

Fifth
Circle

ANGER

Also known as
DAMON CROSS

ANGER

AN ANTIHERO INFERNO NOVEL

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LILY WHITE

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www.michellelancaster.com

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lily@lilywhitebooks.com

<http://www.facebook.com/authorlilywhite>

www.lilywhitebooks.com

ANGER



Antihero Inferno Book 5

by Lily White

LILY WHITE
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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SIXTH CIRCLE (HERESY)

SHANE CARTER

SEVENTH CIRCLE (VIOLENCE)

EZRA CROSS

EIGHT CIRCLE (FRAUD)

GABRIEL DANE

NINTH CIRCLE (TREACHERY)

TANNER CAINE

anger

noun

A strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure
or hostility



Amélie

I'm just a dancer in a cage. A woman desperate to hold on to a life that is becoming more difficult every day. But I love to lose myself in the music, I can escape within the fast tempo and beat. During the hours I dance at Myth, I can pretend that nothing is wrong, and my life isn't falling apart.

Every night I strap on my black angel wings, shake my ass, and I forget the world around me.

At least until the night an angry man showed up and couldn't stay away from me.

He wore chaos and rage as a shroud, all of his secrets hidden behind a set of enigmatic amber eyes that pulled me in.

My curiosity got the best of me, and I followed him to the back rooms. From there, the nightmares started.

Never let Damon's friendly demeanor fool you. It's only an act to hide what's really inside him.

I found out the hard way what it means to make a deal with the devil. I thought he was the answer to fixing my life, but what he asked for in return was too much to bear.

I had no choice.

He refused to give me one.

And because of the choices he made for me, my life was changed forever.

Damon is a man haunted by secrets.

He's a storm that consumes every person around him.

I stood within that storm and faced him down. I was consumed by his secrets and chose to fight against them.

We all have our scars.

I knew that and wanted to know all of his.

But some scars run so deep that they tear us apart when the truth of them is spoken.

I was just a dancer in a cage... At least until a man I knew was trouble walked into my club.

...

Damon

Past

I've never been good at expressing myself. It's like a million thoughts swirl around my head, always spinning but never settling down enough for me to make sense of them.

It's even worse trying to tell another person what I'm thinking or feeling.

Sometimes, I wonder if I've been knocked around too much. All those hits to the head can't be good for the melon. My skull is more of a hard shell that keeps my brain in place but doesn't protect it.

Then again, it could all be part of growing up that made my thoughts difficult for me — that makes speaking difficult or even just simply feeling.

I was a happy kid. A little too happy, now that I think about it. My family wasn't the best and my parents were never around, but the nannies were nice, and I was given everything I wanted.

Most importantly, I had my twin brother. We were inseparable. Two halves of the same whole. We could speak our own language and know what the other was thinking without saying a word.

Our ability to connect like that is probably the only reason I'm still breathing today.

At eighteen years old, I'm about to graduate high school and head off to Yale. I'm about to escape a home that became a nightmare and a father who turned me into Anger and my brother into Violence.

We were beat down until we became the monikers assigned to us as members of the Inferno.

Yet we're still two halves, one hot and the other cold.

We are the living and breathing embodiment of what our father made us. And until now, we were our only tethers.

Ezra and I have our friends, obviously, seven chosen brothers who have been by our side since we could walk.

But you don't flay yourself open in front of the guys and talk about what you're thinking. You don't rip your heart from your chest and put it in front of them so they can know what you're feeling.

It's just not done that way.

Not even Ezra and I can talk like that.

So for eighteen years, I've really had no one.

Until now.

Until Emily.

And she's going away.

I have no choice but to stop her.

It's a typical fucking Thursday at school. I woke up hating my life and practically all the world around me. I managed to pull on some jeans and a T-shirt that is somewhat clean and jump into the passenger seat of Ezra's Jeep in time for him to peel ass out of the driveway and down the street because we were late.

He blamed me, I told him to go fuck himself, and all was well because that's how we say good morning.

Nothing about this day would be unusual except for the nervousness I feel about one thing I have to do.

In two weeks, classes are over. High school is over, and we'll be packing our shit to leave for Yale during the summer.

I'm not ready. Not that I mind leaving our family behind or escaping the nightmare of our father, but there's one person I can't let go. Ezra probably doesn't give a shit. It's a game to him. Always has been.

But to me, she's different.

We started this thing with Emily based on a ridiculous bet. It hadn't meant anything and was never supposed to, but fuck if I didn't start feeling a certain way around her.

Emily brings me peace.

It creeps me out to think of why. The thought that she's like a mom I never had makes me want to stab myself in the eye. But it's difficult for me to describe the feeling I have around her.

She's a place where I can relax. Where I'm accepted no matter what. Where I can be myself and nobody is judging me for what I've been put through or forced to do.

Emily is my *home*.

That's the best way I can describe it.

She takes away those weekends, and she's a safe spot in my head I can run to through every punch, kick, insult or worse.

Emily doesn't have to physically be near me to heal me. Just the thought of her does that.

How can I let go of her?

Expressing myself is hard. The words are never right in my head, so I know they're never right when I try telling people anything. Most of the time I don't talk except to say stupid shit or crack a joke that will make them laugh.

Today, my words must be right.

And that shakes me to the absolute core.

If I fuck this up, I lose everything.

The words must be right.

I've practiced them in my head for the past week.

I've talked to myself in front of a mirror like a little bitch.

I'm terrified.

No matter how I put the words together, they come out jumbled. There's no way for me to know if they're enough, if she'll understand ...

If I'm enough.

That can't stop me. I need to try, need to get this perfect so she'll know just how much I love her.

Maybe if she knows, I can keep her with me.

I'm leaving for college.

She's traveling the world.

But I'd give it all up ... for her.

Pulling into the parking lot of the school, Ezra parks in our usual spot, his curious stare stabbing me in the side of my head.

"The fuck is up with you this morning?"

My head snaps Ezra's direction. "Nothing."

