tight, as she leaves the stroller by the door and places me in the living room.

“I’ll be right through there, I’ll fix us some lunch and then we can do something fun.” She rubs her nose against mine, and I squeeze her tight.

“I love you, my little ray of moonlight.”

“I love you, mama.” She gives me a big kiss on the cheek before leaving the room.

I pick up Teddy and look at the TV. Bright colors and shapes fill the screen and I can’t look away.

It’s so pretty!

A strange noise sounds from the kitchen, and I look around, as if

whatever made the weird noise would appear. It's quiet, and the TV is on.

My attention returns to it in moments, until I hear another noise. I clutch Teddy to my chest, as I wander out of the living room and make my way to the kitchen.

"Mama," I say, but she doesn't reply. Mama always answers me, no matter how busy she is.

I walk into the kitchen to see mama lying on the floor, and a man standing over her. I arch my neck and he takes one look at me before he runs for the back door. He's naughty. Mama doesn't like me running in the kitchen.

He didn't close it. Mama won't be happy.

I walk over to her and place my hand on her face. Her head slides across until she's facing me, her eyes are wide, but she's not saying anything.

"Mama." Tears are pouring down my face, and hiccups are joining the tears.

Why won't she say anything? I lie down beside her and pull her arm around me. Her chest isn't making that funny thump sound, what's wrong with my mama? Her arm falls down, and I grip it tighter.

"Please wake up, mama. Please."

MY PAJAMAS ARE STUCK to my sweat soaked skin and my sheets are no longer on the bed. I must have kicked them off. If only I could do the same thing to that damn dream. What was that? Was it real or just something my mind conjured up to upset me? It couldn't be a memory, it's not possible. I was four, and I've never remembered anything in that much detail before. Besides, who was that man? Better yet, why would he just leave me there?

I jump in the shower and try to wash the remnants of that dream down the drain; it isn't working, but maybe if I pray hard enough, I will forget it all.

I throw on a pair of leggings and a flowing tank top, before making my way down to the mess hall, grab some coffee, and join D at our table. She jumps as I sit down beside her and I can't figure out why. It isn't as though I was being quiet, and I could have sworn she was looking right at me.

"Are you okay?" I ask as I bring the sweet nectar to my mouth and practically inhale it.

“I’m tired and stressed, but I’m okay. What’s up with you? You look like you haven’t slept a wink,” she says, and my shoulders sag as I weigh up what I should or shouldn’t say.

“I had... a strange dream. It left me feeling confused, I guess. I can’t work out if it was just some weird dream, or a distant memory that I locked away. I’m guessing the former, seeing as it happened after I read about my m... Selene. I just need to forget about it.” I stroke the bridge of my nose as Twenty and Twenty-Eight appear at our table.

“Is everything okay?” I ask with a sigh, there’s a tightness in my gut, and my skin is prickling as I wait for something to happen. Daria just stares at them for a few moments before looking at her breakfast.

“We just wanted to come and see the girl who doesn’t care about the rules, or the right way to act. How long do you think you’re going to last?” Twenty asks with a sneer as Twenty-Eight tugs on the hem of her shirt.

“What are you talking about?” D asks, as she shoves her plate away and stands up, placing her hands on her hips.

“The way she acts, people have seen how she talks to the guys. Do you really think they’ll allow it once you finally spread those little legs of yours?” She may as well be spitting lava to go along with the heavy dose of vitriol.

“Come on, can we just go? This isn’t worth it,” Twenty-Eight says as she grabs her arm and pulls her away.

“Don’t forget, Five. You’re no one, nothing. They’ll throw you away like yesterday’s trash in no time.” Those are Twenty’s parting words to me as she strolls away and I sit here with my jaw on the table.

“What just happened?” I ask out loud and D looks at me for a moment before taking a drink from her cup.

“People are jealous, you know this. Just be careful,” she replies before she empties her plate in the trash and we set off for the swimming pool.

It feels as though everything is slipping through my fingers, and no matter how much I clutch at it... it just keeps on falling.

BACK IN SESSION

I'VE HAD an entire month to myself, spending time with Daria and trying to figure out what happened in the tower with Emmet, but I haven't come up with any answers yet. Not that it matters, classes start back up today and I know I'm going to have to put twice as much work in this time. I did okay last year but I want to do better. I don't want to barely scrape by. I may excel in my cooking classes, but it's the business one I need. Especially if I have any hope of starting up my own bakery and keeping it running long term.

My first class is cooking and I'm more than ready to get stuck in. I'm not surprised Aeron has dropped the class. He couldn't even cook scrambled eggs last year, so cakes and pastry would not be a good fit. I still don't get why he even bothered. If he wanted time with me, all he had to do was order it. So why go to so much trouble?

I claim my workstation and start setting out my supplies. I don't know what we'll be making for our first lesson, but I'm willing to do whatever the tutor decides. She comes in and starts pairing us off and my head shoots up when I hear my name be paired up with Dustin, a Harkwright.

He walks over and gives me a quick smile before he places his bag on the floor, and stares straight ahead, waiting for the tutor to say something.

"Today we will make cheese souffles," she says as she passes out the instructions and I pull out the ingredients. I already know what I will remove and change when I make these in my free time.

"You really enjoy this stuff," Dustin states, as I weigh everything out, and I don't reply until I'm finished.

"I live for this. It's the only thing that I want to do. This is what I'll do

when I leave here. What about you? I don't remember seeing you last year," I reply easily, and he smiles a little warmer this time.

"I've always enjoyed cooking, but my father wouldn't let me join this class last year. He feels it's a pointless endeavor, and he didn't want me to become distracted from my future career." He rolls his eyes and lets out a chuckle, but I don't think he's as carefree about all of this as he's trying to pretend.

"Whether you do this for fun or a career, it doesn't matter. We all have hobbies, why can't you have one too?"

"I completely agree. Well then, Five, I look forward to spending this school year with you." He gives me a wink before he preps his station, and I smile lightly, as I shake my head and get to work.

TOM IS WAITING for me when I come out of class, and he grips my elbow and leads me away from the fray. I don't ask what he's doing or where we're going, instead, I decide to just go with the flow, and hope that I won't be late for my next class.

Although that worry vanishes as he leads me into the north wing, and we come to a stop outside a door with Maddox's name engraved on a plaque to the side of it.

"I hope he'll speak to you. He barely spoke to anyone while we were away. Shane and Scott didn't even go to the same place we did." He seems worried, and it only endears him to me further as I kiss him lightly on the cheek, knock on the door, and then enter without an invitation.

He's sitting on a chair with his head in a book when I close the door behind me, and his head shoots up to look at me. His eyes widen as he takes me in before his shoulders tighten, and he closes the book with more force than is necessary.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but I've been worried about you," I say, and he scoffs in reply.

"Hey, I mean it. I miss you, Maddox, and I hate to see you closing yourself off like this. Plus, school is back in session and I could really do with my study buddy for business. I never would have made it through last year without you." I move closer and his shoulders bunch up further until

they're almost brushing his ears.

"I don't think I can do this, Luna. I don't even want to be here. I do so many things to please my family, but what about what makes me happy? Does that even matter? Because it doesn't feel as though it does."

"I'm sorry, I get it, though. I recently realized that I've done very little for myself. I'm using this place to get the career I want, why can't you do the same?" He sits up a little straighter, and his reaction gives me the strength to continue. "You can get the same education as us girls, so do it. Get what you need and then leave this place and never look back if that's what you want. You don't have to let your last name define you. Maddox, if you don't try to make something for yourself, then you'll always be ruled by it, by them." I don't need to elaborate on who I mean by them and he stands up. In a matter of moments, he's wrapping me up in his arms and holding on for dear life.

"Thank you, Luna. You have no idea how much I've been needing to hear something like that. Ever since Shane nearly killed me, I've been barely surviving. Thank you for reminding me I still have a reason to carry on."

"Anytime, my friend, anytime. You know I'm here for you though, right? You don't have to shoulder everything alone." I run my fingers through the back of his head. He sighs and relaxes more against me.

"It's not as easy as that, Luna. There are so many things I can't talk about to you. You're not a Harkwright." He pulls away and walks over to his window, and as I step closer, I can see a view of the gardens.

"What does that matter?" I ask, and he's looking at me as though I'm a moron.

Well, it was a pretty moronic question if you think about it.

"There are certain things that we're not allowed to discuss with... well, with outsiders. Family secrets that are never allowed to see the light of day, and it doesn't matter if I trust you or not. I can't do it. I want to, but I can't... I just can't." He drags his hand through his hair, and I feel so helpless.

"I get it." He levels me with a look and I smile sheepishly at him. "I mean, I don't, but I understand that families have their secrets. I'm still here though, even if you don't want to, or can't talk about it."

"Thanks, Luna. You make me wish I was born into a family like yours." My smile falls away at his words, but I try not to take it to heart. He doesn't understand what those words do to me, the reminder I wasn't born into my family. That mine was taken from me and my birth father hasn't once tried to find me, or how self conscious I feel whenever conversations regarding my

family crop up.

“Crap, Luna, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking, I meant nothing by it. I just meant that you’re so nice, and maybe my brothers would have been better people had we been dealt a kinder hand.” A flush is creeping across his cheeks as his chin dips down toward his chest. His shoulders curl forward, and his arms tuck against his sides.

“It’s okay, Maddox, no harm done. It’s not like I didn’t know I was adopted.” I feel so lame saying that out loud.

“No, but I’m guessing there are things that you don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” I cock my head to the side as he casts his eyes downward.

“Nothing, forget I said anything. Please. Luna, I shouldn’t have said anything.” His eyes are pleading with me, and what more can I do but nod my head.

“Sure thing, consider it forgotten.” These guys just love to be confusing.



THE REST of the week is rather uneventful, for the Academy at least. Aeron seems to be rather obsessed with my new found attitude and spends most nights in my room. Tucker never sought me out after my time with Emmet, so I don’t know what he wanted to show me, but clearly he’s changed his mind, and I’m trying to just let it roll over me and not be bothered by it. It’s probably better this way, I’m struggling to keep my emotions in check with three guys, let alone four, and I think Tucker would prove harder to keep from falling for than the others.

The second week follows suit, and I’m getting into a rhythm. Although, I still feel as though I’ve barely scratched the surface of this ‘new’ me.

It’s the end of the second week, Aeron has been gone for the last five days, but I think he’s back today at some point. I get up and find a handwritten note waiting for me on my kitchen counter.

MEET me tonight outside the maze, my Star, nine pm. Do not be late.

Your Prince.

FUCK NO, I'm not going anywhere near that damn maze, and I don't care how much of a twist his panties end up in. Two people have been attacked within there, I do not plan on becoming the third. I grab one of the freshly baked scones I made last night before sitting down on my sofa and switching Netflix on. It's a Sunday, and no one has made any claims, so I don't see any point in leaving this room unless I absolutely have to.

I get engrossed in the Peaky Blinders world, loving the way they speak, and the British accent. And the fact that they're complete assholes, which just make me think of the Harkwrights. I get through the first three episodes before someone taps on my door, and I shake my head before walking over and pulling it open to find Dustin looking down at me. Although, he's not as tall as my guys. *Shit, did I just think of them as my guys, and who exactly was I including in that sentiment?*

"Hey, Dustin, everything okay?" I ask, arching my body until it's shielded by the door, as I remember I'm only wearing a thin cami and a pair of sleep shorts, and I'm not exactly wearing a bra. My cheeks are heating already, and I hate how easy it is to make me blush.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind talking me through that souffle again. No matter what I do, mine always seems to sink and it's driving me crazy. I know we are not allowed to be alone together, but I thought if we went to the kitchens, we'd be safe enough." Internally, I'm sighing hard, but in reality, I nod my head and hold my finger up before closing the door.

Give me strength or just one Harkwright who doesn't want to claim a moment of my time, and I'll be a happy girl.

I throw on a pair of permitted leggings and a dress top that is the least sexy thing I can find for a day in the kitchen. It would be so much easier to cook in here, but no way am I going to suggest that out loud.

I throw my hair up into a messy bun before pulling my door open, and stepping out to join Dustin, who gives me a lopsided grin, and we make our way down the corridor.

"Fuck me, is there a single guy here you haven't opened your legs for?" One says as she opens her door and stares at us. I fist my hands and start counting back from ten to try to calm myself down.

"I'm still a virgin, you imbecile," I throw back, hating my no cuss rule right now.

"You are so full of shit," she fires back as a shadow passes by her, and my eyes flick up to find Aeron staring back at me. His mouth drops open and

she smiles wickedly as she brushes her fingers over his arm.

“Come on, Dustin, let’s go,” I say as he just stands there. I might not miss the way he throws her hand off him, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not allowed to get jealous, and I’ve hardly been saving myself for him.

It doesn’t stop it from hurting though, seeing as he claimed me. And he told Emmet he wouldn’t go along with his demands anymore. The worst part, if he had come into my room, I wouldn’t have turned him away. I guess, even though he knows I’d be more than willing to participate, like I have before, and I’d be eager to make sure he enjoyed it as much as me, he still went to One. Fine, he wants a girl who’ll open her legs to anyone, then he can have her. But he won’t be getting the same treatment from me.

BY THE TIME we leave the kitchens, Dustin has successfully made four souffles without them sinking. He is so happy and it’s such a weird thing to see on a Harkwright.

“Thanks so much for the help, you’re a great teacher,” he says as we stop at the bottom of the stairs in the foyer.

“Anytime, I enjoy baking and it’s nice to be able to help someone,” I reply easily as people pass us, at least they aren’t feeling the urge to say something bitter and petty like One.

“Star,” my head slumps forward and Dustin climbs a couple of stairs before he disappears. Yeah, I can’t say I blame him, I’d run off too, *if I thought I could get away with it.*

“I wasn’t doing anything,” I grind out, and he comes to a halt as my head snaps up to his and he looks at me as though I’m a puzzle and he’s not quite sure he has all the pieces.

“I wasn’t going to say you were, actually I’m here to talk to you about your friend,” he says, with no inflection in his voice.

“Okay,” I say, stretching the word out, and he heads for the main door. I guess I better follow him.

He walks toward the maze and I let loose a humorless chuckle, and his eyes return to mine.

“I am not setting foot inside that thing, not now and definitely not tonight. You go in there, then you will go in alone.” I won’t be moved on this one.

“What have you got against mazes? I’ve had some great times within this beauty,” he says with a smirk, and my eyes narrow further still.

“Maybe because there’s been two cases of a female being attacked inside there, and I don’t have any intention of being added to the list. If you want to get rid of me, there are easier ways than leading me to my death,” I say with an eye roll, and he shakes his head.

“You’d be with me. Don’t you think I could keep you safe, my Star? Surely, you know that I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.” He steps closer, but every step he takes forward, I match with a backwards one of my own.

“I know you’ve got some weird little obsession with me, b-b-but that doesn’t m-m-mean I’ll be safe. I’m telling you right now, Emmet, I am not going in there and Liam wouldn’t have made me.”

“I am Liam. When are you going to stop seeing us as two separate people?” His nostrils flare, and he keeps stalking forward.

“I have. Liam never existed, and I k-k-keep trying to tell myself t-t-that you can’t be all bad. No one can be that good at pr-pr-pretending, but then you talk to everyone like they’re less than you and you m-m-make me question my own belief.” My back hits the maze wall, and he steps once more, boxing me in with his arms.

“They are less than me.” He looks so confused as he says this and I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “I don’t get you, Luna. I don’t treat you like that, so what does it matter?”

“Because you barely treat me like a person. Why can’t you just be nice? Be a little more ordinary and stop walking around as if the whole world owes you something. If you cared what I thought about you, more than just wanting to own me, then you would try a little harder. You would stop telling me where to go and who to be with. Better yet, you would stop letting yourself into my room while I’m sleeping, because it’s creepy.” I push against his chest and he lets me.

“Don’t forget where you are, Five. You are getting away with more than most girls. Try to not let it go to your head.” He looks me up and down with a shake of his head and starts to walk away, before turning around to look at me. He takes a few steps backwards, but stays close enough so I can still hear him without having to raise his voice. “I’m wondering if you’re even worth it. Enjoy your day, Five. I have rescinded your invitation to join me tonight.” And with that, he leaves me to stand here with his words swimming around in

my mind.

You're not worth it. It's always worse hearing what you already believe about yourself, coming from someone else.

I WALK through the gardens until I come across the shack. I won't go in there because I see it as Tom's place, but I can't tear my eyes away from it. Why is it even here? How does it fit into this pretentious world? Is there even a place in this world for such a run-down, unassuming shack? Will it stand the test of time or crumble like everything else? Am I even still thinking about the shack?

I hear a noise and rush to the side, hiding behind one of its walls. Footsteps fall, sure and swift, and my heart is jack hammering against my ribs. I don't know why I'm having this reaction, but something is screaming in me not to move, that whoever is making that noise is dangerous and I need to stay hidden. I try to calm my breathing, as quietly as I can when a hand grips my arm.

I don't think as a scream sounds out and my fist connects with a firm jaw, and then my eyes look up and I'm met with a storm of red hair, and my hands fall limply at my side. I just hit a Harkwright, I am so done. Even worse though, I hit the only one who has been nothing but nice to me.

"Tom, g-g-god I a-a-am so sorry. I d-d-didn't know it was you, I th-th-th..." I bury my head in my hands, and just wait for my sentence.

He moves behind me and starts steering me wherever he wants, I will not bother looking up. I'll just go wherever he wants to lead. Only, he isn't leading me far before he lifts me up by my hips, and then places me on the floor.

"Look at me, Moonbeam." He doesn't sound mad. If anything, it almost sounds as though he's... amused.

I look at him through my fingers to find a smile on his mouth as he rubs at his jaw, a hint of a bruise already starting to form.

"You thought I was the maze menace. Yeah, in hindsight, I should have said something but I had no idea why you suddenly ran around the side. I just wanted to check on you." His eyes are dancing, and I can't understand how he can be so happy right now.

“I just punched you, Sunbeam. I’m gone, finito, it’s as easy as that.”

“No, you’re not, because nothing happened. It’s not your fault I slipped on a wet floor and went chin first into the sink. Shit happens.” I pull my hand away as I take him in, not daring to believe his words.

“You would do that for me? I don’t understand.” I feel so lost right now and I miss the new persona I’ve adopted. Where is the girl who kisses a guy because she feels like it and gets high instead of crying about it? I like that girl, this one just makes me mad.

“It was an accident, but I have to ask, why are you so certain I’m not the one leaving the women inside the maze?” His words should scare me, right? Either way, they don’t.

“I don’t know, I just am.”

“Okay, well thanks, I guess. Either way, you’re stuck here with us, sorry to say, but I’m not about to offer you a pass again.” His eyes bore into me, and this sudden desire jolts through me as I rise to my knees and thread my fingers through his hair.

“You’ve got that ‘I feel like it’ look again. What are you planning, Moonbeam?” he asks, but he doesn’t move, just sits here letting me cup his face.

I lean forward and run my lips across the bruise I caused to mar his skin, and a low rumble starts in his chest as I move to his mouth and kiss him in a long, drawn out way that I feel all the way down to my toes.

He pulls back with a smirk that all the guys seem to be able to pull off, before he climbs to his feet, and pulls me up alongside him.

“I think it’s time to get you back to the Academy. I’m sure Aeron or Emmet will be looking for you.”

“What if I’d rather stay here with you?” I jut my chin out as I cup him through his jeans.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I only have so much restraint and you’ve all but worn it out,” he says as he seizes my wrist, but he doesn’t pull me away.

“I’m sick of being a pawn in Emmet’s game and a stand in for Aeron when he can’t get to someone better. I’m just tired of feeling worthless, and half the time, I feel as though I don’t even rank second best.” My voice wavers but I don’t break my eyes away from his, and he slams his lips against mine and plunders my mouth with his tongue.

He isn’t toying with me or teasing; he knows what he wants and he’s

taking it. Dominating me with his mouth as he thrusts his hand down into my leggings and panties, and pushes two fingers inside me without warning. He swallows my cries as my hands fumble at his pants until I get the button open and the zipper drawn down. Our lips don't break, even as I push his pants over his ass and slip my hand into the waistband of his boxers, gripping him in my hand and sliding up and down.

We move until I'm pushed against the wall, and he takes his fingers from me just as I'm about to come. My cries are more out of frustration this time as he grips my leggings and pulls them down my legs, kneeling down in the process, and then rips my panties from my body. I feel a sharp sting when the fabric pulls and then snaps, but it's forgotten when his mouth closes over me and he thrusts his tongue deep inside. His hands are palming my ass and holding me in place. I can't keep my hips still as I ride his face, reaching the crest and then falling apart. Crying out long and loud, and it feels like it goes on forever as he continues to lick and nip at my sensitive flesh before he returns to his feet.

I slide his boxers down and grip him in my hand. Only, when he takes a step back, he catches on the pants that are caught around his ankles and falls to the floor. I can't hold the laugh in as he looks at me with irritation written across every line of his features, and the scowl on his face all but does me in.

I'm still laughing as I pull my legs out of my leggings and then drop until I'm straddling his thighs. His hands come up to my hips and he kneads the muscles as I bend over him to claim his mouth in another kiss. My hand is between us as I pump him repeatedly, his thumb falls on my nub, and he rubs furiously. I rock my hips in time and he groans as I slide higher up his thighs and I come into contact with his balls.

Our eyes meet and we freeze, still touching but not daring to move. He groans hard and loud as he pushes me back down his thighs, and away from where I suddenly realize I want to be.

I slide my way back up, but his hands on my hips halt my movements. I bend at the waist and run my tongue up his stomach and over to his nipple.

He growls before he flips us and I'm suddenly on my back with him poised between my legs, and his chest is beating hard. I can feel his tip hitting my sweet spot with every jerk it does.

"No offense, Moonbeam, but I don't think you know what you're doing right now. If we do this, there's no going back. You can't decide to give yourself to someone for the first time again. You'll be stuck with the choice

you made for the rest of your life.” He thinks I have doubts and maybe I should have, but they’re just not there.

I grip hold of him and line him up, I won’t lift my hips. If he wants this, then all he has to do is push his hips down and give me something real.

“I want you, Tom. I’ve felt your hands and mouth on my body, and I’ve seen how you screw a girl and I want to feel how you...” I hesitate, this is one self-imposed rule that is hard to break. “Fuck.” It comes out breathy and dirty and his eyes darken as he grips his cock, and starts rubbing himself against me.

“I don’t have a condom,” he says through gritted teeth.

“I’ve been on the implant since my birthday,” I grit out and then he gives me a bruising kiss, before rearing up and lifting me into his arms.

He slams me up against the wall once more, my legs circling his waist as he uses one hand to grip my ass, and the other to make sure he’s still lined up just right.

“I don’t fuck soft. I know you’re a virgin, but I can’t give you what most girls will get their first time.” It’s his last warning, I can still back out if I want too.

“Good.”

He slides himself up and down between my folds, drawing out the torment before he thrusts in, all the way, and holds himself in place as a grimace passes over my face at the sudden surge of pain. He’s too big, and the fact is, he isn’t even the biggest out of the guys. *Fuck me, they’re going to destroy me.*

“I know it hurts, but if I move, I will soon replace it with more pleasure than you will know what to do with.”

“It’s okay,” I whimper out, as he takes my full weight in his hands, before placing me on the floor. He slips out during the process.

He lines himself back up with me before he pushes himself back in; I cry out at the pain and sink my teeth into my bottom lip as he moves. Pulling out before thrusting back in, his thumb is rubbing at my clit and my moans grow louder. He takes his thumb away before sliding his hands under my ass, my back lifts off the floor as he angles me up, and starts undulating his hips harder and faster. Driving himself into me, hitting a spot that makes my toes curl every time and I can’t keep quiet. My cries ring out around us as I tighten around him. My vision goes black as my orgasm passes through me, and his grunts mix with my moans as his thrusts become jerky, and his mouth

closes over mine as he lets go and comes undone.

We stay connected for a few minutes, and the feel of his weight on me feels better than I would ever dare admit out loud. He gives me a few more lazy kisses as he pulls out, and I can't help but wince a little, not that it matters. I just had sex for the first time and it was... amazing. The way he moved and felt inside me and the way he looked.

He grabs a few sheets of tissue from somewhere in the shack before pressing them over me, it's a little too much. A little too intimate, and it's hard not to fool myself into seeing him as something more.

"I tried to hold back a little, but damn," he says with a chuckle, as he shakes his head and looks down at me with warmth easy to see in his eyes.

"You didn't look the same way you usually do," I say with a flaming cheeks. *I wish I could keep my thoughts to myself.*

"Do you watch all the men fucking?"

"No, just you," I say in reply and his smile grows bigger as he passes me my leggings, sans panties, and I make quick work of putting them on.

"I told you before, I'm not bored when I'm around you. You may also be one of the few girls I didn't want to come as soon as possible with."

I stand up, wincing at the tenderness between my legs, and he pulls me up against him, circling my waist with his arms.

"I thought I would feel differently once I had sex for the first time." Is that a stupid thing to say out loud? *Probably when it's being said to a Harkwright.*

"So, how do you feel?" His smirk is lighting me up, and I hate that I'm returning it with a smile of my own.

"Like I'm still me but also, I definitely want to do it again."

"Well then, I would hate to leave you feeling unsatisfied," he replies as he backs me up against the wall, takes my leggings off and hoists me around his waist.

He pushes in, his fingers digging into my ass and his mouth is leaving open mouth kisses across my neck. *Fuck me, how many times can he go?*

A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

I THOUGHT HAVING sex would have been general knowledge in a matter of days, but a month has passed, and nothing has happened. Emmet hasn't declared me ready for him now, in fact, he hasn't paid me any attention since he said I wasn't worth it. I may be claimed by Aeron, but I haven't seen him. He got called away a day after Tom fucked me into oblivion, and he hasn't returned.

Although, I haven't exactly been alone. I've lost count of how many times I have woken up to bruising kisses that always lead to Tom driving into me like there'll be no tomorrow. I'm thinking the bedrooms must be soundproof or something, because no one seems to know. I wonder why he hasn't told anyone, but I don't want to ruin whatever is happening between us. Even if it is scaring me, because I can't stop thinking about him, and fucking Tom has become my new favorite thing to do. It isn't just that though, it's the way he takes care of me after grabbing a washcloth and cleaning me up. The kiss he leaves on my forehead when he sneaks back out, and I pretend to be asleep. The fact he calls me Moonbeam, and talks about anything and everything with me.

Fuck, this isn't good. I'm beginning to care for him, and I don't know how to prevent it from turning into something more. It's made worse by the fact I haven't seen him with any other girl. That's not to say it isn't happening, but my foolish little mind likes the idea that he's only with me. So *fucking dangerous*, I should try to say no. Tell him I'm not interested anymore and I'm ready to be with my claimer. Only, he's like a drug I can't resist, and I don't have the strength to try to turn him away. I also don't want

to be with anyone else right now, and I'm not missing any of the other guys, other than Tucker.

I shake it off and open my door to find Daria waiting for me. I still don't know what Emmet had wanted to tell me about her, but I guess it was just his way to get my attention. Yet more reasons to stay far away from him.

"Hey, D, how's it going?" I ask with a smile as I close my door and loop my arm through hers.

"I'm fine." I know I'm a terrible friend when it takes her choked voice for me to notice her puffy eyes and red nose.

"D, what's wrong?" I bring us to a halt and steer her around until she's looking at me head on.

"Nothing, honestly, I just don't even want to think about it, let alone talk. Is that okay?" she asks, and I smile gently as I nod my head.

"Of course, but you can talk to me. You know that, right? I won't repeat it or anything, you can trust me."

"I know and if it gets any worse, then I will, but I'm still confident I can handle this myself. Anyway, how about you? Any news on when Aeron will come back?" I hate when people put the spotlight on me, but it's a little more bearable when it's my bestie doing it.

"No, but I don't really get told anything, and it isn't as if he cares enough to do it himself. He's probably counting down the minutes until he releases me and claims someone else, probably One," I say in response as a hand lands on my shoulder, and D stares over my head.

"Hey, Aeron. Welcome back," she says awkwardly, and I really want the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

"Hey, Daria. I'm going to be taking my claim now. She'll see you in the mess hall."

She stares at me with wide eyes before flicking her gaze to him and then bringing it back. She mouths, "sorry," and then walks off just as I'm spun around and thrown over his shoulder, fireman style.

He carries me out of the wing and into his instead, past Tucker, who watches on with disinterest, and Tom, whose eyes lock with mine and don't break away until I'm in Aeron's room, and he's slamming the door closed behind us.

He puts me down onto my feet before moving over to his bed and drops down as he places a cigarette to his lips and sparks it up. I'm not sure why he's brought me in here, but I refuse to be the first to speak.

“Are you jealous, Little Zero?” He looks at me through hooded eyes as they take their time perusing my body, but I refuse to fidget. I don’t feel self-conscious in my clothes anymore. I hate to say, but Tom has helped to rid me of any doubts I had left.

I like the crop top that hugs my cleavage without putting it on more display and the supple, brown leather pants that make my ass look good, or so Tom likes to keep pointing out. Add my smokey eyes and red lips, and I’m feeling good with the way I look today, at least on the outside.

“Of course not, Sir. That would be breaking the rules,” I shoot back with a smirk, and his eyes light up to match the burning cherry on his cigarette.

“So, it wouldn’t bother you to hear what I do to the girls when you’re not around. How loud I make them scream as I sink inside them. I mean, I haven’t been rubbing it in your face, so I should probably get some brownie points there,” he throws out with a smirk of his own, but I won’t react to his words.

“Not at all. You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

He jumps to his feet, his cigarette dropping to the floor, and he doesn’t even care. Although I’m standing here, staring at it, hoping it doesn’t set alight to something.

“Now, unlike you, that makes me jealous. I don’t like it, Five. I don’t like it at all.” He grips my hips and slams me into him, my hands going to his chest, and I want nothing more than to push him away.

“It shouldn’t bother me if another guy touches you, and I shouldn’t care that we only have two years guaranteed, but I can’t help it. I’m so fucked in the head, and this is just driving that point home even more.”

He grinds his hips into me hard when he says driving, and I bite my lip to stop any noises from escaping.

“I’m not capable of being a good guy, I’m going to keep hurting you and there’s nothing I can do about it. Other than set you free and hope that Shane isn’t next on the waiting list.” His words confuse me, and he must be able to read that on my face. “You are in high demand, Little Zero. There’s an entire list on who will be the next to claim you, once I’ve released you. Although, Emmet only wants you once you’re no longer virginal, so you’ll be safe where he is concerned.”

Ahem.

“Why are you so convinced you can only ever hurt me? I’ve seen a nicer side to you, Aeron, and honestly, I like that guy. Why do you always fall

back to... the guy you were on the retreat? You are capable of so much more, and the only one holding you back is yourself.” I may be overstepping, but it has to be said and I can’t see anyone else having the balls to say it to him.

“Because it’s set in my DNA, baby, and it’s inevitable.” He laughs sardonically and I shake my head as I bring my hand up to cup his face. It surprises me that he leans into my touch, but I like that he is.

“I call horse crap. Do you know how many people blame their actions on their family when really, they could have at least tried to change? Now, I know you always self-destruct whenever you come back from wherever it is you disappear to. You get wasted and quite frankly, you’re a little unbearable. The thing is, I can’t run out on you, Aeron. I’m one of the few girls who doesn’t see you as another conquest. I like your company, even when you’re high, as long as you’re the better version of yourself.” I inch my head forward. My nose brushes against his and I feel his breath falter. “Despite myself, I do like you and I have a feeling that you are more capable than you believe.”

“You want me to change?” he croaks as he clears his throat.

“No, I just want you to be one person. Either the one who interrupted my baking sessions and held me after the garden incident, or the one who returns. The one who doesn’t give two hoots who he hurts. Can you do that? No matter your answer, only ever do it for yourself. Aeron, you could do something amazing. You just have to see it for yourself.”

“I don’t think I’m worth it, Luna. My name makes people think I get everything I want but they’re wrong. It holds me back and ties me to a future I have no desire in. I feel worthless, and every time I’m forced to go back to my mother, she wastes no time in reminding me of Hit.” his eyes are shining with his tears, and my heart is breaking. *I’ve never seen so much emotion from him before.*

I never realized how similar we were. We seem like complete opposites, but now I’m seeing him for who he truly is. All I want to do is show him that he isn’t worthless, and he deserves the good in this world.

My eyes search his as he stares back, I can feel him deep in my soul. Mine flicker from side to side before they drop to his mouth, I move slowly because I know Aeron does not kiss. He doesn’t move back, say a word, I doubt he even breathes in the few moments it takes me to place my lips against his. Our eyes are still open, which is strange, but it doesn’t feel like it. I half expect him to rear back or say something sinful and ruin the moment,

but he shocks the hell out of me.

His hand cups the back of my head as his eyes drift closed, and he tilts my head the way he wants. Deepening our kiss and sliding his tongue along the seam of my lips, until they part for him.

His other hand strokes across my hip as mine fist in his shirt, not quite believing what is happening right now. He breaks away, and drops a kiss on my nose, both cheeks, and beneath my eyes before kissing my mouth one last time.

“You make me want to do bad things to you, Little Zero.” My arms thread around his waist as his nose skims up my neck before his tongue follows the trail.

“What’s stopping you?” He looks at me curiously, his eyebrows drawn down before a light chuckle falls free.

“Because it’s up to you who you go with for the first time, and I don’t know how long I can hold off for. It’s the other reason I’m releasing my claim on you, I won’t be the reason Emmet finally gets his way.” My teeth sink into my bottom lip as he steps back and runs a hand through his already messy hair.

“You’re right, you won’t be,” I say without thought, and his hand drops as he cocks his head to the side.

“You’ve chosen then. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised I wasn’t on your list.” His laugh is mirthless as he sits down and starts rolling a joint.

“You were top on the list, Aeron. But E-E-Emmet declared me off limits to y-y-you and you always seem to listen to him. C-c-can I go now?” I ask as my feet fidget, I’m on the edge of telling him the truth and I need to get away before I do.

“Go for it. There’ll always be someone better waiting.” He falls back as his eyes drift closed, and he’s gutted me without even knowing it.

“I meant what I said, Aeron. Y-y-you need to decide w-w-which version is really you. S-so, I’m going to tell you something. If it stays a s-s-secret, then I’ll know I was right about you and if it doesn’t... well, then I’ll be counting the minutes until I’m no longer tied to you.” He sits back up and I take a deep breath and square my shoulders. My hand falling onto the door handle, ready to make my escape as soon as the words hit the air. “You won’t be the reason Emmet won’t hold back, because I’m no longer a virgin.”

His eyes grow impossibly wide as I pull open the door and dart to freedom, hoping I’m not wrong about Aeron. Otherwise, Emmet will come

for me. No matter how he's been acting lately, I can't see him giving up the chance to get what he's wanted. To consume me and then walk away once he finally has his fill.

I HEAD STRAIGHT to the mess hall to find D waiting for me with a plate of food, and tears prick my eyes at her kindness. As I take my seat, an announcement sounds over an intercom I didn't even realize they had in here.

"An assembly will take place one hour from now. Full attendance is mandatory."

"That's strange, there wasn't one being held this morning. I hope they haven't discovered anyone else in the maze," D says and I shrug my shoulders, unsure of what else I'm supposed to do.

"There she is, the virgin who wants to have all the men for herself. They'll get bored with your teasing soon enough," One says, as she sashays over to us.

"I don't want all the men," I say with an eye roll, and hers narrow in return.

"I don't give a fuck how many you want. I'm here to tell you I have my top three, and you will not be taking them from me."

"A top three? Seriously? I know they may have assigned you as One, but you aren't better than the rest of us. I bet it eats you up inside, knowing that I got out of being a Zero without once opening my legs. How many guys have you spread them for?" I stand up and walk around the table, as everything goes quiet.

Sure, I may not normally do this, but I guess I'm channeling my inner Poppy, or at least, the version she showed me in the hospital.

"You little bitch." She steps up, crowding me and getting in my face. "Emmet, Aeron, and Tucker are my endgame. I don't care which one I get, but I will have one of them, and I won't let you get in my way." She's seething and her spittle coats my face, but I resist the urge to wipe it off.

"The only person who will get in your way is you. It's not my fault they don't want what you're selling." Her face grows red as her hand slaps across my face, sending my head snapping to the side.

I right myself, not making a damn noise as our eyes meet and her face

grows pale as her eyes dart over my shoulder.

“Violence is not permitted unless you have permission or were ordered to do it. You are done One,” comes from Jake, but I don’t dare look back at him.

“She had permission. Well done, One,” Scott comes to stand behind her with a devilish smirk on his face. She smiles at me, full of bravado now that she has a Harkwright behind her.

“If that’s the case, then Five has permission to retaliate,” Jake replies, and my eyes slide shut. I want to refuse the offer, but how will it be taken if I do? That people can walk all over me and I’ll continue to let them. *Like I always have.*

I open them and smile sweetly at her, her eyebrows draw down right before my fist slams into her nose, and I feel the crunch as her nose breaks under the force. My heart thumps rapidly in my chest as she cries out. She turns around to bury her face in Scott’s chest, but he steps back.

“Pitiful. The selection this year has been nothing but disappointing.” He shakes his head and returns to his table. And she just cries.

D comes to my side and leads me out of the mess hall, and I don’t take a single glance back toward anyone in there. It isn’t until we are sitting in her room that I finally let myself relax and try to tell myself that I only did what I had to. If only I could make myself believe it.



It’s strange sitting in front of the stage on one of the top seats, but at least I’m not up on stage. This is definitely more preferable, *I think.*

No one says a word as we wait for it to begin, I wonder if they’re as nervous as I am at the thought that yet another female may have been hurt, and we still don’t know who by.

Crystal takes to the stage, her heels clacking against the wood floor, and her eyes are as cold as ice as she takes us in, not even sparing a glance for the men.

“Because of the nature of this impromptu assembly, Sir Harkwright will not be in attendance. Due to unforeseen circumstances, he has granted me the capacity to release and announce a claim for today.” Her eyes scan the group before resting on me. *I can’t be imagining the hostility, right?*

“Five, you have been released. You are no longer owned by Aeron.” Shane rubs his hands together in glee as he stares at me, licking his lips. “However, as of tomorrow, you will be claimed once more. It is protocol to have at least one day rest between a claiming, if it involves the same female. Therefore, tomorrow you will be given to a new Harkwright.”

My eyes shoot to Aeron and he stares right back, although I also have Shane and Emmet staring as well. *He made his choice.* He told my secret and threw me away while doing it. If I don’t get given to Emmet, then it will be Shane. Is it getting hot in here?

Daria squeezes my hand, and I stare at her wide eyed as my heart beats erratically, I need to get the fuck out of here. *Now!*

“...has been claimed by Emmet.”

Come again? Emmet has claimed someone. Fuck, I guess he wasn’t kidding when he said I wasn’t worth it. *Why isn’t anyone going up to the stage?*

“Twenty-Eight, make your way to the stage this instant.” Her pitch takes on a whiney quality that hurts my ears, but no one gets up.

Twenty-Eight, isn’t that Emily? The girl who was crying in the changing room, the one that Emmet tied to his bed and left there because she didn’t want to be strangled. That girl?

“She isn’t here,” is shouted out, and Crystal purses her lips as her foot starts tapping erratically.

“Who said that?”

“I did,” everyone turns as one to look at Twenty, who is standing and glaring at... Emmet. *Death wish or what.*

“I’d watch who you stare at like that, Twenty. Bitterness is very unbecoming,” he says while he rolls his shirtsleeves up his arm.

“Do you know where she is?” Crystal asks, I guess she’s trying to re-establish some order, but she’s failing miserably.

“She was supposed to study with me last night, but cancelled because the Prince called on her. I haven’t seen her since. She didn’t open her door this morning.” Her voice cracks on the end, and her hands tremble. She can’t be faking that fear, but she can’t seriously think Emmet had anything to do with this, can she?

“Someone should check the maze,” another girl calls out and Crystal is becoming more and more ruffled. She can’t seem to stand still, and she’s rubbing furiously at her hand.

“That is enough! No one will go out to the maze. This girl is unreliable and will be dealt with accordingly.” She does not have control of this situation. She may want to be the next Vanderbilt, but she’ll never garner the same reaction.

“Fuck that, she’s probably been murdered like Ms. Vanderbilt,” comes from further in the back, and I think she’s about to lose it.

“No one has been murdered,” she screams, and even the Harkwrights are staring at her as though she’s grown another head.

“Girls, back to your rooms and remain there until told otherwise. I hereby cancel classes for the day,” Emmet’s authoritative voice rises above the growing panic, and we get to our feet.

The rest of the girls are far from quiet as they mumble and argue with one another, but no one will go against Emmet’s orders. Whether the maze gets checked, we’re under house arrest.



I HAVE BAKED SO many cookies, and I even have a lemon drizzle cake. What am I even going to do with all of this? I brush the flour off my hands and lay my apron on the counter before jumping in the shower. I have no idea how long it will be until any of us hear anything, but I doubt we’ll get any proper answers. Not in this place.

I put the shower on as high a temperature as I can handle, and stand under the spray, hoping the heat will help wash away my tight muscles and the anxiety curling in my stomach. I know I should be worried about the girl, and what may have happened to her, but I’m not. That must make me a horrible person, but all I can think about is how Aeron dismissed me. Sure, I haven’t had anyone throw my lack of purity in my face, but that doesn’t mean he kept it to himself. Besides, why let me go when he no longer had to worry about putting my notch on Emmet’s bedpost?

Did I make a mistake choosing Tom? Maybe I shouldn’t have told Aeron, and then there’s the way I punched One in her smug little face. That isn’t me. Or at least, it wasn’t. I can feel myself spiraling, and I don’t know if I like the person I’m becoming. I bet Darius would say I have changed for the worse if he could see me now.

I rest my head against the cool tiles, my hair falls around my face

shielding me from the outside world. A low whistle pierces the air, but I guess that could have come from the shower. A louder one follows close behind, and I lift my head and jump back as my eyes lock on Emmet's.

"Get out," I shout, even though it won't change a thing. He's now seen me naked, and he doesn't have to listen to a word I say. So why does he? I watch slack jawed as he turns around, walks out the room, and closes the door.

I quickly turn the shower off and step out, my hands are trembling as I tie my dressing gown around myself and wrap a towel around my head. I shouldn't have shouted that at him, and although I'm not as scared of them as I used to be, I still need to remember the rules.

Yeah, you do. What the fuck is going through your mind? Fuck, I am your mind, and even I'm confused.

I take a quick glance in the mirror, psyching myself up for whatever is about to be said. I doubt he's left altogether, oh no. Emmet came for a reason and he won't just walk away until he does whatever he intends to do or say.

I leave the bathroom to find Emmet sitting on my bed with his phone in hand. He slides his gaze over me, from the tips of my toes, to my towel wrapped head. A small smirk plays at his lips, before it falls away and his eyes turn pensive.

He gets to his feet and walks closer to me, only a mere foot separating us. We don't seem eager to close the rest of the distance between us.

"W-w-what are you d-d-doing here?"

"A guard will be assigned to your room at all times, and will also shadow you. I believe you are familiar with Darius, so it shouldn't be too difficult." His eyes are so dark, a normal person would be scared. *I guess I'm far from normal.*

"Is your claim okay?" My eyes flick to the floor as I push the words out, and the room is silent, only our breathing to be heard.

I look back up and he cocks his head to the side, taking me in, and I feel more naked than I did when I was in the shower.

"She's gone, I guess another one bites the dust." He's so fucking cold, and goosebumps spread across my arms.

"Who found her?"

"I did, in the maze like the others. Anyway, we're having a party and I order you to attend. Seeing as your fair game, for the night at least, wear something revealing." His eyes scan me again, and this time, I wish he would

just look away.

“Why do you insist on playing mind games? Do you hate me that much? You don’t even know me.” Tears sting my eyes. I won’t let them fall, not even as his hand shoots out and slides into my hair, yanks my head back, and causes pain to shoot through my head.

“I warned you about me. So many times, I tried to get you to see who I was but you wouldn’t listen. You just kept enticing me further, and now, I can’t leave you alone. Do us both a favor, Star. Get yourself fucked so I can finally sink myself into that pussy of yours, and then we can go our separate ways.” He pulls me by my hair until he can push me onto the bed, and then he uses his knee to spread my legs.

My dressing gown lies between them, it keeps me hidden from his stare, but it’s so thin, I can feel every hard edge of him as he sinks between them. His hand circles my throat, and he lowers more of his weight onto me.

“You call it mind games and I call it a day inside my mind. I don’t have a fucking clue what I want from you, Luna. At first, it was to fuck with my father, but now, it’s for me. I crave you, like I’m an addict and you’re the only thing that can chase away my cravings. My sweet fix.” His hand squeezes my throat slightly as he draws my bottom lip into his mouth, and sucks on it hard.

I shouldn’t like any part of what he just said, but damn it. I really do, it’s so messed up, but I find it oddly endearing, and I’m starting to worry for my sanity right now.

“I can’t wait to slide my cock into this warm mouth, I’d fuck it right now, but I want to claim your pussy before any other hole. Pick someone, Luna, because I’m growing tired of waiting, and those other girls aren’t even worth being called a consolation prize.” He kisses me hard, sucks my tongue into his mouth and devours me.

He pulls away as suddenly as he started before he climbs off the bed and his gaze trails down to my core. My only saving grace is the fact that it’s still covered.

“Why did y-y-you c-c-claim her?”

“Because no matter how many girls I call upon, none of them get you out of my system. I thought maybe she would. If she would stop pissing me off. She’s only been with a couple of guy and doesn’t chase after us like a lost puppy, so she seemed like a good bet. Even if she was too vanilla for my liking, but I guess I’ll never find out now. See you tonight, Star. Darius will

wait to escort you to the north wing.” He turns around and walks away.

“Don’t forget, my Star, you still need to figure out the legacy,” he says in a low, deep tone.

“I already have.” It slips out, even though I try to keep it in, and he spins around to look at me.

“Oh, really? Feel free to share the news, Star.”

“My birth mother was an Academy girl, s-s-she even had a proposal but turned it down.” He smirks at me before leaning against the door.

“So, what does that tell you? Come on, fill in the blanks, my clever girl.”

“What I just said, she was here and now, so am I. There was nothing else in the file,” I exclaim, running a hand down my face.

“That’s true. Okay, Star, don’t take too long getting ready and remember, make it revealing.” He winks at me and I don’t even know what to think.

“That’s it? After all of this, and that’s all you have to say?” I really can’t believe this.

“There’s nothing more to say. Don’t worry, Luna, it will all make sense in the end.” He walks out without looking back, and I just lie here, trying to make sense of my fucked up life.

LOSING OUR INHIBITIONS

A GOLD SHIMMERY body con dress clings to me and falls just past my ass. Add that to my tan heeled gladiator sandals, cat eyes, and red lips and I feel so far out of my element, I just want to turn around and head back to my room. Instead, Darius walks behind me as we move down the corridor of the north wing, and slowly approach the game room. Music thumps through the door as I place my hand on the handle and let myself in.

I can see Aeron smoking and passing it around between himself, Tom, and Scott. Tucker is sitting in the corner staring at everyone as though they have wronged him somehow, and Emmet sits on a sofa surrounded by four of the girls. Each with their hands on him. Arms, legs, rubbing his cock through his pants and trailing kisses across his neck, but never once going for his mouth. Aeron has One sat on his lap, her nose is covered in tape, and her eyes are black and puffy. It looks like it hurts a lot. That makes me feel good, and I hate myself for it.

I make my way over to them as Darius takes his spot next to the door, his eyes scanning the room and staring in my general vicinity. At least he takes his job seriously. It makes me feel somewhat safe, and that's the best I can hope for right now.

Scott's eyes fall on me the minute I enter, but it's the sight of Aeron with One that has me reaching for a glass without even questioning what's in it. I throw it back and it goes down easily, a fruity taste dances across my tongue, and warmth seeps through me as I have another glass before rolling my shoulders and my eyes fall on Scott once again.

"There she is. Come sit on my lap, Five," Scott orders as he pushes

Thirty-Six off him, and she falls to the floor with a disgruntled yelp, shoots me a death stare, and then scampers off.

I can feel Tom's eyes on me as I take a seat, and I try to swallow over the large lump lodged in my throat.

"Sixteen, get us drinks," he orders as he pulls me flush against him, and casually places his hands high on my thighs, brushing against the hem of my dress. One inch higher and he'll touch my panties, and I'm praying to whoever may listen, that he'll leave me alone.

Sixteen comes back with a tray of drinks and Scott takes a glass that looks like it's filled with water, and another with whiskey, before he offers me the clear one.

"She doesn't drink," Tucker growls from his seat, his eyes stare intently at Scott's hands, and he pushes them up just a fraction higher than before.

"She can decide for herself. What will it be, Five? Water or Vodka?"

"Screw it," I mutter as I take the glass and throw it back. I'm not an idiot, I already know the fruity number was far from alcohol free. Although vodka isn't the same as I choke when it burns the back of my throat, and he laughs before he orders Sixteen to grab the bottle. Alcohol seems like a great reprieve, and hopefully, I won't notice Scott's hands if I keep drinking.

"Take your fill, Five. You may make this evening more interesting," he whispers in my ear, and I remember the way his voice made me feel when I saw him on the train. I feel a faint resemblance to those feelings now.

I hate Scott, there's no doubt about it, but I don't have to like these assholes. I just have to follow their orders and try to not get on their bad side.

I pour another glass before Sixteen adds lemonade with a soft smile and then walks off to stand beside Jake. I hadn't even realized he was here. At least he isn't staring daggers at D.

My eyes flicker around the room. I can see Bradley, but my bestie is nowhere to be found, and my stomach twists.

"Don't think, just do," Scott says, as his hands push my hem out of the way, and he plays with the spaghetti strap that holds my panties together.

I take another drink, and another, before I forego the lemonade and the glass, and start taking pulls from the bottle. I hope the more I drink, the less I'll remember whatever Scott has planned for me. Tom watches wide eyed, and Tucker looks pensive, but I'm starting to forget to care.

"Kiss my neck, Five. I want to feel your teeth, but no hickeys," he demands, and I take another swig, as I try to pluck up the courage to do as he

orders.

I turn around until my legs are facing the side, and my shoulder brushes against his chest. I drop my mouth down to his neck, kissing softly, my lips a gentle brush against his flesh before I sink my teeth into the spot where his neck meets his shoulder. I hear Scott gasp, and his hand trails off my leg and against my sweet spot. It doesn't get me going like the other guys, but I can still feel the warmth build, and tingles shoot up my spine.

His hand threads in my hair before he pulls me back, bares my neck to him, and sinks his teeth into me before lapping at the wound with his tongue. He leans back and looks at me. I don't see lust in his eyes, I can't see anything but boredom and disinterest. So why the fuck is he doing this?

"Five, my turn," Tucker demands, and Scott pushes me off him before slapping my ass, and I stumble on my feet. The world chooses this moment to start spinning as I slowly make my way to him.

"Straddle me." My eyes find his, but I'm not sure which one I'm supposed to sit on.

"I didn't know you had a twin," I say, and his eyes widen before he scoffs and pulls me onto him, my legs going either side of his. Tucker's hands go to my ass as he grinds me against him. I can't believe how hard he is, or that he even wants me on his lap.

"You decided you want me again." Where the fuck did that come from?

"I don't have to explain myself to you," he replies coolly. He sucks his bottom lip between his teeth and I'm transfixed. My tongue darts out to wet my own, and his eyes watch the movement just as intently.

"Oh, of course not. I wouldn't dream of expecting any kind of answer from you, Tucker." I stretch his name, rolling it across my tongue.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" he demands, his fingers digging into my ass, and my body reacts by growing hot and wet.

"What part was unclear?" I retort, my head cocking to the side as his jaw grinds.

"Why wouldn't you expect an answer?"

"Are you being serious?" A laugh bubbles up as I shake my head at him, taking another sip before looking him head on. "Mr. Secretive, someone who says nothing about anything, and has a rather unhealthy obsession with his cell phone."

"I think I prefer you when you're sober," he throws out.

Scott replies with, "I don't. This is fucking funny."

“Careful, Tucker, you don’t want to act as though you care. If you start being nice, she may pick you to be her first,” Aeron scoffs, and I can’t remember why his words should make me feel relieved.

“Fuck off.” Tucker sits there, with his mouth hanging open at my words, and I shrug in return.

“Did she just swear?” Aeron asks, disbelief clear to hear in his voice.

“So what? It’s not like I killed someone. I guess we should just leave that up to you guys. Only a Harkwright can get away with murder.”

I hear gasps, laughter from Aeron, and even the odd growl.

“I think you should watch what you say,” Tom warns, and I laugh as I take another swig, and climb off Tucker’s lap.

“I think you should realize the world doesn’t revolve around your fucking surname.” Why am I being mean to Tom? *Ooh, I like this song.*

My hips move as I sway to the music, dropping low, before sliding my hands up my legs as I straighten. The bottle somehow makes its way back to my mouth as I start to twirl, until everything is spinning and it doesn’t stop, even when I stop moving.

“Maybe we should stop this,” I hear Tom say.

“Fuck that, this is a show of the lifetime,” Scott replies as his arms slide around my waist, and he grinds his hips into my ass.

My stomach is twisted, and I feel a little sick, but I still drink. I just want the world to disappear. *Warrior by Avril Lavigne* comes on and I sing along, using the bottle as a microphone. I can’t sing for shit, but right now I’m the queen of this song, and no one will stop me from declaring myself as a warrior.

When the song ends, I’m spun around and a warm mouth closes over mine. My hands stay gripping the bottle as Scott steps back and retakes his seat. I shake it off before I walk over to Emmet, and the girls shoot me death stares, but he doesn’t do or say anything. He just grips my hips and opens his legs so I can stand between them. His hands skip up my hips and rest just below my armpits, his fingers grazing the sides of my breasts. I couldn’t wear a bra in this damn dress, and I think he’s realized that.

“What do you want to do, Star?” he asks, his voice low, and it slides across my skin like warm water.

I giggle and I can’t stop it; I drop forward, my hands rest on his thighs as I hang my head and try to stop myself from laughing, but it isn’t working. I look up at him and he looks back, a twinkle in his eyes as my eyes flick

down, and I realize how close I am to his cock.

“Oops, hello, penis. Fancy seeing you here.” I wink at his crotch before rising back up and stumbling around the room, trying to find the bottle I was drinking from. I don’t remember putting it down, and I can’t see it anywhere.

“I think you’ve had enough, Five,” Tom says as he walks up to me, and my head flies back on a loud laugh.

“Yesh, enough of the Harkwright bullshit and mind fuck,” I slur before moving away, and he doesn’t try to stop me.

I wander over to where the drinks are and grab a beer. I throw it back and try to stop my mouth from feeling so goddamn dry. The girls stare at me, and I shoot them a wink before sliding against the wall as my head thrums, and the room spins faster and faster.

“You alright there, Five?” Jake asks. He crouches in front of me and I rest my chin on my knees as a wave of sadness hits me, and my eyes water.

“I’m a disaster,” I whisper, but it registers too late that, instead of speaking quietly, I shouted my words.

“Someone take her back to her room, she isn’t being any fun right now,” Scott moans but no one offers to take me.

“I’m fiiiine, I just need some fresh mair,” I grab hold of a bottle without looking but Tom has me coming up short.

“No, what you need to do is leave. You’re an Academy girl, and your behavior is out of line,” he declares and my eyes shoot to him.

“You’re kickshing me out.” *Am I even making sense right now?*

“Yeah, I am. It’s disgraceful how you’re acting, and I don’t give a fuck if you’re drunk. You can’t get away with acting like this,” Tom says lazily, and his words hurt my heart as I turn around and stumble out the door.

“I’ll escort her back to her room,” I hear Darius say, and no one argues with him.

He finds me outside, I’m sitting on the floor, bottle in hand, and he shakes his head at me.

“For crying out loud, no more,” he grouches, as he swipes the bottle from my hand, places it on the ground, and leads me outside. His hand is on my hip and he places one of my arms around his neck as he leads me to my wing, and I lean my head into him, taking a sniff of his scent.

He leads me into my room and helps me into my bedroom as I lose my balance and nearly topple over. I flop down on my bed, grab the bottom of my dress and tug it up.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he shouts, but that’s the least of my worries, I can’t find my way out of this thing.

“Help, help,” I scream as I twist and turn, and try to yank it off me.

“Will you be quiet?” he demands as his fingers brush against the top of my ribs, grip a hold of my dress, and pull it over my head. I look up at him as I’m freed, and the tears pour out of me.

“I’m a horrible person, no wonder I lose everyone.” I don’t even know if he can understand me, but it doesn’t matter as he sits on the edge of my bed and pats my back.

“You’re not horrible, but you definitely shouldn’t drink. I don’t think it agrees with you. Look, Miss Carter, you’re in an awkward position but you’re handling it however you can. It may or may not be the best way, but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong, or that you’re horrible or bad. You’re human and this is what our species does.” My eyes look into his, and his words touch a part of me I didn’t realize was there.

Hope.

“I’m glad you were assigned to me.” I try to smile, but I’m not sure I’m pulling it off.

“Me too, now come on. We need to get you into some bedclothes, and then you can sleep this off. You’ll feel rough in the morning, but you’ll be okay.”

I stare at him hard, trying to tell my eyes to focus on just him, and not the other two that keep flicking into existence.

I lean forward, compelled to brush my lips against his. His eyes widen as my palms fall on his shoulders, and he sits here stock still. He doesn’t pull away or try to come closer as I push forward, my mouth only inches from his and then... my stomach decided it hates me as something bubbles up and then it happens. I throw up all across his top, and then I slump onto the bed, and everything fades away.

MY MOUTH FEELS as though it’s been stuffed with cotton wool and my head feels as though it’s about to be split open. It’s fucking horrible, and the clanging noise coming from the other side of the door is going right through me. I release a deep moan, and even that makes me feel like hammered shit. I

slowly sit up, the room spins, and my stomach turns but nothing happens. So, I get to my feet, and I can't help but wonder how I got changed.

Did I put myself in this cami top or did someone help me?

I shuffle to the door and push it open to see Darius standing topless in my kitchen area.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" It comes out rough, and my throat feels scratchy. He turns around fast, his elbow knocks a pan off the counter, and I watch as it hits the ground.

"Oh, sweet mother of mercy, does it have to be so loud?" I push the palms of my hands into my eyes and stand here feeling like death.

"I was trying to make you something to eat, but I'm more of an order and microwave kind of guy." He rubs the back of his neck, and his eyes trail over me before they quickly return to my face. I can't even question it, my head is so fuzzy right now.

"That's okay, you don't have to make me anything," I mumble as I stretch my arms above my head, and his eyes fall to my stomach.

"Erm, you should probably go and get..."

The door opens and our heads turn in time as Emmet, Tucker, and Aeron fill the doorway. Their heads flick between the two of us, and I can tell by the way Emmet's jaw and fists tighten, Aeron's ticking jaw, and Tucker's all over tight body that something bad is about to go down.

"You son of a bitch, you are so fucking done. Just wait until my father hears about this," Emmet says before he turns his attention to me. "As for you, I swear to God, if you've so much as opened your legs an inch for this bastard." His fist flies into my wall, sinking into the drywall.

"What are you talking about? I just woke up." My voice is still scratchy, but Tucker gets in Darius' way as he tries to bring me a drink, and Aeron finally closes my door.

"Little Zero, you're in your barely there panties," he grinds out and his words filter through, slower than molasses as my eyes drop to my bare legs.

"Oh crap sticks," I squeal, before I run into my room and slam the door, my head thumps painfully and I rest it against the door. I do not want to see anyone ever again after this, it's humiliating. Although, I feel like a grade A bitch for leaving Darius alone.

"You're so fucking done," I hear Emmet say again, and Darius laughs.

"Well then, if I'm done, I may as well go out with a bang. Who wants to be the first one to say hello to my fists, because I am more than looking

forward to kicking all of your entitled asses,” he growls and my cheeks heat as I imagine him growling, while naked and wet.

Fuck my life, I do not need to be attracted to Darius right now. It’s bad enough with Cole and I don’t even know where we stand, I am not throwing another outsider into the mix.

“If anyone should have their ass kicked, it’s you,” Aeron says with a laugh, and Tucker seems to be the only one keeping his head. He’s not making threats or saying anything, I wonder what’s going through his mind right now.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Now, I haven’t laid a hand on Miss Carter, but your heads are so far up your own asses that you don’t even have the decency to ask what is going on. That I expect, but your total disregard for her safety is a whole other matter. So, you want to call your father, go ahead, you jumped up prick. I have a few things to tell him myself,” a smacking sound hits my ears as Darius finishes his speech, and I throw on my dressing gown before pulling the door open to find him holding his jaw with a smile on his face. Although it is far from friendly.

“Leave him alone,” I shout, my hangover can be damned.

“It’s fine, Miss, the Prince can hit me all he wants, it won’t change a thing. He likes to walk around as though he’s untouchable and nothing affects him, but I see through his bullshit.”

“I think it’s time you leave,” Tucker says coldly, and Darius scoffs.

“You really think I would leave her in your unfit hands? There’s a deluded son of a bitch going around and hurting women in this place. You let her walk out while she was drunk and unaware, even going far enough to kick her out of your wing because her behavior didn’t agree with you.” He walks over to the three Harkwrights, and my face burns.

My eyes sink closed, I acted like a fucking moron last night, I never should have got myself into that state.

“That woman over there, the one with her head in her hands is spiraling and none of you can see it.” I lift my head and I can’t take my eyes from him. I never realized he took that much notice of me, other than making sure I didn’t fall into too much trouble. “You see her every day, and yet you’re blind to the pain she’s in. I expected it from Emmet and Aeron, but not you, Tucker. Honestly, I thought you guys may have even cared for her in your own twisted, fucked up way, but I guess I was wrong. So either start treating her like she is just another number, a nameless Academy girl, or man up and

face how you fucking feel.” He shakes his head at them, but it’s Tucker that he looks at with disappointment. “I am so done with being around children. You may call yourself men, but you do not understand how a man should behave. I can already see she is nothing like the other girls in this place, and I barely know her.”

He turns around and walks back over to the kitchen area and he acts as though nothing has happened. And he didn’t just tell three of the Harkwright men off. They stand there, staring at him, and I walk over to the recliner and sit down. *I wish they would just leave.*

“Here, like I said, I’m not much of a cook.” Darius passes me a plate with a blush on his face, and it almost makes me want to cry. He’s going beyond a standard bodyguard, surely.

He places a mug of coffee on the coffee table, and I look at the rubbery scrambled eggs and crisp bacon sitting on top of the burnt toast. Honestly, I’ve not felt this grateful for a crappy breakfast in a long time.

“You don’t have to eat it, I would understand,” he mumbles before he walks over to the wall to the left of me, and leans his muscular frame against it. Other than when I walked in on him in the shower, I’ve never really taken the time to look at him, and I know this is the worst time to start.

It doesn’t stop me from peering at him through my peripheral though, the smattering of hair on his broad hard chest catches my eye. I’ve noticed the way his shirt stretches across it when he’s wearing one, although sans shirt may be my new preference. His jeans hug his thick, solid thighs like a second skin, and his arms show their muscles even without being flexed. His face has a five o’clock shadow and his dark hair looks long enough to run your fingers through, but short enough that it doesn’t get in his face or need to be tied back. He’s not handsome or a pretty boy. He’s all rough edges and hard lines, and no one would ever dare call him a boy. Darius is all man, and I need to stop looking at him as anything more than my bodyguard.

“You don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Aeron finally throws out, and it sounds weak even to me.

“Why are you topless?” That’s the first thing Tucker has said, and it’s through gritted teeth. His jaw looks hard enough to break through granite.

“Because she threw up on me, and I didn’t want to leave her. So, I couldn’t waste time to grab a fresh one. She was wasted, and none of you were willing to step up and look after her. Every time I think I have it figured out, you do something to make me question my reasoning.” I’m not sure what

he's getting at, but I'm just glad the attention is off me for a little while. I feel raw and exposed from Darius' words about me spiraling, and I don't know how I feel about him even being able to tell. *Why didn't anyone else see?*

"I believe him, so I'm out of here. You guys can do what you want," Aeron says and my eyes flick up to him, but he isn't even looking at me, as he pulls open the door and walks out.

"Piss off then, Tucker," Emmet says as he waves a hand at him, his eyes locked on me, but I refuse to return the stare. I'd rather eat the rubbery eggs than give him anything.

"No."

"Excuse me? I gave you an order," Emmet seethes as he grips Tucker's shirt, and all Tucker does is look down on him, and then he bares his teeth.

"I'm not an Academy girl, so you can take your order and shove it up your ass for all I care. Fuck off, Emmet, I'm claiming her for the day." Emmet's eyes narrow, but he lets go of Tucker's shirt before he storms off.

"You can wait outside, Darius. She'll be safe with me." His eyes burn into me, but I look at Darius instead and nod my head. "Oh, and put on a damn shirt," Tucker throws out with more heat than necessary.

"I'll be right outside," he says coolly before he walks out of my room and closes the door behind him.

Tucker walks closer, he doesn't stop until he's before me. He takes the plate and puts it on the table. He slides his arm under my legs, and the other slips around my back as he pulls me into his arms. Bridal style.

"What a-a-are y-you d-d-doing?"

"I told you there was something I wanted to show you, so I'm putting you in your room. You can get dressed and then we'll go, I'll write you permission to wear whatever you want. Hurry up," he orders as he deposits me on my bed, and then he walks out the room and I have no idea what the fuck is going on. *I'm a little scared to find out.*

I ALMOST GO for my leggings and sweatshirt, but then my eyes fall on the dress that the shop girl picked out for me. The white ruched top with sleeves that fall off the shoulder, and ankle length leather skirt with a knee-high slit on one side. Do I really want to wear this? I can wear anything, but it's

calling to me like a siren song, and I can't resist picking it up, and holding it against my body.

Fuck it, this and a pair of black pumps will be perfect, and it might help me find the confidence that I seem to have lost as I woke up. I don't bother with makeup, and I weave my hair into a simple braid before I walk out into my sitting area. I find Tucker leaning against the counter.

"I have some Advil for you," he says as I walk up to him, and his eyes track the length of me, I feel exposed but it doesn't leave me feeling raw like Darius did.

"Thank you," I whisper, as I take them from his hand and throw them back with the water. He takes my elbow and leads me to the door.

Darius stands straight as we appear, and, unfortunately, he is now fully dressed. He says nothing as he falls into step behind us, my elbow still secure in Tucker's grip. He leads me down the stairs, and into an office behind the desk in the foyer, but it's a different one. I've never been in here before, it's definitely not the place I found out Poppy was coherent or that Millie's aunt had committed suicide.

Darius doesn't follow us in, and Tucker closes the door before going around the desk. He takes a seat, boots up the computer, and says nothing. I just stand here, watching him. He glances at me before he pats his lap, and I slowly make my way over to him before taking a seat, and his arm comes around my stomach until his hand rests on my hip. His other hand on the mouse as he pulls up a file named 'Academy'.

"Why are we here, Tucker?" I turn my head until my eyes are on his, our mouths only millimeters apart.

"I'll tell you, but first, I have a few questions for you. Have you fucked Aeron, because I can't understand why he would release you?"

He's so blunt, and I'm not sure if I should hate it or love it. Although even thinking about the L word around these guys makes me feel as though I'm going to break out in hives.

"No, I haven't been with Aeron. W-w-... Aeron and I have done nothing more than what you and I have." It's not a lie, and I have kissed them both now.

They also stopped coming after me once I did... Why does that thought cause so much hurt to arise in me?

"Okay, there goes my theory." He strokes his chin before pinching mine between his forefinger and thumb.

“Are you really spiraling?”

“I think so, I-I-I-I’m t-t-trying so hard to be different. To find myself, b-but I c-c-constantly feel as though I’m failing.” I don’t like admitting this to him, but what’s the point in trying to hide it?

“You don’t need to try to be someone else, I prefer you when you’re being yourself. Your innocence and honesty, you don’t need to change, Luna.” Fuck me, that’s the nicest thing he’s ever said to me.

“You avoided me, forgive me for not believing you,” I say back, my eyes never straying from his own.

“You kissed me, and I don’t kiss. That’s why I avoided you. It’s too fucking intimate, and I don’t plan on forming attachments in this place.”

“You should move your head then, because, despite myself... I want to kiss you again,” I breathe, and my chest hurts as he turns my head around to face the computer.

“This folder contains a sub-folder that belongs to your mother, that’s why I brought you here. You need to understand how much danger you are really in with Emmet,” he says calmly, before he clicks it, and the image of my birth mom fills the screen.

For the next half an hour, we work through it. My chest aches more and more, as I learn about a woman I can barely recall. She studied science, focusing on biology. Her file says she wanted to be a microbiologist, it lists her hobbies as singing and dancing, and she was a virgin when she started here. She started as Ten and worked her way to the top spot, walked away with a marriage proposal, and it was from Sir Arthur Harkwright himself.

“She turned him down, I can’t believe it,” I mutter as he clicks the mouse, and a picture of her in a jet black ball gown fills the screen.

My fingers reach out as they trace across her image, and how much we look like one another. I’m the image of her and in that dress, she reminds me of how I looked when I attended the masquerade ball.

“Sir was obsessed with Selene, he had monopolized her time, and claimed her halfway through the first year. He never let her go. When she rejected him, he had her followed, but she was hard to track down. When he found out she shacked up with one of the workers from here, he apparently washed his hands of her, and married someone else. Emmet’s mother.” I turn my head to look at him once more, and if possible, he’s even closer than he was before.

“Like father, like son, I guess.”

“Emmet is screwed up because of his father, and watching the

relationships he forges, now you have your work cut out with Emmet. The thing is, your true danger comes from his father. You're her in every way where appearances are concerned, if his obsession comes back, then nothing will stop him from claiming you. Not your age or his son. Don't let Emmet claim you."

"I can't stop him, Tucker." my fingers graze across his jawline, and his cheeks hollow out before they return to normal. "Ask me why I think Aeron released me."

"Why?" He swallows hard as his arm around my middle tightens its hold.

"He said it was because he didn't want to be the reason Emmet would finally have me, I told him it wouldn't be. I'm not a... I'm not a virgin anymore, Tucker." My air whooshes out of me, and his eyes widen before he takes his arm away from me, and pushes me to my feet.

The rejection is tangible, this place is full of hypocrites. Why am I the only one rejected for giving myself away?

He climbs to his feet and spins me round so we're face to face, and then his hand is in my hair and his mouth is hard and bruising against my own.

It takes a moment for me to react, but a gasp has my mouth opening, and he takes the opportunity to slide his tongue inside. He explores my mouth, hard, demanding, and my hands squeeze his shoulders while one of his slides down my body. It lands on my ass and he pulls me hard against him. A moan escapes as he pulls away, and I can't help but whimper at the loss.

"You're really not a virgin?" he asks out of the blue, and my cheeks flush at the question.

"I-I-I w-w-wouldn't l-lie about it."

He walks over to the door, but instead of opening it, he clicks the lock in place. He strolls over to the desk and sweeps it clear, sending the items decorating the top to the floor.

"Thank fuck for that," he says, before he descends on my mouth again.

He makes me step backward until my ass crashes against the desk, and then he breaks free and spins me around, seizing my wrists and placing my hands on the desk. He releases me before he lifts my dress up to my hips and yanks my panties down to my ankles. He puts a hand in the middle of my back and pushes me down until my cheeks rest on the cool surface of the desk. Then he pulls my hips back so my ass is further in the air.

He slides a finger along my slit, and I gasp at the feel of him. He pushes a thumb through my lips, spreads them, and rubs at my sensitive nub while also

pushing a finger inside me. He thrusts in and out, once, twice, and then he pulls free.

I can hear a zipper being pulled down, and then the rustling of fabric before something else is lined up against me. *Definitely bigger than his finger.*

He rubs himself against me, covering himself in my wetness, and I am beyond ready to feel him deep inside me.

“Not that I need to ask, but... do you want this, Luna? To feel me inside you, say yes,” he growls, and the fact he’s even asking is leaving me breathless.

“Yes, I want this,” I gasp out and that’s all he needs to hear as he slams himself inside me, and I cry out at the suddenness of it.

“Fuck, so tight. So good,” he moans as he starts his thrusts, and I can feel his balls as they hit against my skin, the way his cock is hitting my spot. Every. Damn. Time.

My hands fall to the edge of the desk, I grip it for dear life as he thrusts me forward. His hands hold my hips to keep me exactly where he wants me. He’s not gentle, and if he had been my first, he may have ruined me, but no matter what, I never want this to end.

“Fuck, Luna,” he growls again, his hand gripping my ponytail as he wraps it around his fist.

He tugs on my hair, as his thrusts grow harder, faster, and the mixture of pain and pleasure is euphoric all on its own. I’m so damn close, and I can feel myself tighten against him as I fall apart, crying out his name.

His hand lets go of my hip, runs down my back before it slides around my front, and rubs furiously at my clit. My eyes roll up, and I can’t believe what he’s doing to me. I don’t think I have another orgasm left, I’m still trembling from the one he just gave me.

“One more, come on, Tiny One. Give it to me. I want to feel you tighten around my cock as I fill you.”

His words spur me on and my hips move of their own accord, meeting him thrust for glorious thrust. It could be minutes or even seconds before I come again, and this time, he’s right there with me. I can almost fool myself into thinking it was my name that fell from his lips.

A curse.

A prayer.

A promise.

He pulls away and tucks himself back inside his slacks, as I fix my dress and join him at the door, neither of us says a word. He looks at me and opens his mouth as the intercom sounds, and we listen to whatever announcement is about to be made. Crystal's voice sounds as she begins her little speech.

"The assembly has been postponed until further notice."

That's all she says, and the weight of her words has yet to sink in until Tucker grasps at his hair and pulls hard.

"What does it mean?" I ask quietly, I have the feeling I should be panicking right now.

"It means your fair game, Luna, to all the Harkwright men."

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SECRETS AND THE PRICES WE PAY

“HOW ARE we already nearing the halfway mark of the year? It’s gone so quick,” D says as we make our way to our dance class.

“I mean, a lot has happened. I don’t understand how people can go around as though everything is normal. How many more people have to get hurt before they do something?” Am I angry? Too fucking right!

“I know, Bradley says they are trying to get to the bottom of it, without worrying us. He doesn’t seem to realize that keeping us in the dark is the worst thing they can do.”

We shake our heads as we step up to the dance hall and we freeze, our eyes going to the words written in red across the doors.

Someone should strangle Emmet so he’ll understand what it’s like!

“Who would do this? Why would they do this?”

“They think Emmet is the strangler. As to this room, well... Emily was training to be a professional dancer. It has to be because of her. Shit, homegirl, heads are going to roll for this.”

She’s not wrong. If they find out who did it, there will be hell to pay. The sound of heels approaching make us turn around to find our dance teacher with Tucker, and Emmet following close behind.

My cheeks heat as visions of Tucker bending me over the desk fills my mind, it only happened yesterday and I can’t get the way he felt out of my mind.

“Get this door painted at once, and get us a list of every girl who takes your class,” Tucker orders as Emmet stares at the words, his eyes cold and his cheek ticks.

“Five, do you take this class?” Tucker asks, all business, and I nod my head as Daria wraps her arm around me.

“Very well, I will speak to you both later. For now, I suggest you leave and attend your ‘real’ lessons.”

I look at Emmet one last time, the way he clenches his hands, and his jaw is set, and I can’t help but worry. I just don’t know if it’s for him, or the person responsible.

We walk away, at a loss for what we should do for the next hour when Jake appears, and D’s entire body seems to go tense.

“Three, Five. How are you ladies today?”

“Fine, thank you. We best get going. We need to grab our things for class,” D says as she tugs at my arm.

“Hang on, I want you,” he calls, and her eyes narrow as she turns to look at him.

“I’ve already been claimed, so you can want me, but you’ll never have me,” she says through clenched teeth, and I’ve never seen her this hostile before.

A smirk passes across his mouth as he looks at her, his eyes hard and unforgiving.

“I hate to embarrass you, Daria, but I was talking to Five. She hadn’t been claimed yet. Which means I can call on her if I want.” He flicks his hand at her as her eyes widen as her mouth parts. “Run along, D. You’re not needed, or wanted.”

Her eyes shimmer with unshed tears, and although Jake was mean to her, I don’t understand her reaction. Why would she care what Jake thinks? Unless... no. She can’t like him, can she?

He places his hand on the small of my back before he leads me away. I can’t help but look back at my friend, and the lost look on her face. I’ve never seen her so devastated, and it is breaking my heart.

“Come on, Five. I have something that only you can do for me.” His words are said easily, but they make my stomach twist. I don’t want to be with anyone other than Tucker, Tom, or Aeron. I hate that I can’t say no. I’ve never hated these rules more than I do right now.

He leads me out of the academy and we don’t stop walking until we make it to the pool house, and it’s clear to see we are well and truly alone. I’ve never wished Darius was with me more than I am right now.

“How long until your class?” he asks, leading me over to the only sofa in

the room, and pushes me down gently until I'm perched on the edge, and he sits on the other end. A good few feet separating us.

"Just under an hour, w-w-what d-d-do..."

"Hey, it's okay. Take your time, Luna. I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about." He rests his arm across the back of the sofa, his fingers grazing across my hair. Feather light, and it's oddly comforting.

I take a few deep breaths, as I try to figure out exactly what I want to say to him.

"What do you want, Jake?" I can't look at him, but it doesn't prevent Jake from lightly pressing his fingers on my chin, and tilting my head until we're facing one another.

"I want you to help me look after Daria. She's going to be hurt badly, and I need you to be there for her. Even if she tries to push you away."

"I don't understand. Who's going to hurt her?" My eyes narrow as I look at him, and he smiles sadly back.

"Bradley. He's not the good guy all you girls think he is, but no matter what I say to her, she won't listen. It doesn't matter that I would do anything to put a smile on her face, she's too blinded by him." His sigh is weary, but no matter his pretty words, I still don't trust them.

"Damn it, you're in love with her." My eyes fall to my lap as I release a sigh to rival his. "Then I can't trust you. If I'm right, then you want her for yourself. I won't be your pawn, Jake, and I will refuse if you try to make me. No matter the price."

"You can't refuse, do you really want to be kicked out because I asked you to look after your friend? Also, I don't care if you trust me or not. All I want is for you to look at Bradley like you are me, don't trust him, Luna. You're close enough to care, but removed enough to not be taken in by his bullshit. Do this for me, and I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe. No matter the cost." This feels wrong, but is his request really so terrible?

I'm her best friend and I'll do anything to keep her safe and happy. All I have to do is monitor Bradley and be there if the shit hits the fan.

"I'll help her, but for D, not you. I don't trust you, Jake, and I'm finding it hard to believe you're being honorable right now."

"Good, remember that for all of us. Honorable doesn't fit the Harkwright description, even the ones that monopolize your time."

No truer words have ever been spoken, not that I can think of at least. I need to remember who these guys really are and not get swept up in the way

they make me feel.

I'VE BEEN CALLED down to the medical center, which I don't believe is a normal occurrence, I'm just glad my classes are over for the day. I sit here, wait to be called in, and let my mind wander to my mom and Poppy. I try not to let it happen too often, because it leaves me with a dull ache that is almost impossible to get rid of.

"Five," the nurse calls and I climb to my feet before she leads me to an office with Cole sat behind the desk, and Maddox on the exam table with his head in his hands.

"Maddox, is everything okay?" I ask, as I rush to his side. I'm so thrown off by finding him in here, it's just refusing to compute in my mind.

"I'm sorry to call on you, Five. But you were the only one he will allow to see him like this." Cole's words strum at my nerves, and I place my hand on Maddox's shoulder, feeling him tense up beneath my hand before he relaxes.

His hands fall away and his swollen eye, split lip, and bruised cheek make me want to find whoever did this and make them hurt. I know I can't, but this is... shaking me to my very core.

"I tried to stay in my room until it settled, but I've been finding it hard to breathe," he gasps, and I wrap my arm around his shoulders. I guide his head against my chest and run my fingers through his hair.

"He's got two broken ribs, it's what's causing the trouble with his breathing. I'd feel better if he wasn't left alone for the next couple of nights. The painkillers I've prescribed to him should make it easier for Mad here to get some sleep. I don't think there's any internal bleeding, but I just need you to keep an eye on him," Cole says, and I nod my head with no hesitation.

My friend needs me, and I refuse to be anywhere else but by his side.

"Luna, a quick word," Cole says, as he walks over to the door, and I take a quick glance down at Maddox before stepping back, and following him out the door.

We walk out of the room, and he guides me into another one before he closes the door behind us.

"Is he going to be okay?"

“He should be, but he won’t tell me who did it. I have my suspicions, but it doesn’t matter. Nothing will be done, not for Maddox.” He sets his mouth in a grim line, and he shakes his head at his words.

“It’s not fair, he doesn’t deserve any of this. I wish I could help him,” I say weakly and he pulls me into his arms, as he runs his hand down the back of my head.

“It’ll be okay, he’s stronger than he believes. He just needs to see it for himself. I also wanted to see how you are doing, with everything that’s going on?”

I pull back to look up at him, and the warmth in his eyes makes me feel gooey, but it doesn’t undo me like it used to. Maybe my head just isn’t in it today. That’s the only thing it could be, I’m sure. Cole is my future, so why does that thought feel... off, somehow?

“I’m okay, surviving,” I say with a mirthless chuckle before I step back and run my hand over my hair.

“I don’t want to leave him, he needs me.”

“I know, baby. I get it. We’ll have all the time in the world after next year.” He drops a kiss on my mouth, and the word ‘baby’ swims around inside my head. *I don’t like him calling me that, but I don’t have the courage to tell him either.*



MADDOX HASN’T SPOKEN a word since we got back to my room, other than to ask me to see if I can get someone to retrieve his textbooks so he doesn’t fall behind. I wanted to tell him that studying should be the last thing on his mind, but I can’t blame him for wanting to throw himself into something. Especially if it will help him take his mind off his pain.

“I need to do something, Luna, please. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important to me,” he says, and I haven’t got the heart to refuse him.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute,” I say with a gentle smile before I leave my room, and close the door behind me.

I head down to the mess hall, to find it deserted, save for Caitlyn who is sitting at a table by herself, nursing a cup. I can’t see any of the guys and I don’t know if I want to search every inch of this place, I’m too scared in case I come across Shane.

“Luna, is everything okay?” she asks, waving awkwardly, and I return the gesture.

“Yeah, I was just looking for Tom or Tucker,” I reply, as I shuffle on my feet.

“I’m not sure where they’ll be, but Tom could be in the garden, and Tucker is probably in their wing.”

I walk over to the table, my arms folded behind my back, as I rock back and forth on my heels.

“I need to ask them a favor, but I can’t go to the wing, and I’m worried that I’ll bump into S-s-Shane.”

“If you want, I can look for you and get them to go to your room. Shane doesn’t really bother with me,” she says with her eyes down on the table.

“I would really appreciate that, thank you, Caitlyn,” I say softly, and she gives me a timid smile before she gets to her feet.

“It’s not a problem, maybe we could even sit in here one afternoon when it’s quiet and get a drink together,” she says it softer than I did, and I nod in reply.

Another smile and then we leave side by side, I can’t say where she’s heading to, but I think I’ll go back to my room while luck is still shining on me.

I make it back to find Maddox sprawled out asleep on the loveseat, and I set about getting some baking in. I have this restless energy that needs to be unleashed, and this is the only thing that calms me.

By the time there’s a knock at the door, I have two cake tins and a tray of cookies in the oven, and a tray of fudge cooling on the side. I wipe my hands on my apron before I pull the door open and look up into Tom’s sparkling eyes.

He steps in without an invitation, his eyes flicking over to Maddox before he seizes my hips, pulls me into him, and causes our mouths to collide. My hands go to his waist, sweep up inside his top, until they are sprawled out against his chest.

I push back slightly and his eyebrows draw down as he stares at me, but he moves away.

“I heard you needed to see me,” he says, as his eyes flick to the sofa.

“Maddox can’t be alone for the next couple of days, so he’s going to stay here while I’m unclaimed. I was wondering if you could get his textbooks for him?” It feels strange asking him this. But who else could I ask? *Emmet, yeah*

right.

“Sure, I’ll go and get them now.” He places his hand on the door handle but hesitates to open it. “I’m glad he’s got you, Moonbeam. I think he needs it,” he says as Maddox looks up at us, his eyes widen but he says nothing as Tom leaves, and my cheeks flame.

“Is there something going on between you two?” he asks, as he pats the space beside him.

“I guess so.” I bite my bottom lip as I take a seat, and he takes my hand in his.

“It’s okay to care about him, Luna, just be careful okay. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I don’t want you to either, I hate that they hurt you. You don’t deserve it.” I lean my head on his shoulder, and he wraps his arm around me.

“Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with you, especially my brother.” Anger laces his tone and I can’t believe I never even considered that they had brothers or sisters. *I wonder where the girls go.*

I look at him as my door opens, and I turn to see Aeron standing on the threshold as he looks at us.

Maddox turns his head and I watch as Aeron’s eyes widen, he closes the door, and walks over to us. He pulls the coffee table closer before he sits on it, and stares at him.

“Mad, damn. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There wasn’t any point, nothing will stop him when he gets something in his head. Either he beats it out of me or he kills me, I think he prefers the last option. Plus, dad isn’t gonna stop him, you know what he’s like.” He sounds so despondent, and I’m utterly clueless right now.

“I don’t understand,” I say as I look between the two. Aeron stares at Maddox, and when he nods his head he looks at me, and places a hand on my knee.

“Little Zero, Shane did this. Not a surprise, I’m sure. But what many people don’t realize is that Shane is Mad’s brother.” My mouth drops open and I’m horrified that he could do something like this to his own brother.

“What? No! Why would he do something like this to his brother? That’s messed up.” I’m stating the obvious, but what else can I say?

“Because he thinks Mad is messed up.” He runs a hand over his face before looking at him once more. Another jerk of Maddox’s head and he floors me as he says, “Maddox is gay.”

“That isn’t messed up to me,” is all I reply as I wrap my arms around him, and pull him to me once more.

“I know. You can’t help who you want. Unfortunately, not everyone sees it like that. Look, I’ve got some things I need to take care of, but I came here to tell you we’ll be leaving Friday after class is over. Me and you, Little Zero. We’re taking a trip.”

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IT ALL BECOMES CLEAR

“I STILL DON’T UNDERSTAND why he wants me to go with him,” I say as I play with the hairs on Tom’s chest.

“He’s the only one going away this week.” He glides his hands across my ribs, and I want to pinch myself because he’s still here and didn’t leave as soon as we finished.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I raise up on an elbow to look at him, and he gives me a smirk before flicking my nipple.

“As you’ve probably noticed, Shane hasn’t been around since Mad resurfaced. He’s away learning his ‘field’, but he’s back today. So...”

“I’m going because there’s nothing stopping him from ordering me to do whatever he damn well pleases,” I fill in the blanks, and all he can do is nod in reply.

“I better go so I can get my things for class. Don’t get into too much trouble.” He drops a kiss on my head before he climbs out of bed, and I don’t hide the way I ogle him in all his naked glory.

“I never look for trouble.”

“I know, Moonbeam, but it always seems to find you.” He slips his clothes back on before he captures my mouth in a bruising kiss.

“You’ll be claimed soon enough. Hopefully, Sir will be back before Shane can do anything.”

“Here’s hoping,” I say bitterly, and he gives me one last look before he leaves.

I already miss him, and it’s only been seconds. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I guess I shouldn't pull at that thread too much, so instead I get up, jump in the shower, and get ready for the day. I've already got my bag packed for the trip to God knows where, and I hope it won't be too unbearable. I'm sure I'm the last person Aeron wants to accompany him, sucks to be us I guess.

I LEAVE in two days and I'm trying to keep myself busy and as far away from the guys as I can. Anything to minimize the chance of someone claiming my time. The uncertainty is a scary thing, and I can't say whether anyone would want to.

I walk down the corridors after my economics class and head toward the mess hall when I hear my name, or rather, my number be called.

"Five, with me." I turn around and come face to face with Simon. My blood turns to ice as I recall my last year, and my first experience at just how vicious these guys can be. When he ordered Carly to beat Chantelle for refusing to do anal with him, he would have left Carly to kill her, if I hadn't stepped in.

"O-okay," I say cautiously as I hesitate. I am utterly powerless right now, and I have to go off with someone who isn't phased about letting a girl get beaten to death. *Don't give him any reason to do the same to you.* As if I need the reminder.

I roll my shoulders back, but they don't stay that way for long. They slump forward in a millisecond as I fall in step behind Simon, and I swallow hard as he leads me up to the north wing, and I follow him inside his room.

I take in the restraints on the bed, the 'toys' and outfits dotting the ground, and the girl waiting on his leather recliner.

"Are you ordering us to have a threesome?" the girl asks, and I can't for the life of me, place her. At all.

He smirks as he steps closer to her, fisting his hand in her hair and pulling back hard enough to make her wince. "No, she's going to watch. Five here, will not look away for a single second, she'll get her next lot of orders once we're done." His mouth slams against hers as her hands fist his shirt. She moans loud, and I can't believe she's enjoying it. I saw the way he gripped her. How can she be okay with this?

Maybe she's just better at being an Academy girl, then you are.

“Get on the bed, Thirty-Seven. Face and chest against the bed, and ass nice and high in the air,” he orders.

“Yes, sir,” she replies in a breathy voice, walks over to the bed and drops her dress to the floor. My eyes fall to the ground, right before a hand grips my chin and forces my head to look at her.

“I thought I made myself clear, you are not to miss a single second of this. Forget my order again, and I’ll make you join in. I wonder if I’ll be the first guy to ram my cock in your ass,” he says directly into my ear, his lips brushing against the shell of it. I hold back the recoil that wants to be released as he steps back and slowly makes his way over to her.

His hand smacks hard against her ass as he tilts his head to the side and watches me, watching them.

“Listen to her moans, Five.” He slides a hand between her legs and moves his hand fast, before pulling it out completely.

“Can you hear how wet she is, see it? What am I thinking? Of course, you can’t. Well, come on, Five. Come closer,” he orders and I walk forward until he holds a hand out for me to stop.

His hand hovers under his nose as he takes an audible inhale, before holding his hand out. I have no idea what he wants, and I think it’s safer if I assume nothing at this point.

“Smell it, and if you hesitate, then I’ll make you taste it instead.” He smirks and my stomach is rolling as I lean forward and he thrusts his fingers beneath my nose.

“Loud enough for me to hear,” he says, and I do as he says before he drops his hand to his waistband, and pulls his pants down.

He springs free and then he grabs her by the hips, and pulls the poor girl hard enough to unbalance her. He doesn’t even wait before he thrusts himself inside, and his eyes stay on mine as he moves hard and fast. He slams a hand down across her ass, hard enough to turn it a stinging red, before he, somehow, moves even faster than before.

He grunts loud, it’s reminding me of a pig, and I have no idea what to think. The thing is, I have to think of something. Otherwise, I am going to puke and knowing my luck, it will be all over the grunting bastard and the unfortunate girl. All I want to do is squeeze my eyes closed and throw my hands up over my ears. I think the la la song sounds perfect right about now, I’d even prefer to have Shane calling me a whore instead of this.

No, you don’t, but this definitely comes in a close second.

One last grunt and he drops forward, his front pressing against her back. He pulls out and steps away. Her face is almost as red as her backside, and she quickly gets to her feet before picking up her dress.

“Thirty-Seven, you can go now. Don’t play with yourself, that’s a fucking order. If I wanted you to come, I would have let you.” She nods her acceptance, before hurrying over to the door and disappearing from view.

“Well, Five, get on it. Your job is to tidy up, I want my sheets stripped, my toys cleaned, and the outfits to be put away. Oh, and if you come across any tissues, give them a good sniff before you throw them away.” He smiles like a snake and I half expect a forked tongue to slither out. He walks over to his recliner and picks up a remote, before turning his attention back to me. “Oh yeah, I don’t know which toys and outfits are dirty, so just sniff those too. Don’t worry, you’ll know if I have used them,” His smirk is sickening and I choke back the sob building in my throat as I get to work.

“Don’t forget this, the next time you decide to interfere in matters that don’t concern you.” The TV blares to life and I avert my eyes, but the sound is unfortunately something that I cannot avoid.

DARIA IS QUIET TODAY, I wish we had more time to talk so I could try to do something to help her get out of whatever funk she seems to be in. It has been crazy today, and seeing as I won’t be back until Wednesday, my tutors have piled on the extra work so I don’t fall behind. I feel as though I’ve already fallen too far behind, but I refuse to let this year beat me. I just need to work harder and try to get back on top. If only all my classes could come as naturally as my cooking one does.

“D, why won’t you talk to me? I’m worried about you,” I say as I go through my bag one last time.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin. Things just feel different this year. Plus, there’s this ‘decision’ I need to make, my heart is saying one thing, and my head thinks it’s an utter moron.” She twiddles her thumbs, and I don’t know if I’m supposed to question her on this decision or not.

“Is it a hard choice to make?”

“I didn’t think it would be, but I keep hearing shit, and although I know better than to listen to rumors, I can’t help but hesitate. What if I choose

wrong?” Tears slide down her face, and I abandon my suitcase on the floor to pull her in my arms.

“Don’t decide until you’re sure, and even if it ends up being wrong, I’ll be here. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.” She laughs through her tears as my door opens, and she rushes into the bathroom before anyone else can see her.

“It’s time to go, Little Zero. Get ready for a weekend of Hell.”

“Thanks, Aeron. Your words make me so excited.” He smirks at my reply, and I just shake my head and grab my bag.

It’s a good thing I don’t expect chivalry from him, because he doesn’t even offer to carry it for me.

“Don’t worry about your bag, Darius will get it.” Then he walks out the door and heads down the corridor, expecting me to follow dutifully behind. Aeron has two sides to him, the one who looks after me and makes me feel good, and this one. *I prefer the first.*

Darius takes my bag and waits for me to leave my room, I hesitate but I don’t think D will come out until we’ve left. I close my door and head down to the car waiting for us.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I ask, when there are fewer ears around to hear it.

“Unfortunately. Sorry, Miss Carter, but you’re being dragged into one hell of a shit show. Your only saving grace is that you’ll be staying in a hotel instead of with his mother. At least you’ll get a break from her.”

“She doesn’t want her son to stay in her home?” I ask, disbelief clear for all to hear.

“She doesn’t want an Academy girl staying in her home, probably thinks you’ll taint the place with your non-Harkwright smear.” He rolls his eyes so hard, I fear they won’t come back, and I have to bite down an involuntary giggle at the fact he even did it.

Darius can be adorable. I nearly sigh but manage to keep it in, but it doesn’t stop the pink from staining my cheeks.

I climb into the car and Aeron has his head leaned back against the headrest, eyes closed with a pair of headphones on that make it clear he’s not looking for a conversation. I have a feeling this ride is going to feel like an eternity.

WELL, I called it. Two hours feels like two days, and the relief I feel at seeing our hotel is palpable. Aeron doesn't even remove his headphones as we pull up outside, he just saunters inside, and expects the door to be held open for him without having to wait for it to happen. Darius says nothing, and I follow behind.

"Thank you," I say to the doorman, and a small smile breaks through his stony facade before it vanishes.

It's Darius who checks us in and hands the bags over to the bellhop, he grabs the two keycards, and then we're off in the elevator that is decorated in cream and gold. I haven't even had time to process the way the hotel looks, because I'm quietly seething at this pretentious attitude Aeron is exhibiting. I hate everything about it.

My mouth drops open as we stop on the top floor, and we're led to the presidential suite. I don't know why I'm still surprised. He's a Harkwright within a hotel that is owned by the same name. I bet they wouldn't even make us move if the actual president stopped in for a stay.

Darius tips the bellhop generously, and Aeron scoffs before he claims his bedroom, and closes himself off from the both of us. He still has yet to say a single word to me since he got me from my room.

"Don't take it personally. This is just the way he is when he has to come back here."

"Do you often come back with him?" I ask, my head leaning slightly to the side as I take him in. Wearing his pressed slacks and tight white shirt, fucking drool worthy. I really need to slap some sense into myself.

"I'm assigned to the higher profile Harkwrights when I'm not needed to watch over you. Usually Aeron, Tucker, and occasionally Emmet when his personal guards are unavailable," he says this easily, and I'm surprised he's telling me this much.

"Thank you for telling me," I whisper. I tuck my hair behind my ears, a habit I haven't done in a while.

I'm starting to like Darius and it has nothing to do with his looks, and more to do with the way he treats me. Like I'm a person and not low on the pecking order, like I'm not second place, and just another stand in. He defended me to the guys, and it's hard not to see him in a different way.

"Of course, I suggest you check your room. I have a few duties I have to carry out, and I'd feel better if you were not present." He rubs the back of his neck and I give him a soft smile before going into the room he points out. My

stomach is fluttering like crazy, and some time away from Darius may be for the best right now.

I sit down on the bed and take in the royal blue with gold accents wallpaper, the four posts with velvet drapes that I will not be touching. An antique cherry wood sideboard, and large flat-screen TV mounted on the wall opposite the foot of the bed. I even have my own bathroom, and I'm floored by the luxury they live in. I hope I never get used to it. *I never want to become like them.*

I must doze off because a hand on my shoulder has me bolting upright, my heart going off like a jackhammer as my sleep addled brain clears. I realize that Darius is standing here, staring at me, the epitome of patience.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, my voice thick with sleep.

"Aeron has been called away, I doubt he will be back before the early hours, and I thought you may wish to get something to eat."

"Oh okay, I guess room service is in order then." I can't even infuse any excitement into my voice right now.

"Not necessarily, Aeron said you should at least be able to enjoy yourself, even if he can't. If you want to go out to get something, then I am permitted to escort you." He seems... a little off, but at least I can go out.

"Do I have to stick to a dress code?" I ask hopefully, and a smile finally appears on his face, transforming him instantly.

"No, I'd suggest something comfortable. I don't do fancy food, and I plan to eat as well."

"Yay, okay then. I'll get changed and then we can leave," I say with a little hand clap before I jump off my bed and usher him out of the room. I know the perfect thing to wear.

I rummage through my bag, until I find my black boyfriend cut jeans, a white crop top that comes off the shoulders, and D's leather jacket. Once I've got it on, I slip on my black pumps and braid my hair before meeting him in the sitting area of our suite.

My mouth drops open of its own accord as I take in his fitted jeans, black tank top, and grey shirt. He looks so... normal, and I think I prefer him like this than in his suit, and that's saying something.

He gives me a nod of his head before he opens the door and waits for me to leave first, then he closes the door behind us, and leads me down to the first floor. There isn't a car waiting for us, and the idea of walking around outside has by blood thrumming with excitement. It's been so long. I haven't

done it since Tucker took me dress shopping, and I've missed it.

We set off, and he knows his way around as he leads me to a burger joint, decorated with all things eighties. The seats are made of backs of cars with leather cushions, and steel tables are free floating across them. He finds us a spot, and waits for me to sit before doing the same, opposite me. It feels oddly intimate, but it's not uncomfortable. If anything, it feels as though we've always done it. Like we're old friends getting together to catch up and reminisce on old times.

A pretty little blonde comes over to take our orders and her eyes automatically zero in on Darius, not that I can blame her.

"Hi, I'm Darla and I'll be your waitress this evening. What can I get y'all?" She flutters her lashes at him, but he hasn't even looked up from his menu yet. *Calm down, love.*

"Yeah, I'll have the fully loaded burger, with the cheese and bacon fries, and a side of onion rings. I'll also take a Coke," he says, as he places the menu back in its holder, and finally looks at her.

"Of course, you must work out to be in such fine shape, and to be able to eat that without worrying," she says with a laugh and it's beyond awkward. At least, I think it is.

"I'll have the same please, but without the onion rings, and an ice tea," I say it with a polite smile, but her eyes flick to me with disdain before she returns her full attention to him.

"Not really, I just work hard."

"Oh, I can tell," she purrs as her hand falls on his arm, and mine clench under the table as I work on schooling my features.

"Are you going to write her order down or what?" he asks as he raises an eyebrow and plucks her hand free.

"Of course, sorry. I must have got distracted." Another laugh, and it's starting to grate on me.

"Seriously, you're coming on a little strong, don't you think?" I throw out, and she turns to me with a scowl.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She flicks her ponytail over her shoulder, and I shake my head.

"We j-j-just want to eat, f-f-flirt on y-y-your own time. If he's i-i-interested, he'll l-let you know." I really hate my stutter.

“Of course, I’ll be back with your order shortly.” She turns on her heel. “Stuttering little freak,” she adds under her breath, and Darius rises to his feet before he storms past her, and approaches another waitress.

It isn’t long before a man in an apron comes out from what I assume is the kitchen. “Darla,” he hollers over the noise, and she wastes no time in appearing.

I can’t hear what is being said, but I can see the way she’s gesturing frantically, and Darius stands there. He looks over at me as he says something, and the man looks over before he points toward the door he came from. Darla tucks her head as she disappears through it, and Darius makes his way back to me.

“Is e-e-everything o-o-okay?”

“It is now. We’ll have a different waitress, one who knows what respect means, and how to treat a customer with it. I’m sorry, Miss Carter, she never should have said that to you,” he says, and I can feel his anger from here, and it’s humbling that it’s for me.

“I’m used to it, and you know you can call me, Luna, right?”

“Okay, I’ll try. You shouldn’t be used to it, Mi-Luna. You shouldn’t have to take such cruelty for stuttering. There’s nothing wrong with the way you speak, it’s... cute.” He blushes, and it’s sweet and adorable, and I don’t even mind that he just called me cute.

“Can I ask you something?” He nods his head, and I brace myself for what I’m about to ask out loud.

“Why would women be put off by you or use you to fulfill a bad boy fantasy? I’ve been trying to figure it out, but nothing makes sense.”

“You may not want to sit and eat with me, if I tell you,” he replies cryptically, and it only makes me want to know the answer more.

“I doubt that. I won’t judge you, Darius. Besides, shouldn’t we all have someone we can be ourselves with? You seem to be placed with me a lot, I’d feel better if I knew.” Maybe my request is selfish, but he doesn’t have to answer. Though, he didn’t say no, so maybe he wants to tell me.

He opens his mouth just as our drinks are placed on the table, and I play with the straw as I look at him.

“A few years ago I was... I was in prison. I saw someone being hurt, so I stepped in, tried to do the honorable thing. I went further than I should and he pressed charges. My case seemed strong enough, seeing as it was in defense of someone else. However, she didn’t corroborate my story.” His jaw is hard

as he runs his fingers through his hair, messing it up. “She stood by his claim that it was unwarranted, and I acted without reason. I was charged with aggravated assault and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. I served the full term and when I came out, I struggled to get work. I was training to be a teacher, but that was ruined. Somehow, I ended up here, working for Arthur, protecting the guys, and occasionally the girls. Then he brought me into the Academy. You’re the first girl I’ve gotten to know beyond a name and number,” he trails off as he tears into a napkin, shredding it into tiny little pieces.

“Shit, Darius. I’m so sorry that happened to you.” His head snaps up as he stares at me, and I don’t look away.

“You believe me, without question. That never happens. People hear prison and automatically think I have to be the wrong party. No matter how much I try to convince them otherwise. My girlfriend didn’t believe me. She even came to the prison to end things with me, saying that I scared her. It gutted me and I don’t see the point in getting close to anyone now. Someone always seems to end up getting hurt.”

“I know it’s different, but do you remember when I went to see my sister?” He nods and I take a deep breath before I continue. “Well, Cole has been a long-term crush for as long as she’s been his patient. It was harmless, one sided, and I tried to ignore it, but then... he told me he wanted me. He kissed me after I became an Academy girl, so when I saw him with Poppy, everything crumbled.” I feel ridiculous saying this out loud, and I know it’s dangerous because he could tell a Harkwright, and everything will be over for me. “I’ve always felt like I was second best, that I could never compare to Poppy, and she always seemed so perfect. It didn’t take a lot for me to think that he had traded me in for a better model, but Poppy made it clear that I was wrong. Among other opinions that she seems to have of her little sister.” I smile grimly as I take a napkin for myself, and create my own small pile of tiny pieces. “I didn’t want to listen, couldn’t believe that anyone would ever choose me. That I would be the first choice. And then he got me alone at the Academy, said some stuff, and kissed me. I didn’t say anything back, but now he acts as though everything is okay, and I just don’t know how I feel about that. He said he would wait until I’m free, but...”

“You said he was a crush, but do you love him?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did, but I’m questioning everything. I’m wondering how I can really know what it feels like. I’ve never been in love

before.” I hate to admit it, but he was honest with me so he deserves the same courtesy.

“That’s the hard part, until you’ve been in love, it’s easy to confuse it. I’m still not sure if I have been, but because I’m unsure, I feel as though that already tells me the answer.” He starts to reach his hands across as our food arrives, and he quickly snaps them back.

“Darius, do you think it’s possible to have feelings for more than one person?” I don’t know why I ask it, but it’s out there now, and I can’t take it back.

“I think we’re capable of feeling many things and nothing is simple. Emotions are complex and hard to pin down at times, but we’ll always have someone we love. Be it a friend, family, even a pet. If you can love that many people and animals, then why can’t it be the same for being in love with someone? Who’s to say who you can fall for or even how many? Just be careful not to give your heart to someone who doesn’t deserve it. More than likely, you’ll end up being the one to feel the brunt of it.” He gives me an awkward smile before he digs into his burger and I quickly follow suit. The whole time, his words swim around in my mind as I try to figure out exactly what it is I feel for the people in my life.

MAYBE THIS TIME

MY PALMS ARE SWEATY and my stomach is twisted in knots. I seriously doubt I'll be able to eat a damn thing at this lunch date I have to attend with Aeron and his mother.

I have on a knee-length, pinstripe pencil skirt, black stockings, and a dark blue blouse with my hair up in a chignon bun. I also have subtle makeup, and for the first time since I saw Poppy, I do not feel comfortable in my own skin.

We walk into the fancy ass restaurant, and we're instantly escorted to our table with the woman who tries to dress young. As well as being someone who relies so much on Botox, that you can't tell if she's smiling or frowning. It really is ridiculous.

"Mother," Aeron says, as he drops a chaste kiss on her cheek as the waiter pulls out my chair, and I take a seat.

"So, this is the girl you chose to bring with you. I can't say I see the appeal, but hopefully she'll stop you from fucking a member of staff this time." If I had a drink, I would be spitting it all over the place at her words.

I can't believe she said fuck. She really does not seem the type to cuss like that.

"I'd assume so, I don't like to go back for a second turn. Unless you've hired someone new since the last time," he says it so casually, and I have no idea what is happening right now.

"Oh, Aeron. You make me feel so relieved that you are an only child. Could you imagine how awful your brother or sister would have been to have someone like you as a role model? Sometimes I regret ever choosing to have you conceived." She sips her wine, and he does nothing more than smirk.

“I will be back in a moment, I took the liberty of ordering for us all. I do hope your ‘choice’ doesn’t have any allergies, it would be an inconvenience I do not need. You give me plenty of those all by yourself.” She stands up and walks away. I keep wondering if I’ve fallen into some fucked up reality where nothing makes sense.

“I bet you’re finally understanding why I always spiral after visiting with that bitch. I swear, the minute we get out of here, I am getting so fucking wasted. You’re more than welcome to join me, and I wouldn’t be too rash in saying no, believe me. This is her being nice.”

She comes back after a few minutes, just as the food arrives, and I haven’t got a clue what I’m looking at. Although I could hold it in the palm of my hand and still have room to spare.

“I ordered you the ocean black cod fillet, nestled in a garden pea puree, and it comes with the spinach and onion compote. You better not be allergic to fish,” she says while sticking her nose up at me and looking down at it.

“No, ma’am. I don’t have any allergies that I am aware of,” I say back, trying to stay polite, as I wait for them to begin before starting on my own.

“Oh, Aeron dear, go and fetch me a cigarette.” She waves her hand at him, and my jaw sets at her behavior.

“You cannot smoke here, mother, it isn’t allowed,” he replies, and she titters - *actually titters* - at his reply.

“Oh please, I am a Harkwright. If I want a cigarette, I will damn well have one. A true sign of power is being able to do things that others can’t. Now, run along and do as you’re told.” She waves her hand once more. And she’d probably narrow her eyes if she could.

He spares me a glance before he gets up and wanders off. The look on her face is terrifying. I feel like the prey that has just been snared by the big, bad predator.

“You remind me of someone, girl. Hmm.” She cups her chin as she stares through me. I say nothing, instead I just sit here, and wish I could turn myself invisible.

“Oh yes, my brother’s little wife. All of them, in fact. Although, I doubt you’ve had the work they have. You reek of poverty.” She sniffs the air before another laugh rings out.

She takes a mouthful of wine before she clicks her fingers and a waiter hurries over; she doesn’t even say anything as she raises her empty glass, and shakes it in his face.

“You don’t say a lot, do you? Is that why my son brought such a charity case with him?”

“I get the impression you do not approve of me, ma’am,” I say quietly, and she takes another drink the moment someone sets it in front of her.

“Honestly, no. Clearly, our boys can choose whoever they want for getting their dicks wet, but you’re not marriage material. You come from poor stock, little girl, and I won’t let you taint our name, we have an image to uphold.” She pushes her plate aside. I think she’s only had two mouthfuls. *Clearly, the wine is more appetizing.*

Aeron returns and throws a pack on the table, and she takes no time in opening it up and sparking it to life, blowing smoke across the table and murmurs start to arise.

“The manager is coming,” Aeron states, and a spark of excitement flicks to life in her eyes.

“I am sorry, madam, but this is a no smoking establishment, I will have to ask you to step outside if you wish to have a cigarette.” He’s the epitome of calm and collected. Wild horses couldn’t pull me away as she rises to her feet and steps around the table to stand before him. Not once moving to put it out and then proceeds to blow smoke in his face.

“I am Victoria Harkwright and if I wish to smoke inside, I will. If you continue to push this matter, then this establishment will need a new manager. Now, I know you have your rules to uphold and I am not unsympathetic, but if you haven’t heard of us, then either you’re an idiot or you are a very unfortunate soul. I won’t tolerate either option. Now, if you run along, I will forget your indiscretion, but I will only make this offer once.” Her tone is ice cold, and goosebumps are spreading over my body.

“I know who you are, madam. That does not mean I will not enforce the rules. Either put it out or I will have to ask you to leave.”

“Wrong choice, man,” Aeron says, and the manager looks at him with his eyebrows drawn.

“Aeron, my phone.” She snaps her fingers, and he passes it to her with an unconcealed eye roll. She taps the screen and places it against her ear.

“William, Darling. I’m currently standing in your bistro and I am being asked to leave. Is this a decision you agree with? Because if so, I may need to have a little talk with your dear wife about the south of France.”

She stands there listening to whatever William says back, her lips minutely rising at the corner. I guess this is her version of a gleeful smile.

“Oh, that is marvelous. I will pass him the phone. See you soon, darling.” She passes the phone to the manager. “Good luck, dear. The job market is brutal at the moment.” She pats his cheek before she reclaims her seat.

He says nothing as he holds the phone to his ear, his face growing redder with each second that passes. It isn’t long before he returns the phone and storms away.