This is what sucks about being twins. He knows me too well. Attempting to lie is as futile as carrying an ice cube between my ass cheeks through the gates of hell hoping it might stay cold enough to keep me from burning.

When he looks at me funny, I give up lying and deflect instead.

"We're at school. You feel great about it?"

He eyes me. "No."

“Then you know what the fuck is wrong.”

I jump out of the Jeep before he can ask another question, grab my bag, toss it over my shoulder then stalk toward the building.

All the usual people wave hello or attempt talking to me. Not to be the dick that I am, I nod in response, tilt my chin or slap palms as I keep moving.

Slowing down would be social suicide. I'd have to talk to people. Pretend everything's okay. Like I'm someone who should be admired or fucking worshipped and shit.

Spoiler alert: I'm not. Not even in the slightest.

Every kid in this school has no idea how good they've got it compared to my life, or Ezra's for that matter.

But we smile regardless. Make it seem like life is fine. Because that's all anybody can do when you're trapped in a goddamned nightmare that's stuck on an endless loop.

Stopping would fuck me up because I'm barely remembering everything I have to say to Emily when I see her. I'm afraid that if I play the role everyone expects of me, all that practice won't matter. The words will disappear. Just *poof* ... gone.

And she'll be gone too.

School goes by, and I go from one class to the next, not paying attention to whatever the hell they were teaching. I couldn't listen. It would mess me up.

My words must be perfect. I recite them over and over in my head until I think I have them right.

The bell rings for lunch, and it's now or never.

A cold sweat breaks out over my body, my hands clenching into fists before releasing again. I'm a walking disaster waiting to happen if one person tries to get in my way before I find her.

And then, there she is.

Emily Donahue.

A girl I never would have said one word to if it hadn't been for some stupid bet.

Now I stand here wondering if there are enough words in the dictionary that I can use to convince her we should be together.

Stupid fucking words.

I march toward her even though I want to tuck tail and run. My hand brushes her arm to get her attention, my heart thumping like a war drum the second she turns to look at me.

“Damon?”

My name belongs on her tongue. Just the way she says it sounds different than every other person.

My words are instantly jumbled, and I spit out a pathetic statement that is nothing like what I wanted to say.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

Hell, I might as well have said *we need to talk*. Nothing good ever comes from a person uttering that phrase.

Stepping closer and flashing me one of her smiles that damn near melts me in place, Emily stares at me funny.

“Everything okay?”

I shrug. “I just need...”

Damn it.

“Come with me. We'll find somewhere private.”

I grab her hand instead of attempting to explain, then I drag her to the nearest empty classroom. Em's feet stumble as she fights to keep up with me.

Already I'm making this awkward, but I don't quit. Some deep-seated part of my mind has taken over and bound my will to control myself in ropes of anxiety. I'm all action and no thought as I lead Emily into a closet.

The door shuts and we're bathed in darkness. You would think it would be easier this way because I don't have to see the question in her eyes ... or the worry.

It's not easier. Not at all.

"Damon, what's going on?"

Why can't it be the mirror in front of me again? Sure, I felt like a punk standing there talking to myself, but at least I could remember what I wanted to say. It didn't get scrambled just because her voice distracted me.

"Don't talk."

Soft laughter rolls up her throat. "Oh. I get what you're doing."

Her hands find my chest and it frustrates me. "No. Just stop, Em."

I grab her hands and probably squeeze too hard. Emily jerks them out of my hold instantly.

"Damon?"

Just say it.

Stop wasting time trying to figure this out and just tell her what you want.

"I don't want this to end. And I know this is probably dumb to admit, but I think it's also stupid not to say anything."

Emily goes quiet. My eyes have adjusted to the dark now, and I can see her face. She's staring at me with concern wrinkling her forehead and confusion rolling behind her eyes.

"Don't want what to end?"

I run my hands through my hair, jerking at the strands because I need my brain to work.

There's nothing else to do but just spit it out.

I know the words, and it's not like I'm standing in front of a class or anything. It's just Emily and me. I shouldn't be this nervous.

“I love you, Red.”

Holy shit. I’m doing this.

It’s like a dam busted, and all the water is spilling out, the words coming so fast I can’t stop them.

“And I can’t believe I’m even admitting this, but I’m panicking, you know? I feel like I’m losing you when school ends, and I can’t stand it.”

I dare to peek over at her, expecting a smile or some shit, but she has no expression at all, her deep red hair a curtain around her face.

Maybe she’s stunned.

Maybe she’s thinking the same thing.

Girl’s act like this when they’re happy.

Right?

The word vomit comes faster, the script I’d practiced long gone as everything I’m thinking comes out in a knotted jumble I’m begging her to understand.

“It’s just that everything happened so fast, Red. You know? We, I mean the three of us, it was just supposed to be for fun. And I know you’re leaving to travel the world, and I’m supposed to be going to college, but maybe we can do them together. Take turns. We travel, and then I finish school.”

I’m pleading with her. Begging her. Anything to get a simple reaction out of her other than a look of horror. Or surprise?

I don’t know.

She doesn’t normally look at me this way, and maybe I’m screwing everything up.

Like a balloon deflating, I’m running out of air, ideas ... hope.

“Say something, Red.”

She attempts to speak, but like me, the words are stuck on her tongue. Maybe it's just too much. Maybe she feels the same and wasn't expecting this. Maybe she loves me too.

"We can't ... I mean ... Ezra."

Her eyes drop to the floor, long red hair falling forward to conceal her face. I reach out and brush it back. There is no way in hell I'll let anyone come between us. She can't hide from me either.

Not Emily.

Not my *home*.

"Don't tell Ezra. He'll kick my ass for this. I don't want him to feel like he's being pushed out. I need to decide how we can do this. But maybe after a few months of college, he'll move on, and then it can just be us."

Reaching forward, Emily cups my face. It stops the words from tumbling out, halts every thought in my head that's spinning and cycling like they were caught in a tornado. She silences me when she touches me because I can't believe I'm good enough for her to touch.

"Damon..."