“Did you really have to get him fired, mother?” Aeron asks flippantly, not caring in the least that she has just destroyed that poor man’s career, and all because he asked her to follow the rules.

“What? I just gave him an important lesson about life. Never punch above your weight, you’ll only end up being crushed in the end.” Her eyes are on me and I understand the warning. As far as she is concerned, Aeron is off limits to me and after what I just saw, I’d be a fool not to heed the warning.



HE’S SPARKING up the minute we enter the suite, and Darius disappears into his room, but not before shooting me a strange look. One that I don’t have the capacity to decipher right now.

“Do you want some? It’s different to the one you tried the last time you got high.”

“I didn’t realize there was more than one type,” I reply, but I don’t take it and my words cause him to roll his eyes at me before he walks over to the bar.

“How about a drink? You don’t have to get wasted.” He shakes a bottle, and I find myself nodding. I can’t help but wonder if I’ll regret it.

He pours us both a generous glass of something dark before adding coke to mine, and I take it with a timid smile before taking a sip, and it goes down smoothly.

“I can’t wait for this fucking day to end,” he says, and I don’t know if he’s talking to me, so I remain quiet as I nurse my drink, and let my head wander into dangerous territory.

It starts with Cole and whether I want him to wait, if I can see myself with him when all is said and done, and if I’d be happy. I don’t even know where to begin with it all. Then my mind drifts to Tom. He is dangerous to my sanity and even worse, my heart. Because feelings are developing, no

matter how hard I try to fight it. His kindness, the way he looks after me, and how he makes me come alive. It would be easy if he was the only one, but I would only be deceiving myself if I tried to claim that. Tucker is a mystery and enigma rolled up in one gloriously confusing package. I can't even tell if he likes me half the time, but when he allows himself to be less of a dick around me, he's almost endearing.

Emmet just fills me with animosity. I no longer see him as Liam, and I can't see it changing, so at least that one is simple enough. Then I have Aeron, I can't even tell where he's at, and if he even likes me anymore. Although, after spending the lunch with his mother, I can definitely understand him a little more. I mean, for fuck's sake, she's driven me to day drinking!

I lift my glass to my lips and realize it's empty before I get to my feet and make myself another glass. I hope I haven't made it too strong, but I'm past the point of caring now.

"Who did you fuck in the end?" It's so out of the blue, I half expect to get whiplash. *Where did that come from?*

"Does it really matter? It's only a matter of time before Emmet finds out, and then I'll be his until he grows tired of me."

"True. Oh well, Sucks to be you, I guess." He downs his drink before he grabs the bottle and starts taking mouthfuls from the bottle itself, his glass no longer needed.

"Oh no. Clearly, I have it all," I say sarcastically, and he chuckles but stays quiet.

"Are you angry with me, Aeron?" How does that saying go? Loose lips sink ships.

"Why would I possibly be angry with you?"

"I don't know, maybe because I didn't choose you," I say and his scoff and the narrow of his eyes make me think I may be onto something.

"Please, you think too highly of yourself. I couldn't care less who you spread your legs for. Saying that, maybe I should have a go before you have too much cock that you can no longer tighten around me." His words stoke a fire within me, add that to the alcohol, and I think nothing short of a gag could keep me quiet.

"Hmm, let me tackle this in order, just so you can keep up." I tap my lips as I brace my elbows on my thighs and lean forward, steeping my hands beneath my chin.

“Are you calling me stupid?” He seems so affronted, and I hold back my laugh as I slowly shake my head at him.

“Now, now, Aeron. Interrupting is awfully rude, having a bitch for a mother is no excuse for poor manners.” *Oh my gosh, shut the fuck up right now, Luna. You’re clearly drunk.* His eyes widen but he doesn’t say anything else, and I smirk at him, taking a move from his playbook.

“Anyone who has taken the time to get to know me will be able to tell you I think very little of myself. I still don’t understand why I am garnering so much attention from you guys, and honestly, it’s baffling. As for your vulgar comment, all I can say is that, just because your mother is a pretentious asshole who likes to look down on us lowly people, does not mean that you have to be one. The son does not have to become the mother and honestly, you could be so much better. If only you were willing to try. So you can make your orders but if it was left to me, then I wouldn’t choose you, Aeron, not while you are so much less than you could truly be.” I stand up, swaying ever so slightly before I walk over to my door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks, and he sounds so dumbfounded, it would be comical if it wasn’t so sad.

“I have nothing more to say, so either order me to stay or let me go.” His lack of response tells me all I need to know. So, I walk into my room and close the door.

AERON SPENDS the next couple of days out, and I don’t have the urge to find out where he goes. If it’s to his mother, then I’m more than happy to stay in my room. Darius hasn’t tried to coax me out to talk, and aside from ordering room service, I just want to keep to myself, and not speak to a single person. If only life could work out the way I planned and would listen to my wishes.

My door opens without so much as a knock, so I already know it’s Aeron. At least Darius has the courtesy to not walk into my room without an invitation.

“We’ll be leaving tomorrow, but we have to attend a family matter first. A dinner with my mother and uncle I’d wear the cocktail dress I suggested you bring.” Oh yes. The annoying little list he left with me, with the clothes he required me to bring. *Asshole.*

“Okay, is there anything else?” I ask, keeping my tone void of any emotion.

He glances out into the sitting area before he steps further into my room and closes the door behind him. He leans himself against it and stares off to the side of my head.

“My mother didn’t want children, but she was encouraged to produce an heir to take over her area of work once she was ready to step down.”

“Okaaaay,” I stretch the word out, not sure where he’s going with this. Why is he suddenly in the sharing mood?

“She felt that a pregnancy was an impediment that she couldn’t afford and didn’t care for. Anyone can see that she spends a lot of time with plastic surgeons and has a fierce regiment to keep herself looking young for as long as she can. Ruining her body to have a child was abhorrent to her, so she decided she wouldn’t bother.” He drums his fingers against the door, his face drawn as he continues to speak. “I’m a test-tube baby. She had her eggs inserted into a surrogate, and I don’t even know who my father or better yet, sperm donor, ended up being. She didn’t care to ask. As long as he came from money then he would do for the task at hand. A nanny raised me, and I spent the entirety of my school years in a private school where I could only leave for Christmas and summer breaks, if my mother allowed it. Suffice to say, it did not happen often, and the times it did, I spent with Maddox, his sister, and his brothers. He was the only one I could tolerate, he was genuinely nice and my uncle couldn’t ruin that, no matter how hard he tried,” he tapers off and I don’t know what to say after that bomb he just dropped at my feet.

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask, as I get to my feet and stand at the foot of my bed.

“Because everything you said that night was true, I’m just not sure I can be better, Luna. I don’t even know if I’m willing to try, I don’t know any different. You’re the first person I’ve met who hasn’t been taken in by the glitz and glam of my life. I think that’s what drew me to you. That and your penchant for stuttering when you get worked up, but then you went and chose someone else, and it cemented the notion in my mind that I’m as worthless as my mother says. You’re not worthless, Luna, no matter what you think but... I can’t be the guy you think you see, I don’t have a reason to.” He seems so resigned to his fate. I want to grab him by his shoulders and shake some sense into him, but I doubt it will do any good.

“I hope you’ll change your mind someday, Aeron, because the man I can see within you? He deserves everything he could ever imagine. Happiness, fulfilment, even love. Maybe one day you’ll meet someone who can help you realize it, and when that day comes, there will be no stopping you.” He glances up at me. He makes a move to step forward, but he turns around, opens my door, and walks away.

What more can I do, but get ready for yet another meal that can only end in disaster? *Welcome to my life.*

BY THE TIME I’ve finished getting ready, we have to leave. I have worn the dress he ‘suggested’. A long, figure hugging cocktail dress that falls to my ankles with a slit that travels up mid thigh. It’s black and effortlessly sexy, without being too revealing. It’s fairly decent at the front as it crosses over my shoulders, but the back is non-existent as it drops to the dimples at the base of my spine. I pair it with a pair of heeled pumps, and my hair is swept up into a bun with a few loose tendrils framing my face. My eyes are subtle, with just a simple black line over the top and across the bottom, and my red lips are the only bit of color in the entire ensemble.

I meet Aeron at the door and he offers me the crook of his elbow, before leading me down to the car. Not a single word is spoken even as we pull up to the restaurant, and he leads me inside.

We don’t even have to give our name before we’re being escorted to a private room, and the moment we enter, all I can think about doing is slamming my fist into his pretty face. He didn’t even bother to warn me who his uncle is. So, as my eyes fall on Sir Harkwright, all I can feel is the anger coursing through my veins, and the icy fear that is Hell bent on putting it out.

My chair is pulled out for me and I take it, my shaky legs grateful for the reprieve. Although I’m almost directly in front of Sir, and his eyes refuse to release me from his stare. Like a clueless mouse, I am well and truly caught in his snare.

The door opens once more, and Victoria enters with a woman who has the same hair and eye color as me. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. Who is this woman? She takes the vacant seat beside Sir, and Aeron takes the one next to me with Victoria sitting directly in front of him.

“Hello, Aeron dear, how are you?” The mystery woman asks, and I see nothing but kindness in her eyes.

“I’m well, thank you, Maria. How was Venice?”

“Breath taking, I was saying to Arthur that we should go for our anniversary. As long as he is able to leave, of course.” She has a beautiful smile, with pearly whites gleaming in the light. “Who have you got with you? She is a pretty little thing.” I want to take offense at her word choice, but I don’t think she is saying it to be mean, or to cause an upset.

“This is Five, she’s from the Academy,” he replies as he leans his arm across the back of my chair, and I watch as Sir narrows his gaze before schooling his features.

“Enough of that nonsense, you’re not in the Academy right now. Your name is Luna, right?” he asks, directing the last part at me, and I nod my head in reply.

“Don’t be nervous, sweetie. I know it can be intimidating, but you shouldn’t be worried. Just enjoy yourself,” Maria says, and I swallow past the lump lodged in my throat. Victoria doesn’t seem too impressed with the way Maria is treating me, not if the shake of her head, or the way she looks down at me over her nose is anything to go by.

“I love your hair,” I say like an idiot, but it really is beautiful with the way it’s been curled softly, and is held up in a twist with curls falling down like a waterfall across her neck.

“Aww, aren’t you sweet? Thank you. I wish I could say it’s natural like yours, but unfortunately, this is done by countless professionals.” She laughs, but I don’t miss the way her eyes flick to Sir. Why do I get the feeling I’m not the only nervous person here?

“How are you finding the Academy, Luna? Do you enjoy your classes?” Sir asks.

“I do, thank you. The business class was hard to get my head around in the beginning. I spend as much time as I can studying the materials, and extra, so I can be sure I understand it fully,” I reply softly, too scared to meet his eyes.

“That’s very admirable, hard work is something we should all experience. I feel it helps to shape us into a stronger person. No one should just skate by. How can we expect those under us to work hard if we don’t do it ourselves?” He cuts a glance at Aeron, and he clenches his hand under the table.

“What do you hope to do once your time at the Academy ends?” Maria

asks, and Victoria doesn't even try to mask her sigh.

"I want to own and run my own bakery. I may do the odd bake to order, but mainly so people can come in and have a chance to sample food from all around the world. Croissants from France, beignets from New Orleans, Cornish pasties from England. That kind of thing." My nerves slip away as I fall into my comfort zone.

"Oh, that sounds amazing. Will you have tables for people to sit down, or will it be a takeaway only service?"

"I keep going back and forth on that. I've contemplated having a few bistro style tables with a couple of chairs, and maybe a garden out back where they can relax and enjoy their order under the sun." A smile plays at my lips. Aeron sits up straighter and pulls his arm away from my chair.

"Do you know what kind of return you plan to see?" Sir asks, and my nerves come back just like that. *It's so much easier when he's not the one addressing me.*

"No, Sir. That's one reason I'm majoring in business, so I can get a better grasp of things."

"Well, we all have to start somewhere. Maybe I can schedule an appointment with a member of my accounting team, and one from the business side. So you can talk through it with someone who has more experience," he offers, and I'm floored.

"T-that would be amazing. Thank you, Sir," I say, and Aeron is watching his uncle closely.

"Oh this is ridiculous, you cannot be serious, Arthur. She doesn't need anymore handouts," Victoria seethes through gritted teeth, and he turns his icy stare on her.

"What I do is of no concern to you, sister. Do not forget who you are talking to. I pay your salary after all." I want to slink down in my chair, and I jump when Aeron places his hand on mine and squeezes.

Maria clears her throat and all eyes turn to her, and her smile is directed at me. With eyes so closely resembling my own, it's a little unnerving.

"I just wanted to say thank you for taking care of our boy. It's an unfortunate business what happened to him." Her voice cracks a little, and Sir gives her a scathing look.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Maddox. You helped him when he fell off the horse, right?" I can feel my nostrils flare. Since when is Shane a fucking horse? This is bullshit and

my hands shake with the anger that is coursing through me. “Hopefully, he won’t try again. I wouldn’t want him to get a more serious injury.” Her eyes are pleading with me as I open my mouth, and then the weight of her words dawn on me.

My mind goes blank. That would mean... but surely, she couldn’t... oh fuck me, Maddox is Sir’s son, which means, so is Shane. My bully and my friend are brothers to the guy who has fixated on me since the beginning. How much more bad luck can this place throw at me?

The food arrives not long after and we eat in silence, the sooner we get done the better. I’m done with this freaky twilight zone I seem to have stumbled into.

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A CLOSE CALL

CHRISTMAS WILL BE HERE SOON, and they have announced an assembly for next week. I've been back for three days and everything feels different, even though nothing has changed.

I've been going about my day as though multiple bombshells weren't dropped on me, and I'm impressed by how I've kept it all together. Aeron hasn't spoken to me since we got back, and I haven't seen Tom either. I can't help but wonder which girl he spent his time with while I was gone. Was she prettier than me? Better? Could she do things without needing guidance on the best way to get him off?

I need to stop doing this to myself; it isn't going to make me feel any better. It doesn't help that I know I'll be claimed soon, and I'm fucking petrified that it'll be Shane. I just wish there was a way I could know for sure.

I go to my business class and my mind is blank, nothing is sinking in, and I blame it on the Harkwrights for messing with my head. Intentional or not.

"Hey, are you okay?" Maddox asks, and I love him for asking.

"Not really, can I talk to you after class?"

"I'll always make time for you," he says, and my heart melts for him. He's like the brother I never had, and I hate that he's been stuck with Emmet and Shane instead. Then again, I have Poppy.

I know it's not a comparison at all, but ever since I saw her at the hospital, I've been questioning the image I had built up in my mind. It's making me question everything I've believed and thought. Can I really trust my judgement in people if I got it so wrong about her? But then, I feel guilty. What if she isn't a bitch, and it's because of whatever's happening to her?

I give up with this class. I just hope I can catch up, maybe get Maddox to talk me through it?

An hour later and it's over, I let a breath of relief pass through me before I gather my things and wait outside for Maddox.

"I've got half an hour before my next lesson starts, but if you need longer, I can always catch up tomorrow," he says, and his kindness makes me want to cry.

"You don't need to do that. Shall we go for a walk in the gardens? Just not the maze," I hastily add, and he nods his agreement before we set off.

"What's the matter, Luna?"

"I feel so... lost. The more I learn, the less sense I can make of it. I'm so scared of making the wrong choice, and having it blow up in my face. What if every decision I've made since I applied for this place was the wrong one?" I'm playing with the ruffles on my skirt, and he's so quiet, I have no idea what he's thinking.

"If we don't make mistakes, then how can we learn? You can never be sure if you are doing the right thing, not really. What if you see someone choking, you save their life and then they rob a convenience store, killing the clerk? Were you doing the right or wrong thing? Because it caused someone else to die, or was it fate balancing the scale?" He stops and turns to face me. "I think sometimes all we need is someone to say that they believe in us, and they are on our side, and that's what I'm saying to you right now. You're a good person, Luna, and you've got a friend for life in me."

Tears are streaming down my face and no matter how many I wipe away, more just take their place.

"How can those two be your brothers?"

"I wondered how long it would be until someone let it slip. Although, I doubt it was either of them. They're not exactly happy that they're so closely related to me. A distant cousin would have been preferred, I imagine." He kicks at a loose stone on the path, and we watch as it rolls away.

"Your mom seems nice, at least," I say weakly, and he chuckles sadly.

"She's been with us since I was nine, but she's the only mom I have now. And she's always been kind to me. It doesn't stop me from wondering who my real mom is, but father refuses to talk about it. He's not the man you push for an answer."

"What do you mean?"

"Father was married to Shane and Emmet's mom for a few years, but no

matter how much money he threw at her, he couldn't get her to look," he hesitates and stares off into the distance, "a certain way, so he traded her in for a different model. Again, it didn't work out the way he wanted, and he ended up with Maria. They've been together for ten years now. She's the longest relationship he's had. No doubt he'll trade her in when he finds someone who's a better fit for the image in his head. Anyway, he was away on business and slept with a stripper. Nine months later, I came along." He drags a hand through his mop of hair before tugging roughly at the locks. "He told her he would take me on and let me be a Harkwright, as long as she sold over all rights, and never tried to contact me. I don't know how much money he gave her, but it was enough for her to abandon her son. I'm a bastard, and Shane reminds me at every given opportunity. Emmet is just disconnected from the whole thing, he doesn't care who I am. As long as I stay out of his way, he leaves me alone."

"I'm sorry, Maddox, that can't be easy. One thing I don't understand, if Shane is the eldest, then why isn't he the heir?"

"Because he's a psycho. father would never trust him with the business, and in case you haven't noticed, Emmet looks like a younger version of the man. He uses his head more than his brawn. I'm sure father has a purpose for Shane, he'll always find a use for us, I just haven't figured out what it is yet."

"One last question, why does your mom look so much like me?" He fidgets on the spot as I peer at him. His reaction causes something to form in my mind, and I'm regretting asking the question. *Please, don't answer.*

"Because he's paid a lot of money to make it happen. Contact lenses that change her eyes to a pale blue. Hair dye that keeps her hair white, and surgeries to fix any imperfections he finds in the look. If you ask me why she stays, then it's probably because she's an equal mixture of frightened and in love. He's a monster, Luna, I pray you are never alone with him or on the receiving end of his anger, or even worse, his charm. I can't recall a single woman who has resisted."



I'M SPRAWLED out on my bed, textbooks dotted around beside me, and Maddox's notes from class are on my lap. This would be so much easier with a computer, but it isn't as though I'm even allowed one. So, the old-fashioned

way it is.

My door opens slowly and a flash of red fills my peripheral, before I lift my head to find Tom standing in the doorway.

“Hey, stranger,” he says with a megawatt grin, and I tuck my hair behind my ears as I give him a smaller smile in return.

“Hey, Sunbeam, how are you?” *Why am I being so awkward right now?*

“I’m great, thanks,” he says with a laugh, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and it leaves me breathless.

He approaches my bed, slides his fingers across my face, and then leans in for a deep, lingering kiss.

“How was the trip?” he asks as he pulls away.

“Enlightening, I guess. I found out Sir is not just Emmet’s father, but also Shane and Maddox’s. I also got some insight into why Aeron is the way he is, and had some time to work a few things out in my head.” *Oh my God, just stop talking.*

“Wow, not boring then ” He strokes his chin as he gazes down at me, and I can’t help but lose myself in his eyes. “So, what did you work out?” His tone seems almost hesitant.

“I’ve changed a lot since I first came here, and I think I need to adjust the way I see people, and the attitude I had coming in here. There were other things, but that will all work itself out in the end... I think.” Phew, I didn’t go into too much detail. *Yeah, like telling him you think you’re falling for him.*

“I think you’re saving all the good stuff, aren’t you, Moonbeam? Is there any way I could coax it out of you?” He dips his head for another kiss, his tongue twirling and dancing with mine. I think I’d tell him anything, and that’s how I know he’s become dangerous for me. I’m feeling too much for a guy that will probably never see me in that way.

“I’m sure you could, but I’d rather you didn’t,” I say on a sigh I feel bone deep.

“Okay then, you can talk to me though. I know I do stupid shit and mostly when we’re together, we end up naked, but I won’t judge you,” he says, and I believe him but I also worry he’ll run for the hills if I did.

Instead of answering, I pack up my study materials and place them on the floor before I get to my feet and unbuckle his jeans while I fuse my mouth with his. I can’t tell him what I’m feeling, but I can show him and he won’t even realize. I win and lose in this scenario.

He pulls my top over my head before removing his own, steps out of his

jeans and boxers, and then he pounces, sweeping me into his arms and our hands are everywhere. Swallowing each other's moans as I pump his cock and he teases my nipples. I don't know what's going on, but we can't seem to keep our hands in one place. Exploring every inch of skin, every dip, every muscle until it becomes muscle memory.

He drops me down onto the bed and I fall back, my head nestled within my pillows as he climbs up my body. He pulls my nipple into his mouth as his finger slides inside me, pumps once, twice, and then it's gone and he's driving himself home. It's messy, fast, and frenzied, and I never want it to end.

I cry out his name as I come hard enough to leave black dots in my vision and he follows behind, grunting out, "Moonbeam," and it's so fucking perfect, my heart swells and I fall over the edge.

No more doubts or possibilities, I'm in love with Tom Harkwright, and I guess it can only end in misery.

He pulls out and I miss the feel of him instantly; I watch as he disappears into the bathroom before he returns with a damp washcloth and runs it between my legs. He gives me a grin before he takes it back and I look at the time, knowing that he'll leave, and I'll be left here without a chance in Hell of falling asleep. It doesn't matter that it's almost midnight, there's no chance my head will shut off now.

"You're on my side," he says as he walks back in and rolls me onto my side, before he climbs into my bed, and pulls me back against him. He slides an arm under my head, and rests his other one on my stomach, holding me close, spooning me. Treating me as though I'm more than just an Academy girl, at least, that's how it feels to me.

"Stop thinking and get some sleep," he whispers in my ear before he places a soft kiss on the spot where my shoulder meets my neck, then he settles down. I listen as his breathing grows deeper, steadier, until I feel safe in the knowledge that he is now asleep.

My mouth opens, ready to say the three words that will change everything, only... they won't because he won't hear it, and won't feel any different when morning comes around. "I love you, Tom." A whisper in the night, and no one but me will ever know it was spoken.

IT'S BEEN two days since my silent confession and any fears I had about him hearing it are gone, he hasn't been any different with me and he visited me the following night. Having him sleep with me is strange, and I definitely wouldn't have pegged him as a cuddler, but I'm not going to complain. Even if it is only making it worse, loving someone who won't love you is a unique kind of torture, and I'm only prolonging the pain because I don't want to refuse him.

It's six in the morning and he still isn't making a move to leave my room, instead he's got his arms folded behind his head, and a smirk firmly planted on his face.

"Seriously, what is going on? You never stay this long?" I ask for the third time since I woke up and got myself ready.

"What's the rush? I don't have any classes until like ten. Besides, your bed is comfy." He makes a show of getting comfortable, wiggling his body until he finds the perfect position.

"Well, mine start at nine, and I'm getting breakfast with D."

"Is that an invitation to join you ladies?" His smirk grows into a smile, and my mouth drops at his words.

"Why would you want to?"

"Just making the most of your time before you get claimed," he says dismissively, but his smile doesn't drop even though my mouth pulls into a frown.

"Don't remind me, I'm freaking out that I'm going to get given to Shane." A shiver passes through me. He's out of bed in an instant, gripping my shoulders, and dipping his head until we're eye level.

"Shane won't be the one to claim you, trust me. I've seen the list and I know what order the guys who want you are in. Shane is way at the bottom, courtesy of yours truly."

"Really? Oh God, Tom. You have no idea what that means to me," I say as I jump up and down before I throw my arms around his neck and plant a hard kiss on him.

"You're not curious about the order?" he asks when I pull away and fix my lipstick.

"Not really. I'd rather not know who is or isn't interested in claiming me, thank you very much." I close my eyes for a moment before I open them and shake myself off.

"I wonder who you're hoping for," he says quietly before he walks into

my bathroom and closes the door behind him.

I move into my sitting area to find a note on the floor by the door. I pick it up and I'm not surprised to see it's from Emmet. *It is his M.O. after all.*

Meet me outside tonight at seven, by the topiaries. This is an order. Don't keep me waiting, Star, and this is to stay between the two of us.

Emmet

I make a cup of coffee, and after a quick debate, pour a steaming mug for Tom. I wonder how his other favorites feel about him not being present in the evening, but then again, they'll probably find another Harkwright to latch onto. Bitchy, yes. Do I care, Hell to the no.

"Is this for me?" he asks with another eye crinkling smile, I give him a smile, and a nod before wrapping up a lemon muffin for Maddox. He really seems to like my citrus concoctions.

"You should do one of those food blog things, I bet they'd be a big hit," he says as he rests his mug on the counter.

"I guess, but it doesn't really interest me. Besides, I'm not the most technologically minded person," I shrug, and start washing up our mugs. *Our mugs.*

"D will be here to get me soon, so... unless you want to be caught leaving my room," my voice trails off, and his face becomes a blank mask.

"Well, I guess I'll go before I outstay my welcome any further," he says flippantly, and I turn fast enough to give myself a head rush.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that. I've had nothing but trouble from the girls in this place over Emmet's messed up special treatment. I don't want it to start up again because they don't enjoy sharing you with me. It's hard enough not comparing myself with them, I don't need to hear it first hand." I feel like an idiot for putting a voice to my inner musings, but he didn't leave me much choice.

"Oh, fuck me." He runs a hand across his face as he steps into my space and digs his fingers into my hips. "Moonbeam, it doesn't matter what they think, I won't let them start on you because of me. I'm intoxicated by you, and the other girls don't interest me. You saw yourself how bored I always looked. It felt worse. It's different with you. So, for as long as you let me in, I'm not going anywhere." He rolls his hips into mine, and a low groan falls from my lips and he swallows it whole.

By the time Daria comes for me, I've orgasmed twice and I've taken him in my mouth. Even after that, I'm still hungry for more, for him.

TEN MINUTES TO SEVEN, I'm standing here and I can't figure out where Emmet is, my palms are growing sweaty and I'm fidgeting on the spot. As the time ticks by, I can't help but smack myself in the face for my stupidity. Why didn't I tell D about this? *He ordered you not to.*

If I had, I wouldn't be standing out here alone. I walk around to the side door to get back inside the Academy, but it's locked. I mean, of course it is, I shouldn't be surprised by my bad luck anymore. It's getting to the point of idiocy, I can't keep expecting things to work out for me.

I walk back past the pool house, so I can try the main doors when a hand appears in the corner of my eyes. I only have time to release a short scream before it closes around my mouth, and I'm dragged kicking into the pool house. I get forced down onto the ground as another hand wraps around my throat, and a weight presses on my back, constricting my chest further. I try to force air into my lungs but it's hopeless, my vision gathers black spots, and I know I'm about to pass out. I'm going to die, and it's wrong what they say.

My life doesn't flash through my mind at warped speed, I don't see my mom or Poppy. All I can think about is how I don't want to die, and I wish I hadn't been so chicken shit to say what I needed, or wanted to say.

I can't fight it any longer, what reason do I even have to try? For a moment, I see my mama, the one who looks just like me, covered in blood and reaching for me, and then a bang fills the air and the weight disappears. I suck in as much oxygen as I can handle as a pair of hands lifts me off the ground, just in time to see a figure all in black running through the gardens, and straight into the maze.

"You should have gone after him," I rasp, but all Darius does is scoff.

"Anyone else and I may have, but I needed to make sure you were okay." He grabs a bottle of water from the mini fridge stored in here, and I take a few deep mouthfuls, wincing as the pain in my throat objects.

"Well, he's gone now. So, bravo." I'm not even angry at him, but I'm scared and I'm hurting. He's just in the wrong place, but luckily for me, it was at the right time.

"Are you fucking with me right now? You could have been dead for all I knew. Of course I was going to check on you first," he shouts as he grips me by the shoulders, and gives me a shake.

"Well, next time, don't." In my mind, I'm shouting, but reality is entirely

different, I couldn't shout if I tried. I do shove him in the chest though, my own heaving.

"There isn't going to be a next time. Either you don't leave my sight, or I'll make sure you're escorted from the premise. I won't let you become the next victim." His jaw is clenched as his measured steps have me backed up against the sofa sitting in the middle of the room.

"It's not your choice." I shove him again, and he seizes my wrist in his hand, his eyes narrow, and he brings his head in closer.

"I don't know why you're fighting me, but I. Will. Not. Back. Down. On. This," he says each word slowly, carefully, and filled with so much anger that mine rises up to match it.

"You don't get a say on anything when it comes to me." Why am I taking it out on him? *Poor Darius.*

His nostrils flare and I don't know who moves first, but one minute, we're staring daggers into one another and the next, my mouth is on his, and his hands are leaving a scorching trail down my spine. My hands are on his slacks, and his are on my bare thighs as he pushes my panties to the side. He springs free from his slacks, there's no time to remove them, and all I can think about is getting as close as possible. My hands are on him and his are on me, we move in time before he or I - I don't even know - line him up with me, and one glorious thrust is all it takes to have him inside me.

My hands are in his hair, tugging furiously, keeping him on my mouth as I balance on the back of the sofa, and he has a bruising grip on my hips, keeping me in place. Our teeth clash together and my hands go inside his shirt, my nails dragging down his back. He's hitting every damn spot I have as one hand breaks away and gropes at my chest, and I moan against his mouth, sucking on his tongue. Everything is gone from my mind, there's just me and Darius and this animalistic fucking we're doing. *Utter bliss.*

"Luna," he grunts, I can hear the strain in his voice as his movements become jerky, less precise. He hits me just right, and I fall apart in his arms. Our mouths still fused in a hot, needy, messy kiss. One more moan of my name and he's right there, his hands back on my hips, holding tight as our mouths break away, foreheads touching. Our chests heave in time and our eyes clash as he pulls out and releases a shaky breath.

My hand goes to my mouth as I stare up at him. The realization of what we have just done finally dawns and panic rears its ugly head.

I JUST HAD sex with Darius. Oh my God, I just had sex with Darius. What the fuck was I thinking? I mean, clearly I wasn't thinking at the time, otherwise it never would have happened. It doesn't matter that he made my body come alive, and his touch set me on fire with every thrust, and every sweep of his tongue. How he makes me feel seen and treats me like a normal person. I'm not just an Academy girl, Poppy's sister, or the adopted daughter. To him, I'm Luna Carter, and I've been noticing him more and more.

It's just... if Emmet finds out we're both dead, and things always come out in the end, no matter how much you try to keep it hidden. *Darius is now my dirty little secret.* I feel as though I'm about to puke my guts up and panic, fear, and nerves run rampant.

"Luna." He reaches for me, but I sidestep away. I can't trust myself if he touches me. Because if he does it again, then I don't think I'll ever want him to stop.

"I c-c-can't, Darius, we just.... just..." I can't even get the words out, and now his hands are cupping my cheeks, and he's staring straight into my eyes.

"Luna Carter, I see you. All of you, I tried to not notice, to pretend that you were just a job, but that didn't work. I started to see you differently that night you got drunk, then when we had dinner. I like you, more than I should, and I'm not going to pretend differently. At least not with you." He pulls me in and drops a kiss onto my forehead, and the tears fall freely.

I cry for the way my heart aches for a guy who has had a hard time in life, and I know I wouldn't have ever spoken to him if it wasn't for this place. It shocks me how much I've come to care for him, my Mountain. I never even realized until this moment. I cry for how useless I feel when it comes to the Harkwrights, and not being able to understand my own mind or feelings where they're concerned, but most of all I cry because I nearly died. Nearly became another statistic in this place which has so many rules, but at the same time has none. Not with the things that matter.

PRETTY LITTLE LIES

LIFE IS a cruel and evil bitch. There is no doubt in my mind right now. She's just out to get me, and yes, life is a woman in my mind because of how vindictive and cruel she is being to me right now. Darius blows up the minute we make it back inside the Academy building. How can anyone believe that it's all business where he is concerned?

"Tucker, Emmet, Tom. I don't care which one of you assholes deserves my anger because believe me, you're all getting it." It booms from him, and I take a step away as Tom looks at me, and his eyes fall on my neck.

"Moonbeam, what happened?" Concern laces his voice and his eyes are wide as he takes a step forward, but Darius doesn't let him get any closer as he moves in front of him.

"You are way out of line, don't forget who you work for," Emmet seethes. His teeth grind together and I worry for his molars for two seconds before I remember he's a rich asshole, and would probably have them fixed within moments.

"I work for your dad, not you, and my current job is to keep Miss Carter safe. Even if that means protecting her from you three." I guess Aeron isn't included because he isn't here, but a crowd is forming.

"Get to your rooms," Tucker orders, his voice low, cold, and utterly terrifying. He could give Sir a good run for his money if he gave it a shot.

A low murmur builds as the girls shuffle up the stairs, and Tucker shakes his head before angling it toward the hall and moves away. Darius is clenching his fists as we follow behind, and he still won't let the others get too close.

We walk into the assembly room and Tucker locks the door behind us, before he leans casually against the wall, and crosses his ankles.

“Why would you need to protect her from us?” he asks. He may seem calm and detached, but his eyes, and the way his finger taps against his arm, give him away.

“Your little maze strangler just made his move. Seeing as we don’t know who it is, means it could be any of you. Arthur doesn’t want her harmed, and I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

“It wasn’t me and an entire mess hall can verify that. The same goes for Tom,” Tucker says before his eyes narrow on Emmet.

“Why would I do it? Everyone knows that I’m interested in Luna, why would I try to kill her?” His face is red and there’s a vein throbbing in his temple, I can’t stop staring at it, at him. *Could he have done it?*

“You hate rejection, and she’s done nothing but reject you since you gave up your farce of being a poor little cleaner, plus if we consider the other victims...” Tom’s voice trails off, and the air is rife with tension as the room goes silent.

“This is fucking ridiculous...” Emmet starts, but Tucker wastes no time in interrupting him.

“If the next words out of your mouth are ‘wait until my father hears about this’ I will fucking end you. We’ve gone against each other enough times for you to know it’s not an idle threat.” There is so much heat between them, I can feel the hatred oozing from their pores, and I don’t know what to do?

A loud bang sounds on the door, Tucker growls as he pulls it open, and Aeron strolls in without a care in the world.

“You fuckwits are causing quite the stir, what’s...” His eyes land on my neck, and he’s in front of me in seconds.

Tucker and Tom move to stop Darius from pulling him away, which is weird in itself but not as weird as Aeron pulling me into his arms, and whispering nonsense in my ear.

“Luna, are you okay?” Concern is etched in the lines around his eyes, on his forehead, and I have the strongest urge to smooth them away with my thumb. In reality, I’m just standing here, arms limp at my side as I let him hold me.

“Not really, I’m still trying to process it all,” I say weakly before pulling back slightly. He doesn’t let go of me, but I shift enough so I can look at the others.

“If you’re going to lie, then don’t answer.” I pause, giving my throat a second to rest. “How many have died, other than Ms. Vanderbilt?”

Aeron tenses beside me, his arms tightening around my waist, and I lift the one closest to him to rest over his shoulder. Tucker rubs his chin, Tom stares at the floor, and Emmet sends daggers into Aeron with his eyes.

“I can’t tell you, Miss, but I would if I could,” Darius says into the silence, but it isn’t needed. Emmet gave it all away when he said about killing me. It just made my suspicions become more tangible.

“We can’t say, not until we know you won’t tell anyone else. It doesn’t matter what we think, we need to know.” This comes from Tucker, and I can respect the answer, even if I hate it.

“Back to Emmet, did you do it?” Tom has no hesitation in accusing his, well whatever Emmet is to him.

“No, I did not try to hurt Luna,” he seethes.

“What about the others?” I don’t mean to say it out loud, but it’s out there now.

“Work it out for yourself, Star, I’m sure you’ll come to the right answer.” His tone leaves me feeling cold, and my mind is whirring with possibilities.

“Hang on a minute, Five. Why were you even out there?” Tucker asks and my eyes flick to Emmet, but he doesn’t even look worried.

“I had a n-n-note, it said it w-w-was from Emmet. I was ordered not to tell anyone,” all eyes are on him and he just shakes his head.

“As if I would leave a paper trail.” His eyes are dark, menacing, and it really feels as though someone is trying to set the Prince up. *I’m not sure it’s much of a surprise, but why?*

“My throat is really hurting.” My voice is becoming tired, croaky, and I just want to go to bed.

“Let’s get you to your room. Can I stay with you?” Aeron asks, not caring what anyone else thinks and honestly, I don’t even know what to think.

My eyes drift to Tucker and Tom and the latter gives me a reassuring smile, almost as if he’s telling me to say yes. The fact that he’s asking is what makes my mind up for me. The reason can wait for another day.

“Okay.” He sags against me before lacing his fingers with me and leading me to my room. Too much has happened and I can’t process it. The minute I hit the bed, I’m out like a light and I’m only vaguely aware of Aeron climbing into my bed and wrapping me up in his arms.

THE DAY of the claiming is here, and it's the first time I've been alone since that night in the pool house. I don't know if it was two, three, maybe even four days ago. All I know is that it's haunting my dreams and I don't want to think about it when I'm awake.

Aeron has been oddly affectionate, not overly so. But holding me at night and stroking my face before I leave him to go to class. It feels like something has changed with him, between us, and I don't know what it is. I still don't want to question it, but I don't know if I can allow myself to care for him, not right now; not more than I already do.

I get through the day with D and Maddox keeping me distracted, but it's as I run on the treadmill in the gym that I finally allow myself to feel everything. With everything that's happened, I've reevaluated a few things, and I know when Cole comes back on rotation that I need to see him. I need to clear my mind and explain to him how I'm feeling, about us and everything else. I can't keep allowing myself to feel as though I'm being split in two. If I'm being honest with myself, it's slowly killing me.

"There's my favorite little whore." I haven't heard or seen anything of Shane in weeks, so the fact that he's in the gym with me right now is worrying.

We're not alone, but the only other people in here are a couple Harkwrights that I've never really encountered before, and a few girls. I doubt any of them will come to my defense.

"Everyone out, I need some alone time with Five," he says with a snake-like smile, and they rush to do as he says. My eyes connect with Caitlyn's before she ducks her head and leaves. *I hadn't even realized she was in here.*

I don't like this. I don't feel safe, and there's this mass surge of panic swimming through me.

The treadmill comes to a stop and I stand here, scared to move, breath, or even think. His hand skims down my side and across my hip until he pulls me hard enough to knock me off my feet. My chin connects with the belt, and I taste blood as my teeth bite into my tongue. I'm a pro at keeping my pain hidden, and I don't think he likes that.

He flips me over and straddles my hips and I can see it in his eyes; he wants to destroy me. He wants me to cry, beg, something. Anything other than my stony silence.

“I’ve been dreaming of this moment. Maybe I should have got some of those fucks to stay. That way, when I tell Emmet how I got to have you first, break you in, he’ll have confirmation.” He licks his lips as his hand travels under my top and strokes against my stomach before he pinches my flesh, hard enough to mark me. Repeating the action over and over again, until he’s satisfied that he’s left more than his fair share of marks on my body.

“H-h-h...”

“H-h-h what, come on, you stuttering bitch. Get it out.”

Hot, angry tears sting my eyes but I refuse to let them fall, to give him the satisfaction.

“He’s your brother,” I spit out, as my hand comes out and strikes his face. He looks at me, mouth as wide as his eyes before he grips my wrist, and twists it.

“You bitch,” he roars. The back of his hand connects with my face and my head slams to the side where I keep it. *I can’t bear to watch what he’ll do next, I don’t think I’m going to survive it.* His fist connects with the side of my jaw, and fills my mouth with even more blood.

“Oh no, you’re going to watch me for every moment of this.” He grips my chin, forces my head back until I’m looking at him, and then he grips my top and rips it down the center. Until it lies at the side of me, and I’m bare to him, my bra the only thing keeping me decent.

His hand grips the top of my bra, his eyes staring at mine, dark promises that make me wish the strangler had succeeded in the pool house after all. I’ll welcome those nightmares any day over this.

“Time for you to lose that precious virginity of yours. I’ll gladly show you a thing or two.” He chuckles darkly, and I set my jaw.

“It’s not yours to take. Too slow on the draw ” My lip trembles as the door bursts open, and footsteps sound before he’s pulled off me. I watch in morbid fascination as Aeron pounds him into the ground.

I can’t even count his punches, he’s moving that quickly and another set of hands pull me up, but I can’t look away. Even as a shirt that smells of Tucker is wrapped around my shoulders.

“Did he touch you? Luna, did he touch you?” I’m spun around until I’m looking into a pair of ocean blue eyes.

“What?”

“Did he touch you?” he says it slowly, enunciating each word as though he’s talking to a child, and right now, I feel like one.

“N-n-n- but h-h-he...”

“Shhh, it’s okay. I’ve got you, he won’t hurt you.” He pulls me into his firm chest, and I sag against him as my tears finally find their release.

“Aeron, man, you need to stop,” he calls, but it lacks his usual authority.

“I’ll stop when he’s in his coffin,” he shouts back as the sounds of flesh smacking flesh continues to ring out, and then the door swooshing open sounds around the din.

“Get the fuck off me, I’m going to kill him,” Aeron screams, and Tucker holds me tighter.

“He’s done, man. He’s done.” Tom, the voice of reason must have joined us.

“He knows Tucker, he knows,” I gasp against his shirt, now soaked in my tears and blood. I ball it up in my fists as I peer up at him, and he looks as though I’m gutting him right now.

“What does he know?” he asks in a thick, croaked voice.

“That I’m n-n-n-no longer a-a-a v-v-vir-virgin.”

“You fucking what?” Wonder and a gruffness fills Emmet’s tone, and what a way to make himself known.

ONE HOUR until the assembly will take place, I sink deeper into the bath that Tucker ran for me, and sitting on the edge is a slip of paper that is one blow from falling into the water. A piece of paper that Tom has given to me, so I know who is waiting to make me theirs. I shouldn’t know, shouldn’t have the privilege, but there it is.

I clutch it between my fingers, making the edges soaked, but it doesn’t ruin the list or the names scrawled on it. More names than I would have imagined. And the order does strange things to my stomach.

WAITING List For Five

- 1: Tucker
- 2: Tom
- 3: Emmet
- 4: Dustin

5: Dillon
6: Maddox
7: Craig
8: Ashley
9: Shane
10: Aeron

I DON'T KNOW who organizes these lists, but I can't imagine even Sir would have ordered it like this, I would have thought Shane would be higher up and I'm glad he isn't. Although I feel weird about the other guys, the only thing I can hope is that they've claimed another girl by the time I'm next released.

Tucker.

He put himself on the list. This surprises me, and I don't know why. Maybe because of how aloof he is with me half the time, and I never see him with any of the girls. I know he doesn't have any favorites, but he must visit with some of them... right?

It doesn't even matter; I don't want anyone near me, I couldn't even bring myself to go to the medical center in case Cole is on his rotation, and I've just miscounted the months. I'm chickenshit, but could anyone blame me after everything I've been through? This truly has been the week from Hell and the sooner this year is over, the sooner I can start and finish my final year. Wash my hands of all of them, even if the thought of never seeing Tom or Darius again makes my heart break just a little. Because I know my reality, I'm not the type of girl to get the guy or if I really had my wish, the guys. My life was built on tragedy, it's only fitting that it will end the same way.

Depressing, too fucking right. There's no room for optimism right now, but pessimism seems to be my new best friend.

A knock sounds on my door, but no one comes in, and I don't extend the invitation either. Whoever it is can damn well wait until I'm good and ready. I'm not feeling very personable right now. Who could expect any less? Will this place ever stop shitting on me? Is this how next year will be? I mean, it seems to be getting gradually worse as the months pass, so who the fuck knows.

The water sloshes over the side of the bath as I climb out; the paper lies in the bath water, no longer revealing a secret I should never have been told.

I wrap myself in a towel, before quickly drying off and slipping on a pair

of shiny leggings - I don't need permission for these, and I'm not exactly eager to dress sexy right now. I pair it with a grey, shimmery tunic, entirely conservative at the front but the back is entirely missing, other than a criss-cross ribbon, and a slim band of material at the bottom holding it in place.

I look in the mirror, giving myself a little pep talk. "You've got this, you can go out there with your head held high. You're a survivor, Luna Carter, you survive everything that this fucked up world throws at you. The Harkwrights will not destroy you, don't give them that power too." *Maybe it's a little late for that.* "Not helping inner bitch, so not helping."

I roll my shoulders and slowly make my way to the door. My steps slow, growing slower the closer I get. My hands tremble and I can barely get the handle to turn, but somehow I make it work, push it open, and step into my room. To find Emmet sitting on my bed, his hands braced on his knees, watching me. I swear, he's always fucking watching me.

"What do you want, Emmet?" I aim for strong but sounds nothing more than timid, weak.

"Are you okay?" His eyes look tired, his hair is disheveled, and he looks a little haggard. It almost endears him to me. *Almost.*

"No, I'm scared, Emmet, and tired. So freaking tired." I sound it too, can feel it down in my weary bones.

"I'll keep you safe. Now that you're mine, no one will touch you." So fucking sure of himself. It sickens me.

"You are unbelievable, after everything I just dealt with, and you come in here to say that. I was right before, Liam never existed. It was just one of your pretty little lies." My tone is dark, cold. It sounds so strange coming from my mouth, almost as if someone else had spoken the words and I'm nothing more than their ventriloquist dummy.

"Right, and this will make things easier for you. So, who was it you choose in the end?"

"GET OUT." I hold my shaking hand up, pointing it at the door, surprised at the vehemence that came from my mouth.

"I'll find out either way, Star. So, either you tell me, or I'll ask every fucker in here until I get the answer I want."

"You know what, I'm so done. You can make your demands and threats as much as you want, but it means nothing to me. If you can't show me the guy I first knew, then you'll never get me," I say with more conviction than even I expected.

“I told you, Star. You would be mine next, and I will be claiming you.”

“No, you won’t. Because I know who’s next in line to be my claimer, and it isn’t you. Sorry, Prince, but you missed your chance.” I march over to him and he stares down at me, but it won’t make me back down from this.

“I’ll make them let you go,” he says through gritted teeth, and I just smile.

“It won’t matter, because you may rule them on fear but they like me. Either you show me that you can be more than this version of what you are now or you’ll never get a chance with me.” I look him up and down before I turn around and start to walk away.

“What if this is all I am?” he asks and I look over my shoulder.

“Then learn to be more, because I deserve nothing less.”

His mouth goes from a grim line to a smirk, before he laughs so hard, I worry he may burst something.

“You deserve nothing less? Come on, Luna. You deserve whatever we decide to give, you can’t make your demands. Don’t forget, in this place, if your surname isn’t Harkwright, then you’re not worth shit.”

“Sometimes, I really hate you.” It falls out on a wobbly breath, and he steps backward, his eyes never once straying from me.

“I can live with that because I know it won’t last. You want me, Luna, and sooner or later, you’ll have to admit it to yourself.” He walks away and my blood boils as I seethe at his words. Anger and fear are a heady mixture, but there’s also pain. I need to speak to D.

GRAND GESTURES AND THE LITTLE THINGS

TUCKER BEING DECLARED as my claimer is no surprise, but I still don't understand why he would want to. I know we slept together, but he must have done this before that happened.

"I object," Emmet says as he stands from his chair, and marches up to his father, who doesn't even try to hide his cold, calculating smile.

"Is that so? On what grounds?"

"I want her," he says it as if that should be reason enough and I hold myself still, praying that Sir won't listen to his obnoxious brat of a son.

"We all want something in this world, it doesn't mean we get it." Anger laces his tone, and I doubt even a bonfire can thaw the ice within me.

"I am your heir, so the list shouldn't matter. Fuck the rules and protocol, and let me have her." He sounds desperate.

"So childish. It's a good thing I have no intentions of handing the keys to my empire over to you just yet. So no, I think I will make this a lesson for you, get used to disappointment. Emmet. I will enforce the rules and you will stand down before I put you down." Emmet trembles with what I can only assume is unspent rage, and a few moments pass where I worry what he'll do.

I needn't have though, as he turns around and storms back to his seat. He picks it up and throws it across the stage, roars out his anger, and then walks away. Not caring what his father thinks of his outburst, he is only thinking about himself.

"This assembly is over, curfew is now seven pm, do not leave your room beyond this time, or you will be evicted from the premise with immediate effect." He gives me a long, lingering look before he walks off the stage and

follows the direction his son took. Oh, to be a fly on that wall.

“Come on, we’ll go back to your room,” Tucker says, placing his hand on the small of my back and leading me away.

I’m not going to protest, the sooner I’m away from everyone else the better. Something stops me from voicing this out loud, instead I lose myself in the silence, the feel of his hand as we make it to my room, and he closes the door behind him. I sink down on my sofa, pull my shoes off, and stare at the blank wall in front of me, which is positioned away from the TV.

He sits down beside me, pulls his phone out, and stares intently at it. His free hand traces lazy circles on my knee before he reaches for my legs, places my feet on his lap, and I lie my head against the arm of the sofa.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He puts his phone back in his pocket and stares at me.

“Not really. Although, I would love to know why your name was on the list?” I say, my voice heavy with the tiredness that I feel everywhere.

“A part of it was to fuck with Emmet. It’s about time he was taken down a notch or two, but mostly, it’s because I have this strange feeling I might like you. It doesn’t happen often, and I wanted to explore it, find out what it could mean.” He sounds wistful, but I could be wrong. *My head isn’t exactly firing on all cylinders right now.*

“I’m not sure what to do with that, honestly. Doesn’t it bother you that Tom and I...” I don’t know how to finish that sentence.

“I’m not sure how I feel. Although, I’m glad I wasn’t your first. I don’t know how to be gentle and I can be intense, yet another reason I didn’t pursue you too much. Besides, as you can tell, I say what I think. If I offend you, I won’t care. People don’t tend to like that, and I haven’t got the time to care if I offend their senses, or hurt their feelings. What do you think about that?” He sounds so unaffected. Like my response won’t mean a thing.

“You’ve hurt my feelings plenty of times and I already know you won’t apologize for it, I’ve learnt to adapt. Even though I didn’t want to, I still found myself curious about you, wanting you. It messes with my head, but I won’t lie and pretend it isn’t true. Right now though, I don’t want to be touched. I know I’m yours now, and I’m sorry you’ve claimed a dud.” A mirthless laugh escapes me, but he doesn’t join in with the laughter.

“You can stop it right now with that bullshit. I’m an insensitive bastard but I’m not completely heartless. I don’t do things by half and I can tell you here and now, while you’re mine, you will be the only girl I will be touching.

Just let me know when you're ready, now be quiet and let's watch Netflix."

I sit here for a few moments before I shake myself off, pass him the remote, and turn on my side. I nestle myself within the cushions and let a small moan slip free as he begins rubbing my feet. A girl could get used to this. Better remember that I shouldn't. Although, he isn't making it easy.

TUCKER IS a man of his word, he hasn't made a move on me, and has even given up a few nights to Tom. It's weird and I don't know what to make of it. Is he really okay with all of this? Would he do it if he wasn't?

It's been a week since everything went down, Tucker claimed me, and Emmet has been going around like a bear with a sore tooth. He's almost unbearable, and he does not like my new eating arrangements, but it isn't like I planned any of this.

"Is this going to happen at every meal?" D asks under her breath, leaning in close so only I can hear her.

"I have no idea, but they've been doing it for the past week," I reply back, staring at Tucker and Tom, who are sitting opposite us. For some reason, they've decided they would rather sit at our little table than theirs.

"Tucker, I have to ask." She stares him down, but it doesn't phase him in the least. "How did you know my homegirl needed saving?"

I never even thought about asking that, should I have? It just didn't seem relevant at the time.

"I forget her number, but she was a Zero at one point. She tracked me and Aeron down, and told us Shane had ordered everyone to leave the two of you alone. I could barely keep up with Aeron. It was like someone had lit a rocket up his ass. Nothing would stop him from getting to you." His eyes are almost soft. I'm confused, and a little smitten with the way Aeron took care of me.

"Any plans for Christmas?" she asks, as if this is a normal college, and we can come and go as we please.

"Oh yeah, loads." It's loaded with sarcasm and she grins at me, which I return in full force.

"We should go Christmas shopping. I'm sure I could convince Bradley to tag along. We won't stay in this town, though. Way too many eyes," Tucker says, and he's shocked the ever loving life out of me.

“Really, we can go out?”

“Sure, why not? There are a few things I’d like to get, and you can help me pick something out for someone.” His neck is turning red and I nod eagerly. Anything to get away from this place for the day. Fuck, I cannot wait.

“Would you ask Bradley?” D speaks so softly, as if she’s nervous. This isn’t the girl I know, but then again, she’s been different for a while now. Before the retreat took place. And it’s only got worse.

“Sure, I don’t see any harm in it. I know women like to shop.”

“I don’t. I’d rather order everything online to save myself the hassle of looking around the shops and then having to wait in line and make small talk.” A shiver passes over me, and Tom is smiling like a fool.

“Can anyone tag along, or is this solely for those with a claimed girl?”

“No, I suppose not.” Tucker’s tone changes and he suddenly sounds cold and uninterested. Why not say no if he doesn’t want him to tag along?

“I’ve got to get to class,” I say as I rise from my seat, and I watch as Aeron strolls over to me and offers me his arm. I guess I’ve still got my chaperone, another thing that doesn’t seem to be ending anytime soon.

I bet he doesn’t even realize how much he is messing with my head, how confused I am by all of his attention. I’m not sure if I want more of it or for him to stop and go back to being a jackass.

“Come on, I’m heading your way,” He’s lying through his teeth, but there’s no reason to call him on it.

I tuck my hand in the crook of his elbow and he leads me away, Tucker and Tom fall into a conversation, and D stares at me with longing. *I wonder what she’s longing for.*

We leave the mess hall and head toward the cooking class, the atmosphere easy, and the silence is companionable.

“Why do you keep doing this?”

“I don’t know how to say it, Little Zero. Ever since I saw those finger marks around your neck and then fucking Shane,” he growls his name out through gritted teeth, and his eyes narrow to slits. I run my hand across his forehead and he comes to a stop, captures my hand, and kisses me on my wrist. Right where my pulse is thumping hard.

I stare up at him and he stares down at me, our eyes locked in a silent communication that I can’t quite decipher. I may be speaking it, but I don’t understand the words.

“I don’t want to be like Shane.” I go to cut him off, but he places a finger against my lips. “I don’t need your objections, I just need to get this out.” I nod my head and he pulls me into an empty classroom, before closing the door and flicking the lock in place. My eyebrows are up in my hairline, and he strokes his thumb across my forehead, and I sink.

“I don’t want to be like Shane or Scott, or any of those dickheads who tolerate him, and even egg him on at times. I know I could be, and in some ways, I fit in with that crowd better than Tucker and Tom. Mr. Sullen and Mr. Sensible.” I would never call Tom sensible, not after being in a car with him, but I guess Aeron knows him better than I do. “I want to be the guy you can see in me, the better version of myself. I’m not saying I won’t get high or fuck everything up, but I would like you to teach me how to be better. Luna, I have made more than my fair share of mistakes, but the only one I regret is releasing you. Out of some fucked up mixture of fear, jealousy, and my idea of chivalry. Can you forgive me?” His eyes are pleading with me, lines surround the edges, and he turns his mouth down at the corners.

“What do I need to forgive you for?”

“It’s my fault Shane came after you. If I hadn’t released you, he wouldn’t have been able to. I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.” He covers his face, and I grip his wrists to pull them away. My hands cup his face, and I draw him closer to me.

“There is nothing to forgive, it wasn’t your fault. Did it hurt that you let me go? Of course it did, and I felt so stupid for ever letting myself get to a point where you could hurt me. Aeron, despite everything and myself, I do like you. I have zero reservations with helping you, whatever you need.” I smile softly, and he lets out a breath.