My name hangs there, a heavy weight between us, and when I finally see tears roll down her cheeks, I'm desperate to wipe them away.

I never want to hurt her, so maybe they're happy tears.

Please, let them be happy.

Everything is okay when she touches me.

I'm okay.

The weekends don't matter.

Not when I know she'll be waiting for me when they're done.

She'll always be waiting for me.

It's the only reason I can bear them.

“Damon, I'm sorry...”

For what?

She doesn't finish the sentence, just leans forward and plants a soft kiss on my lips as if that answers every question, as if that is her response.

“Sorry for what?” I ask, but she's already opened the closet door and is practically running from the classroom.

I'm left standing in the dark.

Alone.

With all the words I screwed up floating around me in the same jumble they were in my head.

They weren't enough.

I'm not enough.

But that can't be true, can it?

Over the next few weeks, I found out it is true. Emily pushed both Ezra and me away. She left to travel, and we left for college.

All I had left was the sound of her phone ringing, but she never answered.

“Hey,” Ezra pats me on the shoulder to get my attention. I look up from where I'm sitting on the side of my bed, phone in hand, my thumb hovering over the call button to try to reach Red again.

“We need to go, Damon. William's here to take us for the weekend.”

My teeth slam together, my jaw as tight a line as Ezra's. These weekends have become unbearable. Especially since Red's no longer here to kiss away the bruises.

“Give me a minute,” I answer, still staring at the screen, willing her to answer when I call this time.

Ezra notices, a heavy sigh blowing over his lips.

“Let her go, man. She’s not worth it.”

Except she is.

But he doesn’t know it’s my fault she ran and won’t speak to us.

Red left because of me.

Because I didn’t know the right words to say.

I’m the only one to blame when we come back from these nightmare weekends to realize there’s no one waiting to heal us anymore.

There’s nobody else to blame in this.

I turn off my phone without dialing her number because, in the end, it’s my fault I’m homeless.



Amélie

Present

I don't know about this.

Walking beside Brinley into a massive mansion that's larger than some of the extended stay hotel buildings I've lived in, I paste on as bright a smile as I can, hoping like hell nobody can see how fake it is.

There are a lot of places in this world where a girl like me belongs, but I can promise you, this isn't one of them.

We near the ornately carved front doors of the mansion, and Brinley walks with confidence despite her casual clothes. It's not the environment that scares her, nor the people. Honestly, I have no idea why she's always so nervous around large crowds, but that's just who she is.

But this scene?

These people?

She grew up with them.

Not me. The only time my family would be invited in is if we were hired as the help. And even that's questionable. The second they ran a background check, they'd be booting me out the front door.

I haven't done anything wrong, though, and I have a mostly clean record. It's just that I never stay in one place long enough to establish roots or have a verifiable identity. There are some points in my life that are blank slots, time periods when I technically never existed.

Why we lived that way, I have no idea. My mother liked running for some reason. Not that I believe anything was chasing her. It would have been nice to live a normal childhood with friends, and birthday parties and prom. But that's not the life my mother wanted. She could never settle in one place for long. And because my brother and I were just kids, we had no choice but to tag along.

Stepping into the governor's mansion, I can't help that my eyes grow big. A whistle slips over my lips at the splendor of it. When I've imagined dying and going to heaven, this is what I see as God's palace.

The ceilings are insanely tall with decorative lighting built into recessed boxes. It's not that flat shit I'm used to, the kind with rough popcorn texture and water stains.

"Check out this place," I say, not really paying attention to the people filling it. "I can't even imagine what it costs."

Brinley doesn't answer me, and it's not a difficult task to figure out why. She's already eyeing the people attending the soirée, her nervous energy like a heavy blanket surrounding her.

It does nothing to help soothe mine.

However, between the two of us, I'm the outgoing one. So it's my job to light a fire under her ass to find the governor and hand over the flash drive so we can get the hell out of here.

What else is there to do but wing it?

It's not like I'm blending very well with my long blue hair and black, skintight outfit. I might as well pretend to belong until someone comes along and escorts me out.

Brinley and I continue forward, and just when I think I may be able to pull this off, some rich bitch in a gown that does nothing to flatter her skin tone or figure walks by. Her steps slow as she takes a long gander at me.

Ignoring her, I smile at her husband whose arm links hers. I laugh when he damn near breaks his neck trying to keep me

in view as they pass. His wife smacks his shoulder, pointing a finger at his face while she whisper-yells at him and picks up her pace through the foyer.

I don't get it. All these people with more money than they know what to do with and they want to spend their time at these boring ass parties.

Maybe living poor is the way to go.

A blessing of sorts.

We never get bored because we're too busy trying to find the next hustle, or a meal for the night. There's no time for kissing ass or rubbing elbows—or whatever it is these people do to stay relevant.

I tell Brinley what I think, the laughter in my voice making her nervous. She knows better than to let me loose among the highly esteemed and conventional.

“Behave,” she tells me.

As if that will work. Not when I see two drop-dead gorgeous men approach the grand staircase, their eyes meeting mine before they have the chance to climb the first step.

Brinley spots them as well, her stare meeting mine in warning.

“Don't wander off,” she tells me.

I pretend to listen, giving her a nod and a smile while my halo dangles dangerously from my horns.

Eventually Brin leaves me unsupervised while she runs off to find the governor. We're here to give him the original flash drive that we had copied for my brother, Kane. I have no idea what's so important about it, but I'm not the type to ask questions when matters are obviously above my pay grade.

I'm just a dancer trying to make my way in this world. I'm not the brightest, the strongest, the most talented or a tech genius like my brother. But I make do for the most part and

only need to run a few games here and there to keep the bills paid.

Really, I don't have much of a claim to fame, but I can follow a beat and attract attention, so that's what I do.

Paying the bills is important. I learned that from the craptastic life my mom gave me. And I'm hoping, one day, I'll rise above.

I'm in college, but it's not as easy for me as it is for Brinley, and the cost of it alone is almost too much to handle.

This party, however?