“Luna, can I kiss you?”

I don’t know what to say, Aeron Harkwright is asking me, me, if he can have a kiss. I don’t think. I can’t. I just let my mouth fall open and prepare myself for whatever may slip free.

“Yes.” It’s nothing more than a whisper, but it’s all he needs. He moves my hands away from his face before he cradles mine, and brushes his lips lightly against mine. One brush, two, three. Feather light and barely there, yet I can feel them everywhere.

His hands don’t move as he finally, *finally* connects his mouth to mine, pressing gently. Open-mouthed but no tongue, his top lip closing over my bottom one, his tongue gliding across it, sending tingles shooting through my

system like electricity. He glides across the seam of my lips, slipping inside as I gasp and grip onto his shirt. It's slow and wrecking me in the best possible ways. He tilts my head and deepens the kiss. Still slow and gentle, but this is no friendly kiss or some experiment in the act. I've never felt so much from a kiss before, and my head is blank. Blissfully so.

He pulls away and brushes his thumb across my lips before placing one last kiss and whispering, "thank you."

D IS SITTING on my bed in tears, and I haven't got a clue what I'm supposed to do. I'm standing here like an idiot, just watching as she falls apart, and she hasn't uttered a word since I opened the door, and found her tear stained.

"What's going on, D? Tell me how I can help you," I say, fidgeting on the spot as I bounce on the balls of my feet.

"Bradley s-s-said no. I c-c-can't come with y-y-you." It's strange hearing someone else stutter, especially when it's Daria.

"I can't believe he won't let you come, but I don't understand why that would make you so distraught."

She takes a deep breath, wipes frantically at her face. Trying to stop her tears and wipe them away at the same time.

"It's been so different this year, ever since I saw him at the retreat. Things have changed and I don't know what to do. It feels like he's getting bored with me, and I didn't think it would happen. I thought he loved me, that he wanted to see where this could go."

"What did he say?" I take her hands in mine as I sit beside her on the bed.

"He said he doesn't like shopping and he'd rather stay here, and I guess that's okay. I just... it feels as if we are growing apart and I don't know how to stop it." Her bottom lip is trembling again, and I can see more tears forming in her eyes.

"Maybe you should just talk to him, tell him how you are feeling and see what happens. I know you knew him before coming here, but it was a long time ago, people change, girl. It doesn't mean you won't work, but maybe it won't be the way you first pictured." Is that the right thing to say? Fuck, I have no idea.

"Yeah, I will. Thanks, homegirl." She nods her head and gives me a

watery smile as she stands and gives me a weird little wave.

“Hey, D.” She looks at me with a smile and I just let my words pour out of me.

“Sometimes, I really hate Emmet.” Her eyes widen at my sudden change and her head tilts to the side slightly.

“Not that long ago, me and Emmet got into something. I told him he needs to be more than he is now because I deserve nothing less and he told me I’m not worth shit. I couldn’t believe it, all I said was that I deserve nothing less than him being a better version of himself, more than what he is now at least. I don’t know why I expected any different.” My shoulders slump forward and her hand falls away as she climbs to her feet.

“Luna, Emmet is right.” Her words have my head springing up. I can’t believe she just said that. *Really? Damn, girl, you really are moronic at times.*

“How can you say that? You agree with him.” I shake my head, hoping it will help to chase away the confusion that I’m feeling at her words.

“You are in Harkwright Academy. In this, place you aren’t worth anything. We’re here for their entertainment and pleasure. Just because a few of them have given you attention, doesn’t mean you’re better than everyone else here.” Her voice is rising and I don’t understand why she’s getting so worked up. “If we were anywhere else, then yeah, I’d think that was awful, but we’re not. You signed away your right to having your feelings hurt when you hit submit. It’s about time you realized that. Besides, what Emmet said is nothing in the grand scheme of things. Maybe you should re-evaluate what you allow to hurt you.” She picks up a vase and throws it across the room, and I can’t help but jump at the impact.

“D, what’s wrong? Why are you being like this?”

“Because you’re not the only one with problems, Luna. And sometimes, it’s more than just having more than one guy want you. For fuck’s sake, I jumped at being your friend because you’re nice and considerate, but this new Luna doesn’t care about me. You’ve asked me a couple of times what’s wrong, and that’s it. You didn’t even put in a lot of effort, even now. I’m sitting here in tears and you turn it back to your mercurial problems in no time, yet I’ve been here for you through everything. Without a single complaint, and I’m falling apart, Luna. I am drowning and you haven’t even realized.” her voice cracks as her eyes shine.

I stand up and she moves away, her eyes narrowing on me. “I can’t do

this right now, I need to leave.”

“D, I...”

“I’m asking you to leave me alone, or can’t you respect that simple request?” I step back as my heart splinters, and I watch her leave my room. I’ve been a terrible friend. *What if I can’t fix it?*

THERE’S ONLY TWO days until Christmas and classes are over until January. It’s hard to keep busy, but D and I have been making homemade decorations and hanging them in our rooms. I have also been baking like crazy, Christmas cookies and pudding. I’ve even made my own custard to go with it.

A knock sounds at my door and I run my hands over my black blouse and dark brown leather pants. I’ve put on the leather jacket as well, but I have no idea if I’ll be warm enough. Snow is in the air, I can smell it, and if it does come down, I know I will freeze my ass off.

I open it to find Tucker standing there in a pair of jeans, black shoes, and a dark pea coat. He gives me a slight smile as I leave the room, and he places his hand on the small of my back as he leads me down to the car.

We climb in and buckle up, the car pulls away from the Academy, and starts to wind down the road until we come to the security gates. They’re still as foreboding as when I first arrived, and it’s not surprising that no one ever tries to break in.

We drive for longer than I can count and I don’t have a watch or anything to keep check of the time, but it feels like this journey is going on forever. It doesn’t help that he is yet again on his phone, and Darius keeps staring at me through the rear-view mirror.

“Are you physically attached to that thing?” I blurt it out and he slowly lowers it to his lap, locking the screen, before shifting to look at me.

“How much time did you spend on your phone before you came here?”

“I didn’t, I’ve never had one. It was a payphone or nothing, and we would only use that when it’s absolutely necessary. We didn’t even have a landline or an internet connection.” I can’t seem to stop talking and he screws his face up as he stares at me like I’ve grown another head.

“You’ve never had a phone? That’s insane. How do you chat to your friends or make plans with people?”

“My friends are in the Academy, D and Maddox. It may be pathetic, but I’m not a social butterfly. I’m an introvert and keep myself separate from others. Except from my mom and Poppy. I’ve been picked on a lot in life because of my stutter, and it’s easier to not get to know people.” I close my eyes, honesty is great, but I hate how I always seem to share more than I want when I’m around him.

“Fair enough. Although, I’d suggest you get one sorted when you leave here. So you can keep in contact with them.” His screen lights up and frown lines appear on his face as he stares at it intently.

“Is everything okay?”

“Not really. I’m not a huge drinker, but I wouldn’t mind hitting the tequila right about now. Sometimes this life shits on you, and then it shits on you even more just for good measure. I mean, I know I’m an asshole and everything, but I try to do the right thing.” He throws his phone at the chair in front of him and it lands face down on the floor.

“I get it. I don’t know what’s happened, but I know this world is far from fair, and I don’t think you’re that bad. A little rough around the edges and blunt to the point of painful, but that’s you. Whatever is going on, I’m sorry it’s causing you so much... discomfort.”

“Damn, you are so polite. You won’t even ask me what caused this. Looks like I picked the right girl after all. I like that you care but don’t pry. I guess Darius is right, you really aren’t like the rest of them.” He gives me a smirk before he leans back and nothing more is said. Not until we pull up to whatever city we’re in, and he climbs out of the car and offers me his hand.

“Okay, so... I may have an ulterior motive for inviting you out. I kind of need to buy a couple of things, and I haven’t got a fucking clue where to start.” He lets out a loud groan, and I can’t help but chuckle just a little.

“Not a problem, but I have to ask. How did you get rid of Tom? I was almost certain he would join us.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I told him he can fuck off. I have already given up a few nights, I’m not about to go shopping with him as well. He is unbearable, wants to go in every shop, try on ridiculous outfits. Last time, he dragged us into the same shop four times because he couldn’t decide if he wanted whatever shirt he had found or not.” He shakes his head and I grin at him. I wish I could see that side of Tom, but I don’t mind being alone with Tucker.

“I’m not disappointed, I enjoy being out with you.” I shouldn’t, but I

think I need to stop worrying about what I should and should not do or feel. Clearly, I have no control over it.

“Okay, so I need to buy something for my... niece. She’s three and I have no idea what she likes. I’ve tried to find out, but no one is helping me, and I just want to get it over with.”

“Okay, I can feel your frustration from here. It’s okay, I’m no expert on kids, but I can help you find something. Maybe some clothes or a book,” I suggest, and I can see his nose turn up as he scowls at my ideas.

“It’s so impersonal, I want it to be more, well just more.”

“That will be hard at her age, maybe get something to do with unicorns. Little girls love them.”

“Yes, let’s do that.” He grips my hand and drags me inside the first kid store we come across.

We spend ages looking at all the unicorn paraphernalia until I grab the largest stuffed one they have and shove it into his chest.

“Just get her this. She’ll love it, and if it’s not enough, then you could get a unicorn watch or something. I have no idea if it’s age appropriate though.” I ponder that for a moment as he stares at the unicorn before marching up to the checkout counter and pays extra to have it wrapped.

He pulls me into a phone store after and I guess he is bored with looking at the same one so God damn much.

“Okay, what about you? Anything you want to get?”

“I don’t have any money, but it’s okay. I’m just enjoying being outside,” I say with a genuine smile, but again, he shakes his head at me.

“Come on, you must want something.”

“I’m easy, I don’t really do gifts. Usually my mom will get me a new recipe book or a notebook for me to write my own concoctions in. I don’t need anything else.”

“You perplex me, but fine. Come on, let’s grab a bite to eat, and then we can move on to the next store.” He takes my hand again and leads me into a greasy spoon.

I order a chocolate shake with whipped cream and shaved chocolate on top, and a chili dog with fries. Tucker gets a burger and fries with a coffee and then relaxes back into the seat and stares out of the window.

“So, Tom, hey. I guess I can see it, although, I always thought it would be Aeron.” that’s a little out of the blue.

“It wasn’t planned, but I don’t regret it, he’s brilliant. He makes me laugh

and he can hold a conversation.” I’m trying not to sound too wistful, but I don’t know if I’m pulling it off.

“He’s a good guy, a bit of an adrenaline junkie and perpetually bored, but he doesn’t seem as bored when you are around. I wonder what it is about you that drives them all crazy. I guess I’ll have to include myself in that as well.” Did he just admit, in some convoluted way, that he likes me?

“I have no idea, but if you ever figure it out, please let me know,” I say with a sugary sweet tone, and cheeky smile.

“Don’t you worry, I will, and I expect the same from you.” We share a grin at that, and then get stuck in when our plates are set down in front of us. It’s been strange, but I am enjoying myself. I wonder where he’ll drag me to next.



WE PICK up some kind of print that he ordered for his dad, a locket for his sister, and a crystal frame for his mom. I expect to go back to his car, but instead we walk until we find a park and sit down on one of the benches.

“You wouldn’t let me buy you anything, so I’ve decided to be creative. It’s a first for me, but I think you’ll like it.” I don’t know what he’s talking about, and I can’t help but roll my eyes when he pulls out his phone.

“Where would your mom be right now?” A bit random, but I’ll play along.

“It’s Saturday, so probably working a shift at the diner.”

“Do you know the number?” I nod my head, and he stares at me, waiting for something. “Are you going to give it to me?” I say it out loud, and watch as he types it into his phone.

“Hi, can I speak to Mrs. Carter, please? That’s great, thanks.”

What the hell is he doing?

“Hi, Mrs. Carter, I’m Tucker Harkwright and I have your daughter here for you, but you can’t tell anyone this happened. Yes, okay. I’ll pass you over to her.”

He holds his hand over the mouthpiece before drilling his eyes into me.

“No one can know, Luna. I’m breaking all kinds of rules right now.” He passes me the phone, and I take it with trembling hands.

“Mama,” I say through a thick voice, overwhelmed with so many feelings

right now.

“Luna bean, I can’t believe it’s really you. How are you, my darling?” She sounds as emotional as I feel, and my heart is fit to burst.

“Oh mama, I miss you so much. I didn’t know I’d get to speak to you today. I have no idea what to say.” Tears are falling from my eyes, but they are the good kind, the happy kind.

“I’m going on break,” she calls out before the noise on the other end disappears. “I don’t care what we talk about, I’m just so happy I get to hear your voice.”

“Me too, how is Poppy doing?”

“Surprisingly well. It’s amazing what happens when you have more money coming in.” I can hear and feel her frustration from here. “They think an imbalance in her brain caused it, so they’ve put her on some new medication, and she’s having better days. Talking occasionally and moving more. I know she can’t wait to see you.”

“How is she with you? Has she been... mean?”

“Of course not, she’s just Poppy.” There’s laughter in her voice, and it warms me, but her words don’t.

“I really can’t wait to see you, that is the hardest part about being here.” Okay, maybe the attempted murder and Shane are the hardest, but I will not tell her that.

“Can I speak to her?” Tucker asks, and I gulp as I pass it over and to my surprise, he puts it onto speakerphone.

“It’s me again, Mrs. Carter. I know Christmas is a time for family and I know you can’t see or speak to Luna, at the moment. So, tomorrow you will receive a parcel. It will be a mobile phone, already activated, and you won’t have to worry about the plan. It’s already taken care of. I know you may already have plans, but you will need to sign for it.” He’s all business, and I’m in so much shock.

“Um, okaaaay?” She sounds as confused as I feel right now.

“You’ll get a phone call on Christmas Day from this number, I’ll make sure it’s saved, and you can speak to Luna then. I do have to cut this short now, but I’ll give you a few moments to say goodbye.” He passes me back the phone and my head has short-circuited.

“I don’t really know what to say, Luna bean, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Me either, but at least I can call you now. I love you, mom. I’ll speak to you in a few days.” What am I even going to say to Tucker?

“I love you too, my girl. Stay safe.” Tucker takes back the phone and disconnects the call, and I stare at him.

“Thank you. You have no idea how much that meant to me.”

“It’s fine, don’t mention it,” he says before I throw my arms around him and squeeze for all my might and then he pulls back, looks at me seriously and says, “seriously, Luna. Don’t mention it, ever.”

IT’S Christmas Eve and I don’t know if D has spoken to Bradley or not, but they seem closer somehow. He’s even joining us at our table now, which is strange. I don’t know what’s more surprising, the fact that our table is ever increasing or how hardly any of the guys are going home for the holiday. I knew Tucker wasn’t, but why aren’t the others? D and I haven’t said a lot since she blew up at me in my room, but she’s still sitting with me. We even decorated and baked together. That has to be a good sign, right?

I’m still pondering this as I nudge open my door and come face to, well, back of the head, with Emmet. He’s sitting casually on my love seat with a... oh my God, is that a present? *Well, what else would it be genius?*

“Um, hi,” I say awkwardly as I push my door closed and lean against the wall beside it. Ready to open it so he can leave. Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking.

“Hey yourself, my Star,” His voice goes low as he says that last part, and wariness shoots through me. Not attraction, more the fact that we are alone together in my room, and I’m no longer a virgin. I hate it, but I gulp. Nerves bristling through me and making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

“What are you doing in here?” I’m trying to be polite, like my mom has raised me to be, but it’s hard.

“I got you a gift. I assumed you’ll be spending tomorrow with Tucker, so I thought I’d give you this now.” he’s almost... nice. *Don’t trust it. Whatever you do, DON’T TRUST IT!*

Yeah, thanks inner self, but I don’t think I need the warning. I know Emmet, or as well as you can know someone like him. This won’t be any ordinary gift.

“If it’s some weird kind of lingerie, then you can take it back or better yet, give it to someone who cares.” *Well done at staying polite.* Shut up.

“Oh no, this is much better. Come on, my Star, it’s rude to not at least take a look.”

I hesitate before walking the short distance and lift the present off the seat before perching myself on the edge of the coffee table. It’s heavier than I expected, and I’m almost too scared to open it. Not that it helps to have him staring at me, his eyes burning holes into my face.

I pull at the paper until it’s lying in a messy pile on the floor, and my mouth drops open. Is he for fucking real?

“Emmet, what is this?” I ask, staring at him warily.

“It’s a laptop. You know, people use them to browse the web and look shit up.” Gee thanks, dickhead. I didn’t know that.

“I mean, why are you giving me this?”

“Look, it’s the latest model. MacBook Pro, top specs and the biggest screen they have. You can look up recipes and stuff. It can’t connect outside of the Academy zone, so you won’t be able to send messages and social platforms are restricted for use, but it should help.” He smiles wide as he spreads his hands out. “So, do you think you’ll like me a little more now?” *Is he for real?*

“Are you for real right now? Emmet, I’m not accepting this.” I thrust it into his arms and his eyes turn stormy as his lips purse.

“Of course you are, who wouldn’t want this?”

“Me. I wouldn’t. For crying out loud, you don’t even know me, do you? Everything we spoke about back when I thought you were a nice, decent guy. Did none of it sink it?” Who’s shouting? Oh right, that would be me. “You are so used to coasting on your family name that you think you can just buy people to get them to do what you want. If I thought this wasn’t some backhanded gesture, then I would at least try to be grateful, but it isn’t and I’m not.” Indignation and annoyance are battling it out for dominance inside me. “Seriously, I’ve gotten by fine without technology. So, I won’t take it, and I don’t want it.”

“This is insane. You are being irrational,” he scoffs at me, and my nostrils flare as I see red.

“Irrational? Oh no, honey. You haven’t even *seen* irrational yet. Irrational would be falling for your act, irrational would be believing that there was a single decent, non self serving bone in your body. This is nothing like that. If you really wanted to help, you would have asked what I needed or even gone for some piece of poop computer, that would have done the task fine without

throwing your money around. Because you don't appreciate what you have and you do not understand what it's like to have nothing, and yet not feel as though you're missing out."

My door opens to reveal a confused looking Tom and Tucker. Their eyes fall on Emmet, and their presence fills the room to almost stifling measures.

"What's going on? We can hear Five from outside," comes from Tucker, and Tom moves to stand next to me, and casts a disapproving look at the distasteful present.

Don't get me wrong, I would love to have it one day. But it will be when I can afford to buy it, when I feel like I have earned such an extravagant expense.

"You're crazy, and I can't believe how ungrateful you're being. Especially seeing where you grew up." That is the worst thing to say to me, and I don't think I'm the only one who thinks that. Tucker grabs his arm and pulls him off the seat. Barreling him toward the door, and refusing to let him go.

"Emmet," I call, and they stop and both turn to look at me. He looks smug and Tucker just comes across as impatient. "You want for nothing and yet that's exactly what you have. I may come from the poor side of the track, with a mom who barely meets our electricity bill. I may not have a phone or a computer, and yet I have everything. Because I have a mom who took me in and gave me all the love in the world, so you can take your pretentious attitude and shove it up your backside. Speak to me again when you can fathom even a single word I just said, or don't speak to me at all."

Tucker pulls open the door and shoves him through it before slamming it home, and then he leans back and smirks as two hard pounds sound on the wood before everything goes quiet. I guess they don't know what to think either.

"Well then, hopefully this goes down better than his gift." Tom chuckles nervously as he rubs at the base of his throat and shoves a gift bag into my hands.

"Why are you guys buying me stuff? I can't return the favor," I sigh, but I still feel myself warming at the gesture. The fact that Tom got me anything is, well, I'll save my thoughts until after I've looked inside.

"Well, come on, I'm not getting any younger. More sexy, definitely, but not younger." He gives me a wink, and I shake my head as Tucker lets out a long, drawn-out sigh.

I pull out what seems to be a book wrapped in tissue paper before brushing it away and looking down at the leather-bound notebook with 'Luna's Recipes' engraved in gold lettering on the front.

"Tom this is..." *Amazing. Incredible. Makes me love him even more. On second thought, do not say that last part out loud.* "I don't know what to say, you shouldn't have. Thank you." I can't stop staring at it, and I jump as he places his fingers under my chin and tilts my head up.

"You're welcome. Although I probably would have got something as bad as Emmet if it hadn't been for Tucker. I've got to give him mad props, he really helped me out on this one."

He isn't even trying to take credit for one of the best gifts I've ever been given. Damn, if I didn't already love him, I would have fallen head over heels right now.

"Why did you go through so much trouble? I haven't got anything to give you." His eyes are intense as he captures me in his gaze.

"It wasn't any trouble, Moonbeam, and you have given me something, you just don't realize yet." He swipes his thumb over my brow to smooth out the lines, before walking over to Tucker and slapping him on the back.

"Have fun, kids, and don't do anything I wouldn't do." He taps his chin for a moment before he lets out a laugh. "Actually, on second thought, don't do anything I would do." He gives me one last wink before he leaves the room, which means Tucker and I are completely alone.

He takes a seat on the loveseat and pats the space beside him; I don't even hesitate before I'm next to him. His arm comes around me until I'm hoisted into his lap, with my feet planted in the vacant space.

"I know you're not a liar, but was that the only reason you rejected Emmet's gift and loved Tom's, or is there more to it?" I admire his no nonsense attitude, and his intensity isn't anywhere near as anxiety provoking as it used to be.

"Everything I said was true. I mean, you even asked what I wanted and I don't even think you like me half the time." I laugh, but it's self deprecating in its tone. "The thing is, I hate grand gestures, it's always been the little things that matter. My mom has always said that it's the little things that count, and she isn't wrong. That's what I appreciate, if it's from the heart, driven by the fact that whoever did it cares. I mean, what more do I need? I can go my whole life and never receive a single gift. As long as I know there are people out there who care about me and vice versa." What power does

this man have over me? Will there ever be a time I won't bare my soul to him?

"I... like you. I just don't do hearts and rainbows, and I'm not the friendliest of people. That being said, I will try to keep you safe. I can't guarantee it in this place, but I will try."

"Can I k-kiss you, Tucker?" I peer into his eyes, the words a whisper of breath on my lips.

"No." His voice is thick and my cheeks heat at his rejection, embarrassment coursing through me, and I wish I could take back the words.

"Tiny One, I don't kiss but we've kissed twice now. It... it isn't a rejection, but if I feel those soft lips against mine, I won't want to stop at just a kiss and I'm trying to be my version of a gentleman for as long as you need," he groans.

"Oh," slips through my lips.

"Yes, 'oh'," he repeats, his eyes filled with hunger as he takes me in, running his eyes over me in a slow perusal.

"I don't need a gentleman, Tucker. Not now." As soon as the words are free, his mouth is on mine and our tongues are battling for dominance.

He nips at my bottom lip before his hand moves fast up the inside of my top, brushing my bra aside and pinching my nipple. It elicits a heady mixture of pain and pleasure, and a deep moan falls free, I can hardly believe it even came from me. It isn't long before my clothes are on the floor and his soon follow. His hand trails down my spine as he continues to pinch and suck on my nipples.

He grips my hips, making me rise before placing the head of his dick at my entrance and then with one quick thrust, he slams all the way home and I can't contain my moans as my head falls back and I lose myself in the feel of him. The feel of us.

WHEN GUILT SETS IN

TUCKER IS fast asleep and I'm lying with his arm draped over my stomach, willing myself to fall asleep. No matter what I do, all I can think about is the way I treated Emmet and the things I said, it's eating me up inside and I feel so... ashamed. I was way out of line and he wasn't doing it to be malicious. I should have looked at it from his point of view, but instead, I took it the wrong way, and let his words affect the insecurities still deep-rooted within me. I need to find him, tell him I'm sorry, and I need to do it without an audience.

The problem, it's three in the morning. I can't go wandering around, and I certainly can't enter the north wing without one of them with me. I consider waking Tucker up, but it feels wrong to wake him so he can take me to see another man. I slide out slowly, lowering his arm gently over my pillow as I try my hardest not to wake him, and then I wander into my sitting area and close my bedroom door.

I contemplate my next move before opening my door and meet Darius' eyes from across the threshold.

"Is everything okay?"

"Not really, I-I-I t-t-think I did something w-wrong earlier and I can't sleep until I make it right," I shuffle on my feet as he looks at me, and then he sighs before nodding his head.

"I need to speak to Emmet. Could you take me somewhere in the morning and try to get a message across for me? I know it's a lot to ask, but I don't know what else to do." I rub at my eyes and he looks at me with sympathy.

"I'll help you, Miss Carter. Do you think we could talk soon?" His eyes

are half hooded, and I'm slammed with memories of our time in the pool house. Heat curls in my stomach and I have to calm my breathing.

"O-of course, I'll let you know when I'm alone," I say and he gives me a soft smile before I close the door and return to bed.

I climb under the covers, Tucker mumbles something nonsensical before wrapping his arm around my stomach, and pulling me into his heat. I close my eyes and I drift off, safe in the knowledge that nothing will happen, and loving the way it feels when he holds me.

When I next open my eyes, Tucker is propped up against the headboard with his phone back in his hands.

"What is with you and that thing?" I ask with a sleep filled voice, and he glimpses at me before he returns to his phone. His fingers flying across the screen.

Why am I so interested? Is that the right question to ask myself though, maybe I should ask why I care so much. Am I jealous? Staking a claim? I hate when I confuse myself.

"There's something I have to keep an eye on, it's taking longer than I anticipated and honestly, I fucking hate it. Everyone thinks that because we're Harkwrights we get whatever we want, but I'm proof it doesn't always work out that way. I just want to stop fighting and feel a bit of that happiness that 'normal' people seem to experience." Okay, I'm struggling to digest all of that. *It's more than I was expecting, I didn't even think I'd get an answer.*

"Can I do anything to help?" It feels like an empty gesture, but I would if I could.

"If I think of anything, I'll let you know." He chuckles, but it's a hollow sound. "Although, you could come with me to my... niece's birthday party." He hesitates part through, and I understand it. It's mixing personal with whatever this is, and I don't know how to respond.

"If you want me to, I can. Do you want me to help you pick out a gift?"

"Fuck yes. Please. That shit is hard. I don't have a fucking clue what you girls want." His laugh is more genuine this time, and I like this side of Tucker. Open and relaxed.

"I don't think we even know half the time, but I would be happy to help."

"Thanks, Tiny One. It's a couple of weeks before the annual retreat, so classes will be over by then. We can leave a couple days earlier and stay at my place. It will be easier than staying in a hotel. It's not usually done, but I know you won't try to steal or snoop on me." He captures my mouth. I don't

know if it's his faith in me or the kiss, but I melt like a piece of ice on a hot, sunny day.

TUCKER HAS to make some phone calls this morning before he will even think about acknowledging Christmas, so I find myself up here in Emmet's tower, hoping that he'll show. Darius left twenty minutes ago, despite not wanting to leave me alone, and I know because of that, he won't stay away for much longer. Hopefully, he'll be able to deliver the message before he comes back.

I can hear feet hitting the stone steps, and I pull myself into one of the corners, just in case it's someone other than who I'm already expecting. It won't do me much good, but at least I'll have a couple of seconds to try to get past them. I've already gotten away with striking Shane, but I doubt I'll be afforded that luxury a second time.

Emmet rounds the corner, looking for me until our eyes connect and he stands there, at the top of the steps. He doesn't try to come closer.

"You wanted to see me, Five." He looks at his watch as though he has somewhere more pressing to be, and I guess I'm not going to have long to try to make things right.

"I'm sorry," I blurt it out and he cocks his head to the side, staring right through me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that." He's being so sarcastic and I'm not sure what to make of it. I get to my feet and take a few steps closer to him.

"Emmet, I truly am sorry for the way I reacted and the things I said. Will you sit with me so I can try to explain it?" I ask feebly, and he scoffs but folds himself onto the floor, and leans against the wall anyway.

"Go on then, out with it."

"I should have just said thank you, but that I wouldn't accept it. And I shouldn't have said what I did about my mother. That was a low blow, and I hate myself for stooping down to that level. It isn't me, and I don't know why I become so antagonistic with you." I pause for a moment, but he says nothing as a tick appears in his cheek. "I think it's because no one ever seems to tell you no. You treat me like any other girl, but I'm not like them, and I never will be. I mean, come on, Emmet. Do you even like me? I mean really,

or is this all a game to you? Am I just a prize you want to win and brandish around until you find a shinier one?"

"This is a weird apology, Luna. You should try to work on it." He starts to push to his feet, and my hand shoots out to grab his arm. He freezes before looking down at it and then up at me. "At first, it was the latter. You seemed so hard to get and it was refreshing, and now, I think it's because I got to know you and I like what I learnt."

"You don't know me, Emmet. Not really." A sigh falls free as I pull my hand away, but he seizes it and links his fingers with mine.

"I might not have brought the MacBook for the right reasons, but I did want you to have it so you could get your work done easier, and to be able to research without having to go to the library on your own. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown my money around, but I don't know how to be with someone like you. Money and power don't impress you, and it's all I've really known."

"I know and I shouldn't have used that against you, I am sorry for the mom comment, Emmet. I barely slept last night with all the guilt I felt over it."

"What is it you want, Luna? Do you want me to accept your apology? Because I will, I don't know what good it will do but I will." He looks back down at our hands and the way his thumb strokes across my knuckles.

"Of course, that's what I want. The weird thing is... look, I've accepted Liam was just a ploy to get close to me, but I miss him. The way we used to talk, I felt like I could tell him anything, and it was nice. It also felt as though he trusted me and didn't just want me because of some confusing obsession. Why did he have to go away?" My voice cracks and he lifts my hand up to his face, drawing circles with his thumb across the back of it.

"I'm so fucked in the head, Luna, because of my parents. Well, no, that isn't fair. It's because of my old man and this desire to have you worries me. I wonder what it says about the type of person I am, but I can't seem to let it go. I miss being Liam too. It was easier, but I can't be like that around others. How is it fair that I'm one way in private, and then an asshole when we're with the others?"

"I don't think it is fair, but I'm learning a lot about myself in here, Emmet. Maybe you are as well. I meant what I said though. You don't know me." My thumb brushes against his cheek, and it hollows out for a second.

"What would you have preferred over the laptop?" I hate how quickly he

changes the subject, but maybe we need more neutral ground for a moment.

“I’m not sure, maybe a recipe book or something like that. Even a voucher to buy books and cooking supplies, although maybe not that one. Knowing you, it would have been an obscene amount and I would have felt uncomfortable.” My voice lowers as I speak, and I look down at my lap as his eyes burn into me.

“It made you uncomfortable, didn’t it? The laptop, that is. It’s why you would have preferred something cheaper. Because it cost too much and you didn’t like it. Fuck, that never even occurred to me.” He sounds angry with himself, and I don’t like it.

“I’ve changed my mind, I won’t forgive you.” I look at him as he says this and he’s smirking down at me, his words causing a pit to form in my stomach. “Not until you answer a few questions I have, and no bullshit either. I want the truth.” I nod nervously, as my heart thumps and my skin flushes.

“Okay, first question. Why do you hate yourself so much?” I look away, hating that he’s asking me this. “It may be hard, but I expect eye contact. It’s easier to tell if you’re lying that way.” I gulp hard before locking my eyes on him, considering his question.

“I don’t hate myself.” He raises an eyebrow and I hurry to continue. “At least, not as much as I used to. I think it all started when people used to ask why I looked so different compared to my mom and sister, and when word of the adoption came out, I felt like an outsider. I think that’s why I compare myself to Poppy so much, and put her on an impossible pedestal that no person could ever live up to.” I take a haggard breath and I can’t stop my eyes from dropping down, but he says nothing. I appreciate it more than I can say.

“I felt like I had to compete for my mom’s affection. It wasn’t anything she did, but I got it into my head that if I wasn’t the perfect daughter, if I didn’t follow the rules, wasn’t polite and well behaved, then she would give me back. I know she wouldn’t, but the idea formed not long after I arrived, and it stuck. I was so scared she would abandon me and I would end up with a family who wasn’t as kind, that I made it impossible to live up to my own expectations.” I don’t realize tears have fallen until his thumb brushes across my cheek, and wipes them away.

“My sister used to tease me when I was little, saying I looked like a ghost, and for a while, she went around calling me Casper. Then she would get me to do her chores and threaten to get me in trouble if I didn’t. I don’t know

why I thought she was so perfect because looking back, she was mean to me. Mom never saw it, Poppy was smart enough to do it when she wouldn't be caught, and she knew I would never snitch on her. It got easier as I got older, but then I started high school and I was ridiculed, and bullied every chance they got. I was awkward, unsociable, and I struggled to make connections with people. The kids thought I was an easy target, and they were right." My breathing is becoming more labored, and his thumb continues to stroke soothing circles across my hand, still pressed against his cheek. "Poppy taught me how to throw a punch and defend myself, and I saw her as my knight in shining armor. It helped, and they backed off, but the name calling only got worse. They started calling me Casper as well and reminded me daily how ugly and freakish I looked. No matter where I went, they would point, stare, laugh, and remind me I didn't belong anywhere. It got to me more that I would let them see, and the day I graduated was amazing because I knew it was all over."

"Shit, Luna, that's fucked up. You know they were full of shit though, right? You are far from ugly. This is going to sound vain, but I'm not attracted to uglies." He's right, it is vain. It doesn't stop me from smiling, though. "Okay, the other thing I want to know is if I affect you even a fraction of the way you affect me?" He moves, so he's in front of me, my hand falling down into my lap.

"Yes, you affect me. I try to ignore it though because of the way you are. Power and money don't mean anything to me, and I find it hard to be around someone who doesn't know how to treat people with decency and respect. It doesn't mean that being around you isn't hard, I've thought about the way you kiss me, the things you've said, and it equally terrifies and excites me." I cover my face and he grips my wrists to pull them away.

"You don't stammer as much when you're around me, you know, and I can't see myself being different around people. This is the way I am. Although, I can try to be more of my alter ego for you, if you'll give me the chance. All bets are off in the bedroom though." He winks at me, and I shake my head and throw an eye roll in for good measure.

"You had to go and ruin it, didn't you?" I say with a laugh as the butterflies flutter and take flight within me.

"Oh, my Star, I haven't ruined a damn thing." He grips my knees before thrusting them open, then he's leaning over me, his chest pushing into mine, and my back firmly leaning against the wall. His hand fists in my hair before

he pulls my head back, eliciting a shiver in me, and a whimper of pain. His eyes are heat filled, and he looks like he's one second from devouring me whole.

His mouth fuses with mine, his tongue slipping inside before I can react. He glides it across my teeth, then my lip is in his mouth, and he bites down before he pulls away. My head is yanked back even further, as he slides his tongue across the column of my neck. Trailing kisses across my collarbone, and up to the spot just behind my ear. He moves away once more, and his breath fans across my face. He gives me one last lingering kiss, and then he's on his feet, and pulling me up onto mine.

"I can accept what I draw out in you. There's a reason why I didn't want to be your first, my Star, and believe me, that was because I do care about you."

He moves toward the stairs and I hesitate; he looks at me with a question in his eyes and I take a minute to decide if I should speak my musings out loud or not.

"I don't think you did it, Emmet. Hurting those girls, but it sure as heck looks like you did. Be careful, okay?"

"Don't worry about me, Luna. I can handle whatever else they try to throw my way." He gives me one last wink before he walks down the stairs. I'm not far behind him before I join back up with Darius, and he escorts me back to my room so I can wait for Tucker.

What the fuck just happened? It was only supposed to be an apology.

TUCKER ISN'T BACK YET, and I guess now is as good a time as any, as I hold the door open in a silent invitation to Darius. He hesitates for a split second before he walks inside, and I close the door behind him. He takes a seat in the recliner and I sit on the sofa, angling myself so I can face him. Neither of us speak, I wonder if he feels the tension and awkwardness that is barreling around inside me.

"So," we both say together and a nervous laugh fills the silence.

"Look, I know you're here for another year. I can't even pretend to understand what you're feeling, and what happened that night was probably because of the adrenaline." He pauses for a moment and I don't know if I

want him to tell me that he regrets it or if that would be the worst thing in the world to hear right now. “I know it shouldn’t have happened, but I need you to know that I don’t regret it. No matter what you say, that won’t change. It’s been a long time since I felt comfortable to be myself around someone, but there’s something about you that makes me relax and hate myself a little less for all the mistakes I’ve made.”

I’m quiet for a couple of minutes, digesting his words and waiting to make sure he doesn’t have anything else to add.

“I’ve tried not to think about what happened between us.” His eyes shutter at my words, and I rush to continue before he gets the wrong idea. “It hasn’t worked, every time I look at you, I remember the way it felt between us, and how I regret it as much as I don’t.”

“I don’t follow. Do you regret it or not?” he asks carefully, keeping his feelings concealed behind an unaffected mask. *I wish he could teach me how to do that.*

“Both, Darius. I really like you. There’s this part of me that wishes it could happen again, but it can’t. I...” Running my fingers through my hair, I let out a groan before wrapping my arms around my stomach, and I meet his eyes once more. My chest feels almost dull, I feel as though I’m being weighed down by, well, everything. “Regret isn’t the right word, because I wouldn’t take it back even if I had the chance, but it doesn’t make it right. Do you have any idea what Emmet or his father would do if they found out? That thought terrifies me.” My voice loses the power I began speaking with, and my hand rubs at my chest as he looks at me.

He leans forward and claims my hands in his; he stares down at them as - I presume - he considers what to say next.

“If we had met at a different time or place, do you think you...” He trails off but I don’t need him to continue his train of thought, because Hell to the fucking yes I would have.

“Yes, I would have explored where this could go. Although, I probably would have just watched you from afar, too scared to act on it. I wish things could be different.” His thumb swipes across my cheek and I watch as he presses his lips together. He gives me a curt nod.

“I think it could have been great between us, Luna, and I wish I could think of a way to make it happen. The thing is, I’m a stubborn man, and I know a good thing when I see it. I can’t just walk away from this, but I’ll respect your choice if you tell me to forget about you, and I’ll try to do just

that.”

My mouth parts and I suck air in through my teeth as my neck tips back, and my shoulders drop down. Why couldn't he be an asshole? *Better yet, why can't I be stronger?*

My voice is low when I finally remember how to talk, and I flip my hand over until my fingers are grazing his palm.

“Wow.” It's all I can say as it comes out on a whisper, my mouth dry and my chest feels as though it's expanding to allow for all the warmth he's just filled me with.

“Tell me to forget about you, Luna. Tell me you don't want me.” His voice shakes as he drops to his knees before me. This mountain of a man who risks himself for others is on his knees. *For me.*

I pull my hands free as they wrap around my body and my chin connects with my chest, I can feel the trembles that are taking over, and my chest suddenly feels tight.

“I can't,” I choke out, my emotions making it hard to speak more clearly.

“Tell me why.”

“Because I don't want to lie to you, but I can't... I can't do this. There's so much risk and I... I,” trailing off, I can't voice the words out loud to someone else.

“You're in love with one of them, aren't you?” He doesn't sound mad, just curious.

I nod my head, not trusting myself to be able to form any words, and he smiles kindly at me. He slides his hands across my face, lifting my chin away from my chest, as he tenderly strokes my face.

“Is it just because of him?” I shake my head this time, and a surprise chuckle falls from him and I sit straighter, taken back by his response.

“Come on, it's not that much of a surprise. I remember that chat we had over having feelings for people, I don't know how I feel about it all, and I guess it doesn't even matter. The thing is, I do feel something and I'm going to hold out hope that we can maybe explore it, but I won't put any pressure on you.” He gets to his feet and brushes his lips across my forehead before making his way to the door. “I mean it, Luna. No matter what happens, I won't regret whatever this is between us. Also, no matter what happens, your safety and happiness will always come first, I won't jeopardize that.” I give him a shaky smile as he opens the door and takes up his position, and I'm left with my thoughts until Tucker comes back.

“Merry Christmas,” he says roughly, with a sheen of sweat covering his forehead, his Adam’s apple is bobbing furiously and his feet keep shifting from side to side.

“Right back at you. Are you okay?” I ask hesitantly. It feels like he’s miles away, and I’m gathering he’s not in a great headspace right now.

“Oh yeah, I’m great,” he grates out as he moves over to my counter, and looks at my baking supplies dotted on the side.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“You know what I want,” he fumes as he whirls around, but not before taking his arm and sweeping everything onto the floor. “I want people to stick to their agreements and I want you fucking women to stop screwing with my mind.” His feet are planted wide, and his eyes are glaring right at me.

“Hey, what did...”

“Seriously, what is wrong with you people? No matter how hard I try, you just throw it right back in my face. I can’t do anything right, can I? What the fuck do you want?” he yells, as he curls his lips, and slams his hands down onto the countertop.

I wipe my clammy hands over my leggings as I slowly get to my feet. My eyes are blinking rapidly as I stare at him, but I have no idea what to say. He flexes his fingers as he starts to walk toward me and I look around, trying to find an escape route.

“I-I-I’m s-s-s-sorry.” I’m shaking uncontrollably, and it feels as though there’s a rock in my stomach weighing me down and keeping me from running. *Flight or fight, well, what about freeze?*

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not going to hurt you,” he all but growls, and it does nothing to assuage the fear running through me.

He rolls his neck and cracks his knuckles before shaking out his arms and stalks over to me, and pulls me into his chest.

“Fuck, Tiny One, I’m not angry at you. Just women in general.” He laughs mirthlessly, but it doesn’t sound like a laugh to me. It’s too dark, too raw to be construed in that way.

“W-w-what happened?” I ask through a shaky voice that cracks half way through.

“Will you come somewhere with me?” he asks and I nod against his chest. I hate that I feel so scared of him. It doesn’t feel right to me, not with Tucker. Is this reaction because of Shane, the strangler, or something else?

We walk until we make it to their wing, and he leads me inside a room that looks as though a bomb exploded or maybe I should say, Tucker exploded. All of his things are across the floor, his sideboard is in pieces, clothes are in shreds, and his TV is face down with glass surrounding the area. The wall mount is hanging on by its hinges, and his chair is missing most of its stuffing. If it was a person, then their guts would be spilling onto the floor.

“Tucker, what did you do?” A gasp breaks free as I do a double take of our surroundings, and my hands drop to the side as I open and close my mouth like a fish out of water.

“I lost my mind. I thought I had got it out of my system, but I was wrong.” I watch him out of my peripheral as he strokes his chin, before turning me around to face him. I try to meet his eyes, but I keep returning to the disarray that is surrounding us.

“I really don’t know a thing about you, do I? Not the important stuff, like the reason you would do this. I get it, but if you can’t let me in, can you at least speak to someone?” My tone is soft as I smile gently at him. Pushing my own misgivings aside, he doesn’t need that right now.

“I shoulder so much, Five. I’m used to doing it alone.” He crosses his arms over his chest and I place my hand on his back. He looks at me strangely for a minute until the corded muscles in his back begin to loosen.

“If you ever want to talk, or just take your mind off it, I’m here. I care about you, Tucker. I try not to, but I can’t help it.” I run my hand up and down his spine, and I can feel him relax further beneath my touch.

“It’s not something I can just talk about. I need to know that I can trust you implicitly before that happens.” He steps away from me, before turning around and sliding a hand behind my head until he’s cupping my neck. “I’ll take the distraction though.” His mouth is on mine in seconds. I can already tell he isn’t holding back by the way our teeth clash together as he dominates my mouth.

My toes curl in my shoes, and my body feels electric as he consumes me whole. This isn’t a kiss that they make romance novels of. It’s furious, hard, and above all else, it’s real.

He pulls back, chest heaving as he looks around at the destruction he’s caused, and the tips of his ears turn red.

“I shouldn’t have brought you here, I just...” he hesitates and I thread my arms around his waist, he jumps but relaxes into me.

“It’s okay, Tucker. Y-y-you’re always so in control. You’re the thing mysteries are made of, and I’m glad you brought me here,” I speak softly and he looks down at me with his brow furrowed.

“Why would you be glad? This side of me is ugly, and it makes me feel weak to lose control like this.” I smooth his lines with my fingers, and he shivers as his eyes slide shut.

“I don’t see it like that, but even if it is ugly, then what does it matter? It’s your ugly, and I’m glad you trusted me enough to let me see it. It doesn’t make you weak to lose control, it just means you’re human.” He takes my hand and kisses me on the pulse point before biting down on my palm. His eyes darken as he grips my ass and pulls me into him, my legs wrapping around his waist on instinct.

“I used to think you were weak, Luna. That you couldn’t handle this place, us, me. I was wrong. What I viewed as your weakness is exactly where your strength lies.” I don’t know how to respond to that, so instead, I run my nose up the column of his neck.

The smell of sandalwood and something distinctly Tucker fills me as I trail kisses up to the bottom of his ear, before sucking lightly on his lobe. It’s worked for me, so why not try it out now?

A low growl falls from him before he carries me to the bed. We fall down onto it, making quick work of our clothes until I’m back in his arms, and we’re leaning against the wall. He slides inside me with no hesitation as his mouth bites down on my neck, and he sets a hard and furious pace.

My hands run over his back as I hold on for dear life, my head thrown back, and loud cries fall free as he brings me to the edge, faster than I expected. I can feel it coursing through my system, begging for release as he adjusts the angle, hitting me just right and I cry out his name.

“Fuck this, we should have stayed on the bed,” he growls, and I can’t barely think to respond before we’re moving again.

He carries me back over to the bed before he pulls out, spins me around and thrusts in from behind. My hands fall onto the mattress, and my eyes roll back at all the sensations he’s unlocking within me.

“You feel so fucking tight. I’m going to come so hard. Fill you to the fucking brim, and you’re going to come right along with me.” His hand finds my clit, and that’s all it takes before I scream out in pleasure. His own guttural cry of my name makes me feel, euphoric.

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CELEBRATING THE LITTLE THINGS

HE COLLECTS some clothes to bring back to my room so he can have a shower. His shower door is smashed into tiny little pieces, and full of nasty shards that would slice right through him if he even attempted to take one in his bathroom.

“Here.” He passes me his phone and I look up at him, my eyes wide as I rub at my forehead.

“W-w-what’s this?” Such a moronic question, I know it’s his phone. I just don’t understand why he would offer it to me.

“You can ring your mom while I take a shower, at least you can have some privacy that way.” He’s still holding it out to me, but my arms won’t move to let me take it.

He takes my hand and places it inside before he steps back.

“I want to be able to trust you, Luna. And I realize I can’t do that unless I try. So, this is me trusting you not to look through my phone or say something you shouldn’t.” He walks into the bathroom. The door closes and my tears fall free, streaming down my face as I stare at the space he just left. *He’s trusting me.*

I take a few deep calming breaths before I tap the screen and press the phone to my ear.

“Luna bean?” She sounds hesitant and hopeful, and I doubt I’ll be able to stop my tears from bleeding through into my voice.

“Mama.”

“Oh, my sweet girl, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?” She sounds as though she’s moments away from storming the place and freeing me from my

confines, although it suddenly dawns in this moment, that despite everything that is going on, this is the only place I want to be.

“Mama, I’m fine. They’re happy tears, I swear. I’m so happy I can call you. Merry Christmas, mama.”

“Merry Christmas, baby. I don’t think much of those Harkwrights, but Tucker certainly has my thanks.” She sighs almost wistfully before clearing her throat. “How are you really? Are they treating you okay?” Her mom voice is now in full force, and even that is making me smile like a fool.

“I can’t say, but I’m... happy. I didn’t expect to be, but I feel as though I’m finally discovering who I am. My stammer has calmed down. It still happens, but nowhere near as much as it used to.”

“I’m happy for you, sweetie. I wish it didn’t take you going in there to see it, but I’m glad you’re starting to see yourself the way I always have. I am so proud of you, Luna. I sometimes think you’re the strongest person I know.” Her voice now sounds quiet, and somewhat sad.

“Is everything okay, mama. You seem off?”

“Don’t worry about me, you just focus on yourself and let me be the adult for a change,” she mock scolds, and it alleviates my worry, slightly but not all of it.

“How’s Poppy doing?”

“Okay, we had a conversation yesterday that lasted for about thirty minutes, Dr. Stevenson isn’t here at the moment, but the staff are a lot friendlier and certainly more helpful these days. Their attitude stinks, but what else can I do? Although, I am worried about her, she snapped at one of the nurses yesterday and nearly made her cry. You know the one I mean. Curly brown hair, a tiny little thing who always has a smile on her face.”

“Oh, you mean Kayla, the poor girl. She’s always so bubbly and friendly. What the heck did Poppy say to her?” I feel outraged on the nurse’s behalf, she’s always been kind to us, even before the Harkwright payments started.

“I don’t know, she wouldn’t say, and Poppy acted as though she hadn’t done anything. The doctors said they’ll look into it, but I don’t know what good it will do.” She carries on speaking and I agree and ‘ahh’ in the right places, but I’m not really listening. I love my mama, but she loves us to a fault. She can’t admit when we’re not being fair, and I think she needs to believe that Poppy is acting out because of her imbalance. I mean, didn’t I wonder the same thing myself? I’m just not sure anymore. Maybe Poppy is just a rotten egg.

Harsh, but maybe I'm right.

THE REST of the break has been quiet, Tucker had to leave to take care of whatever made him trash his room, but he'll be back tomorrow, and I have no doubt there will be some party for New Year's Eve. I wasn't disappointed that I missed the celebration last year, but now that I'm claimed and a higher number, I'll probably have to attend.

I want to see D, but we haven't spoken since she blew up at me. We still eat meals together, but it's quiet and riddled with tension. I want to go and see her, but I don't know what to say. Do I apologize? Is it even enough? I didn't think I was being a crappy friend, but I can see it now. I should have been there for her more and not unloaded all my shit when I could see that she was struggling. No, I need to go and see her and try to clear the air, but first... I need to see Cole. Which means, I need to try to swing myself an appointment.

An hour later and I'm sitting in his office, waiting for him to come in. I can't get my head around the fact that they believed my bullshit excuse of having migraines. Why that would even get me in here so easily is beyond me. It's five o'clock, so he wasn't around when I got here, but I know he's on his way, and I can't stop myself from rubbing my hands up and down my legs. It's the only way I can stop my knee from bouncing, and it's annoying me. I may have lied to get in here, but a headache is forming, thumping in the base of my skull. My stomach is fluttering like crazy and making me feel as though I'm about to vomit.

The door opens and my stomach bottoms out, only making me feel worse. I can't help but worry that I'm going to pass out at any moment.

"Luna." He rushes over, and I throw my hand up just before he can reach out to grab me. His smile is still in place, but he doesn't seem as sure of himself.

"What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Can you sit down?" I ask quietly, my voice cracking on the words, and I have to clear my throat if I have any hope of getting this out.

"Hey, you don't look so good. Are you feeling unwell?" he asks, with nothing but concern written across his handsome face. The same one I used

to stare at and feel fluttery anticipation whenever I saw him. The one I dreamed of and wished he could only feel the way I did. And now that he does, I no longer want it.

“Cole, I’m so sorry.” My voice breaks and his eyes become drawn as his jaw tightens, staring at me as he shakes his head. “I can’t do this anymore, I have to let you go,” I whisper, so quiet he could have missed it if the room wasn’t so silent, and with nothing but the sound of a clock, tick tocking the seconds away.

“Luna, don’t do this please.” I hate that I’ve brought Cole to this point, but the sad thing is, there’s no other choice.

“Don’t you see, Cole? This is the only thing I can do. We could never work and I can’t have you waiting for the next year, when I know I won’t be coming out to you.” I swallow over the lump forming in my throat,

“I don’t understand what’s changed. I thought we were okay. That we got through the misunderstanding in the hospital. Why do this now?” He still sounds hurt, but by the way he keeps clenching his fists, I don’t think that’s the only thing he’s feeling.

“Because I can’t keep doing this, pretending that nothing has changed and trying to kid myself that what we have is remotely real.” His eyes widen and his mouth hangs open at my admission. Maybe I should have left that last part off.

“Well, it sure felt real to me. But I guess that doesn’t matter.”

“All I’m trying to say is that maybe what we called love was really something else, and we got it wrong. You said yourself you’ve had a couple of relationships, but you never once said you loved them. How can you be sure you really know what it feels like? Please understand what I’m saying, I don’t want to hurt you anymore than I already am.”

“I’m twenty-eight, Luna. I think I know what love is.” He looks down his nose at me as he says this, and it gets my back up straight away.

“What and because I’m nineteen I must be wrong, that there isn’t a chance that you are?” Sure, whatever you say, doctor.” I don’t want to react to him. I’m the bad guy here and I can’t expect him to be all smiles.

“You’re the one questioning everything we’ve said, how can I not doubt that you even know what love is? Although, if you ask me, I just think you’re scared.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, as I throw my hands up in the air.

“I think you’re scared of how you feel about me, and you’re too

chickenshit to face it. You'd rather run away from something amazing than find out where this could go, because believe me, it would be amazing between us. Luna. I know it would."

"Cole, please. I need you to listen to me, I don't know how else to do this. The thing is, I have been through so much since I came to this place. I've done more things than I ever imagined I would and... I've had more things done to my body that I can even name."

He squeezes his eyes closed and he repeatedly says, "stop." I'm surprised he hasn't thrown his hands over his ears and started saying 'la la la'.

"Are you trying to hurt me?" he asks and I'm hurting myself, but I know it's nothing compared to what I'm doing to him right now.

"No, but you won't listen otherwise. Maybe I can't say how you feel for me, but throughout all of this, I've discovered what being in love does to you. How it feels when you can't be with that person, and how immense it is when you finally lock eyes on them again..." I sigh as I prepare myself for my final blow.

"Then why are you doing this? If you know how it feels?"

"Because I love you, Cole, but I'm not in love with you. I just didn't realize it in time to stop you from getting hurt. Now that I know how it really feels, there's no way I can ever mistake it, and I know that I can't possibly... be in love... with you." I look at him with what I'm sure are sad eyes before I stand up, walk over to the door, and place my hand on the handle.

"If you think you've fallen in love with one of them, then you really don't know what love is. Enjoy your empty relationships and lifetime of regret," he says it through a tear-stained voice, and I let his pain wash over me.

I hate that I'm hurting him, but it's not breaking me, and that's how I know I'm doing the right thing. I care enough to let him go, but I don't love him enough for this to break my heart. There's not even a fracture or dent to be found.

"Goodbye, Cole." I wish my own tears weren't starting to form, but I know I've made the right choice, even if I feel like a grade A bitch for doing this to him.

"Would you still want me if I had their last name?" My hand falls from the handle as I turn around to face him with my mouth agape, I can't believe he just said that to me. "I thought you, of all people, wouldn't have been taken in by all their luxuries and empty promises. I guess you were nothing but a Harkwright chaser after all," he says it all through a sneer, his once

dreamy eyes filling me with a sense of dread. Have I brought this side out of him or was it always there, lurking beneath his emerald greens?

“I can’t believe you would say that to me. I guess you weren’t the guy I thought you were.” I turn the handle and turn my back to him, my skin prickling and the hairs on my arms standing on end.

“Yeah well, neither were you. Looks like I chose the wrong sister all along. Who would have thought quiet, stuttering Luna would turn out to be the heartless bitch. Go fuck your ‘men’. You’ll be the one filled with regret, not me.”

I roll my shoulders back and hold my head high as I pull open the door and step outside; I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t stop myself from looking back one last time. “Fuck you, Cole. You may not share their name, but deep down, you’re a Harkwright through and through. I’m just glad I finally saw the real you before it was too late.”

I close the door quietly, although in my head I slam it and give it a few kicks for good measure, and then I stroll away. The minute I make it outside, my stomach finally gets the best of me, and I lose everything I’ve eaten for the day. I can’t stop, even when it’s nothing more than dry heaves, my shoulders are shaking and my chest feels tight. I know I made the right choice, now more than ever. But did he have to be so cruel? Or maybe he’s just lashing out. Either way, it hurts.