I can handle it just fine.

Especially with men as beautiful as the ones I've seen, I don't mind being left alone to prow.

Smiling politely at another woman who passes by and makes it quite clear she's offended by my presence; I slowly saunter through the light crowd.

A small bar is set up on one side of the staircase, glasses of champagne already filled. My fingers are delicate on the stem when I take one.

The bartender smiles my direction, and I nod my head in greeting. After looking me over, a confused frown tugs at the skin between his eyes.

It hurts a touch that even the hired help can't hide their surprise at my attendance.

Before I can pass, he reaches out to grab my wrist and pull me to the side.

Leaning over so he's not heard by the other guests around us, he speaks low.

"Are you lost? Food and beverage services are set up in the back kitchen area. They can give you a uniform there."

The bartender makes a point to look at the drink I have in hand. "You really shouldn't be drinking either. I get it ... It's

tough being new and we all make mistakes. But trust me on this, drinking on the job will get you fired.”

I deflate instantly, my self-confidence gone after he no-so-delicately stated the obvious.

Women like me don't belong here.

Not unless we're in uniform serving the well-to-do their finger foods and drinks on a silver tray.

I pull my wrist from his hold and refuse to respond.

Stepping away, I look for a spot where I may be able to hide better, but with as open as the floor plan is, this narrow side walkway seems is the best choice of hidey-holes.

Leaning against the wall, I sip my champagne and watch the crowd of people mingle.

Every so often, I get a nasty look by some highbrow fuck who walks past. It just forces me to lift my pinkie while taking another sip to be their form of *proper*.

Sometimes I smile.

Most times I smirk.

Only because the husbands' reactions are entirely different from the wives.

I feel sorry for them, really.

How boring must your life be to become so preoccupied by the presence of one person who doesn't fit how you see the world?

There aren't rules in place for every person.

And not all of us were shaped from the same mold.

I'm the type who prefers to see a blend of unique styles and personalities, a rainbow of different people who add flavor to an otherwise unforgiving reality.

Not these prissy ass bitches.

The women who scowl in my direction believe I should be on the other side of some imaginary line. Probably washing their dishes or doing their laundry. Not out here among the refined and classy.

All their reactions tell me is that none of them have any taste.

Just as I finish talking myself down from flipping off one prissy bitch in particular, a man rushes by me, his foot just catching mine so that he trips but manages to stay on his feet.

He turns to me, and I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, my heart double-tapping my ribcage in a hurried jolt at the sight of him.

He's absolutely breathtaking.

I mean that in the literal sense.

My lungs refuse to function for as long as it takes him to stare back at me, his trailing blue gaze slowing on a few key places in his assessment of my body.

I stare in return and note his perfect physique and dark brown hair. The tux he wears is perfectly tailored to a body that is strong in all the right places, and slim where it matters.

Eh, fuck it. I check out his bulge since he's staring at my tits, and yep ... he's a definite keeper.

The man flashes me a quick smile then moves along toward the open doors at the back of the mansion, casting one last glance over his shoulder at me as he walks outside.

"Good lord," I whisper under my breath.

I've counted four hotties, at least, and I haven't yet bothered to wander out to where the largest crowd gathers.

Curious, I push away from the wall to do just that. I know Brinley told me not to wander, but I can't help myself. I need to see just how many gorgeous men are attending this party.

I barely make it two steps before I get bumped into from behind.

Turning my head, I expect to meet eyes with some pretentious bitch, her permascowl in place simply at the thought of having touched someone like me. But instead, I'm floored again.

Stunned silent, my feet lock in place.

If the others were simply gorgeous, this man is fashioned by the gods—most definitely in their likeness. He's the perfect specimen, despite the small scars that mark his olive skin.

Amber eyes peer over at me curiously, his head tilting just enough that I can tell he's not quite sure about my presence at the party but doesn't exactly mind it either.

So infatuated with his enigmatic eyes, I don't take the time to glance anywhere but at his face. High cheekbones are blades beneath a hard stare, darkness rolling behind the beautiful color that mimics what I see in my own eyes when looking in the mirror.

He's been through something, that's for sure.

But I can easily guess that he's good at hiding it behind the wicked smirk that tugs at his full lips now that he's had time to process me.

“Sorry about that.”

He has a smooth voice.

Deep.

The kind that whispers to you in daytime fantasies and in the midnight hours of sleep.

I'm hoping he'll say more since my voice is trapped in my throat.

But that's all he says before walking away to round the large base of the grand staircase.

I follow him almost mindlessly, my fascination a touch out of control.

He turns, but when I think he will take the first step to ascend the stairs, he stops and looks up.

I follow the direction of his gaze and damn near fall over with shock.

There are *two* of him.

Twins.

So perfectly identical that one could easily replace the other.

The universe has jokes, it seems.

And it's on all the poor women of this world who happen to encounter these two.

I feel part jealous and part sorry for the redhead standing in the center of the staircase. She's glancing between the twins as if trapped ... or deciding something.

Poor girl is about to become one of the many women I have no doubt have been torn up and turned upside down by twins who look like that.

I refuse to be one of them.

Nope.

Not today, Satan or any other day, for that matter.

Men like that are the types to rip your heart out with their teeth while smiling. I've seen many tough women fall for those types through the years, when what should have been a fun night turned into months of those poor women chasing after a relationship that would never happen.

But two of them?

Good fucking luck.

They're pretty to look at but have danger written all over them.

Rather than becoming the next victim, I do the intelligent thing and head toward the exterior doors to make my escape.

The backyard is impossibly beautiful. It almost puts to shame the interior of the mansion. I admire the lights strung through the stately tree branches and the winding path that leads past fancy white tents with their crystal accoutrements.

A pretty penny was spent on this party, and it saddens me to think what just a fraction of the cost could do for my life.

I wasn't lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon in my mouth like these folks. At best, I had a used plastic spork my mother managed to swipe from a crusty fast-food place.

It wasn't her fault, though. Something was always wrong with my mom. I've just never figured out what.