A hand strokes up my back and I don’t react, that’s how broken I feel. One conversation with him has shredded all the confidence I’ve managed to build. *I feel wrecked.*

“Come on, Star, let’s get back inside.” I’m hoisted into a pair of strong arms, and I bury my head into his chest. I never thought Emmet would come to my rescue, but I’m glad he’s here. *I wonder what that says about my sanity.*

He carries me until stairs are climbed, and doors are opened and closed. He places me gently down onto a bed that smells like him. I guess he didn’t even consider taking me back to my room. I say nothing as I bury my head in his pillow. A sheet is draped over me before a featherlight touch brushes hair away from my neck.

“It’s okay, Star. Take as long as you need.” I hear his footsteps as they move away from me, followed by the sound of a door opening and closing. I lie here, listening to the deafening silence as every name or vicious word that has been aimed my way is replaying over and over again. This time they’re

joined by the one person who I never expected. *Myself.*

A HAND IS GENTLY SHAKING my shoulder as it successfully rouses me from my sleep. The thing is, I don't want to open my eyes.

"Come on, Star, it's time to get up." Emmet's low timber washes over me. I turn onto my back, but not before I grab the pillow and hold it over my face.

"If you don't cooperate, I'll just have to pick you up." I mumble nonsense back at him before a shriek sounds as I'm lifted into his arms. I still won't pull the pillow away, so I have no idea where we're headed until he drops me into the bath, fully dressed.

"What are you doing?" I shout, I throw the pillow at his head, and he catches it easily.

"You wouldn't get up. This seemed the next best option. Now, get your clothes off and meet me at my sofa when you're done." He leaves, closing the door behind him and I'm surprised he didn't demand to stay. He didn't even try.

I slip out of my soaked clothes, before throwing them on the floor, and then I get to work on getting myself clean. I let the warmth settle around me once I'm done and I just lie here for the next ten minutes until I climb out and wrap the fluffiest towel I've ever felt around me.

I feel refreshed now. Although, I know I've done the right thing, I wish I could have done it better. I have no idea what I'm doing, how can I? Forgetting about my high school boyfriend, Cole was the first guy I ever loved and I didn't know how to let him go gently. Am I a terrible person? Is this place bringing out the monster in me? Do I even have a happy medium? I shake my head and look around the room when my eyes fall on a pile of clothes.

There are a pair of boxers and a wife beater lying on the counter. I slip them on once I'm dry, then I leave the bathroom, and walk over to the chair. Emmet is sitting with his feet propped up on the coffee table and his arm draped across the back.

"There she is. How are you feeling?" he asks, looking up at me.

"A little better. Thanks for letting me sleep," I reply, feeling and sounding

numb.

“Come on. We’re going to sit here and you’re going to tell me what happened, or you won’t. We can drink the day away, or you can do some baking. Whatever will help to get that gutting look off your face.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? I haven’t exactly treated you the same, have I? All I’ve done is get angry at you for the littlest things, and held any slight against you.” I pick at the boxer legs and his hand comes down over mine, holding me still.

“What the fuck is wrong? Just tell me.”

“I have felt as though I’m nothing more than a stand in my whole life, that Poppy was always better than me in every way. What if I was right? What if I’m always going to mess up because that’s all I’m good at?” A deep sigh passes through my lips. He grips my hips and pulls me onto his lap.

“Now, you listen to me. You are nobody’s stand in. You have guys falling over themselves just to have a moment with you. Why would we do that if you weren’t worth it? Do you really think I’d still be trying to win you over if you were nothing? I don’t know what went down today, but I’m not going to let you beat yourself up over some ridiculous shit.” His jaw is tight, and his eyes promise nothing but darkness.

“It’s not as easy as that. No matter how confident I get, it can be thrown away as easy as breathing. What’s the point in even trying?” Damn, when did I become such a defeatist?

“Because the only time you fail is when you stop trying. You don’t run from the scary shit, so don’t let this chase you away. What kind of business will you have if you can’t even get through this? So no. I won’t accept it. You’re going to pull your big girl panties on, have a few drinks with me, and then we’re going to say fuck it to this day and start tomorrow as though it never happened. It won’t even be a blip on the radar. Do you hear me?” He’s gripping my face between his hands and all I can do is nod as he deposits me back onto the sofa next to him, grabs a bottle of whiskey, and starts pouring.

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring, but I do know that I’ll have Tom and Tucker back, and that already alleviates some of the weight trying to hold me down. That’s not to say that Emmet isn’t helping to make me feel better, because he is. I’m just not sure what to do with that. It feels good being with him, right even. Fuck, I think I need more to drink.

THE SHOCK FACTOR

“MY MOUTH TASTES LIKE ASS.” I look through bleary eyes as Emmet stretches his arms above his head, and my eyes are drawn to the tantalizing skin that’s revealed as the cover slips onto his hips.

I swallow hard and try to fight the attraction that is coursing through me like fire. How can I be attracted to so many of them? How can I want them when I’m in love with someone else?

I turn onto my side, and a hand rests on my hip and pulls me back into him. “Where are you disappearing to, my Star?”

“Nowhere, I’m right here,” I say softly as his mouth falls down onto my neck, nipping at the tender skin as he moves down to my shoulder.

“Maybe in body, but your mind is elsewhere. What are you keeping inside that pretty little head of yours?” he asks, as he closes the last of the distance between us, until we’re flush against one another.

“I’m just thinking about the New Year, wondering what I’ll be doing when the ball drops.”

He moves fast, not stopping until I’m flat on my back and he’s hovering over me. His nose brushes against mine as he sets his hard eyes on mine.

“You’re lying. We can’t have that now can we.” His hand falls on my collarbone, as his thumb brushes across my pulse.

My heart is beating erratically as I stare up at him, wondering if he’s going to apply pressure. Will he try to strangle me? Hurt me?

Someone pounds against the door, but he isn’t moving. His hand snaking up further until it’s around my throat.

“Do you trust me, Star?”

“I don’t know, especially with your hand around my throat.” It comes out as a squeak and he tightens his grip before pulling away and moving off me completely.

“At least you haven’t started crying or whimpering like a damn dog. The same can’t be said for Fifteen and Twenty-Eight. I guess they prefer it when it’s soft and gentle, unless they’re the ones inflicting the damage.” His arms are rigid, while his neck is tight and corded.

“Carly and Emily, the first and last victims.” It comes out on a whisper as I move across the bed until I’m against the wall, and away from him. I draw my knees up into my chest and wrap my arms around them. Chills run over me, and I’m struggling to swallow as the back of my throat begins to ache.

“Oh yeah, so they were. The last girl I brought back to my room as well. What do you make of that?” His voice drops lower as he stalks forward.

The pounding on the door is getting louder, but neither of us moves to let whoever it is in.

“Are you trying to scare me?” It comes out shaky as he places his hands on the bed and leans forward.

“I guess that depends. Are you scared, Star? Are you worried I might try to hurt you, finish what happened in the pool house?” He doesn’t look away, but his eyes drop for a moment, as I lick my suddenly dry lips. Not that it will do any good. My mouth is as dry as the Sahara desert.

“That w-w-wasn’t y-y-you. Despite everything, I k-know it wasn’t.” He stretches his arm forward, and grips my ankle before pulling me roughly down the bed.

The door flies open and slams against the wall before Tucker storms in, and pulls Emmet away from me before his fist slams into his jaw.

“Tucker, stop,” I shout as I scramble off the bed and run to them. He pulls his arm back to deliver another hit, but stops as I grip his elbow. He turns his dark eyes on me before he pulls his free and turns back to Emmet.

“Touch her again and see what happens. I don’t care who your fucking dad is. You don’t have my permission.” Of all the reactions Emmet can give him, laughing isn’t the best one.

“What about us? Do we have your permission?” My head flies in Aeron’s direction, who swaggers into the room, closely followed by Tom, who props the now broken door back into its frame.

“Sure, come on in. The more the merrier,” Emmet spits out a mouthful of blood, before levelling a sneer on them all.

“How hospitable of you, but we weren’t looking for an invitation,” Tom replies, before he drops down on the sofa and beckons me with his hand.

I hesitate, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do in this situation and he levels me with his kind eyes. I stop thinking as I close the distance, drop down beside him, and curl up into his side.

“Fine, let’s do this.” Emmet approaches us and sits down on the coffee table, resting his hand on my knee, causing a growl to emit from Tucker’s chest.

“Don’t push it, Emmet. Tucker has not had a good time,” Aeron says lazily as he drops on the floor and dances his fingers across my ankle.

“Fine, then let’s cut to the chase. What do you want?”

“Well, I want to know what pudding Moonbeam made for Tucker over Christmas.” Tom smiles down at me, and I melt under his gaze.

“A Christmas pudding. It’s something the British like to have. I thought I’d give it a try.” I can’t stop my smile, and I know it will be meeting my eyes.

“Ahh, I wonder what you’ll make for me when I claim you.” He gives me a wink before dropping his head to nuzzle my neck.

“Good luck with that,” comes from Tucker as he starts pacing the ground in front of us.

“I agree. She’s mine next. I’ve waited long enough for **my** Star.” Does he have to put so much emphasis on that pet name he’s chosen for me?

“I think you’ll find I’m next in line, so get ready to wait a little longer. By the end of this, you should have the patience of a saint.” Tom chuckles as Emmet goes red in the face, neck, and his shoulders go tight. A vein throbs in his neck, and I can’t take my eyes off it.

“That isn’t what I meant.” Tucker’s smile is wide before he turns around and bursts out laughing. He slaps at his knee before he shakes it off, and returns to his full height as he gives us all a smirk.

“I said good luck because I’m not going to relinquish my claim.” He rubs his hands together in obvious glee, as every set of eyes in this room stare at him, waiting for him to finish. “Luna will be mine until she graduates. Happy fucking New Year, boys.”

None of us are saying anything, instead we alternate our looks between Tucker and Emmet. The former stands there with his chest thrust out, a slight tilt to his head, and a sneer across his perfect mouth. The latter has a furious tick in his cheek as he grinds his teeth, and his chest is moving rapidly.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, you are going to release Luna, and then Tom is going to renounce his position as next in line. Therefore, I get what I want and no one gets hurt.” He cracks his knuckles, gets to his feet, and walks over to Tucker.

“Not going to happen. You see, I have no reason to want to keep you happy. I’m not an idiot like Aeron. Now I know what I have and I plan on keeping her until she’s free to choose who she wants. Say and do what you want, I won’t make the same mistake as him.” He jerks his thumb at Aeron, who shoots daggers into his back.

“What does it even matter?” I mutter, and I don’t like the way all the attention is now focused solely on me.

“Have you got something you’d like to share with the rest of the class?” Aeron laughs without mirth, and I bristle at his tone.

“What does it matter who claims me? None of you listen to your own rules. You do what you want, when you want, and yet you expect us to do everything down to the letter.” Self five, I got it all out without a single stutter.

“She has a point, and if we all have his permission, then what does it matter who has the power? As long as you don’t piss Tucker off, that is.” Tom is fucking loving every minute of this. He isn’t even trying to conceal the enjoyment he’s feeling right now.

“Has anyone thought to ask Luna what she wants? I know we don’t ask the girls, but since when have we treated her like one?” Tom asks as he and Aeron get to their feet until they’re all standing in front of me, their stares weighing me down and making me feel small.

“I d-d-don’t k-k-know. I can’t choose one over the other, I... I have...” I drag my hand through my hair as I try to collect my composure. “I’m attracted to all of you, I don’t want to decide who can and can’t be allowed to spend time with me.”

“Oh great, let’s all have you then. Be our own little harem,” Emmet scoffs before he picks up a glass and throws it at the wall, laughing sardonically.

“I’ve heard worse ideas.” Tom strokes at his chin as I gape at him.

“I wasn’t being fucking serious.”

“So what? Aww, what’s the matter, Emmet? Scared she won’t like you as much if you have us along for the ride?” Why is Tucker taunting him so much, what does he hope to gain from it all?

“This is fucked up, I’m not having any part of it.” Aeron walks over to the door, and my heart lurches at the thought of him walking away.

“Grow up, Aeron. This whole fucking place is about sharing girls. How many have you screwed knowing that I or one of the others probably did it the day before, or maybe even only an hour before you did?” Tom, the voice of reason. Not that I really want to hear any of this.

“That was different,” he shouts.

“How is it different?” Tucker leans to the side slightly, as he purses his lips just a little.

“I didn’t love them,” he screams, his chest heaving as his fist flies into the wall before he yanks the door open, and walks away. Leaving us all to stare after him with our jaws on the floor.

“Luna.” I look up at Tucker, choking at the emotions clogging in my throat. “I can tell by your face that you want to go after him, and I think you should. I’ll give you a pass, in case anyone catches you in this wing. You can try his room, but if he isn’t there, then he’ll probably be in the maze.” He’s so matter of fact about it all, as though Aeron didn’t just drop a huge bomb at our feet, I guess I’m still waiting for the explosion.

“Take Darius with you, don’t go in there alone,” comes from Tom, and Emmet isn’t saying a damn word.

“O-okay.” I get to my feet, barely processing anything as I stumble over to the door and go after the one guy I never expected that kind of declaration from.

“Aeron’s in love with her. Who would have seen that coming?” Tom says as I move away from the door, and Darius reaches to close it.

“I did.” That’s the last thing I hear as the door clicks in place. How could Emmet have ever been able to guess that this would happen?

“I need to find him.” Darius looks pensive before he gently grasps my elbow and leads me out of their wing. I guess I’m going to the maze after all.

Why can’t Sir just destroy it? Clearly, it’s nothing but a hazard when you have a crazed strangler on the loose.



WE WALK THROUGH TOGETHER, heading for the middle, when voices meet my ears.

“For the last time, fuck off,” Aeron growls, and I’m relieved to know he’s here, but I wonder if I should turn back and leave him to it.

“Oh, come on, Aeron baby. You know we’re good together. I’ll have you moaning my name in no time,” One says in a sultry voice, and maybe I should turn around and just let him be. So, why aren’t my feet listening to me? Instead of helping me to flee, they’re leading me right to him.

“I’m not interested, you two-bit whore. Go find someone who buys the bullshit you sell, I’m not falling for it again. So run along, before I stop being such a nice guy.”

“Just go in there, Miss Carter. I’m sure he’ll appreciate the reprieve.” Darius steers me by my lower back until I’m standing in the hedgerow, and my eyes meet Aeron’s.

“Seriously, how many times do I have to tell you that you can have all the guys you want, except from Aeron, Emmet, and Tucker?” She flicks her hair over her shoulder and it shimmers in the light.

“It’s not my fault they don’t like you. I think it says more about you than it does me.” I square my shoulders and keep my head held high. I won’t let this bitch get to me, not anymore.

“Shut your mouth before I shut it for you.” She looks back at Aeron before she says, “seriously, her? What, do you have some weird fantasy about getting it on with the dead or something?”

Aeron flies to his feet before he grips her arms and sends her flying through the maze. “Darius, take out the trash for me, man. I’ll keep an eye on Luna until you get back.” His smile is gone, and his eyes are as hard as flint.

“My pleasure,” Darius sneers at her as she cowers before taking a step toward Aeron, and Darius grabs her by the waist. He lifts her off the ground and carries her away like she’s nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

“Well, you may as well take a seat. At least until Darius gets back.” He picks up a handful of stones, and starts throwing them one by one.

“I was worried about you, Aeron, I didn’t…” His finger presses against my lips, cutting me off mid-sentence.

“Of course, you didn’t know. I didn’t exactly show it, did I? I just wish I’d realized before I let you go, I guess I need to work a little harder on my timing,” he laughs coldly as he throws the last of the stones in the air.

“Would it really be so terrible to share me with Tucker?” *Now there’s a sentence I never thought I’d say.* He grazes my cheek and my breath comes out staggered, the things he can do to me with a single touch.

“It wouldn’t just be him though, would it? Tom won’t say no. I mean, isn’t Tucker already sharing you with him?” I don’t need to respond, but doesn’t he see that he’s been doing the same? “Then there’s Emmet. No way is he going to be okay with this, believe me, Luna. If he agrees, you can’t trust it. He’ll find a way to keep you to himself and then what happens if you fall for one of us? We’re supposed to just stand aside so you can be happy together? Fuck that. I’d rather lose you now, rather than later.”

I place my hand on his cheek and even when he tries to shrug me off; I refuse to let go.

“Aeron, I may not be where you are right now, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care, or that I don’t have feelings for you. Because I do, you were the first guy out of all of you I wanted to be around. I get it if you don’t want to share and maybe it’s some sick irony, seeing as we’re not allowed to get jealous, and we have to accept that sharing is inevitable, but that doesn’t mean I want to hurt you.” I release a breath through my teeth as his hands fall on my waist and he pulls me closer, dropping onto the bench. I hook my leg over his until I’m straddling his lap. I cup his face as I stare into his beautiful eyes. “If you don’t want to be a part of it, neither do I. I’ll ask Tucker not to give anyone permission, whatever I can do to make things a little easier for you.”

He pulls me against him as our lips meet, a long, slow, torturous kiss that makes my heart ache. It feels like a goodbye, and I’m already mourning his loss.

“We could have lost ourselves in each other, if only I hadn’t let you go.” He brushes my thumb down with his thumb, holding it in place as he swipes his tongue across the inside before releasing it.

“I would gladly lose myself over you, a little more time and I know I would have fallen for you completely. You may not be my knight, Aeron Harkwright, but you are my favorite sin.” I place one last kiss against the corner of his mouth before I get to my feet. “Will you be okay?” It feels awkward asking him that right now, but I don’t want to leave him until I know for sure, even if it is a no. I want to stay with him, but I have a feeling I’m only making things worse.

“I will be. Darius is back, so you should get going. I just need to be on my own for a while, I’ll, er, see you around.” He stares at his hands with a strange little smile on his face. I can’t tell what’s going through his head right now, but I will respect his wishes. Even if all want to do is wrap my arms

around him and make him see that he deserves better than all of this. The Academy, his mother, me.

Darius leads me out of the maze and follows me back up to my room. I don't care what the pass says, the last thing I want to do is return to those boys. What even happened this morning? Emmet went from nice to dark in a nanosecond, and then they seemed to have some kind of pissing match. Fuck it, they can fight all they want, I'm staying out of it.

"What happened between you guys this morning, and why was Emmet's door hanging off by one hinge?"

"Come in, I need coffee before I relive the fiasco that this morning turned into." He follows me inside and closes the door behind him, as I change the filter out and make a fresh pot. I think I'll make it a little stronger today, the more energy the better.

I pour us both a cup as soon as it's done, and he folds himself into my recliner, while I take a seat on the sofa.

"So, what happened?" Wow, he really isn't beating around the bush with this one, is he?

"Tucker announced that he will not relinquish his claim on me. Suffice to say, the news did not impress Emmet." I run my hand through my hair, shaking it out with my fingers.

"Why would that cause Aeron to storm away?" His ears are tipped with pink, and I have a feeling that he may have heard his declaration.

"Emmet made some sarcastic comment about us having our own little harem, Tom and Tucker didn't exactly say no, and Aeron says he can't share me because... well, because..." Why is it so hard to say it out loud?

"Because he's in love with you," Darius smiles gently, and I nod as I drag my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Yeah, because of that," I mumble and he laughs.

"It was bound to happen, Luna. It isn't your fault, but is that something you want? You know, to have your own harem." Damn, this conversation is growing more awkward by the second.

"I don't know, but I mean, while I'm in here, what does it matter what it's called? Once May rolls around, I'll only have one year left. It would be nice to spend it with the people who are meaning more to me than I could have ever expected." I drop my eyes to my hands, as I wring them together. "Even if it means that one will always be missing. I wish it didn't have to be like that though."

“I’d better get back to my post. I won’t be around later, but I am on duty for the New Year bash.” He gets to his feet and I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes.

If I can’t have them all, then should I be with anyone other than who owns me? I don’t need to be with any guy, but what do you do when you can’t choose? I love Tom, but it doesn’t mean what I feel for the others is just a phase. None of them will be easy to move on from, that’s if I even want to.

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A MIDNIGHT KISS

RED KNEE LENGTH dress with a black lace overlay, check. Red lipstick, check. Hair put up in effortless curls, check, and black wedge pumps that won't kill my feet if I do a lot of standing. Well, that one is still undecided, but a girl can only hope.

We're supposed to be going to a New Year's ball, which is a little concerning seeing as this is what Tucker has given me to wear. I feel underdressed, and it's only going to draw more attention to myself.

"You look... good," he says as I step out of the bathroom, and I can feel a shy smile pull at my lips.

"So do you." It's no lie either. With his black slacks and red shirt, he looks downright sinful, and I thought that was only reserved for Aeron.

"Well, let's get going." He offers me his arm and I slip my hand inside.

"I feel a little underdressed for a ball," I say, as I tug at my hemline, and he laughs softly.

"I guess it's a good thing we're not going to the ball then." My mouth drops open, and he uses the tips of his fingers to close it, before capturing me in a toe curling kiss.

"Come on, Cinderella. Your chariot awaits."

"Cinderella went to a ball," I say dumbly, and please God, just shoot me now.

"I presume she was also a virgin. It only works if we don't pick it apart." He laughs a little louder this time as we walk down the stairs.

"So, in this little role play of yours, are you the Prince?"

"Fuck no, I'd never want to be the prince." His words make me pause for

a moment. "I'll be the guy she wishes she'd danced with instead." Although there's laughter in his voice, it sounds as though I should read between the lines. I'm scared that I'll read them wrong if I try.

We climb into the black Bentley, and he beckons me with his fingers until I'm leaning into his side. The others aren't with us, and I'm not sure if I should feel relieved or disappointed. Maybe a healthy mix of the two?

"They'll be meeting us there. I don't know who else will turn up, but Tom won't miss it, and Emmet is too stubborn to let you go without a fight."

"Has anyone heard from Aeron?" I hesitate to ask, but I can't stop myself either.

"No, but I extended the invitation. I thought you would want me to." He rubs at the back of his neck, and I drop a kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you." I breathe and his eyes zero in on my mouth, but he doesn't move in for a kiss, so I won't either.

He pours two glasses of champagne and passes me one. It tickles my throat as I take a mouthful.

"Do you really want Emmet to be involved in any of this? Because you're just asking for trouble if you do."

"I know Emmet is intense and an..."

"An asshole," he supplies for me, and I bite back my grin as I nod my head.

"Yes, that... But I don't think he's any worse for my health than the rest of you. It's the mind games that really get to me. I never know what version I'm going to get and it's hard..." I rest my fingertips against my mouth, as the rest of my words fail me.

"Emmet isn't the one I'm worried about. Look, if you asked me to release you so you could be with Tom, I'd hate it and I'd say no, but I'd at least consider it. That wouldn't happen for Emmet, the moment he claims you, everywhere he goes so will you. Do you understand how many times you would be around Arthur if that happens? So, no. Whatever happens, Tom and I agree Emmet can never put a claim on you. We're your safest bet." He loosens his collar and pops a couple of the buttons. He throws back his glass before pouring himself another one.

"You make it sound as though I should be scared to find myself alone with Sir." I laugh shakily as my hands tremble. My skin feels as though it's covered in hundreds of bugs, all crawling over me at the same time.

He doesn't laugh as he levels me with his hard eyes, and his mouth is

pulled into a straight line.

“You shouldn’t be scared, Luna. It should terrify you. On second thought, maybe we should get you a switchblade, just in case.”

“You’re insane, I wouldn’t stab Sir. It wouldn’t be worth my life,” I choke out as I pull away, move to sit against the door, staring at him with wide eyes, and my trembling increases into full-blown shakes.

“Look calm down, Tiny One. Forget I said anything. You need more information to be able to process all of this, just don’t forget what lengths he went to, just to track your mom down.” He holds his hands out, in a placating gesture that never works. *Another pointless action that never seems to have any substance or merit.*

“I’m not Selene and she isn’t my mother. I don’t even know her,” I shout, as my chest heaves, and the divider slides down until Darius is staring back at us.

“She’s fine,” Tucker growls through his bared teeth, and Darius stares back, seemingly unconcerned by his reaction.

“We’re here, so stop shouting and have some fucking fun for once in your life.” The divider slides backup as Tucker pushes his door open, and holds his hand out for me to take. It’s petty and I’m not proud of myself right now, but I ignore his gesture as I open my door and climb out.

“Happy fucking New Year,” he sneers at the doorman as he leads me to the entrance and then we are led inside and up a set of stairs until we make it to the VIP section. I’m still shaking as my eyes fall on Tom’s red hair, then Emmet’s mossy green eyes, and I all but stop breathing as Aeron appears right in front of me and pulls me up against him.

“I don’t know what I want, but I do know that there isn’t anyone else I would want to see the New Year in with.” His breath glides over my ear, spreads across my neck, and some of my anger dissipates. It’s hard to be angry when he’s around, unless he’s the one causing it.

What can I say? These guys are complex.

I AM HAVING SO much fun. It would be better if D was here - I think - but Bradley had to attend the ball, I guess. Although, we’re not the only ones who have ditched it for something more... well just. More.

Sam is here with Caitlyn and Jake, Dustin and Dillon are in the non VIP section, hitting on anything that moves.

“This is so much fun,” I shout as I hold my arms in the air and twirl around. Long Island ice teas are the best. I’m on my fourth, and have a nice buzz going.

Tucker wraps his arm around my waist before pulling me into him, his leg goes between mine until we’re ‘dancing’. It’s more like sex with clothes on, but who cares.

Tom comes to stand in front of me, his hands on my hips as he guides my movements and slides his body against mine. A Tom and Tucker sandwich.

Hey, it’s a TLT.

I can’t stop laughing as I think about the TLT, and I can feel Tucker shaking his head against me. We dance until the song ends, and my skin is flushed and glistening. I’ve never felt more alive.

We pull apart and Aeron hands me another drink as I sit down beside him. He curls his arm around my waist until I’m sitting between his legs, and his chin is resting on top of my head.

“I saw that, Little Zero, and I am so turned on right now,” he whispers as he sucks on my ear and a shiver passes through me.

I arch my head until our eyes meet and our lips connect, it’s a kiss that is all tongue. Our lips barely brush as they meet for a second or two. His tongue takes control of my mouth, and his hand strokes across the side of my face.

“I swear, you’re always turned on,” I say breathlessly as we part, and his eyes are heated to molten levels.

“I am when you’re around.” We share a smile as Emmet glares at us from across the table. I pull away slightly and our eyes lock as I try to get a read on what he’s feeling.

“You never come to me like you do with them.” He slams his hands on the table before storming away, and I don’t hesitate to go after him. Liquid courage for the win. Not that I’m going to make a habit of getting drunk. Still, it’s New Year.

“Emmet, wait,” I shout as I run after him, trying to be heard over the thumping baseline.

“Why should I?” he shouts back before he whirls around and levels me with a look so cold, it almost rivals Sir’s.

“I just want to know that you’re okay. I...”

He shakes his head before he grips my elbow and leads me behind the

bar.

“Hey, you can’t be back here,” comes from the barman.

“Why don’t you call the owner and ask him if he cares that Emmet Harkwright is going into manager’s office?”

“Umm okay, yeah... you go right on ahead,” he sputters out and then Emmet drags me through the door until the music is nothing more than background noise. *I can finally hear myself think.*

“Do you even like me, Luna?” No Star or Five, shit.

“What are you talking about? Where is this even coming from?”

“It’s a simple yes or no question, come on. Do you like me?” He backs me up against the door, staring me down, but he doesn’t step close enough for us to touch. I don’t know if that’s a good sign or a bad one.

“Sometimes I do, when you’re not messing with my head,” I mumble out, my cheeks heating under his scrutiny.

“Oh, poor little Luna. Isn’t life hard?” he mocks as he places his hands either side of my head and I shrink back ever so slightly. “I’m Luna and I don’t know whether I’m coming or going with the big bad Prince’. Well, that makes two of us.” He pushes off the door with a laugh as he walks over to the desk, and props himself up against it.

“Are you trying to teach me a lesson or do you just not give a shit about me?” He thumps his fist against his chest. He’s hitting me with a single look, and I’m so far out of my element.

“I-I...”

“No, you all think I’m such a bad guy, and I never try to pretend I’m not an asshole, but you’re not better than me. You look at me and you kiss me back like you might want me, but out of the four of us, I bet I’m the only one you’ve never kissed first.” My eyes drop and he slams his fist on the desk. “If I’m such a headache and nothing more than an annoyance, tell me to fuck off. Because seriously, why am I even bothering? I know I joked about a harem, but it looks like you could do fine without having me in it. Am I wrong, Luna? Well, I’m waiting.” He tugs hard at his hair before his hands drop to his lap, and clench into fists.

My stomach sinks as my heart thumps in my throat. My eyes feel wet and I feel heavy as I push away from the door and walk over to him. He looks up at me, his eyes wild, but I can feel his anguish as clearly as if I was feeling it myself.

“Emmet.” He’s a sight as I slide my fingers across his face and mold my

mouth against his. He doesn't react, as his body goes tight until his hand is at the back of my neck and he breathes into me. Filling me with something I didn't realize I was missing or needing.

He grips my hair tight, before angling me just right, and teases my bottom lip with his tongue, but he doesn't try to own me with his tongue or explore everything I have. My hands fall to his shoulders, and he groans at my touch as my fingers dance along his neck before they drop to his biceps. I cling on for dear life as he deepens the kiss, stealing my breath, and sobering me up.

When he pushes me away, my fingers hover over my bruised and swollen lips, as I stand here staring at him.

"Do you like me, Luna?" My nerves tingle as I try to stop fixating on that kiss, just to clear my mind enough to respond.

"Yes," I breathe out.

"Do I scare you?" He rests his hand on the base of my throat, and I swallow hard.

"Yes. I'm scared of what I feel when I'm around you." I've never sounded more sure in my whole life.

"Do you trust me not to hurt you?" He tightens his hand, and I know he can feel my thumping pulse against his thumb.

"Physically, yes," another whisper and he places his mouth at my ear. Tingles shoot down my spine as I wait for his next words.

"Mentally?"

"I think you'll destroy me."

He pulls back and we stand here staring at one another, with so much hanging in the air between us, and a tension that is fueled by so many feelings. I wonder where we'll go from here?

FIVE MINUTES until the fireworks will explode across the sky, and I can't avoid it any longer.

"Where are you going?" Aeron asks, his eyes staring down into the public dance floor.

"The little girl's room, I'll be right back," I say with a smile and his eyes meet mine with a forced smile on his lips.

"Don't be long or you'll miss the countdown," Tucker says as he grinds

against me, and I give him a smile.

“I won’t be, I’m sure the line won’t be that long,” I say with a sigh, and they both give me a dubious look as I head to the toilets.

I guess I’ll be eating my words. This is crazy. I can barely even see the door. Darius is standing beside me and earning a few looks. From curious to downright lust filled. I don’t like it, but it isn’t as though I can say anything. I don’t have a right to be jealous, not while I’m here with the guys.

I finally make it to the door and get my business done, but it’s true what they say about ladies and bathrooms. They really do like to get their gossip on.

“I’m telling you. They are Harkwrights. I wouldn’t mind putting one of those as a notch on my bedpost,” a girl says, before she is joined by laughter. I can’t help but roll my eyes, any higher, and they’ll end up getting stuck in there.

“Come on, they’re with the Academy girls. Why would they even bother with you?”

“Have you seen the guys up there? I’m telling you I’ve only seen one girl. And no way can she offer them what I can.” More snickering joins her comment, and I’ve had enough of listening to it.

I open the stall door and walk over to the sinks; I don’t even bother looking in their direction, but I know they’re not showing me the same courtesy.

“That’s the girl. I’d bet my inheritance on it.” Whispers ensue before someone stands up beside me.

“Woman to woman, I’m making a move on one of the guys. I hope you have a way to get home. They won’t even remember your name by the time I’m done.”

I don’t respond as I rinse my hands and then dry them off on a paper towel, before I suddenly turn around and look her up and down. Silver spiked stilettos. A gold sequin dress that clings to her and cuts low across her chest. No doubt she’ll be giving someone more than a nip slip before she goes home. Her dress is short, if she bends over, she’ll be showing everyone exactly what she has. Now, I’m not a believer in slut shaming, but this bitch is making it hard.

“Be my guest, but I doubt you’ll get the reaction you are hoping for. I don’t care who you think they are, because you don’t know a fucking thing about them.” I square my shoulders before I shake my head at her, her

friends, and turn around to leave.

“Says you, aren’t you a sanctimonious little bitch? The only way a girl like you could get one is by whoring yourself out for three years. You’re replaceable, and I could have done the same, I just have more self respect.”

I rest my hand on the door, and I just let her words wash away. Last year, even a few weeks ago, that would have affected me. Maybe even brought me to my knees, but I’ve learnt a lot since fighting my feelings for the guys in my life. I’m better than this, and I won’t miss out on kissing the only person I can imagine sharing the first kiss of the new year with.

I step out into the hallway and I can hear the eager chants as my eyes fall on Darius, waiting for me. He’s always protecting me, he may have intimidated me in the beginning, but now, I see him for who he really is. A man who went to prison to protect a woman he didn’t even know, someone who stands up and defends me. A guy who is too good for this place.

“Hey, whore.” My hair is gripped from behind, and I can feel myself losing my footing before Darius grips my waist. Tears prick my eyes at the pain it’s causing in me, but I blink them away.

“Let go,” he demands, his gaze falling over my shoulder.

My hair is released as she pushes past me and places her hand on his arm. *Damn, this girl has some balls on her.*

“Honey, you can do so much better than this ‘girl’. Believe me, a guy like you deserves the best, and you couldn’t do better than me.” She arches her back, pushing her chest into the side of his arm. Her eyes stay trained on his as she takes her free hand and starts to run her fingers down between her breasts.

“Get your hands off me. I’m not interested. Trust me, there is no one better than her.” He looks at me as he says this last part, and I melt as my skin tingles with electricity.

“Come on, Tiffany. They’re about to start the countdown from ten,” one of her friends declares and she bares her teeth at us before sauntering away, and shaking her hips exaggeratedly. No way is anyone going to believe that she walks like that all the damn time.

Darius grips my hand before leading me into a storeroom full of various bottles and kegs. He looks at me with kind eyes and this sweet gesture, giving me a few moments to compose myself, undoes me completely. I watch him as he leans against the wall and I put a foot in front.

“Five,” I step forward, counting along with the crowd as I close the

distance between us. *What the fuck am I doing? What if someone walks in?* “Four.” His eyes are staring at me, questioning what I’m doing without uttering a word. *Yeah, I’m right there with him. Come on, Luna, use your head.* “Three.” I place my hands on his shoulders. “Two.” Rise up on my tiptoes until our mouths are level.

“One,” I breathe the word across his mouth as I press mine against his, and steal the kiss I’ve been craving ever since we came together. All doubts fly out of my head and my mind goes blissfully blank, where the only thing I am aware of is the feel of him under my hands, my mouth.

He sinks beneath my touch, as I glide my tongue across the seam of his lips and they part instantly until our tongues are tangling with one another. Our kiss is slow, languid, and reaching into the darkest depths that I have inside.

I pull back slightly, our lips a whisper breadth apart. “Happy New Year, Darius.”

“Luna, what was that?” he asks, his voice cracking as he blinks rapidly.

“That was me telling you it meant more than I can show you right now. That when I leave this place, I don’t want to lose you.”

“You can’t say that. Anything could happen from here to then. You could change your mind.” I shake my head vehemently at what he says. “How can you be so sure?” he asks hesitantly, but a smile is pulling at his lips now.

“Because when I started here, I said I would never find a knight, I’d only find villains.” I palm his face, brushing my lips along his jaw. “I was wrong, you’re my knight, Darius. You make me feel safe and protected and one day, I’m going to do that for you.”

He rests his head against mine and we’re both smiling now, soft and full of meaning.

I rest my head on his shoulder, and he holds me. I know I have to get back out there, but I just want a few more moments. I have this feeling deep in my core that this is going to blow up in my face, that although this may have started perfectly, it will only end in tragedy.

FEARING THE UNKNOWN

NEW YEAR'S DAY, and Tucker has woken up in a strange mood. I don't think I've seen him look at his phone once and he's been... friendly. By Tucker standards, at least.

"Did you have a good night?" he asks, as he throws on a shirt, before walking over to the coffee machine and pours us both a mug.

"I did, thank you. It still feels weird though, having an interest in more than one person." *I give up, that's it. I refuse to help you anymore.*

"Well, that's easily fixed." He passes my mug and I can't do anything but stare at him and wait for the other shoe to drop. "I've decided, I don't want to share. I'm rescinding all permissions and from now on, you'll only be waking up next to me." My hand pauses, my mug just centimeters from my lips. *This feels like a complete U-turn.*

"I didn't think you minded, not t-that I c-care." My heart is racing and I'm terrified I'm going to say the wrong thing.

"I didn't and now I do, that's all there is to it. Remember, Tiny One, I don't have to explain myself to you, so don't try to question me. Now, I've got some arrangements to make, so I will see you this evening." He puts his barely touched mug down and moves to stand in front of me. "Remember, you're no longer allowed to be alone with them and I'm ordering you to not touch or kiss anyone other than me. Break that rule and you're gone. If they try to make you break it... well, we'll have to see what happens."

I can't believe this, but then again, isn't this what the Harkwright experience is all about? I'm still getting the better end of the stick compared to most, but I get the feeling I won't be getting the same allowances I have

been. I'm not sure what has changed, but either I roll with it or I risk everything. I'm going to miss the others, but there isn't a damned thing I can do about it.

My door sounds and it bursts open before I can even call out "come in". Jake walks in, and something cold crawls down my spine. This can't be good, and if it's about Daria, then I don't think I'm going to be any help with the way our friendship is right now.

"I can't be alone with anyone." It feels weak to even say it, but he doesn't falter as he closes the door, and moves over to my sofa.

"Then I guess you better keep this quiet, seeing as I'm not the one who'll get in trouble." Isn't he supposed to be the nice one? *Did he miss the memo or something?*

He drops down next to me and I stare at him for a moment, before I get to my feet, and move over to my recliner. I don't know why he's finding it so funny, but that's the least of my concerns.

"What's wrong, Jake?" I pick at invisible lint on my leggings, as I listen to him shifting around, like fuck am I going to look at him.

"I need you to 'be there' for Daria, and should she mention anything about Bradley or myself, then I want you to relay the information back to me. I think that covers everything." My eyes finally meet his, and he's got a deceptively looking friendly smile on his face. He can't be serious though, he must know I can refuse him. Like Hell will I agree to this.

"N-n..." I square my shoulders and try to keep a strong chin as I take in a few deep, calming breaths. "No, Jake. I won't do that and before you start in on the rules, I am allowed to say no to you. To anyone who isn't Tucker, so no." *Stop raising your voice, what are you playing at? Stay calm and remember that you kind of have the upper hand in this situation.*

"You're right, Luna. You don't have to agree, but I'm about to tell you why you are going to change your tune." His smirk suits his surname perfectly. Ice is crawling down my spine.

I have a really bad feeling about this.

He rests his ankle on his knee, before leaning forward slightly. His look is anything but friendly. No, this has the Harkwright darkness written all over it.

"That club. last night was 'entertaining' to say the least. The girls were shameless, and pretty much everyone got laid." My brow furrows as I try to put all the pieces together. Where is he going with this? "None of that surprised me, at least, until I took this pretty little thing into the security

office and my eyes fell on the cameras. You really get around, don't you, Luna? Are the Harkwright's not enough for you? You need to go after the help as well, I find it fascinating. Truly I do." He chuckles under his breath, but it lacks warmth or any humor.

I can feel the blood leech out of my face, my hands are trembling, and I can't stop blinking. Why can't I stop blinking? I really should close my mouth. Shit, he saw us.

I can't remember how to breathe. Why aren't my lungs functioning? Has it always taken this much effort to force air into them?

"Calm down, Luna, I'm not going to tell anyone. As long as you remember my generosity and lend me your assistance." *Shark meet Jake, your long-lost twin.*

"You were supposed to be the nice one." It's all I can think to say as I take deep, gulping breaths. My hand is clutching at my chest and I can't stop the tightness from forming and growing.

"I am. Scary, isn't it?" His tone is low and chill inducing. He knows he has me over the ledge and there's no way I can refuse.

"Why do you hate him so much? What did he ever do to you?" I ask, and he glances over his shoulder at me. Not even bothering to turn back around.

"He did something years ago that made me realize what a selfish bastard he really is. He took something that meant more than I can describe, and he didn't think twice about it. His whole personality is built on a lie. You may think he's one of the good guys, but that's only because he wants you to. Don't fall for it, Luna. Be the smart girl I think you are." He doesn't look back as he walks out and I'm left to sit here with unanswered questions. Maybe secrets really are toxic and can only make things worse.

I DON'T KNOW why I'm sitting here. After what happened, I haven't left the Academy solo. It's just after what happened with Jake, I can't help but feel unsettled and I need to get out. This is as close as I can get to freedom. I don't even know how to make this work, D doesn't want to be around me and I haven't done anything to rectify it. I want to, God do I want to, but I'm scared she'll reject me and I'll lose her altogether.

I'm looking at the topiaries when Caitlyn passes by and the urge hits me

full force in the chest.

“Caitlyn,” I call out as I watch her come from around the side of the building, before standing up and chasing to catch up to her.

“Luna, hey.” She starts biting on her thumbnail, as she looks at me and stops moving.

“I just wanted... I wanted to say thank you for what you did. I should have come to you sooner and I’m sorry I didn’t.” Am I a horrible person? Or do I just have my priorities wrong?

“It isn’t necessary, I was scared for you. I didn’t want to leave, and I’m sorry I was too chickenshit to refuse him.” Her eyes glimmer with wetness, and I shake my head at her.

“I’m glad you didn’t. You would have only got in trouble. I wouldn’t want Shane to turn his attention on you. Anyway, I just wanted to say that if you ever want to give that friendship thing another go, I’d like that.”

Her cheeks turn bright red as she nods her head. “I’d like that too, maybe we can meet up for lunch or a coffee sometime.” Maybe I should let her go, but I can’t ignore that little voice inside.

“I have some time now, if you’re up for it?” *Does it sound as lame as I feel right now? If she says no, then probably.*

“Umm sure, yeah I can do that.” She doesn’t sound convincing, but I’m going to take what I can get. She didn’t say no. That has to be a good sign. *I think.*

We walk through the corridors on our way to the mess hall when voices sound, and I can’t believe my eyes as I round the corner.

Eight pressed against the wall, her leg wrapped around Tom’s waist as his hand glides up her leg. I can’t be upset, I’m not allowed to. So why does it feel like my heart is cracking as her lips part and a moan passes through them?

Caitlyn has no idea of the turmoil I’m in right now, or how the pain is so excruciating it feels as though it will never stop hurting. I’m not allowed to care or be jealous, I know this. So, why won’t my stupid, moronic heart listen, or pay attention to those fucked up rules?

Caitlyn falters before she grabs my arm and pulls me into the mess hall. I want him to look up. Come on, Tom, look at me. *Don’t look at me, I don’t want you to see the devastation is more than likely written all over my face.*

I can’t do this right now, I’m here to fix the rift between me and Caitlyn. Maybe if I can do that, then I can fix the one between me and D. Because I

miss her, I really miss her and I just need to figure out what I need to do. Because I will do anything, the sky really is the limit in this situation.

We grab our coffee and take a seat at the first table we come across, the Zero table. It feels so surreal sitting here again. As though nothing has changed and everything that has happened is nothing more than a dream. Well, a dream or nightmare depending on the day. *That's being generous. More like the hour.*

“So...” Cue the nervous laughter as we say it simultaneously.

“I’m sorry, Cait, I shouldn’t have pushed you away. You offered me an olive branch, and I didn’t accept it, even though I should have. You were my first friend here and there was no need to treat you like that, I was just,” a sigh escapes as I run my hand over my hair, “I was hurting, and it was stupid. I didn’t want you to risk yourself just so I could have a friend, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Luna, I get it. Everyone had someone except from you. I was so happy when you became friends with Daria. I was just sad that I couldn’t be there for you. I’m glad we can at least try again.” She stirs her coffee as she smiles at me and I return it.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course you can,” she replies and I feel weird doing this, but I don’t know who else I can ask.

“I haven’t been a great friend lately and I think I’ve messed up big time with D. I want to fix it, but I don’t know how to do it, saying sorry doesn’t feel enough. So, I guess what I was wondering is, what would you want to hear?”

“I can’t tell you that, I’m not D. I think you just need to tell her how you feel, try to show her you want to make everything right. I don’t know what you did, but I know that you’re a good person, she knows that too. Either way, I hope things will work out for you.”

“Me too, not just with D though,” I add and we share another smile before finally taking a heavenly mouthful of coffee. I try to join in with the small talk, but Tom and Eight won’t leave my mind.

WHAT IS GOING on with me? I should be at D’s door trying to make things right, but I’m sitting here, just wasting time.

My door opens and my heart is lodged firmly in my throat as I take in Tom, with his messy hair, and huge grin.

“There’s my Moonbeam.” He closes the door behind him and walks toward me, he smiles as I stand up but it falters as I move away from him, instead of moving closer.

“Hey, you can’t be in here. You need to leave.” I can’t stop my eyes from drifting to the door. *What if Tucker turns up?*

“I have permission, stop worrying,” he says with a smirk, but his eyes are drawn and I don’t think he likes the way I’m acting.

“You don’t. Tucker has rescinded all of his permissions. He’s not willing to share me anymore, I’m sorry, Tom, but I can’t have you in here.”

“So what if he has? I’m great at keeping secrets.” He bridges the distance, and it’s only my hand against his chest that is stopping him from getting any closer.

“Tom, no.” *Lower your voice, Luna, someone may overhear.* I take a deep breath before trying again. “I can’t do it, you’re not the one who will get into trouble if we’re discovered. I can’t risk everything I am working toward, not while he owns me. I like you, but my family comes first.” I’m trying to stop my voice from breaking, but it’s hard. It doesn’t matter that I saw him with Eight, I still love him.

He takes a step back, and I swear I can see a flash of anger before he returns to his bored stare. The kind I rarely see when he’s with me.

“You like me, huh?” He raises a brow and I have no idea what his next words are going to be. “I see, and there I was thinking you loved me.” He sounds so... condescending, but that isn’t what makes my heart falter and stop.

“You heard me, but... y-y-you never said anything.” I don’t think my eyes can get any wider than they are right now.

“Well, I figured you didn’t want me to know. Besides, what was I supposed to say? Sorry, Luna. Were you expecting a declaration of love or something?” he says it with a mocking laugh and it’s gutting me. “Well, I guess I best be off. Wouldn’t want poor little Luna getting in trouble. See you around, Five.”

“Why are you being like this? You know the rules better than me. You know I have to do as I’m told, and it isn’t as though I’m the only girl you were sleeping with.”

“You don’t know shit, and I don’t remember you caring about the rules

when you were running around with me. I doubt what happened in that shack was permitted.” His nostrils are flaring and his hands keep clenching and unclenching at his sides. *He can't be.. shit, is he angry?*

“I lost my way Tom, I forgot who I was. I got so caught up in all the attention I was getting and the time I spent with you. I forgot that this could all go away with the click of a Harkwright’s fingers. So yeah, I may not have cared then, but I can’t let that happen again.” My chest is heaving and my breathing has become more rapid, but I guess that is to be expected. “Also, there may be a lot of things I don’t know, but I saw you. With Eight. I shouldn’t care, I know that. Just like I know I’m not allowed to be jealous, but my head and heart don’t want to get with the program.” *The next time you think you have something else to say, just keep your mouth shut.*

I watch as he walks over to the door and grips the handle, I can see the way his back has tightened and his clenched jaw.

“I don’t know what you think you saw, but you were wrong. I haven’t been with anyone else for weeks, God knows I’ve tried. I’m addicted to you, Luna, and I’m not ready to get you out of my system.” He walks out and I’m glad.

I have no idea how someone is supposed to respond to something like that.



FIVE MINUTES. That’s all that has passed since he walked out. Am I supposed to go after him? *No, do not go after him.* I went after Aeron though, doesn’t that mean I should go after him? *Let him go, follow the rules and stop chasing after the Harkwrights. Do the right thing and go after the one person who matters in this place.*

I don’t often listen to my alter ego, but she’s right. I need to make things right and my first step; apologize and grovel like hell to D.

I can do this. The worst she could do is close the door in my face. *Or slap you, I'd probably choose the latter.* Yeah, that really isn’t helping. I just need to pull on my big girl panties and go over to her room.

I walk over there and my hand hovers over the door, one inch away from knocking and announcing my presence. Why am I hesitating? I don’t think she will hit me and honestly, that isn’t why I’m holding back. What if she

doesn't want to be friends anymore? What do I do then? Shit, what do I do about Jake?

No, you cannot make this about him. Don't do this for selfish reasons, Luna, be the girl your mom raised you to be. Kind, considerate, and a damn good friend.

The knock sounds so loud to my ears. I know it isn't, but it feels like it could be heard from miles away. Please open D, please. One minute, two, three. No answer, I guess she must be out. I have no idea what to do now; I did not plan for this. Should I go back to my room? Wait? On second thoughts, standing here, just waiting for her to come back, may be a little weird.

I walk back into my room and flop down on my sofa, feeling more than a little disheartened by my whole plan falling apart. Although... maybe this has worked out for the best. There is something else I could try.

I pull out my pad of paper and my trusty pen, and try to work out what it is I need to say. She could ignore the attempt. She may not even bother to glance at it before throwing it away, but at least I can say I've tried.

D,

I don't know if doing it in this way is cowardly; I did come over, but you weren't there and I can't put this off any longer. You were right; I haven't been a good friend, and I think I lost myself for a little while. I got swept up in all the attention and I think I started to view myself as being someone who was untouchable. I became the person I don't even like. I should have been there for you more and tried to convince you to talk to me. I don't think it was all born out of selfishness, I don't want to make excuses, but I have no idea how to do this whole 'best friend' thing. I thought it was wrong to push you, I'm sorry. I don't want to lose you, you've been nothing but a great friend to me and I've lost count of how many times you have been there for me and supported me.

Honestly, you're probably way too good to be friends with a girl like me, but I don't want to let you go. Selfish, too freaking right, but I'm no idiot. Not usually anyway. I have some things I need to tell you, but more than that, I just want to listen. To anything you are willing to share, I hope we can go back to how we were. Or maybe something even better. I love you, girl; I hope I haven't left it too late. I won't bother you again, and I get it if you

have washed your hands of me. I'll hate it, but I will respect your decision.

Lu

I POST it under her door and disappear back through mine. I guess now it's just a waiting game. Hopefully, Tucker will be back soon and I can ask him for a favor. That doesn't seem any easier than trying to fix things with D. Will things ever be easy?

TUCKER IS HERE, and I can't bring myself to ask him. He's tucking into the pizza I made, and I'm just sitting here. Not saying or doing anything. This feels so fucking awkward, I just hope he isn't picking up on it, and it's all inside my head.

"Okay, what are you thinking about? I can hear your mind whirring from here." *Definitely not in your head.*

"There's s-s-something I wanted to ask you." I'm chewing on my bottom lip, and he looks down at the action before returning his attention to the pizza.

"Then ask."

Okaaay.

"I was wondering if I could call my mom, please? I need to ask her something and I don't know how else I can do it." Okay, I need to stop talking now. *Don't start rambling.*

"Okay, but don't ask again." His tone is cold as he pulls his phone out and passes it over. He doesn't even open it up to her number. He's trusting me to do it myself.

I can't even begin to explain how much this means to me, I won't allow it to go to my head though. That never seems to end well.

She answers on the third ring and a huge sigh of relief escapes free, as her voice fills the phone line.

"Luna bean, I can't believe you're calling me. How are you, baby?"

"I'm good, mom. How are you, and how is work going?" I can't rush into it. She deserves better than that.

"I'm okay, baby. Tired but the extra money is helping me. Work is, well,

it's work. I'm only at the diner now though, I left the bar. I know how much you hated me working there, so I left while I could." She seems happy, I guess I just have to trust that she is.

"I'm glad, mama. I just want you to be happy. Um, there's something I wanted to ask you, but I feel weird doing it." My teeth worry my bottom lip and Tucker frees it with his thumb, before pinching it and my breath falters.

"Luna bean, you can ask me anything."

"I want to find my father and I was hoping you may know something, anything that could help me." The line is quiet, and I wish I could have done this in person.

"I don't know a lot, there was no name on your birth certificate and no one who spoke to the police gave any name up. All I remember is hearing you talk to your teddy about how much you missed him and your uncle. Damn, what was his name?" It's rare for my mom to curse, even a minor one like that. Although, she could give me a name. That could help **a lot**.

"It began with an M, I'm sure of it. Uncle Marty, Marsy, Marshy. I'm sorry, hon, I wish I could remember it better. I feel as though I'm letting you down."

"Hush now, you could never let me down. You've given me and done so much for me, you're my hero, mom, and you have given me something. Thank you,. I drag my hand through my hair and try to keep myself together.

"I do those things because I love you, I don't need any thanks. I'm here for you, Luna, no matter what. You will always have my support." Yet more reasons why she is my hero.

WHEN A CLAIMING ENDS

IT'S BEEN five days since I slid the letter under her door, and I have heard nothing from her. Sure we eat together, but it's all superficial. I don't know if she's read it or not, but if she has, then it hasn't helped. We have an assembly in four days, no one seems nervous about it, so I guess it's nothing to worry about.

Maddox is sitting with us now as well, which is great, I just wish the guys weren't so awkward and full of testosterone. It's like a constant pissing contest with the lot of them, and it's driving me out of my mind.

Well, between Tucker and Emmet. Aeron and Tom haven't sat with us or spoken to me for, well, since Tucker laid down the law.

"How are your classes going?" Emmet asks, it's such a normal question that it feels weird coming from him.

"It's okay, I just wish I had a better handle on economics and business. Although, Maddox is a great help." I shoot him an appreciative smile and Emmet glares in normal Emmet fashion.

"Speaking of class, we should probably get going. Are you coming, Daria?" Maddox asks, but she just shakes her head. She isn't even looking at me, I guess my letter really hasn't been received well.

"I'll see you later," I say with a smile.

"Yeah, see you later."

I grab my bag and I set off with Maddox. Please, don't let me suck. *Please.*

I'm relieved Sir never set up that meeting, I would hate for him to know how bad I really am. He built an empire. And all I want to do is bake. Why

can't I just do what I love without all the extra baggage that goes with it? Maybe I'm not supposed to own my place, I could always get a job in a bakery. I would still do what I love. Does it really matter if I don't own it?

"Today, I want you to work on creating a product that would work alongside your business plan from last year. This will include a financial plan and a marketing strategy. You have one month, I look forward to seeing what you come up with."

"This should be fun," Maddox says and all I can think right now is, shit.

"What are we going to make that will fit in with a bakery? It's impossible. Everything has already been made."

"Hey, it's okay. We'll figure something out," he says, I just wish I could borrow a bit of his positivity.



IT'S BEEN three days and we still haven't come up with anything. It doesn't help that I'm distracted. I feel like I'm letting Maddox down.

- *Tool caddy*
- *Extendable rolling pin (this one seems lame now that I'm reading it back, but I'm running out of ideas here, Maddox)*
- *Apron with tool storage*
- *An app to document recipes and the best place to buy ingredients. From freshness, to best price.*

I really want to have more ideas for him before he gets here, but I doubt I'll have any bright ideas in the next five minutes. I throw my pad down on the coffee table and walk over to the coffee machine. Maybe caffeine will help.