Walking past a server, I place my empty champagne glass on her tray and take a full one. I have work tonight and shouldn't be drinking, but then again, shaking your ass in a cage doesn't require strict sobriety.

I've barely made it fifty feet into the backyard when a woman yells, "Oh my god, Tanner! Give it to me harder!"

Spinning in place, I gawk at the mansion like everyone around me to see a woman run out in an ombré gown, another gorgeous male specimen running after her.

I remember seeing them when Brinley and I first pulled up, the man helping the woman from the car. Now, with the way she's storming off, I'm wondering if she just caught him banging another woman in the hall.

Maybe that's what all the yelling is about.

Who the hell knows, but this party just got a lot more interesting.

I never would have guessed the snooty actually know how to have a good time.

Perked up by the fact that everybody is whispering about something other than me, I meander through the crowd, helping myself to finger foods and hors d'oeuvres. It saves me money on a quick dinner before work. I sneak some extras into

a napkin because you should never give up free food when it's offered.

Twenty minutes pass as I scan the crowd and walk a slow, snaking path. Nothing of much interest is out here, and none of the other guests are as stunning as the ones I'd seen inside.

I'm about to head back to the mansion when Brinley finds me, her shirt wet and her expression screwed into a tight scowl.

A question is on the tip of my tongue about her shirt, but she rage-drags me back into the mansion before I can ask it.

As she leads me through the mansion, I ramble on about all the men I've seen and the couple getting it on so loud everybody could hear it. But she doesn't care about all that. Apparently, some jackass spilled his drink on her and she is fit to be tied about it.

Unsure what her hurry is, I drop the subject as we tear out of the mansion and back to her car.

I barely have my door closed when she peels away from the place, and we run by her dorm to change.

After that, we're practically racing to Myth so I can get to work ... late as usual.

Okay, we're not really racing. Brinley has a heart attack if the speedometer goes three above the posted speed limit. But right now, she's pushing five above the limit, and that's racing to her.

My boss, Granger, is going to lose his shit ... also as usual. But I'll get away with it because I'm his favorite dancer.

I'm also a piece of ass he likes to think he'll get to tap eventually. I'm not about to correct him on that line of thinking either. It's all a part of the side hustle I need to run to pay my bills.

Hear me out on this, and try not to be a judgmental prick.

I can't afford my life.

Never could.

Starting from age twelve, I had to figure things out and make what little I could to help my mom and brother with the bills.

Mom did what she could. Don't judge her either. She could never stay in one place, establish roots, or just settle down. It seemed like every time I thought we might stay somewhere longer than a few months, mom got scared and said we had to go.

My older brother, Kane, and I could never figure it out. Not as kids anyway. And every question we asked went unanswered.

Kane hustled, too. He just turned out to be better at it than me. But, he's a genius when it comes to computers, and I'm not much of a genius at anything.

I'm glad he turned out to be the smarty-pants that he is, though. With all the clickity clacking he does on a keyboard, Kane is able to accomplish tasks that bring in enough money for him to continue supporting mom while also paying for my school.

We made a deal...or rather I should say he made a *demand*: I go to school and he pays for it. But I have to float the cost of a place to stay, food and everything else.

As far as Kane knows, I work at Myth. I just haven't told him about the cages. He thinks I bartend and run drinks to tables.

I know my brother. He'd lose his shit if he found out I'm dancing, and he would make a new demand that I find a more acceptable way of supporting myself.

But this is what I'm good at.

So I do it.

What Kane doesn't know won't hurt him.

What I can't make by shaking my ass for the crowd, I make by playing men. They like to think they can fuck me eventually, so they spoil me financially in pursuit. I take the money, and they never get farther than second or third base.

And that's the game I've been playing with Granger.

It's stupid of me to run this game with my boss. I know that. But I don't have a lot of choices these days.

Plenty of guys, but none of them with money.

If another wealthy asshole rolls along in the future, I'll happily dump Granger's ass and hustle the new guy for a while.

Until then, I'm stuck with who I've got.

As soon as we step foot inside the club, I spot Granger immediately. He knows what time I'm supposed to be here, and he looks forward to me being late. It just gives him one more thing to hang over my head while he makes me feel smaller than a speck of dirt on his boots.

Standing at the bar in his typical black on black outfit, Granger checks his watch before locking his stare on me. Chills race down my spine, my eyes closing for just a second because I know what his tight scowl means.

Brinley notices it as well.

"I told you he'd be mad."

Her reminder doesn't help the sudden tension in my shoulders from being targeted by Granger's dark stare.

There's nothing I can do but play it off.

It's what I do best.

"He loves me," I lie, more to myself than Brinley. "Give him five minutes tops before he's chasing me. And then one dance and he'll get over it. But you're right. I should get going. Meet me upstairs for a drink later."

Flashing her a practiced smile, I run forward to talk to Granger. His scowl doesn't soften, not until I pout my bottom lip like I know he enjoys.

Anything to make me feel sad or upset, and this man is all over it.

That's the problem with men like him. They need to feel superior or in charge, and they can't do that unless their approval alters your behavior.

I know the type well and have been up against them many times. It's easy enough to play the part and get what I need out of them, but it does nothing to soothe my shame for allowing it.

When struggling to survive, even intangible things like a woman's pride is a valuable commodity. Especially when dealing with narcissists. I learned that hard truth when I was fourteen. A little young, in my opinion, but you do what you must to survive..

Without giving Granger time to respond, I run past him and head upstairs to get dressed in his favorite outfit. I hope that the second he spots me in my cage, he'll forget I was late and take up his usual position guarding the stairs that lead to me.

Sometimes I think he guards my cage because he's territorial.

Other times, I think it's because he's playing a game on me as well.

He knows that I make shit money here without being able to go in the back rooms like the other dancers for private shows. The less I make, the more dependent I become on him. The more dependent I am, the more he can harass me.

It's a shitty dance for power but one I'm willing to put up with since I'm not actually interested in him. If I were, the way he treats me would cut straight to the bone.

The music is thumping the walls when I reach the second floor and hang a quick right to run down the hall leading to the back rooms. Most are used for private dances and other strange favors, while the one closest to the hall entrance is a dressing room.

Thankfully, the room is empty, the other dancers scheduled for tonight already in costume and in their assigned places. It doesn't take me long to find a pair of tiny shorts that barely cover my ass and a metal studded bra.

On the wall hangs a large set of fake, black angel wings that Granger always saves for me. He loses his shit if any other girl touches them on the nights I work. I'm beginning to believe those wings are some kind of weird fetish of his.

"I'm taking you home tonight, right?"

Fuck...

I'm in the middle of clasping my bra in place when I turn to look at Granger.

He leans back against the door and stares me down with dark eyes that always appear threatening. Even his current stance is a threat. Almost as if it's his intent to keep me trapped in here until he decides it's time for me to leave.

But that's Granger.

A narcissist, through and through.

I swear, this man's ego sits upon a throne built with the broken hearts of all the women he's managed to control.

Don't worry about me, though. I've got this. There's a difference between *actually* giving up control and simply giving the illusion that's what you're doing.

He hustles me in his way, but I hustle him right back.

We both have our reasons, and I'm comfortable with the exchange because we both get what we want, regardless of whether he's really controlling me or not.

My lips curve into a seductive smile.

“I figured you’d be angry about me being late, so I already told Brinley I have a ride home tonight.”

Heat douses his dark eyes, and I fight not to react by shoving past him and out onto the dance floor.

Here’s the thing with me...

I don’t let men control me.

Their power, money and influence mean nothing to me.

But I will use them as a tool if it benefits me.

And I’ll do so while letting them think I’m some toy they can cast aside when they’re done with me. Because by the time that happens, I’ve already gained everything I set out to do.

In the end, I’m nobody’s toy.

I’m simply the girl who was smarter than they thought.

And while they may feel something or desire more, I’ve already moved the hell on before they realize that they’ve lost that particular war.



Damon

I can't even begin to explain where I am right now. The world makes about as much sense as my thoughts.

It's all jumbled again, the current life I've carved out colliding head-on with a past I'd barely managed to block out.

How Ezra is handling any of this is a mystery to me, and it angers me to see him so level-headed over Emily's return.

Ezra and I knew we would see her again before going to that damn engagement party. And we knew we'd be tasked with distracting her away from Ivy so that Gabe could run his game.

But what I didn't expect was for the feelings I'd fought away after graduating high school to all come flooding back like a damn tsunami, the water flowing beneath my feet and over my head until I was swept away.

I genuinely thought I could handle it.

I honestly believed that seeing Red again would have as much impact on me as seeing any other random chick.

I'd hoped that my feelings for her were as securely packed away as the memories of those weekends Ezra and I were taken away by our father.

It was all there, nicely packaged in some spot in my mind where I didn't think about it or care.

Fuck it all, you know?

It was handled.

Except it wasn't. Not like I'd thought.

I'm beginning to think now that I'd done too good a job shoving those memories aside and locking them up tight. Because once the corner of that box was lifted, they exploded out, the memories of those weekends and of Emily's connection all mixed together.

I was perfectly fine.

I was balanced and in control of my head.

At least until I saw her on the grand staircase heading up to where Ezra stood at the top.

It was when she turned to look at me standing at the base of the stairs that I lost control completely.

Just that.

One look

It's been a spiral into the deepest parts of hell ever since.

I'm not going to bore you with the details because you know how a spiral goes.

One event occurs that leads to another and another and another.

You find yourself fucking miserable while smiling to pretend that nothing is wrong.

Except everything is wrong

Next thing you know, you're in a fucked-up situation with no ending in sight.

So yeah, Ezra and I saw Emily again for the first time in years. We both fucked with her. I made an ass out of myself by thinking it meant something and went to her house with some delusional ideas.

Maybe I'm not homeless anymore.

Maybe she's returned.

Maybe she's sorry for the way she ghosted us when we left for Yale.

Turns out all those maybes were definite nos ... At least for me they were.

While I was sent away from her house with excuses and tears, Ezra convinced her to hang out as friends.

We have one date a week and just finished the first one.

I was excited after that date.

Maybe we'd never be lovers, but all three of us could be friends.

Emily went home after.

Ezra and I rode to our house together.

Now my twin brother is gone again.

Do you think I don't know where he went?

I can't sit in this empty fucking house and do nothing. Especially while knowing Ezra is with Red.

And since I'm not invited over there, I'll hit up another place where nobody wants me.

Stepping away from my bike, I approach Myth as sure-footed as possible. It's the first time I've been here since Shane and I were arrested for the fight upstairs.

Two against seven seemed like unfair odds in that fight, but I still left the club laughing. Turns out a little bit of anger is enough to cause serious damage, but thankfully, nobody was killed.

The storm in me was mild that night because it was just the beginning.

Ever since, it's as if all the characters of my childhood are trying to crash back into my world.

Red doesn't want me.

And now my father won't stop calling.

Even now as I'm about to reach the front door, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I stop in place despite the light drizzle of

rain falling on my head and yank the phone from my pocket.

William's name flashes on the screen, and I don't have to wonder what the old fuck wants.

He lost his golden ticket just before we graduated from Yale. Knowing that dickhead, he's already burned through everything he gained from us.

Hitting end call, I stuff my phone back in my pocket and close the remaining distance to the front door of the club.

"There's no way in hell."

The bouncer, Patrick, takes one look at me and shakes his head, laughter in his voice when he implies I should pound sand.

A smile inches across my face because one fighter always recognizes another. He probably enjoyed taking me to the ground with a quick, heavy elbow to my spine and his feet tripping mine.

"I let you win that night," I reply.

Knowing I'm already busted, I might as well make a joke of it.

Patrick is a massive guy. Not somebody you'd want to meet in a dark alley if he was the type to hurt people for the fun of it. His shoulders are the same width as mine, but he stands at least an inch taller, and his arms are as big around as tree trunks.