He knocks before entering. He may be the only Harkwright who does that here. It still makes me smile and I'm glad Tucker didn't rescind his permission. *I think that would have hit me the hardest.*

"If you're Maddox, come in. If not, then you can turn around and go the other way," I call out sweetly, he's smiling as the door opens, and he walks in.

"You shouldn't answer the door like that."

“I know, I’m just a little wound up, I guess.” I pick up the paper and pass it to him. “I really tried to think up better things, but nothing came to me. I’m sorry, Maddox.” My cheeks are flaming as I grab him a cup of coffee, and take a seat next to him on the sofa.

“Stop worrying, these are good. I don’t know about an extendable rolling pin and I think the caddy one is already out there. But the app idea could work, I really like it, in fact. All we need is someone good with computers and code writing, and I think we could have something.” He’s giving me his warmest smile and I can’t hold in my squeal as I throw my arms around him. I’ve contributed. *You go, girl.*

Maddox leaves not long after so he can speak to a few tech minded people he knows, I’m guessing it’s a Harkwright, but I could be wrong. I hope I am. I think I’ve met all the nicer ones this place has to offer, and I know there are still a few I’ve yet to encounter up close and personal. I think I’m going to keep my fingers crossed it stays that way. I do not need any more complications in my life. The assembly is tomorrow and then I just have to get through the next few months. Then I’ll be leaving with Tucker to go to his niece’s birthday party. That is going to be surreal, no doubt about it. *I hope she likes me.*

I tidy up and then head out of my room. I haven’t really got a destination in mind, but where else am I going to go? It has to be the kitchens. I have the urge to make a cheesecake. Hopefully, they’ll have the ingredients I need. I head out of our wing and down the staircase and come up short.

Craig has Nine pinned up against the wall, with his forearm pressing against her throat. Simon is standing beside him with a wicked grin on his face and I can’t move. I’m just standing here, on the last step from the bottom, fighting my instincts.

I need to help her, don’t I?

“P-p-please, C-craig, I’m s-s-sorry. I won’t do it again.” She pleads for something and he just laughs and presses his arm further into her throat.

“Fucking pitiful. You know the rules, you dirty fucking whore. If we tell you to do something, then you fucking do it. If I told you to jump off the roof, I’d expect you to march your pathetic little ass up there and do it.” His spittle coats her face, and she shakes beneath him.

“I-I k-know, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly, because we wouldn’t be having this conversation if you were. Although, who told you to think? I don’t remember giving her that order, do

you, Si?”

“No, I can’t say that I do,” he replies almost gleefully, as his eyes cut to me and his smile only grows more twisted.

“What I remember was ordering you to strip and to get ready for me and Si here to fuck you at the same time.”

“You wouldn’t let me go somewhere more private,” she cries and his hand connects with her cheek, causing her face to hit into the wall.

“If I want to give the whole fucking place a show, then I will. Oh well, you nearly made it two years.” He moves his arm away before grabbing her hair and pulling her away from the wall before he sends her hurtling to the floor.

I can’t just stand here and watch this happen, I rush over to them but Simon’s stare stops me in my tracks.

“Remember the lesson I taught you, Five. Do not interfere. I don’t care if you’re claimed, I’ll happily teach you another lesson on the correct way to behave.” Visions of what went on in his bedroom swarm in front of my eyes and I feel as though I’m going to throw up any second now.

“Fuck off, Five,” he says low and I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself as I look to her one last time and then just... walk away.

I make it around the corner before I run. I don’t even know if I’m heading toward the kitchens or not, all I can think about is that poor girl. I guess it serves me right for not paying attention as I slam into a hard, firm back. My obstacle turns around and I stare up into Emmet’s eyes, and he lifts one brow as he stares right back.

“Star, what’s going on?”

“Please, Emmet, help her.” I grip hold of his hand in my own and he glances down at them before looking back at me.

“Help who? What’s going on?” I shouldn’t be doing this, but I have to do something.

“Craig, h-he’s going to hurt her. Please Emmet, I couldn’t... I just...”

“Get out of here, Luna. Academy business doesn’t concern you.” My heart stops, I don’t know why I expected anymore from him. I guess this is what I get for trying to see the best in people, I imagine it’s truly there.

I wipe at my eyes before hanging my head and I continue to the kitchens, but for once, the urge to bake has abandoned me. I don’t know what I’ll do now, other than sit in this corner and will the hours to fly right on by.

THE ASSEMBLY IS HERE and I'm sitting up front and center with D sitting beside me. I think it's out of our ranking than actual desire, but it doesn't matter. Nine isn't here, and I can't get her face out of my mind. The fear I saw written all over it and bleeding out into her voice. I just let it happen. *There wasn't anything you could have done.* That may be true, but it doesn't help, I guess the truth can't always set you free. Because that is my truth, and yet, all it's doing is weighing me down.

A hush descends throughout the hall as Crystal walks out onto the stage and takes her place behind the microphone. Ms. Vanderbilt never needed to use one, but then again, she was a force very few reckoned with.

"Good morning. Today's assembly is to prepare you for a few changes that will take place when the school year comes to an end. Luckily for you, Sir Harkwright has deemed you worthy to hear about said changes from himself. Be quiet." Yeah, she really isn't menacing enough to pull that warning off. Not that one is needed where Sir is concerned.

She saunters off the stage and Sir takes her place, moving the microphone out of his way, while sending a glower at her departing figure. I don't think she's in his good books right now.

"In a few months, your second year will come to a close. Well done to those who have made it this far. Now, you have been called here because the Three spot is still open and we must fill it. Consider it a free-for-all, anyone could take it. That being said, very few of you are up for the challenge, by what the boys tell me." I wonder who will take it, and it still feels strange hearing someone address the men as boys. "There will also be a position in the marketing sector opening up within my organization and I will offer the position to one of you. Again, it may not go to any of you if you cannot prove yourselves worthy of such a position, but it will be there when you graduate. Another assembly will take place on the last day of term, and I recommend you come well rested and ready for anything."

That's a strange thing to say, at least, I think it is. Why would he say that to us? Is he trying to scare us even more than he already does? Probably, he comes across as a narcissist.

"Now, before I go through the claims that are being cancelled today, I have been informed that one boy wants to address me. Come along, Craig. the stage is yours." His eyes are narrow as Sir looks at him. He definitely

doesn't seem as confident as he makes his way over to Sir and bows his head in what I assume is reverence.

"Thank you, Sir, I want to put in a formal complaint against..." his voice drops too low for me to hear, who is he complaining about? It can't be Nine. He already took care of her.

"Speak up, boy, or sit your worthless backside down." A chill runs through me at his icy tone, and I'm glad I'm not on the receiving end.

"Emmet, I want to issue a complaint against the Prince of the Academy."

A loud gasp travels through the room as we do it in perfect synch. What the fuck is he playing at?

"Sir is going to annihilate him," D says under her breath and I have to stop myself from replying. I can't believe she did it, Sir would castigate her, if he was aware of her transgression.

"Oh really? Well come on, boy, spit it out. Tell me why you would dare to do something like that against my heir, and your future boss."

"He interfered in matters that didn't concern him, I was handling an issue and Emmet forced me to stop. I was disrespected and told no by one of the girls. He had no right to step in." His chest is heaving as his jaw grinds from side to side, even his face is turning a shade of scarlet.

He seems to have forgotten who he's addressing. I don't think it will take long for him to remember. Not by the smile that is spreading across Sir's face, or the way he is loosening his tie, and undoing the top two buttons.

"Emmet, my boy, why did you interfere?" He doesn't look away from Craig, and I feel safe in my assumption that he is the only one not staring at Emmet right now.

"We are running out of girls, Sir. We have already lost too many and I did not feel it was necessary to lose a perfectly suitable one because of his impulsiveness. She has been punished thoroughly, and I know she will not make the same mistake twice. We already have some psychopath running around and incapacitating girls, let's not add to it ourselves." He didn't even stand up to answer his father. How can he be so unruffled by all of this? Unless he knows something that I don't, which is more than likely given the circumstances.

I can't believe he helped her. I honestly thought he was going to walk away and leave Craig to destroy her. I feel conflicted and unsure of what I should say when I next see him. Should I bring it up or pretend it never happened?

“There you have it. Maybe next time, you will take your grievance to him before bringing such petty matters to me,” he tuts as he moves closer, and Craig flinches as he takes a step back. “Never do it again.” His fist connects with Craig’s eye socket and his head flies back, right as he delivers another punch to his stomach. The last one connects with his jaw and blood slides down from the corner of his mouth as Sir wipes his hand on Craig’s shirt. He steps back to his previous position. Like nothing happened at all.

“Now then, I am rushed for time because of that petty matter, so things will have to be done on a more... informal basis. I am rather displeased by this turn of events and Craig will have to answer for that as well. Be that as it may,” he glances at his watch one last time before looking toward the guys, “Bradley has henceforth released his claim on Miss Daria Lewiston. She will not be claimed for a minimum of twenty-four hours. I will have Miss Martins play the standard message for a claiming, but Miss Caitlyn Banners and Miss Lisa Weathers, make your way to the stage for your claiming. From here on out, Caitlyn will be claimed by Sam and Lisa will be claimed by Jake. That is all I have time for, Miss Martins, play the tape.” He walks over to Craig before driving his foot into his ribs and then wiping his shoe across his side.

I look at D, who has tears swimming in her eyes, but they have yet to fall. Instead, her eyes keep moving back and forth from Jake and Bradley. I can’t believe he released her, I thought he loved her.

A pair of shiny black dress shoes appear in front of me and I look up. A heavy gulp lodges in my throat as I meet Sir’s eyes, and my hands are shaking more than they ever have before.

“Five, walk with me to my car.” He turns around and walks away and I rush to keep up with him. I don’t want to, but I don’t have a choice. All I can do is follow and ensure I stay behind him the entire time.

“I have been thinking about the discussion we had over dinner when you accompanied Aeron. If you are still interested, I can have a meeting set up for you and a member of my business and financial team on the twentieth. You will have to go to New York for a week, but I’m sure you will be able to catch up on any work that you may miss. What do you say, Five, are you still interested?” He stops walking and looks at me with eyes that leave me feeling entirely vulnerable.

I can’t stutter, I can’t stutter. Please don’t let me stutter.

“Yes, Sir. Thank you. This is incredible and more than I could have hoped for.” Yes, I stayed strong. I’m feeling pretty proud of myself right

now.

“Excellent. Very well, it is all in place. You can accompany Tucker to the meeting, just ensure you have a business plan in place and include your plans for marketing and your financial predictions. It should be a very enlightening experience for you. I will see you soon, Miss Carter.” He holds his hand out to me and I don’t know what to do. Am I supposed to shake it? *Well, I wouldn’t advise licking it.*

I place my hand in his and our eyes stay locked for the entire time before he finally releases me and walks over to the door. I hate that I’m rushing to open it for him, but it feels like it is the correct move to make in this situation. He does not look back as he climbs into his car and leaves the Academy. I’m not sure I really understand what just happened, I think I may be in shock. I shake my head to try to clear it before poking my head into the hall, but Daria is nowhere to be seen. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out where she has gone, and this time, I will not stop knocking until she either opens the door, or I knock it down.

As if you could, but I agree. She should not be alone, let’s show D that we’re here for her.

I’m not going to hesitate this time, I have no idea what state she’s going to be in, but it doesn’t matter. She can shout at me, hit me, or slam the door in my face. Whatever she needs, I have to prove to her I’m still the girl she met.

The door opens after a couple of minutes. Her eyes are clouded over, she’s swaying on her feet, and her bottom lip is trembling as she stares right through me. She isn’t saying a word as she disappears back into her room, leaving the door wide open. I follow her inside and gently close the door behind me. She drops onto her recliner and sags into the seat.

“D, hon. Can I do anything?”

“No, there’s nothing...” She trails off and I don’t think she’s going to bother finishing her sentence. Or maybe that is the end, it’s hard to tell right now.

“I know I haven’t been there for you lately and I’m going to do whatever I can to make things right. I won’t put myself first again, not when it comes to you.” I mean it, but her bitter laugh is hard to take. I hate seeing her like this.

“You can’t do that, Lu. I just wanted to feel as though I had someone to talk to, someone who would listen. Maybe I overreacted, I don’t know. It’s too late now, I’m leaving.” Her chest sags as her head drops low and her hair

falls to conceal her face.

“What? D, no. You can’t leave because of him, he isn’t worth it. You’re better than these idiots here, none of them deserve you. Not Bradley, not Jake, no one.” Her head shoots up, fast enough that I’m surprised she doesn’t have whiplash.

“Jake? That’s a strange name to just throw in. Do you think I’m interested in Jake?” Her voice sounds so hollow, and it’s scaring the living fuck out of me.

“No, of course not. I know you only had eyes for Bradley.” *Stop mentioning that dickhead’s name, she doesn’t need reminding.*

“I was an idiot.” Her voice cracks as she wipes furiously at her face.

“You’re not an idiot, no one would have seen this coming.” *Except from Jake, didn’t he keep saying Bradley wasn’t a good guy and was only going to hurt her? What about Emmet? Hadn’t he tried to tell me something before I acted like a lunatic and made him walk away in anger?*

“No, you’re wrong. Everyone but me and you saw this coming, I just didn’t want to believe it, face it. I wanted to believe I had found the one good Harkwright in this place. I fell for the wrong Harkwright, and now it’s too late. I’ve ruined everything. I’m suck a fucking mess, Lu.” She’s tugging at her hair and her face is filled with pain, and she’s one decibel away from shouting.

“I’m here, D. Anything you want or need. I’m not going anywhere, not until you kick me out.” Her spine stiffens before she relaxes back into the chair and rests her head back against the chair.

“Just stay a little while, I don’t want to be alone.” It comes out low and my heart is breaking for her. So, I fold my legs up under me as I take a seat on her loveseat. I’ll just wait until she’s ready to either talk or kick me out. *Let’s hope she chooses the former.*

“LUNA.” It’s been a couple of hours since anything was said and she dozed off for a while, I look over at her and her red-rimmed eyes. *Poor D, she doesn’t deserve any of this.*

“I don’t know if I’m ready to put everything in the past, not yet at least. But I want to, so I’m not going to open up about what happened. Although,

when I'm ready, it will be to you."

"I love you, girl, and I'll give you all the time you need. Whatever you need, I promise." I smile at her and it isn't surprising that she isn't returning it. She looks so broken right now, I wish I could help to put all of her pieces back together again, but that's something she has to do. I just know that she'll come out stronger and all the better for what that a moron has put her through.

"What did Sir want you for?" Curiosity is burning bright in her eyes and I wish I could distract her with something else, but I guess I have to play ball for now.

"He's setting up a meeting for me with someone from his business and financial team, I don't really know what to make of it, but I could use all the help I can get right about now."

"Damn, be careful with that. I doubt Sir would do anything unless it benefited him in some way." I don't know if she's worried about me, I can't read anything in her voice but her words only confirm what I'm already thinking.

"I'm worried, D. I don't know what his angle is, and I'm not sure I even want to know. But that doesn't even matter, I just want to make sure you're okay," I say it softly and I can't bring myself to make direct eye contact. I guess I'm still worried that she's going to change her mind and kick me out any minute now.

"I'm not, but I will be. You were right, I can't just leave, not because of some guy. He isn't worth it. I just have to get my foolish heart to listen to my head, and then I'll be fine." She goes quiet, but under her breath I can hear her whisper, "I'll be fine."

NEW YORK

THINGS AREN'T BACK to normal between me and D, but Rome wasn't built in a day, and our friendship can't be fixed in one either. I mean, technically it's been eight days and I'll be leaving for New York the day after next. I'm scared and nervous as hell, but at least I'll have Tucker with me and Maddox has helped me to get a plan made up, with projections and other things I'm not sure I fully understand. I still don't know why he seemed so surprised that I would ask him. I mean, who else would I go to? He is in my business class, and he's picking it up a lot better than I am, plus he's my study buddy and friend. No one else even came to mind.

I'm sitting in my room, waiting until it's late enough to go to bed. If Tucker isn't here by ten, then more than likely he won't be coming over tonight. It isn't as though we spend every night together, and I enjoy the odd night I get to myself. I don't know if he does it for himself or me, but I'm still grateful for it. Not that I'm going to say that to him, God knows how he'll take it.

My door opens and I realize that tonight will not be one of those nights as I try to make sure I don't look disappointed before getting off my bed and walking toward the door to meet him at the threshold.

"Hey, I wasn't sure if I'd be seeing you tonight." That feels like a stupid thing to say now that it's out there.

"I think it will be best if we have a little chat before I get started with all the things I want to do with that tight little body of yours." His words have my toes curling, but I'm worried about what this little chat will be about.

"Sure thing, do you want to sit on the bed or the sofa?"

“The bed will be fine,” he replies coolly as he makes a quick work of the buttons on his shirt, and my mouth is pooling as it hits the floor. He’s just standing here, bare chested.

He smirks before slipping his shoes off and sitting down on the mattress, with his back leaning against the headboard. I sit down beside him, until we’re shoulder to shoulder, and try to not make assumptions about what this could be over.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, hesitating but wanting to get this over with at the same time.

“Not really, no.” My spine bristles, but I try to calm down. “I won’t be able to accompany you to New York, unfortunately there is some business I must attend to down in Philly. Time is of the essence and I can’t put it off, not that I need to of course,” he quickly adds that last part, as if I need the reminder I’m nobody to him.

“Does that mean my trip is cancelled now? I mean, I know I can’t go on my own, so I’m assuming it is.” Why don’t I feel as disappointed as I had expected by this revelation? *Did I not want to go?*

“No, you’re still going. It was set up by Sir, so there’s no way you can miss it. It just means that someone else will escort you.” He rubs at the back of his neck as a dark look passes over his face. “You will be going with Emmet. Get ready for a fun-filled week, Luna. You’ll be at the Prince’s mercy.”

Well... Damn.

I DIDN’T WANT my bags to be carried down for me, so I’m sitting on the front steps, waiting for Emmet and the car that will take us to New York. We’re set to leave in a few minutes, and I’m surprised I haven’t seen him yet. For that matter, I haven’t seen Darius either. I thought he would have been joining us, so why isn’t he here?

A black Dodge Charger with fully tinted windows has pulled up, and I can’t believe this car is for us. I mean, it has to be for someone else, right?

The window winds down and Emmet is staring at me with his brow arched. Shit, am I supposed to get in that thing? Why is he driving it? I am so confused right now.

“Come on, Star. We haven’t got all day,” he says with a grin, and I pick my mouth up off the ground and walk over to the car. The trunk pops open, and I place my bag inside before walking over to the passenger door and climbing inside.

“I thought we’d be going in the standard car,” I say, once I have my seat belt on and he’s pulling away from the Academy doors.

“I rarely have time to drive these days, besides my guards will follow behind us. We won’t be needing your personal guard for this trip, so at least that’s one less person from the ‘I hate Emmet’ club.”

I’m working hard on keeping my features impartial, I don’t want him to see how disappointed I am to learn that Darius won’t be with us.

“Okay, whatever you think is best,” I say respectfully, and I can see him glance at me from the corner of his eye, before returning them back to the road.

“So, a meeting with my father’s team, how did you swing that one?” I can’t tell if it’s a loaded question, or if he’s just curious. Either way, it would probably be in my best interests to answer him.

“He offered it to me, when I had dinner with Sir, Aeron, Maria, and Aeron’s mom.”

“I see, well I’m just going to say that I don’t like this one bit. But it isn’t as though I can do anything about it, so…”

“Why don’t you like it?” *Don’t ask questions, it’s such a rookie mistake.*

“Because I don’t want you having any interactions with my old man. It doesn’t sit well with me. So, you met Maria, what did you think of her?” His lip curls as he says her name, and his eyes seem so lifeless.

“She was nice, friendly, and seemed genuinely interested in me. I get the impression that you don’t like her much.”

“Well, I guess she’s better than wife number two. Now she was a right bitch, a gold digger to boot, and hated the idea of being a stepmother. Maria is nice, I guess, but she’s a moronic woman who needs to wake up and smell the roses. Stupid women drive me insane, yet I’m constantly surrounded by them.” I bristle at his words, but I’m trying my hardest to keep my opinions to myself. I don’t like him speaking of Maria like this, though.

“She didn’t come across idiotic to me, but I only had dinner with her.” *Well done with defending her.* I didn’t think I was supposed to!

“She’s still with my father, that makes her an idiot. After everything he puts her through and all the messed up shit he does, she still looks at him as

though he hung the moon, and dotted the sky with the stars himself. It's ridiculous. I don't understand why everyone is so taken in by him, it's not like he's the only rich man around." He's so passionate about his hatred for Sir. I can't believe he's even saying all of this to me. Is it even allowed?

Of course, it isn't allowed, and please, Luna, just stay quiet. If you only listen to one thing I have to say, make it this.

"What? You have nothing to say on the matter? Come now, Luna, you must have an opinion, surely."

"I don't really know what I'm supposed to say, I can't see it ending well for me whether I agree or disagree." I feel oddly comfortable with him. I wonder why that is?

"Pretend you're not an Academy girl and he isn't Sir Harkwright. What would you say to a comment like that?" He glances at me for a moment, and I'm glad we're driving so he has to look away.

"Fine, but if this ends up biting me in the bottom, I'm not going to be happy."

"I could always bite you in the ass, would that make it better?" he asks with a smirk and my cheeks are flaming instantly.

"I'm just going to pretend you never said that." I clear my throat and try to work out what my opinion is on what he said. It's easy, really. "I don't think it's fair to speak about Maria like that behind her back. How you feel about your father shouldn't make a difference. People make choices all the time. Just because it may not seem the correct one to you, doesn't give you the right to judge her, and well, you're just being mean."

I cross my arms over my chest as I wait for him to say something, anything. Laughter is not what I am expecting, so I guess he lives to surprise me, and I have no idea what to make of it.

"Mean? You couldn't come up with a better insult than mean? Clearly you need to spend more time with us, then you'll learn a thing or two."

"I don't want to learn how to upset and offend people. I want to be nice, polite, why does that have to be such a bad thing?" I'm not annoyed by what he's saying, more curious.

"It isn't a bad thing as such, but there's being polite and then there's you. What happened to the bad girl who didn't give two fucks?"

"I went too far, almost forgot the risks of being at the Academy. I need to last until graduation, and if that means being quieter and following the rules better, then that is what I will do. I need this, Emmet, I can't afford to fail."

Hence why I will take all the help I can get, even when it's offered by Sir." It feels almost freeing to speak this way with him. I can almost forget that he's the big bad prince, who seems to love messing with my head.

"Everything comes with a cost where he is concerned, just watch yourself with him. You are the last person who should be left alone with my father. Trust me on this. I have the inside scoop where his ideas are concerned." His hand is white knuckling the steering wheel and his cheek is ticking like crazy.

"Why do you say that?"

"Take a wild guess. You've seen Maria, and I could easily show you a photo of my mother if you need more help with drawing your own conclusion. Come on, Luna, you can't be that oblivious." He pulls over to the side and shifts in his seat so he can look at me.

"Is this to do with the fact that Maria looks a little like me? Same hair color and eye color? Because I noticed that, and I know she dyes her hair, but why should that matter?"

"Get real, Star, everything about her is fake. My father spends tens of thousands of dollars to get her to look like that. Contact lenses to change her eye color, tattooed eyebrows so they're the right color, and continuous appointments to a hairdresser so her color is always perfect. Plastic surgeons to get her face just right, from the size of her nose to the fullness of her mouth. He has done this with all of his wives, and only Maria has got away with less, because her face was the right shape when they met. He isn't only a narcissist, he is also living in a fantasy land."

"He wants them to look like my mother." It comes out on a whisper, and I feel sick.

"Exactly, and as far as I've heard, you're the spitting image of her. If that's the case, why have something fake, when you can have the real thing?" I move as far away as I can get, as I try to digest everything.

"That doesn't mean he'll want me though. I'm just a kid."

"Hey, maybe I'm wrong. I fucking hope I am, but if not, you have to be careful. I mean it, Luna, avoid him any chance you get."

JAW MEET FLOOR.

"Close your mouth, my Star, It can't be that surprising," he says, as he

places his fingers underneath my chin and closes it for me.

“I thought we’d be staying in a hotel,” I reply and I admit, I feel a little dumbfounded right now. *Get rid of founded and you’re correct.*

“Why would we stay in a hotel if I have a place in New York? It makes very little sense to me.”

“Well, I didn’t know you had a place here,” I retort, as I unclip my seatbelt and climb out of the car.

“Star, I have a place in most states, the fun ones anyway. You’ll never stay in a hotel when you’re with me.” He winks at me, and a bolt of electricity zaps its way down my spine.

“Will your guards be staying here too?” Did my voice shake then? I think it may have.

“There’s an annex round the back for them. Trust me, there isn’t a place safer than here. Other than my father’s place, of course, that’s more secure than Fort Knox. Because he is just ‘so important’. Come along, Star, let’s get inside.” He doesn’t retrieve his bags or open the trunk for me to grab mine either.

I look back at the electric gates that we just drove through and I can’t believe he lives here. It’s a God damn house. Why would he need a house? I guess I expected more of a bachelor pad, a penthouse apartment, or something other than this.

A three story mini mansion, with a wrap-around porch and dark oak paneling. I don’t know a lot about architecture, but it screams expensive, but it also feels like a home. I don’t know if it will still feel this way when I get inside, but I guess anything is possible at this point.

I follow him up the porch steps and through the front door, there’s an entryway with shoes lined neatly on a rack, and various styles of coats and jackets hanging on hooks above it. I slip off my shoes and hang my jacket on the only available peg, before following him through the door and into a spacious living room. I mean, it’s huge, all open planned, and large windows. The kitchen is separated from it by an island in the middle, and it’s all black and chrome. The living room is painted in a light grey, with a black sofa, two recliners, and a glass coffee table in the center. There’s a large flat-screen on one of the few walls in this room and a painting of a stormy sea with the sun setting in the horizon. Dark and foreboding, and it suits him, it really does.

It’s nice, but it feels cold, lifeless, un-lived in. It doesn’t feel like a home and I can’t help but wonder if that was planned.

“So, what do you think?” He walks into the kitchen and flicks the coffee maker on and I’m just standing here, staring at a room that gives absolutely no insight into the type of person he is.

“It’s... nice. It just feels, I don’t know. I’m just going to go with nice,” I say as I shift on my feet and play with my necklace to keep my hands busy.

“A-huh, I mean it should be nice for the price I paid in getting it decorated and set up. It’s not home though, I prefer my place in Maine, but I don’t get out there a lot these days.” He sounds almost wistful, but I’m probably reading it wrong. I mean, a far-away look on his face and the sigh he let out toward the end could mean anything.

“I’ve never been. Honestly, before I came to the Academy, I never left the South Bronx. Minus the odd trip to the hospital, library, or store. I’ve never been anywhere else, I wasn’t found in New York, I don’t think, but it’s the only place I can remember.”

“You should go if you get the chance. The scenery is stunning and they have some of the best restaurants around. Especially if you enjoy seafood. I doubt Tucker would take you though. If he isn’t at the Academy, or here for some boring ass business meeting, then he’ll be in Connecticut. He’s not much of a traveler, but I’m sure you’ll have lots of fun,” he says in a dry tone as he pours us both a cup of coffee and leaves mine on the island.

I really should move closer and stop loitering in the center of this room. I just don’t know how to act here. It’s his place and I’ve never felt more aware of being alone with someone than I do right now.

“So, what’s on the agenda this week?”

“Tomorrow we will go shopping and find you an outfit suitable for your meeting. I presume you have your plan already organized?” What’s with the bite in his tone. Did I do something wrong?

“Yeah, it’s based on the one that Maddox and I did last year. He’s helped me to tweak it a little, he’s better with that sort of stuff than me.” I laugh nervously as I pick up my coffee and take a mouthful, just to give me something to do.

“Why didn’t you just ask me?” He’s frowning now, pursing his lips, and his head is tilting to the side.

“I never even considered it. I don’t mean to be harsh or anything, but Maddox and I study and work together, especially for class projects. It was just a gut reaction to ask him. Did you want me to ask you?” Great, now I’m tilting my head, mirroring him exactly.

“Why would I want you to? Silly question, really, but seeing as I will be taking over a multi-billion corporation, I could have been a real asset to you. I guess it’s a great lesson to take with you moving forward, when considering who to go with when you need help. The person you like or the one who has a working knowledge of the issue at hand.” He puts his cup in the sink and walks over to the back door and stares out into the garden.

“Emmet... what does your mom look like?” *Sometimes I really want to punch myself. Case in point, times just like this.*

His back stiffens as he turns just enough to glance at me over his shoulder, his look is indiscernible but it is certainly leaving me feeling a little unsettled. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls his wallet free. My heart is soaring, just a little, at the fact that he keeps a photograph of his mama in there. It’s sweet and makes him feel a little more approachable.

He holds his wallet out, leaving me no choice but to bridge the distance so I can take a look. My mouth is drier than the desert as I pad barefoot over to him. I try to swallow, but there’s nothing there and as I look at the photo, I can’t stop my hands from circling my stomach as I hug myself.

It’s not a shock, or at least it shouldn’t be. I guess I had hoped that she would have been the exception, especially with how Emmet has pursued me, and with the things that Shane tried to do. What does this even mean? How can he want me when I look so much like his mama? This feels so wrong, sordid, and all kinds of messed up. I can’t stop thinking about the times he’s kissed me and made my blood run hot.

“Do I even want to know what is running through that pretty little head of yours?” he asks with a smirk and it just turns my stomach even more. Does he know what I’m thinking? Is he enjoying what this is doing to me?

“I-I-I d-d-d-doubt it.” I need to get away, but there’s nowhere for me to run. I’m stuck in this place with a guy I don’t know, and I can’t ask him the questions that are plaguing my mind. Mainly because I haven’t got a clue how he will react to them.

“Have you ever wondered who the strangler is?” Well, his question has certainly jolted me out of my growing panic for a few moments.

“Of course, but I can’t figure it out. It has to be someone that either hates or wants you. Why else would they choose girls that you were last seen with, or use your name on the letter that lured me outside that night? I’m just glad nothing else has happened since. Maybe their failure threw them off.” I’ve been thinking about this and honestly, that’s the only explanation I can come

up with.

“Oh, so you think these girls are being hurt because of me? Fucking typical.” He slides the back door open and storms outside and, for some reason, I’m rushing after him.

“Emmet, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your apologies, Luna. So just fuck off back inside and leave me the hell alone. I don’t want you out here with me,” he screams it at me. He’s shaking as he spins around to look at me, before shaking his head with a sneer, and walking further away.

I don’t want to leave him like this, but I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to make this right or how to make him hear me. I guess all I can do is respect his wishes and hope that he’ll let me explain once he calms back down.

I walk back through the door and come face to face with a man I’ve never seen before. A startled scream escapes, and he shakes his head as though I’m annoying him.

“Calm down. This is why I don’t work with the girls.” He looks me over with a scowl on his face, before shaking his head. “The name’s Michael and I’m one of the guards. I’m to escort you to your room. So let’s get on with it so I can get back to what I’m being paid for.” With that, he turns around and stalks up the stairs and I have to rush to follow him. *I miss Darius.*

ENTERING THE LION'S DEN

I CAN'T SEE Michael and I ever getting along. I guess I'm lucky I won't see much of him, if at all, once I get back. I guess it doesn't help that he has to babysit me while I find suitable clothes for tomorrow. I guess I thought Emmet would be with me for this, but he had already left when I got up this morning. I must have really hurt him with what I said, but I didn't mean to, and it certainly hadn't been my intention. I don't understand what I did wrong, and this confusion is eating at me.

"Off you go, the store is closed for your duration. Try to keep it quick. Okay, girl?" Yep, I really dislike Michael. I nod my head in agreement anyway, as I rush into the top end boutique and look around at the clothes.

I don't know what I'm looking for, it's been so long since I dressed myself and I don't think my style will go down well with the people I'm set to meet.

"You must be Luna. I'm Cassandra and I'm at your disposal," says a thirtysomething woman who wastes no time in coming over to talk to me.

"Hi, Cassandra. Look, I'll be honest with you. I have no idea what I'm looking for. This is all so new for me," I say as I fidget with my hair and shuffle around on my feet.

"It's okay, your boyfriend left a list of suitable clothing, and I've got a few outfits set out in the dressing room for you. So, why don't you go inside, and we'll see how they look?" she says with a kind smile and it's putting me at ease. I don't dare correct her on the whole boyfriend thing. I know I'm not allowed to mention what I really am to Emmet.

"Okay, thank you."

I walk into the spacious room and look over the selection. I choose a red, knee-length dress to try on first. It has a panel top and pleated skirt and it looks nice on the hanger. Hopefully, I can pull it off.

I waste no time in slipping it on, before stepping out to show Cassandra, she smiles before waving her hand side to side. I disappear back into the room and try them on, one after another.

The fourth outfit feels like a winner to me, but I don't know what was on the list, so I could be wrong. It's a black ruffled skirt that falls to my knees, with a white blouse and black waistcoat. Honestly, I freaking love it, and I'd buy it if I thought there was even a remote possibility that I could afford it.

I step out once I throw on the black slingbacks, and her answering smile fills me with confidence.

"I think that's the one. You look comfortable, and it's definitely within the specifications. What do you think?"

Her question throws me for a moment, and I feel kind of foolish for reacting that way.

"I love it, I don't even know why but it's so comfy and I like that it's smart, but still has a slight edge to it."

"I agree, it's perfect for you. So, go ahead and get changed back into your things, and I'll get it bagged up for you. It's already been paid for, so there's nothing else for you to do." She gives me one last smile before walking away. I wish Emmet was here, and that thought is knocking me off kilter.

I walk out to where Michael is waiting for me, and he leads me back to the town car before driving me back to Emmet's. I hope he's back now. I want to fix this rift I've caused, and I can't do that if he isn't around.

We pull up and park behind the Charger. I grab my bag and walk inside the house before putting my things away and making my way into the living room.

Emmet is sitting in the recliner with his phone tucked under his ear, scribbling furiously on a pad of paper. I don't want to disturb him, so I go upstairs to my room and hang my clothes up so they don't get creased. I can't believe I'll be meeting with them tomorrow. I hope I'm prepared enough, but I'm worried that I've missed something vital. What if I do or say something stupid? I don't want them to think I'm an utter moron and run off to tell Sir.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and toy with my bottom lip, I can't believe I never went to Emmet. Why didn't I? Because I don't like asking him for help. I guess I was worried he would find a way to use it against me,

and I let my stubbornness run the show. I don't regret going to Maddox, but he's learning like I am. Emmet has hands-on experience, I should have asked him. *Pride be damned.*

I'VE BEEN BACK AN HOUR, and he hasn't come up once, or at least I haven't heard anything coming from out in the hallway. I want to go down, but I don't want to be in the way. It doesn't help that I'm bored beyond belief and absolutely starving. Michael didn't give me any time to grab breakfast, and it's nearly too late to consider anything I eat lunch.

This is ridiculous. I can't just sit up here. I get up, walk out of my room, and head down the stairs. Well, he's not in the living room anymore. I go into the kitchen and root around in the fridge. He has all the makings for a chicken and bacon carbonara. I guess I could make it for us, and I'll just have a sandwich or something later.

I'm so engrossed in my task, I jump out of my skin when a hand lands on my shoulder. I spin around and come face to face with... Sir.

"I apologize, Miss Carter, I didn't mean to startle you. I was just looking for my son," he says, and my heart is racing like a jackhammer.

"I-it's okay. I haven't seen him since earlier, I'm afraid," I say before I take a large gulp and try to swallow my nerves.

"That's fine, I'll just take a seat and wait for him to make himself known."

Oh crapsticks. He's sticking around. Well, you may not want me to be alone with Sir, but it looks like I don't have a choice in the matter, Emmet. *Please, come back soon.*

"What are you making?" he asks, and his voice is deep but also soft at the same time. The kind of voice that puts you at ease the minute you hear it, I've never heard him use it before though, not even during dinner.

"It's nothing fancy, just a simple carbonara," I reply, and I'm trying my hardest not to giggle like an imbecile. Although giggling would be more preferable to crying, and I have no idea how I'll react if my nerves don't go away soon.

"Toast is simple my dear, I wouldn't diminish what you are doing so easily. You should show pride in your talents, unless you are a terrible cook."

I glance at him and I can't read his expression at all.

"Not that I know of. Although people can be nice, so who knows?" Cue the damn giggling.

"Maybe I'll stay for a bite, I promise I won't give false accolades, not if they're not deserved."

No, no, no. please don't stay, please don't stay.

"Father, was I expecting you?" *Thank you, Emmet.*

"No, but then again what is life without a little whimsy," Sir replies, and I never would have thought I'd hear him say something like whimsy.

"I'm your son, which means I know you never do anything on a whim. Something must have brought you here." It doesn't feel right to be witnessing this conversation and I'm worried that Emmet will push him too far.

"I came to discuss a few matters with you, but that can wait until after lunch. Miss Carter is making a carbonara, and I've decided to join you both. I thought I would offer my services as a food critic. At least she'll know that I'm not just patting her on the back because I'm worried about hurting her feelings." His voice has lost that calming quality, now it feels rife with tension.

"She's going to open up a bakery, not a restaurant. I don't think it really matters if she can cook pasta. Besides, I've tried her baking, and it's fucking delicious. I think that's enough said." His tone sounds so cold and detached.

"Watch your language." His voice cracks the air like a whip, and I half expect to see Emmet bleeding from the impact. Dramatic? Of course, but it's justified.

"Of course, father. I forgot myself for a moment there. It will not happen again."

"Make sure it doesn't. I did not raise you to use obscenities to make a point, you should be able to do it without lowering yourself to such a disgraceful standard." please, just let me disappear now. I don't like what I'm hearing, although I think it's more of what isn't being said, rather than what is.

"So, are you going to magic up a dining table or are we expected to sit on the sofa with the plates on our laps like heathens?" *Please have a table. For the love of God, Emmet, please have a table!*

"Of course, I do, father. It's in the dining room. I don't entertain guests often, so I didn't see the point in ruining the room with one." They are so formal with one another, but there's a constant bite to their words.

“Well, it will not set itself up. Unless you were expecting Miss Carter to do that as well as prepare the food.”

“No. I will do it now.” He steps up beside me and reaches into the cupboard beside me to retrieve the plates.

“Sorry, Star, this will not be a fun experience for either of us,” he says in a low voice and I hope beyond all reason that Sir can’t hear him.

What more can I do but give him a small smile, it’s weak and lacking any warmth. In all honesty, it’s probably more of a grimace, but I can’t muster any other kind of response. A shiver passes through me as he leaves the room, I just hope it’s unwarranted.

“Are you nervous about your appointment tomorrow, Miss Carter?”

“I am.” Deep breath, I just need to find my composure and safe place. I don’t even know what that is anymore. “I’m excited, which I guess is strange, but this is just so important to me.”

“You’re passionate about your craft. If only more people were like you. I’ve known my fair share of people who have a similar outlook, and most of them have gone on to do great things. Unfortunately, not everyone can make it in this world. I wonder which side of the toss you will fall on.” His footsteps on the floor sound like a death march to my ears. I know he’s coming closer. All I want is for Emmet to hurry up and get back in here.

“I hope so too,” I say with a sigh. I am worried. Worried I haven’t got what it takes to start a business, or worse, to make it succeed.

“Did you know my family struggled when I was a boy? There were eight of us in a three bed house, and one of those rooms could barely be classed as a bedroom.” He stands beside me and I can feel his gaze burning into the side of my face. “My father inherited the Academy from my mother’s father. His own family disowned him when they viewed my mother as too low on the food chain. He made it what it is today, and it’s only grown since.”

“Why...” I can’t finish that question, let alone start it. This is dangerous territory, and I don’t know how to navigate it.

“Why did it go to me and not her? Because her father was a very old fashioned man who believed that women shouldn’t be in a position of power, let alone in charge of anything other than an oven, or washing machine.” He scoffs and I don’t know why he’s being so forthcoming on all of this. “I don’t agree with him, which is why, after I completed my time at the Academy, I started the organization that every person will recognize in one way or another. My point is, the boys may not understand you, but I do.” I can’t help

but look at him and I can see him lifting his hand right as Emmet strolls back into the room.

“The table is all set. Why don’t you go and take a seat, father? You shouldn’t have to serve yourself.” He should remove that scowl from his face, even though right now I could kiss him for walking in when he did.

Sir gives me one last lingering look before he moves into the dining room. Leaving me alone with Emmet, and I feel as though I can finally breathe again.

“Is everything okay?” He’s giving me a strange look, as though he walked in on something he shouldn’t, and I hate it.

“I’m... I’m handling it the only way I know how,” I say quietly, as I dish up the food. We make our way into the dining room that has even less soul than the rest of the place. Or at least, what I’ve seen of it.

I take my seat beside Emmet, and as far from Sir as I can get. I don’t like how his eyes are trained on me, but I can’t believe it’s because he wants me. Sure, everything is pointing in that direction, but I’m not Selene. As far as I can tell, other than looks, we are two completely different people. That, and I’m young enough to be his daughter. I know age is just a number, but that is a huge pass from me.

We are eating in silence, and nothing but the sounds of forks hitting the plates can be heard. I wonder if I’m the only one feeling uncomfortable right now. It’s times like these that I wish I could read minds, especially where Emmet is concerned. I don’t even know if he’s still angry with me, and although, I want Sir to leave, I don’t want Emmet to go back to ignoring me once we’re alone again. *Then what do you want to happen?* If only I knew, brain, if only I knew.

Ten minutes later and Sir places his fork down on the plate, stands up, and leaves the room. He hasn’t said a damn thing, what does it mean?

“What’s going on?” I ask softly and Emmet copies Sir’s actions and gets to his feet.

“I’m not sure, leave the plates and go up to your room while I find out. It’s in your best interests, believe me.”

“I feel rude just going upstairs, without even saying goodbye to him.” I roll my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Still preferable to what you could be feeling, believe me. My father is great at invoking all kinds of negative emotions and reactions in people. Now, go upstairs, I won’t tell you again.”

He leaves the room, and although it's against my better judgement, I do as he says.

I WAITED two hours before going downstairs last night to find the entire place empty. This seems to be a trend with Emmet, and I guess I just have to accept that. Today is different though, it's for me and my dream. I am filled with equal measures of excitement and nervousness beyond belief. I have been dressed for hours, but I haven't gone downstairs yet.

I keep going over my plan and checking for any issues. I don't doubt they'll ask something that I won't be able to answer, but hopefully this will be enough.

"Star, are you ready?" he calls through the door. I can't believe the relief that is coursing through me right now because he used my nickname. Maybe he doesn't hate me after all. Hopefully, he'll tell me why he got so worked up, at least I'll know what to avoid in the future if he does.

I brush my hands over my skirt one last time before opening my door. But he must have already gone downstairs. I descend the stairs, to find him sitting at the island with a bowl of cereal, and a cup of coffee.

"Help yourself to breakfast, we'll be leaving in thirty minutes," he says, as he reads... a newspaper.

"Thank you." I grab myself a bowl and take a seat beside him, wondering if this is how the rest of our stay in New York is going to go.

"Are you all set for the meeting?"

"I think so. I was going to ask if you'd have a look at what I have prepared, but I wasn't sure what you would say." I tuck my hair behind my ears, before pulling it up into a high ponytail.

"I suppose I have some time, if you have it with you." This is so damn formal. I don't like it. *You can't have everything your own way, you're on his turf now.*

I place it on the island and he looks it over while I tuck into my bran flakes. It tastes like cardboard, but at least it's healthy. *Why is that a good thing?* I have no idea, but it felt like the right choice before I started to eat it.

"Without knowing what they will discuss with you, it is good. I don't see a mission statement though, was that left out deliberately?" He glances at me,

and he seems genuinely curious.

“Umm, no. I didn’t realize I needed one, or what it is, if I’m completely honest with you.”

“It’s simple, really. It explains, in a limited number of words, what your business’ overall goal will be, why it exists. Another way to look at it is, it’s a way to explain how your bakery will be different from the rest. Do you have anything in mind?” he asks, and I take a few mouthfuls as I try to work out what mine could be.

“Something like ‘food from around the world’. I think that would be a good explanation of what I’m hoping to do,” I say while nodding my head, and he rubs at the back of his neck.

“No offense, Star, but it’s kind of shit.” I can’t help but splutter at his reaction and his smirk is infuriating. “The premise is fine, but it sounds as though you’ll be cooking loads of different kinds of things. It’s too vague, you need to pin it down to what it is you will be selling.”

Damn, he’s good at this. Now, I feel even more foolish for not going to him to begin with.

“‘Cakes, breads, and pastries. Tastes from all over the world, right here in your hometown.’ Is that any better? I really don’t want to screw this up, Emmet. It’s almost as though I’m going for a job interview. I can’t believe how nervous I am.”

“Hey, nerves are a good thing. It shows how much you truly want this. I’d be more concerned if you weren’t nervous. Also, I think that is a much better statement, so you had better write it down before you forget it.” He slides my folder back to me and I quickly jot it down on the top of the first page.

“I think it’s time we get going, then we can come back and get changed for dinner. Come along, Star. Your future awaits.”

I FEEL LIKE SUCH AN IDIOT, I can hardly recall a single thing that was said during that meeting. I’m just glad Emmet stayed with me, hopefully he has taken in more than I did.

“Do you believe these projections are accurate? That it will require this amount just to acquire the correct equipment,” Mrs. Masters asks, and my mouth is dry and luckily, gives me a reason to reach for a glass of water.

“Yes, ma’am. Forty thousand should cover the equipment, furniture, permits, and licenses. And hopefully, the first month’s utility bills and supply costs. I know it seems like a sizeable amount of money, but I need to ensure I have the best equipment for the job.”

“You also don’t see yourself being able to break even before the third year. Have you considered franchising the business so you could see a monetary gain earlier on?”

“How would she see more money before the third year if she went that route? She would need to lie down more collateral to begin with and her estimated costs will increase with each business she starts. Besides, she should at least wait and see how this one goes first. Why does my father even employ you?” Emmet asks, and I’ve never been more grateful to have him with me.

“I did not mean to speak out of line, sir. I just don’t see how this can be a profitable business. She is planning to do this on her own, and in New York, no less. There are plenty of bakeries around here,” Mrs. Masters states, and she isn’t wrong.

“I was considering opening the bakery in either South Carolina or Savannah. So, I don’t think that will be such a problem. Besides, I won’t be taking out a loan or anything, so I will only risk my own assets.” The worst thing to say, I can just feel it.

“I was under the impression that you were only Five. That means you will only be walking away with a hundred thousand. I would seriously reconsider your choice of venture. Either that or get a better number. Then again, you could always marry for money.”

Marry someone for money? I would never do something like that. I still can’t believe the way Emmet blew up at her. He was absolutely terrifying.

“I was under the impression you have two children under ten. I wonder what they’ll say when you go home and tell them that mommy lost her job. Do you think your husband will support you? I mean, I’m sure he will... at first. Unless, of course, he were to find out about what your late nights at the office really entail. You are a naughty girl, aren’t you, Masters?”

I slip on a red bodycon dress and black heels. I have to be a contortionist to get this zipper done up, so I guess I’d better ask Emmet. My cheeks are already as hot as the sun, and he isn’t even going to see anything.

I make my way down to the living room, and he switches the television off.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” he says with a grin, and my cheeks are only getting hotter.

“Would you mind zipping me up?” I ask, as my eyes stare at his shiny black shoes.

“Gladly,” he replies, as he moves to stand behind me. I can feel his knuckles graze my spine as he draws the zipper all the way up. Goosebumps are lining my skin and I can barely catch my breath. What is this effect he has on me? Why hasn’t it gone away yet?

He leads me outside and we climb into his car, before heading off to the restaurant.

“Have you been here before?”

“Once or twice. They have a waiting list that you have to join three months before you want to be seated. Lucky for us, I’m a Harkwright. They’ll always make room for one of us, even if that means giving someone their bill early,” he says it as though I should be impressed. I’m not, that’s for damn sure.

A valet meets us at the door and takes the car before Emmet leads me inside.

“Mr. Harkwright, I didn’t realize you would be joining us this evening,” says the concierge.

“Neither did I, but you know what we’re like. We love to keep things interesting. Do you have a table for us?”

“Of course, one moment please.” He scurries away before whispering in a waiter’s ear. It isn’t long before we’re led to a table and a disgruntled couple pass us, with nothing but disgust and hatred clear on their faces.

“This doesn’t seem right, taking a table from someone who was here before us,” I say, as I look over the menu.

“Who’s to decide what is right or wrong? I wanted a table, so I got one. It’s as simple as that.”

Emmet orders a beef cannelloni, with garlic bread, and a bottle of wine to be brought to the table. I just opt for the lasagna myself, and I have no idea what we’ll do while we wait for our food to arrive.

“Why were you so mad at me?” Not what I was going for, but I really don’t seem to have much of a filter these days.

“What you said bothered me, and I realize you weren’t blaming me for what has been happening, but you were still putting it on my shoulders. Do you have any idea what it is like to be held accountable for things you never

did? That no matter what you say, the blame still falls onto you. Even when that person knows you had nothing to do with it. People are so shocked and appalled by the way I act, yet they haven't got a fucking clue. I'm the way I am because of how I've been raised, there's no helping me, Star. I'm never going to change."

"Do you want to be different?" I ask, and I can't get a read on him.

"Why would I? I see nothing wrong with who I am. What about you, Star? Do you wish I was different?" His eyes are more intense now, and I know he is watching my every move.

"No, I think I just wish you could be one person. The constant changes in personality are really confusing, and I never know who I'm going to get. That, and I'm scared by how much you seem to want me. I think you're dangerous, Emmet, and I rarely ever run toward it."

We are staring at each other, as our drinks are brought over and we both take a large drink. We say nothing else as our food arrives, and we keep ourselves busy.

LAST NIGHT FELT AWKWARD ONCE we got back, and I didn't waste a lot of time in excusing myself to my room. I'm surprised he's being so understanding and hasn't tried to make a move. I can't imagine it's because of Tucker, he doesn't come across as someone who follows the rules.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks, as he passes me a cup of coffee.

"It was good, thank you. I can't get over how comfortable the bed is," I say with a laugh.

"Mine's comfier," he replies with a wink, and I don't know how to respond to that. *Just don't say anything, it seems like the safer option right now.*

"Can I ask you something? I'm just a little worried that you may take it the wrong way."

"Well, now you have me intrigued. Go for it, my Star."

"Have you ever tried to see how the other half live?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, and I'm trying so hard not to roll my eyes.

"You know, being someone who doesn't have a seemingly endless supply of money. Someone who doesn't have every door opened for them and

having a table suddenly appear, even though there's a long waiting list just to be seated. The restaurant you took me to yesterday, is the kind of place you have to reserve months in advance, and yet you got in. Even though it was decided on a whim." How do I make him see what I'm trying to get at here?

"I've never really seen the point in it. Why wait for something when you don't have to?"

"Because this world you live in is so foreign to me, and I'm experiencing it because it's what I need to do. Maybe you'd understand the way I react to certain things, if you just tried to live in my world for a day." I run my fingers through my hair, yanking slightly as I try to rid myself of this growing frustration.

"And you feel strongly about this? Having me see what life was like for you before you came to us?" He cocks his head to the side while he strokes his chin.

"Yes, no, I don't know. You were Liam so you could get to know me and see who I truly was. As well as seeing if I was deceitful, well this is who I am. You really want to know me, then maybe you should try it." Why am I even saying this? I don't want Emmet to understand me, do I? I know I want to understand him, and I feel like I'm starting to now that we've spent this time together. Even if it is just a bit.

"Okay then, let's do it. But you'll have to tell me what to do because I haven't got a clue how to be poor." It sounds conceited to me, but I just know that he doesn't mean it in that way. That he's even willing to try means the world to me, and that's a scary thing.

"O-okay, I c-c-can do that." Damn it, I've been doing so well with my stuttering. *It's okay, this is going to take time, and having a stutter is a part of what makes me who I am.*

"Okay, tomorrow I'll live like a Carter and then you'll do something for me. Only, you have to agree without knowing what it is. As well as not asking any questions about it or refusing once I let you know. Do you agree to my terms?" He seems a little too happy for comfort, but I think this is worth the risk.

"You have yourself a deal." He holds out his hand to me and I slip mine within. Just like that, we shake and our deal is made.

I wonder what I've just agreed to.

"For today though, I have some business to take care of. You can come with me if you'd like, but you have to go along with whatever I say."

“Okay, now you have me intrigued. I’m in,” I reply, and I don’t think I like the glint he has in his eyes.

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THE PRINCE EFFECT

WE CLIMB out of the car and walk into a restaurant that is serving brunch. We don't wait to be seated as Emmet sits down at a table already occupied by a girl, or I guess, a woman. She must be close to my age, and I'm curious who she is.

"Emmet, darling. I'm so glad you came." Her eyes light up greedily as she takes him in, but the light dulls when she spots me. "I see you've brought a friend."

"I have indeed. Although, I'd say she is a lot more than a friend," he replied coolly, as he slides his finger down the column of my neck, before lowering his mouth to my pulse point.

"I don't understand, why come at all? If you're seeing this 'girl', then why bother? Unless you want her to join us."

"Not at all. She doesn't need any assistance when it comes to satisfying my urges, unlike you, of course. I just wanted you to see who I've replaced you with. I guess you could say I've traded up," he says with a mocking laugh.

"But I did everything you asked of me. I brought all those outfits, and I let you use those restraints. Why tell me how you want me to behave, if you're just going to throw me away?" She sounds genuinely upset, and her eyes are already filling with unshed tears.

"How can I put this in a way that your little brain can understand? You. Are. Boring. Oh, that was easier than I thought. You're boring, Carmen, and frankly, you're not good enough for me."

"What, you think she is? Look at her, she's nothing. You could have a

real woman,” she throws out, and more than a fair share of heads are turning our way.

“There is nothing real about you, Carmen. Even your tits are as fake as the tan you have going on. But if you really want to discuss this, then maybe we should go out into the back.” He slides his chair back and climbs to his feet. She wastes no time in following him, and with one simple glance, I do the same. Have I stated enough, how much I hate this?

We go into a back office and he slides the lock in place, and she wastes no time in wrapping her arms around his neck and kisses him hard. He’s looking right at me as she kisses him, and then he pushes her away and against the door.

“You need to stop calling and texting me, and I swear to God, if you turn up at my place uninvited again, I will not be held accountable for my actions. I don’t take well to trespassers. You were a fleeting thing, Carmen, and you are deluded if you ever thought more would come out of our little arrangement. Now, fuck off before I get mean.”

“No, you can’t just push me away and shove that little slut in my face while you do it,” she screams, and his hand is around her throat in no time.

“Yeah, baby, you know what I like,” she purrs and a shiver passes through him before he pulls himself away.

“I mean it. Don’t contact me again. I’m done with you, I will not repeat myself again.” He grabs my hand, pushes her out of the way, and leads me out of the restaurant. We didn’t even grab anything to eat.

THE DAY of Emmet being like me is here, and I have no idea what to expect. I’m struggling to believe he will really go through with it. It sounds mean, but I only give him an hour before he renegades on our deal.

“So, how much money am I allowed to use today?”

“Fifty, that’s still more than I’d usually have, but I think that will be a good amount,” I say with a smile and his falls away.

“Fifty? What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? That will only get us a starter, if we’re lucky,” he says with a growl, and I have to bite my cheek to stop myself from laughing.

“We can get lunch with ten dollars, it will be fine. Now, I have a whole

day of activities lined up. I thought we could go to the Met, and then maybe the movies. Ooh and then I'm going to take you to a few thrift stores and see if we can buy you something nice." Okay, my cheek is hurting now.