"Sure you did."

Eyeing me with curiosity, he sits down on a wooden stool and crosses his arms over his chest. It just makes his biceps bulge larger.

Am I intimidated?

Not in the slightest.

But jealous?

Yeah, maybe a little.

Patrick put in some work for those guns.

His brown eyes search my face.

“How many nights did you spend in jail for that fight anyway?”

I smirk. “One. Not even twenty-four hours, really. Think I was still drunk when they pulled me out.”

A shake of his head. “Man. Now this is why you assholes don’t learn anything.”

He pauses for a few seconds, scans the parking lot, then turns back to me.

“Can’t let you in.”

Rolling my eyes, I already know where this is going. I pull my wallet from my pocket and extract a crisp hundred.

“For this, I think you can.”

The most I get is side-eye as he continues watching the parking lot.

“Not for that. Although my eyesight does get pretty shitty the higher the amount. Hell, if it gets high enough, I’m practically blind and have no idea who went inside.”

So that’s the name of this game.

I pull out another two hundred.

“My eyes are getting fuzzy, but I can still see who’s walking in and out of this club.”

I pull out two more.

“Ah, damn. There goes that weird blindness again.”

He snatches the bills from my hand.

“Enjoy your stay. Try to keep your hands to yourself this time. I’d hate to have to remind you I can take your ass out.”

“I let you win,” I snap back before shoving through the entry door to stalk inside.

The second the loud music thumps against my ears, I know I'm in the right place. Especially given my mood.

I don't want to feel anything.

Think about anything.

Nothing.

I just want to be numb. Maybe dance with a few cuties and hopefully shove the memories and feelings that are still assaulting my mind back in the locked box I'd let them slip out of.

None of it should own real estate in my head.

Not Red.

Not my dad.

Not those fucking weekends that are nightmares attacking me when I sleep.

None of it.

Ignoring the first floor that's reserved for the socialite crowd who wants to be part of the scene but are too clean cut and snobby for what Myth is really about, I climb the stairs to the second floor.

The music changes when I reach the top, the quick, high-energy beat of electronic dance music transitioning into something a touch darker and more seductive.

Giving the space in front of me a quick glance, I turn right toward the bar, my palm slapping against the wooden surface to get the bartender's attention. He looks over at me, cocks a brow, and after I assume is a moment of indecision from having witnessed the previous fight, saunters over to stand in front of me.

"I'm surprised they let you back in."

Nodding my head, I chuckle. "Yeah, I think security had a problem seeing me when I passed him."

The bartender laughs.

“Hate when that happens. What can I get you?”

“Just a beer. Nothing too crazy.”

It takes him a few seconds to snatch one up from the cooler, pop the cap and place it on the bar.

“That’ll be ten.”

I give him a twenty and tell him to keep the change.

Turning to look over the room, I take a long sip of my beer, the cool liquid easing the burn in my throat and the tension riding my shoulders.

A couple walks past me arm in arm, both with expressions of intrigue and a little fear. Following their path with my eyes, I understand the mix of emotions. Those two are headed to one of the back rooms for what I assume is the first time.

There’s no telling from night to night what Myth has set up back there, but that’s all part of the mystery and thrill of it.

This place isn’t exactly a strip joint or a dungeon.

It’s both and neither at all.

A mix of everything that can entertain and tantalize.

You’re not forced to participate, but you’re always welcome to try.

Some of the employees who work out on the floors also work those backrooms. So even if you come alone, you can find a partner willing to experiment with you or give you exactly what you’re after.

It all comes down to how much you’re willing to spend on the experience.

Me, personally? I’ve never been the type. But if the right...

My stare lands on a woman I’ve seen before but forgot about over these past few weeks.

So much has been going on with Emily’s return and Tanner’s bullshit with Luca that she hadn’t crossed my thoughts.

Until now, at least.

And fuck, she's exquisite.

Tucked away in one of the side cages that's elevated on a platform, her body is barely hidden beneath a black bra top and tight, black shorts. Strong legs and thick hips keep perfect time with the beat of the music, her eyes closed as she loses herself to the sultry, fast-paced song.

Her long blue hair is what draws my attention to her, the thick strands bouncing around her body as she dances, those fake black angel wings not fooling me in the slightest.

My fingers clench tighter around the cold beer bottle, the rim tipped to my lips as I swallow and keep watching her.

Why the hell was she at the governor's mansion on the night of the engagement party? It's a mystery I'd wondered that night, and again the second time I caught sight of her when Shane and I started the fight.

Remembering how I'd brushed past her on my way to corner Emily with Ezra, I'm starting to believe I made the wrong choice that night.

I'd rushed to a woman who wants nothing to do with me, instead of stopping in my tracks for one who could very easily distract me from all the bullshit in my life.

Whoever she is, she's lost to the music, and I'm captivated by the way she moves, by the glimmer of sweat on her skin, by the easy suggestion that her swaying body makes about what it could be like to be moving with her.

She's exactly the distraction I need tonight.

If only for a night.

Hell, maybe just an hour.

It takes effort to peel my eyes away from her to look down at the base of the stairs leading to her cage.

Last time Shane and I were here, one of the male employees stood bodyguard and wouldn't let me pass, his eyes

a warning stare that kept me from getting too close to her.

He's not here tonight, though. And the rule of this club is that dancing with these girls isn't off limits ... just as long as they approve the company.

They get paid well for what they allow, I'm sure. And if it costs me every last dollar I have in my wallet, I'm willing to pay the price of feeling nothing for an hour or two.

Not *nothing*, I guess.

But something other than the anger and pain that comes with all the fucked-up parts of my life that appear to have returned and are knocking on my door.

Finishing my beer, I order another, pay for it, then push away from the bar to approach her cage.

She's still lost in the music, completely unaware of her surroundings and the predator stalking toward her.

Not that I'm normally the type of guy a woman needs to worry about. There isn't a sick bone in my body. But I do have moods, some of them more genial than others.

Tonight is about finding a good time.