"This is ridiculous, but a deal is a deal. Come on then, Star. Let's see how the other half lives."

"Oh yeah, and no car. If we can't walk it, then we'll get on the train." I'm just going to ignore his little glare. He'll thank me for it later. *Yeah, he really won't.*

Our first point of call is the Met, and I have no idea how this will go down. Museums aren't really my thing, but once we start walking around, I begin to enjoy myself. Emmet even seems to be enjoying himself, although he has yet to go into a thrift store, and I'm crazy excited to take him in one. I don't even know why, but I'm almost giddy about it.

"Why have you got that silly smile on your face? What do you have planned for me, Star?" he asks, as he slides his arm around my back, and rests his hand on my hip.

"I'm just excited to take you into your first thrift store, that's where I did most of my shopping," I say with a little bounce to my step.

"You buy your clothes out of a thrift store, like clothes that have been worn by other people?" he asks, as he wrinkles his nose and grimaces.

"You don't have to make it sound so abhorrent. Besides, you can find some decent stuff there. I like them." I shake my head at him, and he pulls me closer until my hip is resting against him.

We stand here looking at a painting and it feels natural to be held like this, by him. My head leans to the side and connects with the side of his chest until he's moving to stand behind me. His arms go around my stomach as he holds me against him, and my head leans back against his chest.

"Why are you so comfy?" I really didn't want to say that out loud.

"I have no idea. You're the first person to think so," he replies, before we move to the next exhibit and his hand returns to my hip.

OUR NEXT STOP IS A VENDOR. The look on his face is priceless. He looks a mixture of disgusted and downright scared.

"It isn't that bad, trust me. Get a chili dog. They are amazing and you

really can't go wrong with one of them," I say as I pat him on the back and his answering glare has my sides splitting with laughter. I'm not even trying to hold it in.

"You are such a brat," he says, as he marches over to the vendor and orders us both one.

"I know, but it's so much fun," I tease, as he hands me mine and I give him a wink. I'm never doing it again though, it felt so weird.

"You've never winked at someone before, have you?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"Not at all. I just notice the small things when it comes to you." We look at each other, before he moves forward. I have to shake myself off before I hurry to catch back up to him.

"Come on, let's go check out these stores you're so keen to drag me to." I can't stop smiling, and I don't even want to try.

I practically skip into the first one we come across, my eyes instantly fall onto a pair of shiny black Doc Martens. They're my size. This has to be fate. Only, fate is cruel because as usual, I can't buy anything.

"You like those, huh?" he says, as he eyes them, and I swallow down my excitement so I can sound as blasé as possible.

"They're okay, do not get them though, Emmet. Please, I'm really enjoying myself today, and I don't need any gifts."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't do gifts, especially after what happened the last time I got you one." I can't help but toe the ground, as I stare at it.

"I'm still sorry about that. I overreacted, and it wasn't fair to you."

His hands cup my face as he tilts me up to look at him.

"It's okay, I didn't do it for the right reasons, anyway. Some of them were honorable, but mainly I was just trying to buy your affection. That's how it works in my world." I glide my fingers over his cheek, and I'm so tempted to rise up on my tiptoes and kiss him, but I won't.

I pull away and start rifling through the clothes until I come across a denim jacket and hold it out to him.

"Here, try this on," I say with a smirk.

"No."

"Come on, Emmet. You have to try something on."

"It has rhinestones on it, so that is a Hell no," he throws back at me and I can't help but laugh as I put it back and my eyes fall on something even

better.

“Fine, but you have to try this on,” I thrust it at him, and he looks at it as though it’s riddled with fleas.

He slips it on, and I let out a wolf whistle that is even worse than the wink.

“That looks amazing on you, and it’s only fifteen bucks.” I clap my hands and he takes it back off.

“Yeah, it will be great for whoever decided to buy it.”

“No way, you have to do things my way. You can’t come in here, find a leather jacket like that, and not buy it. I mean it, Emmet, you have to buy something.” I may be a little too passionate about this, but I love seeing Emmet like this.

“Fine, but that means we’ll only have twenty-seven bucks left. How are we supposed to go to a cinema and get food with that?”

“We’ll go to the matinee, it’s only about fourteen bucks for us both. We can even share a bucket of popcorn.” I smile cheekily at him, and he walks over to the counter to pay for his jacket.

I swear I even hear him mutter, “it probably isn’t even real leather.”

The thing that is really making me melt, though? He said that we had twenty-seven left, not him.



“IT WAS A GOOD FILM, although it felt like there was more action than storyline,” he says and I completely agree.

“I know, I like action, don’t get me wrong. But there was rarely any point to it,” I say back and we share a smile before walking off.

“So, what now?”

“We could go for a walk around Central Park, I’ve never been there.”

“Me either, let’s share this first together.” He takes my hand in his, and our fingers interlock.

We walk around for a while, and chat about anything and everything. We skip all the heavy stuff, and I almost forget about the whole ‘me looking like his mother’ thing. Because yeah, that’s nothing major. *Just keep telling yourself that.*

“Okay, so I’ve got two bucks left. What are we going to do for dinner?”

“Well, if you want the true experience, then there is only one thing you can eat...”

“Which is?” He’s done nothing but smile today, aside from when he’s glowered or grimaced at me.

“Noodles, you have to eat noodles.”

He looks so perplexed, and I can’t wait to introduce him to such a culinary feat.

We head back to his, and my feet are killing me. I’m not going to complain and he can’t stop looking at the packaging. We walk back into his place and I get started on preparing the noodles. It doesn’t take long until I’ve got them in a bowl and I slide it over to him.

“This looks disgusting,” he says, as he moves his fork around.

“Hey, don’t judge it before you try it. If you don’t eat them, then you don’t get anything else. Those are the rules,” I place my hands on my hips and he sneers at me, before taking a bite, and I bust a gut laughing at his expression.

“You look horrified. It isn’t that bad,” I say.

“It isn’t great.”

“You are such a snob.” I dig into my food and he continues to eat his.

It isn’t long before he finishes, and he is just staring at his bowl.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m still hungry,” he replies with a pout.

“No, you’re not, there was more than enough there to fill you up.”

“I’m telling you, I am hungry. I know how I feel.” His pout is only getting bigger.

“No, you’re not. You just think you’re hungry. Mind over matter, dear.” I pat him on the hand and his glower only intensifies.

“For crying out loud, Luna. I am starving over here.”

“For the last time, you are not hungry. You’re not having anything else, it’s against the rules.”

“You can’t be serious, this is insane.”

“Well, you either admit that you’re fine, or you go to bed.” It’s hard not to laugh.

“It’s only nine o’clock. I can’t go to bed, I’m not tired.”

“Then stop complaining that you’re hungry,” I say with my hands on my hips.

“But I am.”

“Then go to bed.”

“Woman, you are impossible,” he says, as he puts his bowl in the sink, and I’m shaking.

“Such a brat.” He spins me around, until he lines our bodies up, and his hands are on my hips.

“Surprisingly, I had a good time today. I’m glad we did it.” He dips his head closer to mine, and his eyes are staring at my lips.

“Me too, on both counts.” My hand is resting against his chest, and I need to push him away. *Is one moment of weakness so bad?*

“I’m going to kiss you now, Star,” he says in a low, gravelly voice.

His mouth is on mine in moments, and both slow and hard at the same time. My toes are curling in my shoes, and my hand is fisting his shirt. My heart is racing, and all reasonable thought is flying straight out of my mind.

His hands slide around to my ass, and my head kicks back in. My hand flattens back out against him, and I gently push away.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared to say. I don’t want to upset you or worse, make you angry.”

“What, you think I would do something to you?” His lip pulls back as he jerks away from me. I reach out to him, but he only steps even further away from me.

“No, but look what happened last time, and I didn’t mean to offend you. There is no way I can say what is on my mind and not do that this time. It’s messed up and honestly, it’s really...”

“Just say it.” He starts pacing the floor, and he looks at me through narrowed eyes.

“Okay, but I don’t want to spoil this week. Please, Emmet, let me tell you when we get back. I’ll tell you everything then. I promise.”

He agrees and a huge breath of relief washes out of me. At least we have a few more days together. Hopefully, I can keep those thoughts out of my head, and not cause anymore upset.

BACK TO REALITY

THINGS WERE ALMOST perfect with Emmet, and I'm back to feeling confused by him. My feelings aren't simple, but there are so many there. Five guys, one I'm in love with, but also feel hurt whenever I lay eyes on him, and four who are meaning more to me every day I get to spend more time with them.

I've been back for a week now and Tucker comes back today, while the majority of the Harkwrights are leaving for two weeks for in house training in their chosen fields. Whether they chose them or their parents, it doesn't matter. It's what they'll be doing when they leave here next year.

Which means that Emmet won't be held back any longer. I'm surprised he's let me get away with not telling him what's bothering me for this long. Speak of the devil. *That saying has never felt more apt than right now.*

"My Star, you've been avoiding me," he says, as he takes the chair beside mine. I'm hoping he won't say anything while we're in the library, but I doubt it will stop him. Not Emmet.

"I've just been trying to catch up on what I missed," I say, as I tuck my hair behind my ears and wipe my sweaty hands against my leggings.

"I want to know what happened while we were away. I won't be held off anymore."

"That's fair, I just don't want to tell you." Hey, at least he can't accuse me of not being honest.

"Tough, because I want to know. Oh look, it seems we're alone." Damn, I hate that smirk.

"I-I-I f-felt weird having you kiss me..."

"What, because of Tucker?"

“No, because of your... your mom.” Why is it so hard to say it out loud. *Because you know how he’s going to react.*

“What has she got to do with anything? You haven’t even met her.” He’s staring at me with his arms crossed over his chest, and a hard smile on his beautiful face. *Why do they all have to be so... gorgeous? It isn’t fair!*

“I look like her, Emmet. How can you be attracted to me? Seriously, it’s messed up.” I shake my head, while my nose wrinkles.

His lips flatten as his nostrils flare. A humorless laugh escapes his perfect mouth, and his hands are clenching onto the armrests.

“So what? You think I want to fuck my mom or something?”

I don’t know what I think, and I can’t answer that. It’s like a loaded gun, and I’m afraid it will point at me when he pulls the trigger.

“Fuck me, you do. You think I want to fuck my mom or something. Jesus fucking Christ, Luna. I can’t even look at you right now,” he says through gritted teeth. He gets to his feet while pulling at his hair with both hands.

“Why, because I look like her?” *Seriously, shut up.*

“Un-fucking-believable, I’ve got to go. But don’t even think we are done with this, we will talk when I get back. Because I can’t trust myself to be around you right now.” He gives me one last sneer before he storms off.

I should have kept my mouth shut. Better yet, I shouldn’t have reacted when he kissed me.

I’VE BAKED a batch of cheesy rolls, a loaf of sourdough bread, and chocolate and fudge cookies. I guess I feel a little calmer, but not as much as I had hoped. Tucker will be back any minute, I mean maybe he’s already back. I wonder where he goes. Can it always be business related? Because it sure as Hell felt personal over Christmas. I keep wracking my brain for any clues I may have missed, but I can’t think of any.

I am fully stocked and ready to go back to my room. I think I’ll drop these off up there, and then maybe go for a swim. I walk out of the kitchen and head toward the stairs when a pair of hands grip my hips and spin me around. I come face to face with Tucker, one minute I’m standing here looking at him, and the next his mouth is on mine and he’s claiming me thoroughly. Right here, in front of everyone. The guy who doesn’t kiss is sure

of a heck making a show of it. Should I be concerned about this? Because it isn't him, but I can't deny that I'm enjoying every single second of it.

He pulls back and smiles down at me and then the wolf whistles start to pierce the air.

"The mighty Tucker kissing a girl. This is a surprise," calls out Jake, and his voice is enough to ruin this moment for me.

"Fuck off, Jake, and mind your damn business," he shouts back, before he takes my elbow and leads me up the stairs.

"Hey, you. That was a surprise," I say, and it's coming out a lot more breathy than I intended. Not that I intended to say it in a breathy voice or anything.

"Well, what's the point in keeping it hidden? I've already broken two of my rules since you came on the scene," he says dismissively, and I can't help but wonder what other rule he broke for me.

"You don't have to break your rules for me, I don't want you to change who you are."

"I'm not, but sometimes rules have to be changed or at least adapted, it's the way life is. It doesn't concern me, so don't let it bother you. Besides, I've had a crappy couple of weeks. Being back here is surprisingly relaxing," his arm winds around my back, until he pulls me closer.

We walk into my room, and I place my baked goods on the side. I'm glad he's back, and I guess I'm also happy he's going to keep me to himself. A part of me hates it, but I do like how it simplifies matters. This way, Aeron won't be hurt anymore than he already has been, and that whole harem matter can be laid to rest. It was ridiculous to even consider it, those things are only meant to happen in books. It could never happen in the real world. *Could it?* No, and I need to stop thinking about it. It's over and done, finito, dead in the water. All of those marvelous ways to say it's never going to happen.

Great, now I'm rambling in my head, is that a sign of insanity or not? I'm a little unclear of what the signs are. Shit, I've been quiet too long, I need to say something. What am I going to say? Argh.

"So, did you have a productive time?" Why do I feel so lame lately? Everything I say sounds so stupid out loud.

"I guess so, I just wish things could be simpler at times. I wonder if I wasn't a Harkwright if I'd still be having all the issues I am now. Then again, I wouldn't be in this situation if I wasn't, and I'm not sure that would be a good thing either. What about you, how was New York?" He sits down on

the sofa and leans his head back against the cushions with his eyes closed.

“It went okay, although they made it clear they didn’t think I would get anywhere. Apparently, a hundred k isn’t enough to get started with. They make it sound like it’s pocket change, and yet, to me, that is a lot of money to be walking away with. I know I won’t have it all, but surely there would be enough so I can open my bakery wherever I choose to do so.” I need to lower my voice, and stop getting so worked up about this.

“You’ll figure it out, Tiny One. If anyone can, it’s you. Don’t worry about it yet, you have a whole year until that can be your new reality, I’d enjoy the dream instead of being weighed down by everything that could go wrong.” He really has that much belief in me, be still my beating heart. That may be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me. And it came from Tucker. The one person who always manages to slay me with his words.

“Thank you, I don’t think I realized how much I needed to hear someone say that to me.” I sit down beside him and watch how his lashes flutter against his cheeks. The way his chest moves steadily, and the slight smile gracing his lips. I shouldn’t stare, but I can’t help myself.

“I can feel you staring at me, stop being a creeper.” His smile turns more solid, and I can’t help but chuckle under my breath.

“How can you even tell?”

“It’s a gift of mine,” he says in a sleepy voice, and I run my fingers through his hair. He sighs and shifts until his head is resting on my shoulder.

“Do you want to lie down in my room?”

“No, I’m not tired. I’m just going to lay here for a minute or two.” His voice is heavy with sleep and it isn’t long before his breathing turns shallow. I just stay like this, running my fingers through his hair, and wondering what is happening here.

IT’S BEEN TWO HOURS, and I’ve only just figured out how to extricate myself without waking him up. I hope he’s been sleeping okay while he’s been away. I’ve never known him to fall asleep on me before, I think I kind of like it. It makes him seem more vulnerable, it’s definitely not a side of him I’m familiar with.

A knock sounds at my door, and I rush to answer it so it doesn’t wake

him up.

“D, hey. Are you okay?” I ask, and she shakes her head.

“Can I come in for a minute?” she asks in return, and I open the door fully, and point to my bedroom.

I write a quick note to let Tucker know that I haven’t gone anywhere, before joining her and closing the door.

“Sorry, I didn’t want him to wake up,” I sigh. I stand against the door, and she sits on the bed, staring at her nails.

“It’s okay, I didn’t realize he was here. This will teach me to turn up uninvited.”

“You are always welcome here, invite or not. I’m sorry if I ever made you feel differently.”

“I hate this, Lu. I’ve lost Bradley, Jake, and you. I have no one else here, I just feel so alone.” Her head falls into her hands, and I move to sit beside her.

“I remember the feeling well, but you still have me ,D. Even if I’ve done a terrible point of showing that to you. I don’t want you to feel like you’re alone here. You were so good to me when we first met, let me be here for you. Please.” I place my hand on her back, and she relaxes beneath me.

“That decision I was struggling with, it was whether I should sleep with Bradley. It didn’t feel right, and now I know I was right. I should never have given myself to him. He just threw me away like yesterday’s trash.” Her voice is shaking, but she wipes at her face to look at me. “It has me questioning everything. I thought doing that was the biggest mistake I’d ever made, but what if it wasn’t? What if I chose wrong when I listened to him years ago? Lu, what if he turned me away from the best guy I’d ever known, and I chose wrong all those years ago?”

“What do you mean? I thought Bradley was your first love?” I ask, as I rub soothing circles into her back with the palm of my hand.

“He was my first boyfriend, but he wasn’t my first love. I’ll skip over the boring details, so here are the cliff notes for you. I had this guy who was my best friend until my feelings turned deeper. I was going to tell him how I truly felt, when Bradley told me that he didn’t like me in that way. That I was nothing more than a sister to him, and he was already fooling around with other girls. I was thirteen, and it broke my heart. But instead of asking him, I believed Bradley. I didn’t want to risk embarrassing myself, but what if he lied? I ruined a friendship because of what he said and now, I’m second

guessing every decision I ever made.” She looks at me with sad eyes, and my heart is going out to her.

“You can’t do anything about what happened in the past, D. I wish you could, but hindsight is evil.” We both share a laugh at that one. “If only you could ask your old friend, at least so you could get a bit of closure. Is that even a possibility?”

“I mean, I guess so. But it’s been so long, won’t I just be making a fool out of myself?” she asks, and I don’t want to say no because I don’t know what he would think.

“I can’t say, but if this is something that you feel you need to know, then what is a little embarrassment compared to clarity? Do whatever feels right to you, that’s the only advice I can give.”

“Thanks, Lu, I appreciate it.” She smiles and then her eyes dart to the closed door. “Soooo, what is going on with you and the guys? I feel so out of the loop.”

“I don’t even know where to start, but let’s see. Tucker claimed me and told everyone that he isn’t going to let me go before graduation. So, Emmet made a joke about having a harem and then flipped a lid when Tom and Tucker didn’t say no to the idea. Aeron professed his love to me and has since avoided me like the plague. Oh, and I told Tom I loved him when I thought he was asleep, but it turned out he wasn’t. And then, he threw it back in my face when we argued over me not risking my future just to have a few moments with him. Seeing as Tucker suddenly decided he wasn’t up for sharing me after all.” Wow, I feel a little breathless after all of that.

“First of all, that is a lot to process. Secondly, damn, girl. A harem? Now that’s the stuff romance novels are built on these days. Could you imagine having one filled with Harkwright guys? At least your babies would be pretty.” I push at her shoulder and she swats me away.

“Oh, yeah, about that... I kind of have a thing for someone else as well.” Even though this room is soundproof, I still whisper that part.

“Shut the front door. Who?”

“Darius, my bodyguard. He is so perfect, D. he makes me feel normal, and he listens to me. I know it’s wrong, I just wish I could switch my feelings off. I’m relieved he isn’t around, to be honest. It just complicates things even more.”

“Oh, homegirl, what a tangled web you weave. Please tell me that sums it all up though. Because my head can’t take anymore.” She’s smiling now, and

I'm so glad.

"Pretty much, I had a boyfriend for a while, until I realized what love really felt like. The breakup didn't go to well. And now I have to avoid a certain area of this place." I look up at her through my lashes, as she gapes at me.

"Let's save that one for next time, I'd hate for Tucker to walk in and hear any of this. Thanks for talking to me, Lu. I've really missed you."

"I've missed you too," I reply. Then we hug and cry together, and suddenly all is right with the world.

I WAKE Tucker up with a chicken risotto, and he practically inhales it. He is wasting no time tucking into it, and it's nice to see someone enjoying my cooking. It always fills me with a warmth, and a sense of satisfaction.

"You're going to make people fat, I can just see it. You'll have people lining up for days to try your food," he says simply.

"I'm not knocking it. But why are you being so nice to me?"

"I got to spend the day with my favorite person before I came back here, and it always puts me in a good mood. Even feeling as tired as I do cannot ruin it. Don't worry, I'll go back to my usual self in no time." He winks, and I stick my tongue out at him.

"I don't mind how you act, Tucker. Although, I won't lie, I do like this version. What do you like? The old me, or the one I've been recently?"

"A mixture of the two. Confidence suits you, but you wouldn't be Luna if you didn't stutter and blush furiously. I guess most people would find it endearing, I just see it as you." He finishes off his food, before clearing his plate away, and then he leaves it in the sink.

"Who are you in love with, Tiny One?" he asks with his back to me, and he's knocking me off kilter.

"Why would you think I love anyone?"

"Aeron said so. Apparently, it's obvious. I hadn't noticed, but I have been preoccupied since being here."

"Tom." It comes out in a sigh, and he turns to look at me, before nodding his head.

"Do you want me to release you, so he can claim you?" His voice is

devoid of emotions, and his shutters are well and truly in place.

“No.” It comes out rushed, I didn’t even need to think about it. “Maybe a month ago, I would have said yes. Now though, I feel so much and it isn’t just with him. It’s confusing, and I don’t need to make it harder on myself. Maybe it would be easy to be with him, but I can’t pretend that he’s the only one I would want.” Does that sound bad?

“I’m not okay with the whole harem idea, and I’m not willing to share. I do understand it must be hard for you, though. So you don’t need to fear being caught doing anything against the rules. I won’t have you kicked out, not if you actually love the fool.” It’s gruff and hard, and I can feel water pricking my eyes.

I get to my feet and walk over to him. I place my plate next to his in the sink, before palming his face.

“I’m only with you, Tucker, and it isn’t only because of the rules. I’m happy with this.”

“Okay, I’ve got to go back to my room for a while. Don’t forget to wash up.” He smirks and then leaves me standing here. He is such an arrogant asshole.



IT’S BEEN three days since I told Tucker I’m happy to just be with him. Emmet isn’t back yet, neither is Tom, but I think Aeron may have stayed behind. I want to come up with a reason to speak to him, but I can’t think of anything, or at least, anything good.

I sit in the canteen during a study break, and I seem to be the only one here. Aside from Aeron, and I guess that is why he is on my mind. D is in class and I have no idea where Tucker is.

“Hey, Little Zero, it’s been a while.”

“Hey, yourself, how have you been?” It feels like I’m having a conversation with an ex, that’s how uncomfortable this is.

“Not too bad, I’ve been meaning to speak to you, actually. I just didn’t want to do it with an audience.” His eyes glance around the empty room as he says it.

“I’m free now.” I pat the seat beside me, and he takes it with another quick scan of the room.

“I know you are aware of how I feel, but there is something else you need to know. Nothing happened that morning you found me in One’s room. I didn’t go with any other girl while you were mine. She gave me the option. I just didn’t take her up on it. I should have said something before.” His hands fall on top of mine, and I don’t pull away.

“Why didn’t you, Aeron?”

“I wanted you to think that something had happened. I was self destructing, and I didn’t like the way I was feeling about you. You’ve met my mother. Why would I want to put anyone through that ordeal? Even worse, I wouldn’t want anyone to be stuck with a screw up like me. I thought I was doing the right thing, and now I don’t have you, and every other girl pales in comparison. So yeah, it turns out I’m faithful, even when I have no reason to be.” He laughs sardonically, while shaking his head.

“Selfishly, I hate the idea of you being with anyone else. You’re not a screwup, though. You are capable of so much, and I’m still here for you. I always will be, even if I can’t be with you. Just know, given the choice. I wouldn’t choose, I don’t think I could.” He leans his cheek against mine and we sit here like this.

Until the door swings open and I excuse myself. Aeron is the guy I wish I loved. If things carry on like this, then my wish may very well come true. *Oh yay, just what you need.* Isn’t that the truth?

CUPID'S ARROW

I'VE NEVER HAD a valentine before, not exactly by design. Although it's never bothered me. I don't really know how Valentine's Day is handled in this place; we weren't here when it took place last year. There's a reason people fear the unknown. Nothing has been mentioned, and no one has slipped any cards under my door. This has filled me with relief, because I'm hoping it's a sign that we will treat today like any other.

I put on a red skater dress that falls to my knees, and a pair of red wedge sandals. My eyes are bare, other than a line of kohl, and I've opted for a pale pink lip gloss instead of my usual red lips. I feel... pretty today. I think that's the right word, and I'm looking forward to getting to class. I haven't even bothered with the canteen, instead I had a breakfast muffin and I'm just going to head straight over to my business class and get this show on the road.

Maddox is already in the seat beside mine, and I'm a little apprehensive. We have to present our app today, and I have no idea how it will be received. As long as we don't fail this assignment, it will be fine. But we're also getting ready for our exams that will take place soon, so I both want to get this over with and draw it out just a little longer.

"We're going to do fine, we've tested the app, and it works great. Stop worrying," Maddox says, as he pulls my hands away from my mouth. I didn't even realize I'd been biting my nails.

"I know, I can't help but be a little worried though," I whisper back, as our tutor walks into the room, and our class begins.

It passes by quickly, and she seems happy with what we have come up with. We won't get our final grade until next week, but I'm feeling more

positive now.

“So, what does Tucker have planned for you this evening?”

“I have no idea, I didn’t think we were doing anything. It isn’t as though we’re actually in a relationship,” I state, and he just smiles at me as though I’m a child.

“You’re claimed. It’s expected for you to go out and do something for Valentine’s Day. It’s all about appearances, after all. You’re a high number, you get certain treatment that the rest of the girls don’t.” He gives me a quick, one arm cuddle, before he leaves me for his next class.

I wonder if he’s right, and if so, what will we be doing this evening? I haven’t even seen him yet today.

I walk toward my econ class, and see Twenty leaning against a wall, staring daggers into Emmet. My heart skips a beat at the sight of him, and then reality comes crashing in. He said it wasn’t over, and Emmet is a man of his word. I am not looking forward to that conversation at all.

“If he catches you, you’ll be in trouble,” I say, as I walk past her.

I stumble forward, as I’m pushed from behind, and my hands stop my face from impacting the ground.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must have slipped,” she sneers, as she holds her hand out for me to take.

I don’t want to, but I want to cause a scene even less. I let her pull me up, and then she steps into my personal space.

“Worry about your actions, instead of focusing on mine. I know what I’m doing,” she hisses, before she digs her nails into my palm, and then she saunters off.

Emmet stares at me before he watches her walk away. I have no idea how much he saw; I don’t want her to get into trouble. It’s stupid, I know, but I know what kind of punishment takes places behind these walls, and I don’t want someone to be subjected to it because of me.

“Five, with me,” he orders, and then he walks toward my class. I can’t refuse, not really. Besides, we won’t be alone, so we won’t be breaking the rules.

He opens up the classroom next door to mine, and then he strolls inside, and I follow close behind.

“Did you have a good trip?”

“Yeah, because I asked you in here so we can have small talk. I told you we weren’t done, Star, and I’m ready to talk to you now.” But I’m not.

“Okay...”

“What you said was fucked up, do you even realize that? I am not into incest, and you couldn’t have made yourself less appealing if you tried. Now I’ve tried to see it from your point of view, and I can understand it, but fucking Hell.” He whirls on me, and it isn’t long before I’m pressed up against a desk, and he’s hovering over me.

“I look like her, Emmet, and the woman who fueled your father’s obsession. It isn’t normal and if you were anyone else, I’d be asking you to go to counselling or something.” *Yeah, poke the bear. That’s a great idea.*

“You are infuriating, and I hate that you’re not even wrong. But you’re not looking at the big picture. You don’t even know what my mother looks like anymore. And when I look at you, I definitely do not see her. Maria and Katya sure, but I fucking hated that bitch, and I couldn’t care less about Maria. I can’t make you see what I’m saying, but if you ever think like that again, then I am so done with you. I’ll fuck every girl in this place if that’s what it takes to get you out of my system.” His chest is heaving in time to my own. “That’s all I had to say. Happy Valentines, and I’ll see you later.” He moves away and my entire body feels weighed down.

The thought of him touching another girl makes me feel sick, because in my mind... he’s mine.

I HAVE SEEN nothing of Tucker, I’m starting to think he left the Academy just so he could avoid this day. Again, I wouldn’t blame him, I wish I could do the same thing. It’s D that I feel sorry for, I’m sure she thought she would spend this day with Bradley. Why did he have to be such a dick to her?

My door sounds and I walk over to it, a shiver passes through me as I look at Jake, and he pushes his way inside.

“It’s time.”

“Time for what?” Don’t say it. please, don’t say it.

“I want to know what Daria has said,” he says it as though he’s just asked for the time, but it isn’t as simple as that.

“I don’t want to betray her, Jake, I’ve only just got her back.” I rub at the back of my neck as I pace the ground.

“I will not tell her, Luna. Now, get on with it.”

“You’ve got a girl though. Why claim someone else if you want D so badly?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything, the same can’t be said for you though. Unless you don’t mind if I tell everyone who you shared your New Year kiss with.” He raises his brow, almost daring me to call him on his bluff. I’m not that fearless though, and I can’t risk it coming out.

“She’s hurt and upset, but it’s mainly because of what happened when she was younger.” I have to force the words out, and his eyes widen as his hands fall limply at his sides.

“What do you mean? What happened when she was younger?” His eyebrows draw together, as he runs a jerky hand through his hair.

“She said she had this friend who she fell for, but Bradley told her something, and made her think it was all one sided. I think it’s the reason she ended up with him in the first place, but I can’t say for sure. We’ve only just started talking again, I don’t have a lot to give you.” I’m finding it hard to swallow over the pain that is forming in the back of my throat, and everything suddenly feels stiff.

“You’ve given me plenty. Have a great day, Luna. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.” He gives me a weak smile, before opening my door and revealing Tucker on the other side.

“What the fuck is going on?” He holds his chin high, and his arms and fingers are flexing.

“Nothing like that. You know I’m not interested in her. I just wanted to make sure Daria was doing okay. Blame me, not her. She’s done nothing wrong,” Jake says, quick to jump to my defense. He is such an enigma. I can’t figure out if he’s one of the good guys or not.

“Run along, Jakey boy. I’ll deal with you later.” He does as he’s told, and Tucker walks in. “We’re going out, so wear something comfortable. If you have trainers or comfy boots, it would be wise for you to put them on.” He takes a seat, and I rush to get changed. Where is he taking me?

I put on my pair of Doc Martens, a pair of jeans, and a tank top. Hopefully, he’ll be okay with me not wearing the required clothing, but I’m sure he’ll tell me if he isn’t.

I step out, and he gives me a quick once over. Then he takes my hand and leads me out of my room. It’s only four pm, so I can’t imagine we’ll be going out to dinner, unless he wants to eat early. It just seems a strange time to me, then again. I’m not really dressed for that kind of occasion.

We climb into a car and then set off. He hasn't got his phone out, and he's staring at our hands. He's yet to let go of me, and I haven't pulled myself free yet either.

"Where are we going, Tucker?"

"Somewhere fun. Just remember, when the night ends, you'll be leaving with me. That hasn't changed, but today should be enjoyable for the both of us. I don't do romance, so this is the next best thing."

Did he answer my question? Damn, he's good at avoiding a subject, isn't he?

We drive for a while before coming to a stop. He gets out first, then offers me his hand and my mouth falls open as I take in where we are.

"No freaking way, are you serious?" I clap my hands in glee, before throwing myself at him. He catches me easily, and his chest vibrates with his laughter.

"It's a great way to let off a little steam."

Paintball, man, he's something else. He's... perfect.

"The surprise isn't over yet," he says, as he leads me over to claim my clothing and find a gun. His words have barely registered when a squeal travels across the air, and a flash of blonde fills my peripheral.

"D, I can't believe you're here."

"It was all Tucker's idea. I came with the guys. He wanted it to be a surprise," she says with a wink. I look around as her words sink in, to find Emmet, Aeron, and Tom talking to Tucker. I can't believe he did this.

"I can't believe he did this for me, D. It's making my chest ache," I say it quietly, and she gives me a sympathetic smile.

"He's a little rough around the edges, but he's one of the good ones. I think he genuinely cares about you, and I think you've yet to realize just how much he means to you as well" She pats me on the back before we get our gear on. I have got nothing to say back in response, so instead, we join up with the guys, and get ready to have some fun.

BEST VALENTINE'S EVER! No doubt about it. I'm sore as anything, but it's so worth it. Aeron and I are camped out behind a wall, waiting for someone to fire a shot so we know where they are.

“I’m glad you came,” I say, as I peek over the top, narrowly missing a paintball that whizzes past my head.

“Me too, I wasn’t going to at first. But Tucker convinced me. It was weird, really. He said that I loved you, so I should be able to spend some of today with you. I don’t know what you’re doing to him, but it seems to be working for the best.” His words are nice, but I feel unsettled.

“I’m not doing anything. I think we’re just seeing a side of Tucker he doesn’t show often.”

“Tucker hates me, Luna. Trust me. This is all you. That, and he really enjoys shooting me.” He rolls his eyes and I laugh, before standing up and letting a few shots off.

“Ahhh fuck,” someone shouts out, and I jump for joy. Right as a splatter of paint covers my chest, and I groan at my own stupidity.

I walk off to the losers circle, to find Tom and D watching the others with rapt fascination.

“I lasted five minutes,” D grumbles, and I pat her back in mock sympathy.

“You did good, Moonbeam. Thanks for shooting me in the face,” he says with slumped shoulders and dull eyes.

“I didn’t know it was you, if that helps. I was just shooting anyone who wasn’t on the blue team.” I give him a cheeky smile, but he doesn’t return it. I hate that things are so off between us, maybe this is how it’s supposed to be. It’s for the best, I’m sure.

“I really didn’t fuck her.” D whips her head around and stares at him, and no doubt my face mirrors hers.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” she asks incredulously.

“Luna saw me with someone, I don’t even remember who. We were in a compromising position, I guess, and she thinks I fucked her.” He stares at me and I can’t bring myself to look away.

“It hurt, Tom, and I hated how much it hurt. What you said was worse though, you didn’t need to throw my words in my face.”

“Well, it isn’t as though you were ever going to tell me,” he growls, and D keeps looking back and forth between us.

“Why would I? Feelings mean nothing in the Academy, and it isn’t like you would have said it back.” My voice is rising, as I jump back up to my feet, and stare him down.

“That is beside the point,” he seethes, as he gets to his feet as well.

“Yeah, well. This is what I think to your opinion.” I point my gun at him and let a shot off to his chest.

“You cheeky fucker, run,” he says, but there’s a sparkle in his eye and it’s exciting. I bite my lip for a second before I do as he says.

I run until my chest hurts, and then my ass is suddenly throbbing as he takes a shot at me. I can’t help but laugh, and when he joins up to me, something feels lighter between us. There are still so many words left unsaid between us, but I believe him. If he says he didn’t sleep with her, then he didn’t. That doesn’t mean he wasn’t going to.

“DID YOU HAVE FUN TODAY?” Tucker asks, as we drive away from the paintball zone.

“I did, thank you for doing that. I haven’t been paint balling since I was fourteen,” I say happily. I feel like a contented cat. If I was one, I’d probably be purring non stop.

“How do you feel about breaking an Academy rule?” he asks with a twinkle in his eye.

“I guess it depends what it is,” I say easily, but I doubt I’ll say no. It doesn’t even matter what it is at this point.

“I’m supposed to give you notice before we spend a night away from the Academy. But if we stay away tonight, then I won’t be giving you notice.” He glides his finger down my cheek and I shiver.

“Let’s do it. We’ll consider this notice enough.” I barely get my words out before his mouth is on mine, and his tongue is exploring every single inch of it.

He unbuckles my belt and pushes me down against the seat, and positions himself between my legs.

“Just a taste of what’s to come.” He undoes the button of my jeans, and then shimmies them down my legs.

He slides himself down my body, hooks my panties in his fingers, and pulls them down. It’s only moments before his mouth is over my clit. He sucks and flicks my nub with his tongue, while sliding his fingers deep inside.

I can’t breathe, think, do anything of consequence. It feels so good, too

good. I can feel electricity shooting down my spine, and a heat building low in my stomach. My toes are curling within my boots and my hand is clutching onto the belt behind my head.

“Tucker, stop, don’t stop. Oh. My. God,” I cry out as I finally explode. He replaces his fingers with his tongue, swallowing every drop I have to give.

The car comes to a stop, and he slides my panties and jeans back into place. I take a few moments to compose myself before we leave the car and I take in the place that we’ve stopped at.

“I have an apartment at the top. It’s not my home, but it’s where I stay when I’m here.”

“Is this where we’re staying for the night?” I arch my head back, but the building goes on for miles.

“It is, and then I have one last surprise for you tomorrow before we go back to the Academy. Come on, Tiny One. Just try to keep an open mind,” he adds on. We enter the apartment building and ride the elevator up to the penthouse.

We step inside and to say I’m shocked is an understatement. This is like nothing I could have ever imagined. He has a black and grey sectional in the middle of his living room, sky blue walls, and what I assume are family photos on the walls. There’s one with a little girl, who I guess is his niece, who I’ll meet once the year ends.

His kitchen is modern, with cream walls and marble countertops. I can’t see the bedroom from here, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s like these rooms. This place feels like a home and nothing like the bachelor pad I had pictured in my mind.

“This is so... homey. I love the family photos,” I say, as I walk over to them and take some time to look at the people and moments that he decided were important enough to capture and display.

There is one of him and a girl who I guess is his sister, waiting in line for some kind of ride at a theme park. One of him and a man holding fishing rods, and a massive fish between them. One has him standing in front of a house, with his arms wrapped around a woman, and the last one is of him and his niece. He has her on his shoulders, and she’s wearing the biggest smile. I look to my left and find one more. Of Tucker with Tom and Aeron, and they look happy.

What went wrong?

“You finished snooping?” He stands behind me and leans his chin on top

of my head.

“I think I’m about done,” I say with a smile he can’t see, and he swats me on the ass.

“How about I give you a tour of the bedroom?” I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck. He picks me up, and my legs wrap around his waist.

He carries me into his room and drops me down onto the bed. I’m enveloped in rich cotton, and a mattress that both hugs and supports me at the same time.

He makes a quick work of sliding my boots, jeans, and panties off. I help him along with my top and bra, then I lean back on my elbows and watch as he undresses himself.

“Random question, but just how big are you?”

“Seriously, you want an actual number?” He looks incredulous as his brows rise, and he pauses with his thumbs hooked in his waistband.

“I mean, don’t all guys measure themselves at least once?”

“I haven’t. What, you want me to grab a ruler so you can measure me?” It could help.

“I mean, if you have one...”

“I am not going to stand here while you measure my dick. You’d be measuring me soft if anything, and that won’t be a true number.” He folds his arms across his thick chest, and I’m biting my cheek to stop from laughing.

“Okay. Can you do a windmill?” I’m not going to last much longer, this is just too fun.

He sticks his tongue in his cheek as he takes his clothes off. My mouth runs dry at the sight of him, then his hands are on his hips and he’s doing it. I shouldn’t clap, but I can’t help myself.

“You are so fucking weird.” He pushes me back down until I’m flat on my back. His mouth falls on my nipples, and his hand works my other one.

He builds a frenzy up within me. I need him somewhere else, but I don’t know how to tell him what I want.

“I want you on top.” He bites down on my nipple, before climbing up me, and sucking on my bottom lip.

He flips us until I’m on top of him, and then he guides my hips until I’m rubbing myself against his length.

He lines himself up, and then I’m pushing down. It’s only just registered that we’re facing one another, and he’s never had me a position where I could

stare into his eyes before. So, why can't I? Why am I sliding mine closed as I grind myself against him? Rolling my hips and building the perfect friction between us.

His fingers are digging into my hips as he holds me in place and thrusts himself up, hard and fast. Hitting every spot I have, and I'm so damn close.

"Look at me, Tiny One." His voice is gravelly and deep, and it's only adding to the pleasure that's coursing through my body.

"You don't like to," I moan out, hoping he won't stop this delicious torture.

"What's one more rule?" My eyes open slowly and lock onto his.

The warmth in my stomach is growing hotter. Calling it an inferno may not even cover it, and staring into his eyes is intense. Too intense. I feel more bare than I have ever felt before. I lean down and kiss him hard, it's all tongue and clashing teeth. Messy, dirty, and so damn hot.

I come hard and he isn't far behind; he grunts as I cry out, and then I just lay here. Spent and content, as my eyes drift closed, and the night just falls away.



I WAKE UP, tangled up with him, and he's snoring lightly. I can't believe I fell asleep, should I feel embarrassed? I just feel so relaxed, and this is turning into one of my favorite ways to wake up in the morning.

I draw circles on his chest, tangling with the smatter of hair he has, and he isn't even stirring. I don't know why I drop a kiss onto his neck, before I climb off the bed and steal his dressing gown.

I walk into his living room, I may as well make us some breakfast. I have no idea if Tucker can even cook, and I may as well whip something together while I'm up.

I root around through his cupboards and find a waffle iron, and get set to whip up some batter. There's nothing better than homemade waffles, I just hope he likes them. I pull open a few drawers, trying to find either a whisk or a spoon at least. My eyes fall on a letter tucked away, I'm not going to read it, although I can see the address stamped across the top. It's from the court, is Tucker being served? Is this why he keeps disappearing and spends so much time on his phone? His attitude makes a little more sense. I close the drawer

and finally find a whisk and start to make the waffles. Luckily, he also has cinnamon. It's definitely one of my more preferred flavors, and again, I really hope he likes it too.

I get the batter made up and switch on the waffle iron, and I can hear movement coming from the bedroom. He has excellent timing.

"A guy could get used to this," he says, as he walks toward me in nothing but his boxers.

"I'll supply the food, and you can bring the view," I smirk at him and he returns it.

"Well, well, well. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were flirting with me." He comes closer and drops his face down to my neck.

"I thought I'd give it a try. I have no idea if I'm any good at it though." I laugh, even as my neck feels impossibly hot, and a tingling sensation passes up the back of my neck.

"It works for me," he says against my skin, and I shiver as he slips his hand inside my dressing gown.

This feels so domestic, and beyond natural. It's like we've always done this, and it feels... weird.

"I have one more surprise for you, Tiny One, and then we'll have to return to normality. We must leave your necklace somewhere though. We can't risk anyone discovering where we've gone." He pulls his hand away, and starts grabbing plates and setting them up on the counter, before switching on the coffeemaker.

"Can I ask where we're going?"

"It's complicated. I've got a place that I need to view. Hopefully, it will end up being my permanent residence, and then we're going to see someone. Don't worry, I'm sure they'll like you," he says easily, and I guess I can't ask for any more information. I'll just have to be patient and see what happens.

WE GET into a different car this time, and my necklace is sitting on his kitchen counter, screaming at me to run in and grab it. What if I'm seen without it? What if someone recognizes Tucker? I know he isn't as well known as everyone else, but someone will surely recognize him at some point.

“Is this your car?” I ask, as I look at the fabric upholstery, and fairly basic stereo. It’s not a typical Harkwright car at all. It’s probably the kind I would buy.

“It is, it’s one of the few things that has no connection to the Harkwright name. Sometimes, I like to be normal, and it’s hard to do that if you’re driving around in a Vanquish, Bentley, or Ferrari. There is nothing wrong with a Ford Focus, and I’m not a pretentious prick like the rest of them.” He checks the road as though it’s done him harm, before pulling away.

“I know you may not answer this, but it’s been bugging me since I got accepted...” I trail off, and wait for him to say that it’s okay to speak my mind.

“Just come out with it. It’s so fucking annoying that you ask to ask a question. If I don’t want to answer, I won’t. It’s as simple as that,” he says roughly. He flexes his finger against the steering wheel, before undoing the top button of his shirt.

This man is giving me emotional whiplash, so why do I like him so much? What is this connection between us, that has me saying things I wouldn’t usually? How can I bear to be around him when he can cut me down so easily?

“Are you all related, or am I missing something? I know you all share the same surname, but...” I don’t really know how to finish my sentence.

“No, we’re not all technically related. Some of us aren’t even true Harkwrights. We share no blood or anything, but we have the name and that’s all that matters.” He rubs at the back of his neck, but that doesn’t sound right.

“I thought blood is what matters to your family, that adoption doesn’t count and if you don’t share blood, then you won’t be counted as one. Unless you marry into the family, I guess.”

“Marriage doesn’t make you one of us, it just gives you the name. A lot of power comes from owning it, but if you don’t have the acceptance of Sir and the other Matriarchs, then you won’t last long. In your case, you wouldn’t have been a legacy if your mom had attended instead of your birth mom. For us, however, it’s a little different.” He cuts me the side eye, and I don’t want to test his patience any further.

“What, you have nothing left to ask? Come on now, Five, you clearly have something else on your mind.”

“How many of you are Harkwrights by blood?”

“Out of the guys in attendance, it would be,” he strokes his chin, as he mouths names that I can’t make out, “eight. I could be missing someone, but I’m sure it’s eight. Two are adopted like you, three are stepchildren, and the last two cousins by marriage, but on the outsiders side. Family can petition to Sir to allow them to use the name, but they have to work for him and follow his rules. The parents and the children, that’s why not everyone is happy about attending that place.” He grinds his jaw back and forth, as he grips the steering wheel tight enough to turn his knuckles white. “The outsiders are never poor, and they have to pay money into the family trust, basically they buy their way in. If they have skills, they’re welcomed in. However, not everyone can buy their way in. If you will not be useful to the family, then you’ll be turned away. It’s messed up and like something out of a movie, but it’s our life.”

“You’ve been there twice though, haven’t you? If you don’t like it, then why did you come back?” Maybe I should buy myself a gag, that may shut me up. *I doubt it.*

“Who said I didn’t like it? However, I chose to attend last time because I wanted the experience, this year I just wanted to escape from reality for a while. Do not ask me why,” he growls that last part, and my mouth slams shut.

See, I can follow instructions - that aren’t baking recipes - when I need to.

“We haven’t got a guard detail this time, so don’t wander off alone. This will also stay between us, I can’t afford to get a beating from Sir for acting irresponsibly.”

I nod in response, and I wonder how he pulled it off. If we’re not allowed to be out without a guard, then how did he get rid of them?

WE PULL up to a two-story brownstone, with a manicured lawn and a sprinkler working happily. There are roses and other flowers I don’t know the names of planted around and it feels quaint. We pull up the driveway, and I can’t help but notice that it isn’t guarded by a gate or surrounded by too many acres to count. It’s on a quiet little terrace, and it has a family vibe to it.

“Let’s go inside.” He climbs out of the car and strolls over to the front

door. I have to rush to catch up to him, and I manage to catch him in the entrance.

There are hooks on the wall to hang your coats, and space for shoes, and even an umbrella stand. Who lives here?

“Come on. It’s ten thirty, and we are fighting the clock today.”

He steps through another door, which opens up into a hallway, with embossed wallpaper on the walls. The living room is to our left, and the kitchen is down at the bottom. The stairs are to our right and there’s another door on the left side as well.

“The living room is rather basic, but it will be easy enough to decorate. It’s the kitchen I need help with, if you could look and see if I will need to have anything done to it,” he says, as he places his hand on the small of my back, and guides me to where he wants me.

I open the cupboards and check the oven, before moving onto the floor and the lighting. It’s a lovely kitchen, and I could cook up a storm here, but the oven will not last long.

“The space is narrow, but if you knocked down the wall for the dining room, you could have a kitchen/dining room combined, and make the space larger. I would replace the oven, but it would do the trick for one person. Other than that, I would personally add some more cupboard space, but I would have so many baking supplies that I would need it. If this is for you, then I’d say it’s perfect.” I stop twirling around, and he looks at the oven pensively.

“The oven can go, I’ll get some built in instead. A large fridge freezer and knocking down the wall will be fine. Right, the last stop is the garden, and then I need to take a quick look at the bedroom before we can go. You can join me if you’d like, or wait in the car. It’s up to you.” He doesn’t wait for my answer before he walks outside and I duck my head inside the open dining room door, before hurrying to join him.

The space is crazy, it’s long and wide, with a treehouse and swing. There’s a pond at the bottom and an archway covered in roses. It’s so pretty, and every flower adds to the beauty of it, I can’t see a single weed. There’s even... no, it can’t be. I rush over to the greenhouse and look at all the herbs and vegetables that are growing inside. Whoever owns this house now is my kind of person.

“What will you do with the treehouse?”

“Knock it down or keep it for my niece, I bet she’d love it. When she gets

older, of course. Unless I get a spiral staircase built so she doesn't have to climb a rope ladder." He rubs at his chin again, as he stares up at it.

"Will you keep the greenhouse? Or..."

"I don't really know what I'll do with it, I didn't even realize it had one. I've only seen photos of the inside, and this is the only time I could get out to view it."

"Where's the agent then? Aren't they supposed to escort us around?" I ask, looking around, as if they'll magically appear, now that I've mentioned it.

"She'll be meeting us outside to see if I want it or not. It isn't as though I'm going to trash the place or anything, so we're safe." He turns around and heads back inside.

We go upstairs and the bathroom has a glass-enclosed shower, with a massage function built in. There's a claw-foot bathtub, and, of course, a sink and toilet.

They have painted the first bedroom in grey, and it has a large bay window, with a seat beneath it. It looks out onto the garden. I bet it would look beautiful in the winter, covered in snow. There's an en suite attached, and a built-in wardrobe.

The next room has a window seat as well, with a queen bed set up, and another built-in wardrobe. There is so much floor space, it's unreal, but it doesn't feel too big. It isn't like the Academy where you feel as though you'll get lost. Or if you fill a room up, you know there is no way the stuff would ever fit once you finally return home. *If you return home.*

"There's also an attic room, but I've seen enough. Come on, Tiny One, it's time to go."

We walk back downstairs and out of the house, and a stylish woman comes into view. She gives Tucker a warm smile, and an appreciative stare, before smiling at me.

"So, what do we think? As I said before, I could probably swing permission if there are any changes you want to be made. The seller is looking to move on quickly, so I could get the paperwork finalized quicker than usual. All you have to do is say yes." She smiles at him and he returns it easily.

"The dining room wall will need to go, I want to open it up into the kitchen. Will he be leaving the greenhouse and items inside, or taking them with him?"

“He’s leaving everything you saw in there, so you can keep it, sell it, or throw it. The choice is yours. So, do we have a deal?” She holds her hand out to him and he stares at it for a second or two.

“I’ll take it.” He engulfs her hand in his and then it’s done. Just like that, Tucker has purchased a house. It shouldn’t be that easy.

WE DRIVE for a few hours and I still don’t know who we are going to visit. I don’t even know where his new home is, I really should have paid more attention. His phone rings and he glances at it quickly before swearing under his breath. We pull to the side; he climbs out and walks off to the side.

I can’t really hear what is being said, but occasionally a few words reach me.

“Fuck...”

“Screw you...”

“Don’t push me...”

It’s been ten minutes when he slides back in. I stare out the windshield and pretend I am not dying of curiosity. He puts the car back into gear, and then we’re on the move once more. I watch as the streets become more familiar, and then we’re pulling into a diner. I’m choking on the ball lodged in my throat.

“We can only stay for lunch, then we have to get moving. I just thought this may be a good place to try.” He throws his phone into the footwell and then gets out, and I don’t even wait.

I’m out of the car and running up to the doors, I can see my mom placing plates on the side before she’s running toward me and we meet in the doorway. I can’t believe we’re here, and I can see my mom in person.

“Luna bean,” she says on a sob and I can barely contain my own. Tucker hasn’t even joined us yet, and I love that he’s giving us this moment.

“I miss you so much, mama.” She soothes my hair away from my face, before pulling away and holding me by my shoulders.

“You look good, baby, healthy, and dare I say happy? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, mama. I’m eating way too much food and studying every moment I get. But I always find time for baking.” She laughs at that, and then steers me inside. It isn’t long before Tucker is taking the seat opposite, and

my mom takes the one to my right.

“So, you must be Tucker,” she says politely, as she looks him over.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s nice to speak to you in person.” What does he mean by that? Has he been talking to my mom?

“I agree, although I must admit. I’ve had it in my mind that I have to hate you, and I’m not sure if I’ve changed my opinion yet.” I love her honesty, I just hope he doesn’t try to cut her down.

“It makes sense, I wouldn’t like me either. However, as we discussed, I have brought her. We’ve got about an hour before we leave. Make sure you tell her everything, ma’am. Before someone else does and believe me. A lot of people deal in secrets, it’s better she hears this one from you.”

“Mom, what is he talking about?”

“We’ll talk, I promise. Let me just grab you both something to eat and then... I’ll take an extended break. I’m sure Tony won’t mind.” She rushes off, without even asking what Tucker would like to eat.

“Do you have any idea what she’s going to bring me?” he asks quietly, and I have to think for a minute.

“She’ll probably just order us the same thing, a chocolate shake and a burger with chili fries. It’s what I always ordered whenever she brought me in here.”

“Okay, I can handle that. As long as it isn’t a salad. I need real food.” He pats his stomach and I laugh softly.

I forget how big he is, until he sits opposite me, and takes up a lot of space. I’d feel sorry for anyone who had to share a bench seat with him.

“Am I going to be angry with my mom when she tells me?” He clearly knows what it is, and if I’m honest with myself, I don’t really know how I feel about that.

“I don’t know how you’ll react, but no, I don’t think so. You may feel a little hurt, but secrets aren’t always a bad thing. It’s just better you hear it from her than our resident secret keeper.” He stares out of the window, and I wonder if he regrets not bringing his phone with him.

“We have a resident secret keeper? What does that even mean?”

“Every Harkwright in a position of power has something they do to ensure they get what they want. Some bribe, threaten, and some use sweet talk.”

“Like Aeron’s mom.” I don’t mean to say it out loud, but I seem to have his full attention now.

“Yes, like her. She deals in secrets. And uses them whenever she wants to get her own way.”

I guess morals only exist when you don't have money, what a sad world we live in.

Mom returns with the food, and we tuck in while she waits on other tables. We say nothing else, as I listen to the hustle and bustle of the diner. Everyone here seems so happy and carefree. I miss it more than I realized.

“Can I get you anything else?” she asks, and we shake our heads as we finish the fries.

“Could we have a minute, if that's allowed?” she asks Tucker, and he thinks for a moment before he gets up.

“I can give you five minutes,” he says, and then he walks out and heads to his car.

“I hate that this is happening. I'm sorry, Luna. Maybe I should have told you, but I didn't want to ruin the way you saw your sister. You two were so close, and I wanted to preserve it.” She's wringing her hands, until she picks up a napkin and shreds it.

“Just tell me, mom, please.”

“Poppy didn't come back because she had something happen to her. They kicked her out of college.” What? That makes little sense. “She wanted to join a sorority, and there was only one place left. It was down to her and another girl. She bullied her, Luna, and it got so bad, the girl had to leave. I don't know what she did, but it didn't stop there. There was this guy she decided she had to have, and she created rumors about his girlfriend. He didn't buy into it, and she couldn't understand why he would stay with her.” She pauses for a moment and takes a mouthful of my shake, before grimacing at the sweetness. “She trashed her room, broke a window, destroyed all of her belongings, and shredded her clothes. I made a deal with the dean, he wouldn't press charges if I covered the costs. I don't know how he got the girl to agree, but here we are. I'm paying off the damages she caused, and a little extra for the girls she hurt. I don't know if she fell into depression because of guilt, or because they made her leave. All I know is that she destroyed those poor girls and I don't even know who my daughter is,” her voice cracks, and her hands are shaking.

“Mom, it's not your fault. Didn't the doctors say it could be because of what is wrong with her?”

“It's a possibility, but I'm not sure. Even if it is, can I really condone her

actions? I don't know what happened when she went to the other college, but something made her fall into Catatonia and I can't help but wonder if it was some kind of karma. How terrible does that make me? Wondering if my child deserved what she got. I can't handle anymore, Luna. I just want this guilt to go away." Tears are streaming down her face, and heads are turning.

"Mom, it's understandable what you are feeling, I probably would have thought the same thing. I love Poppy, I really do. But lately, I've been wondering if I put her on a pedestal for all the wrong reasons. It's okay to not be okay with what she did, but it doesn't mean you love her any less." I wrap my arm around her. I wish I could make her tears go away, I don't like to see her hurting.

"Donna, are you okay?" Tony comes over, his brow is wrinkled, and his eyes look... pained.

"I'm fine, Tony. Don't worry. I just... need a few moments." She tucks her hair behind her ears, and I can't help but pick up on it.

Does mom have a thing for Tony?

"Go outside and get some air, take as much time as you need." His hand hovers in the air, before he wipes it on his pants, and walks back behind the counter.

We walk outside, and she leans against the wall, while taking deep breaths. Tucker is leaning against the car, and now and then, I catch him looking at us. He walks over to us, with a grimace on his face, and I know what he's about to say.

I wrap my arms around mom and place my mouth close to her ear. "You are the greatest mom a girl could ever hope for, you do everything you can for us, and you have nothing to feel guilty about. I know you didn't want me to join the Academy, but I'm glad I have. I've learnt so much about myself, and I think I may have also finally discovered what the right kind of love feels like. Even if it is complicated and messy, I wouldn't trade it for the world. If you have that with Tony, then go for it. I just want you to be happy."

She looks at me with wide eyes, and her cheeks are as bright as a tomato. I knew she liked him, and I'm glad I was right. Tony is a good man, and she's worked for him for the past two years. Besides, if he treats her wrong, I could always set someone on him. *You wouldn't do that.* Yeah, but he doesn't know that.

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TIME FLIES BY

I'VE GOT a study plan organized, and both D and Maddox are helping me to stay on track. I'm helping Dustin with the baking side of things, and Aeron is helping me with the econ. I didn't know what to say when he offered, but Tucker has agreed to give him permission, as long as it's for studying.

"Okay, how are you with the principles and understanding problems that can arise in business?"

"Great, yep, I've got that down," I say with an eager nod.

"Yeah, well, I want you to answer these questions and then we'll see if you need to study any further. You don't want to chance it, Luna. If you fail this year, then you're gone." Wow, what a way to drive it home. *Thanks for making me a nervous wreck, Aeron.*

I get to work on the quiz and then pass it back to him.

"What happened between you and Tucker?"

"What do you mean?" he asks, glancing up from the quiz sheet.

"Didn't you guys used to be close? You, Tucker, and Tom."

"Yeah, I guess so, it hasn't really changed. Things are just... different now than when we were younger. Sometimes things change, and there isn't a lot you can do about it." He rubs the back of his neck, before picking up a pen, and marking the sheet.

"How did I do?"

"You did good, I've marked the places you could develop further. But I can help you with that next time. For now, we just need to know which areas you have a good grasp on."

"Okay, thanks for doing this. I know you don't really want to be around

me right now. I understand it; I do. So, yeah, thank you.” I really need to stop rambling.

“I want to be around you, Little Zero. It’s just so fucking awkward right now. I’m waiting for the feelings to go away, and then I can get back to my usual self.” He laughs, but it sounds more bitter than cheerful.

“I wish things could be different, I hate how complicated things are now. I never expected any of this to happen.” I get up off the floor and get us both a coffee.

“Maria thinks I should wait for things to get better, that you might choose me in the end. But we don’t deal in possibilities. It’s facts or nothing, and the fact is, you don’t love me.” I go to say something, anything, but he holds his hand up to stop my word from spilling out. “Look, can we just not do this? I’m here to help you. Let’s leave all the emotional crap to everyone else.” I nod my head, even though it doesn’t feel right. But what more can I say?

“I can’t believe how quickly the time has gone. It feels like it was only yesterday we were shooting balls of paint at each other. Now here we are, two weeks later, preparing ourselves for finals.” I think that’s a good alternative to the awkward, emotional stuff.

“Well, Tucker has been keeping you busy. Last year flew by. Although, I was high for the majority of it.” His fingers twitch, and he brushes his sleeves up to reveal a new tattoo on his arm.

“You got a new one.”

“Yeah, I always do stupid shit when I’m off my face,” he says with a Cheshire smile, but I can’t get a good enough look at it.

“Right, next up, math.”

Can my groan be any louder? Nope, it’s math. I may be good at it, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy it.

I MEET Daria on the front steps, I’ve had enough of Aeron’s mock exams, and this is a welcome distraction.

“Hey, homegirl, how’s the studying going?”

“Great, but it’s making my head hurt,” I grouse, and she pats my hand before laughing at me.

“Hey, it will all be worth it in the end.”

“You know, I don’t know what you want to do when you leave here.” I feel crappy for that, but I can’t pretend otherwise. Even if we are heading off for archery. *Please, don’t shoot me, I think that will hurt a lot worse than any paintball.*

“I want to be a journalist. Who knows, maybe one day I’ll be writing a piece on your bakery. That would be pretty cool.” She slides her arm in mine and we start walking through the gardens.

“I’ll be sure to buy every article you write. You’ll do fantastic, I just know it.”

“Thanks, Lu, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself just yet. We have one more year ahead of us, and I’m not exactly the popular girl around this place. I keep expecting my number to get bumped to the bottom, just to spite me.” She scowls at the topiaries, and I wonder if she’s picturing Bradley right now.

“That won’t happen. Besides the third spot is still up for grabs. I thought it would have been filled by now.”

“It won’t happen. Everyone is just waiting for you to earn it. I don’t know what you’re supposed to do though.” That’s a weird thing to say, right?

“Why do you say that? Anyone could claim it at this point.”

“Anyone could, but they won’t. Come on, Luna. Look at the way you acted, and you are still here. We’ve all heard about the time you got drunk in the game room. Anyone else and they would have been punished severely. But you got away with it scot free. I think you should just do whatever it is they want you to do. I’d rather it goes to you than Twenty, or any of those other pitiful girls in this place.” She has so much anger in her, and I hate it.

“I don’t know what they are waiting for, but I think I need to try. I need the money, I just don’t want to lose any more of myself to get it.” I have this heaviness in my chest and I can feel my stomach hardening. I don’t know what more they want from me, haven’t I given them enough already?

“Have you been in the maze since the strangler started?” she asks out of the blue, and I don’t like the way her eyes keep straying in that direction.

“Once, but I had Darius with me. Speaking of Darius, I haven’t seen any of the guards around lately, what’s going on there?”

“You haven’t heard?” I shake my head, and her eyes turn down at the corners. “Sir called them away. Apparently, we’re not in danger anymore. Nothing has happened in months, and I think they’re trying to pretend it was nothing more than a shared bad dream.” A shudder passes through me, that

shakes me to my very core. I hope they're right.

We walk over to the entrance, but I'm not willing to risk it, and I don't want D to either. I pull on her arm, and she comes to a stop, but she can't take her eyes off it.

"D, what's going on?"

"I saw someone go in there earlier, and I wanted to know if they had left or..."

Oh crapsticks, she must have seen Bradley go in there with another girl. How insensitive can he be?

"D, it isn't worth it. He's not worth it. You deserve so much better than Bradley." A faint laugh passes under her breath before she shakes herself off. She gives me a wide smile, and we head toward the archery field to let off some steam. At least she won't shoot me, I think.

THE NEXT TWO weeks pass in a blur of girl time with D and Caitlyn. Sweaty, blissful nights with Tucker, and studying with Aeron, Maddox, and Dustin. I'm pretty much being left alone by everyone else, and my dining table is now back to just belonging to me and D. Caitlyn has yet to eat with us, but I think she's building herself up to it.

"Have you heard, have you heard?" D asks, jumping on the spot next to my chair. I put my fork down and stare up at her expectantly, and she's wearing the biggest smile.

"What's going on?" I ask, forgetting all my obsessing over finals and preparation, as I'm swept up in her obvious excitement.

"We're having a dance, and we get to go out dress shopping. I am so excited." She claps her hands together, and I almost join her until I see Bradley. He stops walking toward their table, and heads toward us instead. My stomach twists up in knots, and I'm starting to worry about what my friend may do when he gets to us.

"Hey, girls, how are you doing?" he asks with his charming smile, one that will never work on me.

"Oh, we're great. Thanks, Bradley. So sweet of you to ask," D replies with a... damn, an actual, genuine smile. This is not what I was expecting.

"Oh, um, that's great. Why are you so excited?" His eyes are burning, and

if I didn't know better. I would say he was jealous, but of what?

"Why, the dance, of course. You know how much I love to dance. It's going to be so much fun. I hope your new girl doesn't step on your toes or anything. I mean it genuinely. Some people just have two left feet." She pats him on the back, before sauntering over to the food station.

"What the fuck just happened?" he asks the air, as his eyes follow her every move.

I know he isn't asking me, but I can't stop myself from saying, "I have no idea."

Bradley stalks away, and she comes back happier than I've seen her in a while. She drops down onto her seat, and moans loud as she takes a mouth of pancakes, and so many people are staring right at her. Even a few of the Harkwrights. It has to be the noises she's making.

"D, what is going on? I wasn't expecting you to be so friendly toward him." I tilt my head in his direction, and she laughs softly, prettily.

"Oh, Lu. I am just feeling so good right now. I get to go clothes shopping, dancing, and I have you back in my life. What could be better? Besides, I meant it, I know he likes to dance and Seven is no twinkle toes. Believe me, you will not want to miss the dance. If Tucker won't take you shopping, maybe see if you can tag along with me and Maddox. He has offered to be my chaperone for the occasion," she winks, and I can't stop smiling.

"So, is Maddox taking you to the dance?" I ask, and she laughs loud and carefree this time.

"No, babe. He isn't taking me. But, there may be an Assembly next week after the dance has been and gone. So, try not to pass out when the announcement is made." She tucks back into her food, and I just sit here. I'm slightly in awe of how well she is handling everything. She may well be my new role model, after mom, of course.

We put our plates away once we're done, and leave the mess hall, but not before Tucker and Maddox can catch up to us.

"I take it she's told you about the dance?" Tucker asks, and I simply nod.

"We'll be going shopping on Friday, once classes are over. So you'll have an outfit for Saturday. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. The dance isn't usually held until closer to the end of the academic year, but Sir is mixing things up a bit."

"Is it going to be another masquerade?" I ask, and Daria shakes her head with a knowing smile on her face.

“Not exactly, I mean we can wear a mask if we want to, but this year is going to be a little different. It’s all to do with the seven deadly sins, and the more sinful your dress, the better,” he says against my ear. My mind races at his word, and the sensations he’s stirring within me.

“We’ll leave you girls to do whatever shit you girls do. See you tonight, Tiny One.” He gives me a tongue tangling kiss before he and Maddox walk away.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say he had it bad for you, homegirl.”

If only D, if only.

WE HEAD off to the pool and swim a few laps, and her smile fades for a moment when Jake appears, but it soon returns. I wish I could say the same for myself, I just can’t be happy when he’s around.

“Daria, Luna, how’s it going?”

“It’s going well, we were just talking about the dance,” she says cheerily, but it sounds a little forced. At least, it does to me.

“Don’t remind me, Fourteen won’t stop talking about it. What is it with you girls and dances? I just don’t see the appeal,” he says easily, as he swims circles around us.

“That’s because it doesn’t involve water. I still think you were a fish in a former life.”

“That would have been sweet, I do prefer the water to dry land.” He laughs, and my stomach twists. I can’t be around him, but I can’t just get up and leave either. It isn’t fair to D, and I’m trying so hard to be a better friend.

“Well, we better be going. We’ve got to get changed before our next class.” She gives him a little wave, before heading to the ledge, and pulling herself up.

“See you around, Luna,” he calls, and I can’t stop my spine from stiffening. I throw him a half assed wave and then follow D to the changing rooms. She has no idea how much I need this.

FRIDAY IS FINALLY HERE, and I am more than ready to get out of here for a

little while. All anyone can talk about is the finals, and we'll be starting our mock exams soon, and our final papers before the real tests begin. I'm so scared I'm going to choke, and I just need to get out of my head for a little while.

D meets me down by the stairs, and she can't seem to stop bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Will you calm down? It's just shopping." I laugh, and she sticks her tongue out at me.

"I couldn't have said it better myself." Her back goes ramrod straight, before she relaxes, and turns to talk to Jake.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, Fourteen needs to get a dress, so we thought we would tag along. Tucker said there'll be more than enough room." Great, just what I need. To be stuck in a car with him. Hopefully, they won't go into the same shops as us.

Tucker and Maddox arrive, and we head out to the car waiting for us. I don't know where we're going for our clothes, but hopefully, it won't take too long to get there.

"Everything okay?" Tucker asks as he slips his phone away.

"Yea, everything is fine." I don't sound convincing even to my own ears, I just hope he won't push me on the matter.

We drive for ten minutes before we come to a stop. And that can mean only one thing. We're shopping in the town of Harkwright.

We climb out of the car and walk into the shop that Ms. Vanderbilt took me to when I had to select some clothes. Tucker heads straight over to the counter, and my eyes fall onto the girl who was nothing but kind to me. I can't stop myself from walking over to her, I'm not going to hug her or anything, but I have to say hello.

She turns and smiles at me, before walking over to a rail with dresses already hanging up on it.

"I was hoping it would be you. I can't believe how different you look."

"Is that a good thing?" I ask, as I bite down on my lower lip.

"Definitely a good thing, I told you a few pounds would do you wonders," she says with a wink, and I laugh while nodding my agreement.

"So, we were told they have to be sinful, without giving too much away. This is the best I could come up with, that I thought would suit you. So, go on. Try them on and let me see what I have to work with." She gives me

another wink, and I disappear into the changing room.

I strip out of my pleated skirt and crop top and put on the first dress on the pile. It's red, with a black lace overlay. The back dips down almost to my ass, and the front goes to my belly button. Yeah, that's a hard pass from me. The girls come in, and both shake their heads vehemently, and Daria starts trying on her own dresses.

"I still don't know your name," I say, as I lay the dress down, and pick up the next one.

"It's Shay, and that one doesn't work for you either."

I take a look in the mirror, and I quite like it. It's completely backless, except from the lace across my shoulders. The front cuts across my chest and falls down in a straight line to the floor.

"No, Luna, you can't wear that. It isn't sinful enough," D says, as she twirls around, and my jaw hits the floor.

It's a pale pink halter neck dress, with another neckline that drops down past her belly button. I have no idea how it's staying in place, but I'd like to believe that it's magic. The back is made up of sheer lace, and it falls to the ground like a waterfall.

"Wow, you look amazing," we both say at the same time, and she smiles wide, before taking it off and putting the rest of her clothes back on.

"What, you're not going to try anything else?" I ask.

"Girl, when you know, you know. This is the dress for me, but I'll stay to help you find yours."

I pick up another one, but it's hard to tell what it's like when I hold it up. All I know is, it's black, has flashes of red, and made entirely from lace.

I put it on, and Shay does the back of it up for me. I look in the mirror and I want to say no, but their smiles are so big, I don't know how to.

"Luna, it's perfect. What's wrong?" D asks, as she comes over, and puts her arm around me.

"Don't you think it's too... revealing?" I ask, as I spin around to look at the back.

"It's no worse than wearing a bathing suit, and it covers all the important bits. But if you don't like it, I'm sure we can find you something else."

I want to jump at the chance to refuse this dress, but then I think about how Tucker will react when he sees me in this, and I shake my head.

"No, I'll take it," I say softly, and I just stare at my reflection, wondering who the girl staring back at me truly is.

She's wearing a black lace flower dress, which has one sleeve to the wrist, and the other is bare aside from a layer of lace lying across her shoulder. The dress falls and gathers on the floor, like it's very own puddle. It's all black, except from red roses at the front of the skirt and covering the bottom. It is completely see-through, and I mean, completely. But the flowers around the chest and panty area are darker and hide the essentials.

Fourteen comes strolling in, and her eyes bug out when she sees me.

“Well, clearly you won't be wearing that. I mean come on, slut alert.” She cackles like a witch before disappearing behind one of the changing screens.

That settles it, I'm definitely taking this dress. Forget what the others think, I'm not wearing it for them.

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BUILT FOR SIN

I'VE BEEN ready for hours, D and I were supposed to get ready together, but she had to cancel at the last minute. I can't be upset about it, and I'm not. As long as she's okay, I'm happy. I just don't know what to do with myself, Tucker isn't even due for another hour.

My door opens, and I sigh in relief. I'm not going to complain that he's early, I throw on my dressing gown, so he doesn't miss the big reveal. I leave my bedroom door with a smile on my face. I come up short when I see Tom, instead of Tucker.

"Tom, what are you doing here?" I hope that hasn't come out rude, I don't want to offend him.

"I just wanted to see you before you leave for the ball. I'm not going so I thought I'd see what you're wearing before Tucker comes to get you."

"Why aren't you coming?" I ask, as I take a step closer, and then stop myself.

"It's not really my scene. Besides, I can do without watching Emmet lose it when he can't claim you for the evening like he did at the masquerade. I think I'll pass on all the drama." He doesn't hold himself back like I do, but he stops inches away.

"Do you want to see the dress?" I ask shyly, and he gives a quick jerk of his head.

I take a step back, and pull at the belt, until my dressing gown falls open, and he draws in a deep breath.

"Fuck, Moonbeam. You're going to cause a few heart attacks in that dress tonight. You look... incredible."

My hands go to tuck my hair, but it's already up in its fancy bun, and they meet with nothing but air.

"Thank you," I say with a whisper, and he closes the distance once more.

"I'm going to win you, Moonbeam. No matter what it takes." His hands are suspended in the air, millimeters away from my face.

"I'm not a prize to be won, Tom," I sigh.

"No, you're not, you're the moon, and you're everything. Have a good night." He places a chaste kiss on my cheek, before he leaves me alone, and my hand hovers over my lips. I feel like crying, but I won't let myself. Why do I always come undone whenever he's around? And why can't he love me?

Tucker arrives not long after, but arriving early isn't as good now. If only it had been him instead of Tom, then I wouldn't be feeling so vulnerable right now.

"Wow, Tiny One. You look fucking sinful, and I am not looking forward to seeing all those guys looking at you tonight." He prowls over to me and slides his hand into my hair. Drawing me closer to him, and sucking hard on my bottom lip, before nipping at it.

"We don't have to go," I say hopefully, and he just shakes his head.

"D would have my balls if I kept you away tonight, and she's scary. Bradley is such an idiot."

"Did you know what he was going to do?"

"I had my suspicions, but you're better off asking Emmet or Aeron. They live closer to him and would know a lot more than I do." He tucks my hand into the crook of his elbow, before leading me down to the ballroom.

It's deathly quiet as we enter, and I can feel too many eyes on me. I don't care what the girls think of this dress, but the guys' attention is making me uncomfortable. Maybe I should have gone with a different dress.

"D is over by the bar. Shall we join her?"

"Yes, please," I say, before leaning my head against his shoulder, and then we move through the crowd and head right for her.

"Damn, Luna, I knew you would slay everyone in that dress. I'm so glad you went for it."

"Hey, look at you. I bet there isn't a jaw that hasn't hit the ground at the sight of you tonight." She blushes furiously, but she doesn't deny it either. "So, who did you come with tonight?" I ask, and she glances around but doesn't say anything.

"Was it, Maddox?" Tucker asks, and I don't know why he's interested.

“Yeah, he’s easy to be around. Besides, he doesn’t make me feel like a piece of meat. That’s always a win in my books.” She smiles over my shoulder, and I turn to see Maddox heading our way.

I’m glad they’ve become friends, seeing as they’re my two favorite people in this place.

“Right, it’s dancing time,” she declares, and we follow her out onto the dance floor as the music changes to a slow song.

My head falls onto Tucker’s shoulder, and my mouth is inches away from his neck. I can’t stop my eyes from slipping closed, as his arms circle my waist and hold me close.

This is one of those perfect moments that I wish I could freeze and keep forever. I never want it to end, but even the best moments have to come to a close, soon or later.

We stay like this for three songs, and even when the beat changes, we still stay the same.

“What’s going on with you, Tucker? You’ve been so good to me lately, I guess I’m just wondering why.”

“It was brought to my attention that I can be a callous prick, and I guess I’m trying to prove that I can be decent when I want to. I know I won’t always be like this, but I think I needed to prove it to myself. And who better to try it with than you.” His hand drops lower, until it’s only inches away from my ass, and I smile contentedly against him.

I almost don’t notice when the music ends, but then Tucker pulls away and moves to stand behind me. I look up to see Sir up on the stage, with Shane and a guy I’ve never seen before, standing behind him.

“The music will resume momentarily. Now, usually I would wait until an Assembly, but unfortunately, I have to leave for a few weeks, so I will do it now while you are all in attendance. So, why wait?” His eyes cut to Shane, and a sneer is firmly on his face. Shane, however, is smiling. “Shane will no longer be attending the Academy. Once the year ends, he’ll be gone. Therefore, he will be replaced by Thallon, someone who understands the way a Harkwright is supposed to behave within the Academy. He will not be participating with the Academy until the final year commences, but he will be here for tonight.” He pauses for a moment, as his eyes sweep the crowd, and stop on me.

Tucker tightens his grip on my hips, and his reaction is worrying me.

“The final matter is that Jake has relinquished his claim on number

Fourteen, with immediate effect. No one will be able to claim her for twenty-four hours, and Maddox has claimed Daria Lewiston. As this is not her first claiming, I will not explain the rules again. Welcome to the family, Daria, for now. That is all for this evening. Enjoy your ball and good luck on your finals.”

He leaves the stage, and the music starts back up, but no one is dancing anymore. Tucker is still holding onto me with a death grip, and I’m not even trying to fight it.

“Miss Carter, may I have a moment of your time?” Sir asks, and I’m taken aback by the fact he’s even asking. Again, I can’t refuse, so I nod and follow him out to the hallway.

I wish Tucker would follow us, but I know he won’t, not without an invitation from Sir himself.

“I heard what happened during your meeting, and it is unfortunate how Mrs. Masters treated you. I will not tolerate that behavior, and I have dealt with her. I hope her words have not put you off your future endeavors.” He rests his hand on my bare shoulder, and my stomach rolls.

“No, Sir, I am more determined than ever.”

“I am glad to hear it. Although I may suggest you find a way to increase your number. You will have a greater chance if you have more collateral to fall back on.”

“I understand, Sir, I am just waiting to earn my chance. I’m not going to ask or expect it to be handed to me, I just need to prove myself.” I have no idea if I’m saying the right thing, but his eyes are sparkling, nevertheless.

“What a mature reasoning you have. Good luck, Miss Carter. I’m sure I’ll be seeing a lot more of you once the new year begins.” He takes my hand between both of his, before releasing me and leaving me alone.

Why would I see more of him? Please, please tell me that was nothing more than idle words. I shake myself off before rejoining Tucker. He keeps staring at me, but I’m not going to say anything. Not now, and certainly not here.



THALLON IS CIRCLING THE BALLROOM, and I doubt many are immune to him. With his dark, soulful eyes, short, black hair and stubble lining his strong

jaw. He has that broody look down to perfection, and just the right amount of muscles. He's wearing a leather jacket and dark, stain-washed jeans, with a pair of biker boots, and a chain dangling across the side of his thigh.

"It had to be Thallon," Aeron says, as he drops down beside me, and I can't even hide my surprise.

"Did you expect anyone else? I bet he'll be a much better soldier than Shane ever was. He has more to prove after all," Tucker says flippantly, and both D and myself keep looking between them.

"Be careful what you say," Aeron says in a singsong voice, as he stares at me, then D.

He's got pot leaking from his pores, and his eyes are hooded and clouded over. I doubt he'll stay for much longer, not without causing some kind of scene.

"Is he okay?" I ask quietly.

"He will be," Tucker replies, before placing his hand on my thigh.

"No need to piss on your territory. I'm just trying to avoid One. She's like a damn dog with a bone, and she will not leave me the fuck alone. It would be so much easier if I were gay." The whole table goes quiet, and I can't stop myself from glancing at Maddox.

His hands are clenched tight on the table, and his face is ashen as he glares daggers into him.

"Maddox, could you make sure Luna gets back okay? I'm going to get Aeron back to his room." He pulls Aeron to his feet. Tucker doesn't even move out of the way when Aeron slams his fist into the side of his face. He doesn't react at all. "I'll join you once I've got him sorted out," he says to me, and I watch them disappear through the doors.

"I'm sorry about Aeron," I say to Maddox and he just shakes his head.

"It isn't your fault. He never knows when to shut his mouth. Are you ladies okay if we leave now? I don't think I can take much more of this."

Me and D share a look before we climb to our feet and move to stand beside him. If he needs to leave, then we'll leave. It's as simple as that.

THE REST of the weekend goes by slowly, but now, we only have one month until our final exams, and I think nearly everyone is feeling the pressure.

From the dancers trying to perfect their routines for the showcase, to the science majors, and the arty types who have to complete whatever they've chosen to create.

My baking one doesn't worry me at all, well, at least not unnecessarily, but the others? Damn, how can you know if you're ready or not? All I can do is revise, and oh yeah, revise.

I've barely got time to see D or Maddox, and even Tucker has taken to bringing his material to my room so he can focus on it. I don't know if he's doing it because he wants to spend time with me, or to stop anyone else from turning up.

I'm ratty, and temperamental, and I have no idea if my attitude can get any worse.

"Calm down, Five. You've still got a month before the exams. It will be fine," Tucker says, as he sits reading through one of his module books.

"That's easy for you to say, you don't suck at everything," I snap, and now I feel guilty.

"Go and lie down, now," he orders, and I swallow hard as I walk into my room and lie down.

"On your front, Five." I flip over and I feel as he pulls my skirt up.

"That wasn't nice, Five, and I feel like you need to be punished." My stomach drops, and I don't know what to expect.

I jump as his hand connects with my ass, and then he rubs the pain away before he does it again. This should be horrible, maybe even degrading, but my panties are already getting soaked. I'm enjoying it more than I thought I would.

His hand slides between my legs and slides beneath my panties. He slides them through my wetness, and I cry out and forget all the stress I was feeling moments ago. My panties are ripped off my body and I feel them snap against my skin. The pain only lasts for a few seconds before he's lining himself up with me. One quick thrust, and he's buried deep inside. My teeth bite down onto my fist as he pulls out and then slams himself home. Repeatedly, until I can't tell which way is up or down.

"Maybe I should be naughty more often," I grind out through my groans.

"You won't hear any complaints from me," he says against my shoulder, before he sinks his teeth into my skin. I cry out once more, as I tighten against him and spiral over the edge.

"Oh fuck, Luna." His moan is so guttural, and it's driving me insane.

He leans against me, and I can feel him everywhere. Even as he falls free, and the bed gets sticky. Yet, I still don't want to move.

I'M WALKING to the library when I see Emmet duck inside a classroom. I know there aren't any more classes this evening, and my curiosity is killing me. I shouldn't have a look, I should just go into the library and forget I saw anything. So, why are my feet taking me in his direction? I glance through the tiny window to see him holding Maddox up against the wall.

My vision clouds red, and all common sense abandons me as I storm into the room. Emmet takes one look at me, shakes his head, and then releases him.

"What the heck are you doing? He's your brother." I can't believe this.

"Luna, it's okay, don't get involved," Maddox says, and I don't understand why he's defending him.

"Maddox, he had you pinned against the wall. That isn't okay."

"It's none of your business, Luna. If you get involved, then you'll get in trouble. Just leave, please." I don't know what to say, and I'm trying not to feel hurt.

"Okay, I'll... I-I-I guess I'll s-see you later." I turn around with shaking hands, and then go to the library. The place I should have gone all along.

THE REST of the month is a crazy whirlwind of late night study sessions, my body weight in caffeine, and not a lot else.

Things have been weird between me and Maddox since I walked in on what Emmet was doing, and no one is willing to tell me what was going on. I can't question them either, so we've reached an impasse. It's easier to stick to mindless chatter and avoid anything real. I'm glad I have D and Caitlyn to keep me sane at least, and Maddox is still helping me. But now, so is Emmet. Apparently, he's the best person to help me prepare. I'm not going to argue with it, but he never even offered. He just joined us one day, and now he's at every study session.

I'm waiting in the library for them to get here. Tucker wasn't keen on

Emmet being in my room. Which I can definitely understand. Emmet is a loose cannon, and I never know how he'll be. Even worse, I don't know how I will react. I still think the whole mom situation is weird and I don't understand it, but... and I hate myself so much for this. I want him, hence why I won't allow myself to be alone with him.

Damn you, New York, you gave me a new insight into Emmet, and now I want to see more. I hate you, as much as a person can hate a state. Yep, and I'm not going to take it back, you are just evil.

"Why are you giving the wall a death stare? Did it insult your family or something?" Emmet asks with a smirk, as he takes a seat beside me.

"No, not the wall," I grumble, as I look around for Maddox.

"Don't bother, he isn't coming." My eyes meet his, and I swallow hard.

"Oh, should we reschedule then?" Please, say yes. Pretty, pretty please.

"Why? We're both here."

Yes, yes, we are. That's the problem, because this library doesn't have a librarian.

"I have a few practice exams, so let's get to it. Unless there's something else you'd rather do." He lifts one side of his mouth, and his eyes close halfway.

"Nope, tests it is," I croak out, as I seize the papers and write my answers with shaky hands.

"Why so uncomfortable? Unless you're still pissy about that classroom."

I sigh as I place the papers and pen on the table.

"I don't like when Maddox gets picked on. He doesn't deserve it, and no one seems to stand up for him. Not until the damage is already caused, of course."

"I wasn't 'picking' on him. Believe it or not, I was being a good big brother. He was on the verge of doing something stupid, and I was trying to prevent it." He looks bored with this conversation, but I'm anything but.

"How stupid?"

"Incredibly, moronically, stupid. Maddox is a smart guy, but he's also naïve. Even when he knows the way people will react, he still hopes for the best. It would be pathetic on anyone else, but Maddox... What can I say? He's different." He picks up a book, and starts flicking through the pages, and my back goes rigid.

Different, is he for real?

"Maddox is the best guy I know in this place and sometimes being

different is a good thing. I can't..."

He places his hand over my mouth and leans in close enough I can feel his breath fan across my face and smell peppermint on his breath.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way, and I don't know how much you know of Maddox. Whether you're the type of person he'll confide in, but if he has, then you must know that certain secrets can be damaging, especially with whom our father is. He suspects something, but as long as he can claim ignorance, he doesn't care. That, and he hopes Shane will beat some sense into him." His nose wrinkles as he speaks of his dad, before he presses a fist against his mouth, and puffs out his cheeks.

His hand falls away from my mouth as he leans back, and I say the first thing that pops into my head.

"I'm glad he's leaving. I'll feel a lot safer."

"That's a strange way to look at it, seeing as Thallon is taking his place. There are plenty of people here who would push you down a flight of stairs, given half the chance. Don't fool yourself into a sense of false security, everyone is out for themselves in this place. And honestly, the girls are the worst."

"High praise coming from the Devil himself." I look up through my lashes, and he's staring hard at me.

"Indeed, but I doubt I'll lose my title anytime soon. Just feel lucky you haven't seen that side of me. It won't paint a pretty picture." His darkness is bubbling close to the surface. I can feel it, as though it's a tangible presence.

"I'll get these answered." I gesture toward the tests, and he nods before returning to his book.

I calm my racing heart and try to concentrate on the task at hand. It's hard though, yet another reason why Maddox is better. Not just because he's my friend, but because he isn't a distraction. So many times, I've thought of these guys as being a danger to my sanity. Now, I wonder if I was ever sane to begin with.

STRESS AND RELIEF

“ARE YOU READY TO GO?” Tucker asks for the umpteenth time, and I can’t stop myself from rolling my eyes.

I have no idea where this impatience is coming from, but at least I’m good to go now.

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Say that again later, Tiny One,” he says huskily, and my panties grow damp at the sound.

“Where are we going?” All I know is that he told me to put on a pretty dress and be ready by ten. I’m ready on time, it’s not my fault he got here thirty minutes too early.

“I told you. There’s someone I think you should meet before we leave for my niece’s party. At least you’ll know someone other than me there. I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to stay with you for the duration. So, you shouldn’t feel alone this way.” Well, damn. That’s so considerate, sweet, dare I go as far to say as caring.

“Okay, let’s go then.” I tuck my hand within his arm, and he leads me downstairs.

My heart stops as my eyes meet Darius’, but he climbs into the front seat, not reacting in any way. Which is a good thing, I know this. I just wish I could perfect the art of unaffected as well as everyone else apparently can.

“When we first arrive, I will need to go in ahead. I will come and get you once the moment is right, and Darius will stay with you. I thought you would feel more comfortable with him.” God, stop being so nice to me. I can’t take it, it’s too much.

I can't speak over the lump lodged in my throat, but he doesn't seem to need my words. He clips himself in, and I quickly follow suit as his phone starts to ring.

"Hey, we're just about to leave." He goes quiet as, I assume, he listens to whoever is on the other end. If only I had supersonic hearing, now that would be a useful superpower to have in any situation. As long as you can switch it off.

My cheeks flame as I imagine all the things I could overhear without intention, and he's giving me a strange look.

"Don't worry about it, she'll be fine. And I know this is going to be weird for you, but I promise not to ask anymore favors for the rest of the year." He smiles wide at whatever they say in response.

"Yeah, I'll see you soon." He looks to me one last time, as he goes to say something, and then stops himself. "Okay, I'll say it. You're so demanding today. I love you too." He disconnects the call, and I stare at him like a fish out of water.

"Not a word, Luna. Not a damn word."

Trying not to laugh, I mime locking my mouth and throwing away the key.

I can't believe I heard the 'L' word come out of him, and now I'm a little worried about who we're going to see.

We drive for about an hour. The car is completely silent, not even the radio is playing. When we come to a stop, it's down a quiet street, with a simple two-story house. It has a small porch, with overhead shelter. The garden is well manicured, and filled with lots of different flowers. The house could do with a fresh coat of paint, but it's nice. Definitely not the kind of place I was expecting to be going to today.

"Okay, wait here. I'll be back in a little while." He jumps out and enters the house, he doesn't even knock. I stare after him, hoping to get a glimpse of whoever is waiting behind the door, but I can't see anyone else.

"How are you, Snowflake?" Darius asks, and it's been so long since he called me that. I think it was an insult in the beginning, so why is it making me smile like a fool?

"I'm okay, although I haven't seen you in a while."

"I know. Apparently, I'm not needed at the Academy now. He's a fool, but he can't be reasoned with. So, I have a favor to ask of you." He angles himself around, which can't be easy considering how broad he is.

“Of course, if I can, you know I will.”

“If I’m not at the Academy, then I can’t access your tracking chip. It’s how I found you in the pool house that night. I promise I won’t use it to keep tabs on you, I just need to know that you are safe, while I’m not there. I can’t believe that whoever was doing it has suddenly decided to stop.”

“Okaaay, but I can’t give you access.” I know I’m missing the point here. I guess I’m going to need him to spell it out for me.

“I’ve got you one that you can attach to the sole of your shoe, or anywhere it’s unlikely to be seen. I won’t check it, but it will alert me if you leave the Academy house after seven pm, so I know to check. I don’t know how I’ll explain knowing something was wrong to anyone, but I’ll deal with that. If it occurs.” His eyes are wide. The muscles in his shoulders are pulled so tight, and his cheek is ticking like crazy.

“I don’t know, Darius. It’s weird. I don’t want you to worry, but...”

“It’s okay, I’m fucking insane for even asking. Look, can I at least give it to you? You can keep it in your room for all I care. At least I’ll know I tried.”

“Okay, I can do that at least. Darius, I miss you... I try not to, and I know I shouldn’t say this, but... I hate that you’re not there.” I stare out the window because it makes it easier.

“I miss you too. I wanted to see you before I left. I just didn’t have the choice. Things will work out in the end, though. Maybe you’ll graduate and leave us all behind. In all honesty, I think you should.” His Adam’s apple bobs, and I can’t stop myself from looking at him now.

“Darius, I...”

“No, that’s what I think you should do. It doesn’t mean I want you too, though. Fuck, Luna, I never claimed to be a selfless man. Just do whatever will make you happy and don’t worry about the consequences. If I can make it easier for you, then I will. Even if that means saying goodbye.” It’s like we’re locked in a staring contest, and I almost miss Tucker walking back down the driveway.

“Good luck in there,” he says under his breath, as the door opens, and Tucker helps me out of the car.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road.” He wipes his hands on his trousers, as he glances around. Shit, is he worried? That cannot be a good sign.

The door opens once more, and it’s to a woman who I guess is in her late forties, early fifties. She gives me a friendly smile, and her eyes remind me so

much of Tucker's.

"Luna, this is Sophie, my mom."

"Um, hi," I squeak out, and she offers me her hand to shake.

"You had no idea you were meeting me today. He is a very naughty boy, that son of mine." She pats him on the cheek, before we follow her into her home.

We walk into her kitchen and sit down around a table. With a vase of flowers arranged in the center, and a pitcher of iced tea with glasses already laid out.

"I hear you are rather fond of this drink, and I happen to share that with you. Tucker will just have to make do." He scowls at her, but finishes it with a smile, and she swats at his hand.

"So, she didn't know she was meeting me, you have at least told her about our situation, I assume." She has the stern mom voice down pat, and it's nice to see it being used on someone else for a change. I thought it was reserved for only my mom for a while there.

"Not exactly..."

"It's either a yes or a no, Tucker."

"Then no, she doesn't know a damn thing," he says with an extra helping of attitude, and she glares at him until he says, "sorry, mama."

"I have no ties to any of the Harkwrights and, frankly, I want it to stay that way. He may share their name, been raised by them, but they are not my family. And I'm not exactly welcome either."

"I don't understand. Are you adopted?"

"Yep, got it in one, Five." His eyes are hard, and it's easy to see that he isn't happy about revealing that to me.

"Tucker Mathew Harkwright, do not disregard her so easily. I don't care what you do in that place, but in my home, you call her by her name, or you can take your backside straight out of my house." She gets to her feet, and stares him down while his eyes cut to the table.

"My family was very old fashioned and did not believe in having children out of wedlock. I was young and stupid, and let them talk me into giving him away. I've regretted it every day since, but when he turned up on my doorstep seven years ago, it was the greatest day of my life." She smiles fondly at him, before returning her gaze to me.

"Not everyone is aware I see her, so this can't go any further. This is just another necessary step, to see if I can trust you. So, you've met her, and

you'll have a friendly face at the party." He gets to his feet and disappears off into the garden.

"Don't mind him, hon. He isn't used to letting his guard down. This kind of thing doesn't come easy to him, and he wouldn't have brought you here or invited you to that sweet little girl's party, if he didn't trust you. Just so you know, his other parents know about me, and they're happy we've reconnected. It's that Arthur fellow who wouldn't allow it. He gives me the creeps." She shivers and I understand her reaction.

I guess with Sir, you either hate, fear, or want him. I'm just glad I'm the first two.

Tucker comes back in not long after, and we sit around the table as they discuss the party. I'm not a great help with this kind of thing, but it's nice to see him happy and relaxed. Sure, there's tension, and I gather it's because I'm here, but I'm glad he's done this.

Another layer of the Tucker mystery has been revealed, and it isn't making things easier. Apart from one, right now I belong to him. Which means that for once, my feelings finally make sense. I'm not ready to question how deep they go, but I can act on them within reason. Did I say easier? Maybe there isn't a right word for how I'm handling everything, maybe for now. I should just go with the flow and see where it takes me.



SEEING Sophie has probably been the highlight of April for me. The rest is just dragging by so slowly. I'm worried that I may have fried my brain with all the studying I've been doing. It doesn't help that not only my tutors, but also the guys, are quizzing me every chance they get.

Apart from Dustin, I seem to do the quizzing with him, and I hope he isn't hating me for it. But it's almost over, May will soon be here, and I'll know if I've done enough to make it to next year.

"How's it going, buttercup?" D asks, as she takes the treadmill next to mine.

"Just getting some stress relief," I huff out and she gives me the side eye.

"I take it Tucker was busy."

"I can't believe you just said that, D." I'm laughing so hard, and it's making my power walk a lot harder to do.

“Well, it does burn off a lot of calories. So really, sex is actually a way to gain better health.” How can she sound so serious while she’s saying this?

“I am not talking about this with you, go away.” I wave my hand at her, and she sticks her tongue into the side of her cheek.

“Fine, spoilsport. Anyway, I have some news. You up for going for a walk?” I turn the machine off in answer, and we head out of the gym.

We walk the halls, and pass guys getting blown, and girls arguing over which Harkwright they’re going to try to nab next. So the usual.

“I’ve been wondering, what college only lets sixty-five students in at a time? It feels so absurd.”

“It is strange, but it just adds to the appeal I guess. So many people apply, and only a handful get in. I guess it makes the girls feel special, that they’ve beaten the odds. That, and I doubt they could keep such a level of security if they opened their doors to more students” It seems like a reasonable excuse, but it still doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.

“So, what’s this news you have?” I ask, as I nudge her with my elbow.

“Maddox is taking me away when we finish the term. Apparently, we’ll be going skiing and staying in our own lodge. I’m so excited, I just wish you could join us.”

“I would love to, but Tucker already has plans for us once we’re done here. I think we’re even leaving the next day. I’m excited, but also a little nervous. He’s been so good lately, I can’t help but wonder when the other shoe is going to drop.” I chew on my thumbnail, until she bats my hand away.

“Hey, just enjoy it. Life’s too short to sweat the little things.”

“I know I shouldn’t ask this, but you don’t have feelings for Maddox, do you? I mean, he’s a great guy but I don’t want to see you get hurt again.” I feel foolish even saying it, but she may not know he’s gay. I mean, I didn’t.

“No, I know the score, Luna, he told me the night of the ball. But he’s sweet, kind, and he makes me feel good. It’s nice to have a friend who understands the way the Harkwright mind works. You don’t have to worry about it, I don’t have any foolish notions where Maddox is concerned.” She wraps her arm around my shoulders, and I slide mine across her waist.

“I definitely like your news, I’m glad you’ll be having a fun summer.”

“Oh shit, that wasn’t the news. I just got excited and had to tell you.” She laughs softly, before finding her composure.

“Shane is getting married in July. Yeah, apparently, he’s had a fiancée the

entire time he's been here. Can you believe it?"

Why is that interview only coming back to my mind now? I remember Sir saying how his eldest found his future wife in the Academy, I just never realized it was Shane. The poor girl, I can't imagine being stuck with someone like that.

"It really makes you feel for her, doesn't it?"

A loud commotion reaches us, and we hurry our steps until we make it to the lobby. A crowd has gathered around the front doors, and I'm trying to make myself taller, so I can see what they're all staring at.

"What's going on?" I ask, as I tap a girl on the shoulder. She looks back and gives me a soft smile, and I realize it's Elena.

"Hey, Luna, it's not good. Someone painted a message on the steps. They tried to paint over it, but someone saw it, and the next minute everyone is gathering, trying to get a glimpse."

"Do you know what it says?" D asks, and Elena grimaces.

She grabs a different girl, and we move away from the commotion, and stand by the stairs.

"Can you tell them what you told me?" Elena asks, and the girl is shaking.

"All can rise, and all can fall. Beware the dark, for when the next girl falls."

Nothing is said, as we let the words sink in, and it doesn't take a genius to work out what it means.

"They think it's a hoax, that someone got bored and decided to stir up a little chaos. Although, I saw some cars arrive earlier, and the guys that got out weren't small, and I think I even saw a gun," the girl says, before she looks back at the crowd.

"Thanks, Miley. I hope it is a hoax," Elena says, and there's nothing but agreement all around.

Aeron rushes over to us and seems to stop himself from reaching out to me.

"Is everyone okay?" he asks, and we all nod our heads in unison.

"A little shaken, but we're dealing. What's going to happen now?"

Aeron grabs me and D and leads us into the ballroom, before closing the door. I turn when I hear another door close, and then Tom appears within my line of sight.

"The guards are back, and there will be more this time. Class will

continue as normal, but I suspect other changes will be made. It's just a precaution though. It's a hoax." He tugs at his hair, and I wonder who he's trying to convince. Us or himself?

DARIUS' tracker is hidden inside my Doc Martens, and I don't see any point in using it now that he's back. This whole situation has everyone too scared to leave their rooms, and the mess hall has never been quieter. Those with a kitchen in their room, like me, are eating in there every chance they get. They have cancelled the extracurriculars until school starts back up, and all we are leaving for is class. We still have to attend those, our finals are in two weeks and we can't start slipping now.

I keep telling myself it is a hoax, even though I don't believe it. Lying to myself is the only thing keeping me sane, and for now, that will have to do.

"How are you doing?" Tucker asks, as he walks me back to my room.

"I'm okay, I just keep thinking about the pool house, and I keep wondering if they'll try again. I know it's unlikely, but I can't stop my mind from going there." He drops his hands onto my shoulders, and starts kneading the muscles, while I get my door open.

"Nothing is going to happen, you have more than enough people keeping their eyes on you. I'm even relaxing the restrictions a little. I have a lot of tests coming up, and I don't want you to be left alone."

"You don't need to do that, Darius is here," I point out.

"Yes, but I can't spend every night with you, and I'd prefer it if someone was here when I can't be. So, who's it going to be? Tom, Aeron, or Emmet?"

"No, I can't make that choice. Tucker, I can't. Please, don't make me." I beg him, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

"Okay, I'll choose then. I can do tonight, and I know Emmet is free tomorrow. As for the other two, we'll figure something out. Just don't let them touch you. My freedom still comes with some strings," he grinds out, before his hands fall away, and he walks straight into my room.

Oh well, this should be fun.

I follow him inside and curl up on my side of the bed. He wraps his arm around my middle and pulls me closer.

"It will be okay, Tiny One. We'll find this bastard."

“Do you think it could be a girl? In my head, it’s a guy, but it’s not unlikely. Is it?”

“In my head, it’s a guy too, but I do not understand why. I guess it could be a girl. The sooner we catch them, the better. At least then we’ll finally get some answers.” He rests his head on my shoulder, and we both drift off.

I wake to a noise coming from the other room, and I extricate myself from his hold. There isn’t anyone in here, but there is a piece of paper on the floor.

STAR,

Meet me by the pool on our last night here. There are things I have to tell you, but I can’t yet. I can’t order you, but I can ask.

Your Prince

OH NO, I am not falling for that again. Even if it turns out to be genuine, there is no way I am going anywhere without checking first. And I won’t keep this from Tucker. Once he’s awake, I’ll show him.

“Tiny One? What’s going on?”

I spin around, with my hand clutching at my chest.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack, I thought you were asleep,” I say breathlessly, and he walks further into the light.

“I woke up when you got out of bed. What’s going on?”

“Someone left this for me, it says Emmet, but then again, so did the last one.” I hand it over, and I can hear his teeth grinding from here.

“We’ll sort this out, but for now, let’s just go back to bed.” I follow behind him, and strip off my clothes before climbing under the sheets and losing myself in his warm embrace.

ONE LAST GIRL

THE LAST ROUND of finals has arrived, and so has the day I am supposed to meet 'Emmet'. He swears black and blue he didn't leave that note, and I'm not the only one who believes him. I mean, he's spent nearly every night in my room, Tucker wouldn't allow it if he thought he was lying.

"Stop worrying, you'll be fine," Emmet says, as he eats one of my breakfast muffins.

"That's easier said than done. If I fail, then I'm gone. There'll be no saving me this time." I put my hair into a braid, just so I have something to do, and he shakes his head at my antics.

"You will not fail. You are more than ready for this. Just have a little faith."

"I know, I know. I'm trying, I can't even eat anything. My nerves have destroyed my appetite." I throw myself down onto the sofa, and he smirks at me.

"Come on, it's time we get going. And remember, if you're unsure, just leave the question. You can go back to it at the end."

He puts his bowl away, and then we head out. He walks me to my room, before heading off to his own, and I can't help but watch as he walks away. The Devil has a heart. I wonder how many people know this about him.

I shake off my thoughts and take my seat. Maddox is already in his seat, but we haven't got time to talk. I need to get myself in the zone and concentrate. Everything else has to wash away, at least until the hard part is over.

I SIT on the steps with Maddox and watch as people pass us by. We should be in our rooms, but we are both feeling cooped up. Besides, we have two guards watching our every move, so we should be safe.

“At least it is finally over, now all we have to do is wait,” he says it so casually, and I wish I could adopt the same mindset.

“The wait is going to kill me. I want to know now.”

“Trust me, I doubt you’re alone in that feeling. The time will fly by though. Besides, we’ll all be off doing our own things. You won’t even think about it once you leave this place.” I hope he’s right. I could do with a good distraction.

“I thought D would have been here by now, do you think she went to her room?” I ask, as I look around, hoping that I’ll spot her somewhere.

“She shouldn’t have. She definitely said she’ll meet us here. Maybe we should go look for her,” he says, and he doesn’t need to say it twice. Especially where D is concerned.

I walk over to Darius so I can tell him what’s going on, when he holds his hand up and speaks into his mouthpiece. His eyes pinch up around the corners, and his mouth falls flat. A sense of dread is filling me, which is irrational. Just because D isn’t here, doesn’t mean that anything has happened. But something is screaming at me that it does, and I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose D.

“Darius, we’re going to go look for Daria,” I say slowly, and his eyes shutter at the mention of her name.

“What happened?” I ask carefully, trying to stop myself from jumping to conclusions, and causing undue panic.

“You can’t say anything,” Maddox’s guard says, and I can’t stop myself from shooting him the evil eye, before I march over to Darius.

“Tell me, please, I need to know if she’s okay.” He hesitates, and I take it to mean the worse. My fist hits his chest, twice, before he captures it.

Maddox rushes over and pulls me into his arms, while I try my hardest to keep it all together.

“Emmet is on his way, but it’s okay, Miss Carter. Everything will be okay.”

It feels like hours pass, but really, it’s only been minutes before Emmet makes his way over to us.

I can't speak, and even Maddox is remaining silent as we watch him.

"Come on, I'll take you both to her."

"Is she okay?" Maddox asks with a choked voice, and his face looks grim, in my opinion at least.

"She will be. Just come with me, and I'll explain on the way."

He starts walking, and we walk either side as he takes us around the outside of the Academy. I already know where we are going, and I don't even care which doctor is on rotation today.

"She was found in the swimming pool. She was fully dressed and we don't know how long she was there before Jake found her. She's alive, but she hasn't woken up yet."

We arrive at the medical center, and he leads us to her room.

"Go in, Maddox. I just need a minute," I say on a sob, and he nods his head before disappearing into the room.

I turn to Emmet and throw my arms around his shoulders. He goes stiff, before he relaxes, and holds me tightly against his chest.

"It's going to be okay. Jake said she responded to him once he gave her CPR. The doctor thinks she just needs her rest. She will be okay, Luna, and I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it to be the truth." He strokes his hand over my hair, as I allow myself to fall apart. But only for a few moments. She needs me to be strong, and that's what I will be.

"Find who did this, Emmet, please. Find them and make them pay." I look up at him through watery eyes, and he wipes away the tears on my cheeks.

"Don't worry, I have every intention of doing just that. I'm sick and tired of this psycho thinking they can get away with everything. I'm not taking it anymore, and if my father doesn't put an end to it, then I will. They want the Prince, then they're going to him."

I wipe my face on my top, before stepping back and walking into D's room. Maddox vacates the chair, and I sit beside her. Holding her hand in mine and praying to whoever is above to let her be okay.

I hope Emmet finds them, and I couldn't care less about what he will do.

Because to put it simply, I'm in love with the Devil. And I don't think I'm ever going to stop.

To be continued...

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HARKWRIGHT DOSSIER

Emmet Harkwright

Heir

Age: 24

Hair color: Dark brown

Eye color: Green

Allergies: N/A

Field of Interest: Business/management

Hobbies/interests: firing range, the arts

Tucker Harkwright

Age: 23

Hair color: Caramel

Eye color: Blue

Allergies: Penicillin

Field of Interest: Law with interest in malpractice

Hobbies/interests: N/A

Tom Harkwright

Age: 20

Hair color: Red

Eye color: Dark green

Allergies: Shrimp

Field of Interest: Tourism

Hobbies/Interests: Racing, music, reading

Maddox Harkwright

Age: 19

Hair color: Honey brown

Eye color: Brown

Allergies: Nuts (severe)

Field of interest: Business

Hobbies/interests: Reading, writing, music

Aeron Harkwright

Age: 21

Hair color: Blonde

Eye color: Hazel

Allergies: Ibuprofen

Field of interest: Accounting

Hobbies/interests: Unknown

Shane Harkwright

Age: 26

Hair color: Black

Eye color: Grey

Allergies: Blackberries

Field of interest: Private security

Hobbies/interests: Contact sports, football, hockey

Scott Harkwright

Age: 20

Hair color: Brown

Eye color: Grey

Allergies: N/A

Field of interest: Accounting

Hobbies/interests: Cars, writing, comics

Jake Harkwright

Age: 19

Hair color: Blonde

Eye color: Amber

Allergies: Pollen
Field of interest: Architecture
Hobbies/interests: Swimming

Bradley Harkwright

Age: 19
Hair color: Black
Eye color: Brown
Allergies: Blackberries
Field of interest: Architecture/graphic design
Hobbies/interests: Firing range, painting, model work

Ashley Harkwright

Age: 19
Hair color: Purple
Eye color: Dark green
Allergies: Dogs
Field of Interest: Modeling
Hobbies: Guitar and drums, fishing, boating.

Craig Harkwright

Age: 19
Hair color: Mousy brown
Eye color: Grey
Allergies: N/A
Field of Interest: Public relations
Hobbies: Racing, firing range, skydiving

Simon Harkwright

Age: 24
Hair Color: Black
Eye color: Blue
Allergies: Shrimp
Field of Interest: Publicist
Hobbies: Sailing, woodwork, sculptures

Dillon Harkwright

Age: 23

Hair color: Blonde

Eye color: Blue

Allergies: N/A

Field of Interest: Advertising

Hobbies: Building, gaming, gardening

Sam Harkwright

Age: 21

Hair color: Jet black

Eye color: Grey

Allergies: Cats

Field of Interest: Law

Hobbies: Fishing, woodwork

Dustin Harkwright

Age: 18

Hair color: Blonde

Eye color: Blue

Allergies: Shellfish

Field of interest: Human resources

Hobbies/interests: Cooking, pool, darts

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THANK YOU

Thank you to my family for all your support and helping me to realize my dream, especially my hubby who has always been supportive of my writing, even if he isn't a big reader himself. Shocking I know, but I love him anyway.

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My black heart loves you all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm BC Morgan, I've lived in England for the entire duration of my life. I have two beautiful children, who mean the entire world to me. I also have an amazing partner who has supported me every step of the way. I'm very lucky to have the family and friends I have, they have given me so much support and I appreciate them all. I also wouldn't be here without the wonderful Diabetic Team I have in my corner. They help to keep me healthy.

I mainly write contemporary style books, but I do like to branch out into the Dystopian Genre. But really, I will try my hand at any style that suits whatever idea is swimming around within my head, even PNR.

I love coffee, no matter if it's a drink or ice cream, I'll be the first one there to buy it. I love all music, but my favourites include Foo Fighters, Cage the Elephant, Queen, and Carrie Underwood.

I read all types of books, but my favourites include crime books from the likes of J.D. Robb and Jack Higgins, to fantasy type books from Rachel Caine and my new favourite contemporary author, Bo Reid. That's not to mention the amazing Contemporary authors Scarlett Ross and Crystal North who drag you into their worlds and make it impossible to leave until you've devoured each and every word.

Last, but not least, I am Bee, and if you'd like to get to know me better, here's where you can find me.

[My Facebook group Bees Daemons](#)

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