It's about bleeding out something toxic that's poisoning me slowly.

I'm not approaching her to make a friend. I'm heading her direction simply to use her for what she can provide me.

A distraction.

A release.

An hour or two of something that can help me forget everything that's not right in my head.

Climbing the stairs, I keep my stare pinned on her, enjoying how she's lost to something else, completely unaware I'm so close.

I reach her cage and grab one of the bars above my head with one hand while taking a sip of my beer with the other.

It's theft, really. This stolen opportunity to study her up close while she dances without a care in the fucking world.

To see this woman at a distance is enough to make your heart pound a little faster, but to see her up close is something else entirely.

Her body is perfection, at least for a man like me. Slim in all the right places while stacked in others.

She's the type you could double fist her ass cheeks and pull her to you, her tits high and tight, bouncing to the beat of music just as much as her hair.

Everything is toned and strong, her arms, legs and stomach just begging to be explored with my fingertips or my tongue.

Not that it'll go there.

Not tonight.

I've never paid for sex, and I don't plan to start now.

But if there was ever a woman who could convince me to do it, it's this one.

I'm not sure how much time passes while she continues dancing, and I stand a breath away, so damn close that I'm surprised she can't sense me staring at her.

She's that lost to what she's doing, so far gone from this moment and everything around her that I can imagine her becoming the music.

And fuck ... she can move.

I'm as lost to her as she is to the beat, and I can't imagine anything more intoxicating or intriguing.

At least until she finally opens her eyes and discovers me.

You would think my close proximity would startle her, that she'd lose that perfect pace she keeps with the music pumping through both of our veins.

She doesn't.

Not even in a little.

Instead, her eyes remain locked on mine for a few seconds, her full lips parting just a touch to draw in a deeper breath.

At first, I think it's the swirls of color crashing down from the dancing lights above our heads, but then I realize her violet eyes are natural, a shade I've never seen in another person.

I stand mesmerized as she continues dancing while studying me, those violet eyes slowly moving down my body and back up.

A barely-there smile graces her stunning face.

"You just going to stand there all night, or are you planning on dancing with me?"

"I can't dance," I confess. "Not like you anyway."

Her smile widens. "Then why are you up here?"

Another confession, one filled with so much need that I hate to admit it.

"I want some time alone with you. In a back room, where you belong to just me for an hour."

She takes a moment, considers it.

"I don't usually go to the back rooms."

"Don't usually and never are two different things."

My counter-argument causes the corner of her mouth to curl.

"Aren't you the observant one? Okay. Give me five minutes, and I'll meet you by the bar."

Nodding my head at that, I keep my eyes trained on her and finish my beer, not bothering to step away immediately to give her space.

She never stops dancing.

Never once loses the beat.

It's impressive and aggravating at the same time.

I want to startle her, for some reason.

Knock her off course.

Affect her in some minor way.

But given how she continues staring at me while keeping pace with the driving beat of the music, I doubt I'm able to affect her at all.

Soft laughter flies over those full lips.

"I said five minutes, Champ. The clock doesn't start until you walk away."

Instead of giving ground, I lean in closer. She doesn't so much as flinch.

"Don't tell me you're the bossy type," I tease.

She stares at me for a few seconds, her body swaying like a siren leading me straight to the gates of hell.

"I can be anything you want, crazy boy. The only question is whether you can afford me."



Amélie

It's odd he doesn't recognize me. It's not like this is the first time we've met eyes, or the second, for that matter.

The first time I remember seeing this man was when he brushed against me at the governor's mansion. The second is when he ignited Granger's temper for attempting to approach me before creating a warzone of Myth's upper floor.

Then again, this could be his twin for all I know. It would make sense that he stares at me now like he's never seen me before.

"I don't pay for sex, Blue."

Smiling at that, I continue dancing, even while he encroaches on my space. Thankfully, the cage bars keep him from leaning in fully.

"That's a good thing," I answer, my voice breathless from shaking my ass for the past few hours. "Because I don't offer sex on my menu."

Not in the way he's suggested anyway.

A girl needs to hustle, but there are different ways of getting what you want.

Most of the time, these idiots are willing to shell out a whole lot more when you don't give it up. You just need to keep letting them think it *may* happen someday.

Like Granger, for instance.

He's been working on me since the first time I stepped foot in this place. I've allowed him to drive me home. I've flirted. I've let him think he has influence over me. And yeah, the man has seen all that I've been blessed with.

But have I fucked him?

No.

He just thinks he'll be able to wear me down eventually.

Here's the important part of the hustle; let people think what they want. Friends, family, close acquaintances and people you don't much care for. It doesn't matter in the long run because they're all going to think what they want regardless.

But never correct them or paint a pretty picture with your words about anything that's not true. That doesn't make you a hustler. It just makes you a liar.

I can't stand lying. One turns into two, and before you know it, you have an entire web of them you're sprinting to keep up with.

"Five minutes," I remind him, raising my voice to be heard over the music.

He lifts his eyes to mine.

This crazy boy had allowed them to drift down to watch my hips move.

The return was a slow crawl up that I could feel down to the tips of my toes.

Oddly, I didn't mind it.

"Five minutes." The corner of his mouth quirks. "Want me to grab you something to drink while I wait?"

Smiling at that, I shake my head. "I'm good."

That's another one of my rules.

Never take a drink from a patron.

If I can't break the seal on the water bottle myself, I might as well blame myself for downing whatever somebody put in it. And since I'm not looking forward to waking up in a back room after being raped, I'm sticking to that rule regardless of how gorgeous this man is.

And no, I'm not victim blaming for saying that. I've just worked in this industry long enough to have seen some things.

The twin nods with obvious reluctance, but he releases the hold he has on the cage bar above our heads to turn and descend the stairs.

I watch him stroll back to the bar, my heart thumping way too hard because I know it's a mistake getting involved in any way with that man.

Whichever twin it happens to be...

But a job is a job, and thankfully, Granger isn't here tonight to cut me off from the extra tips.

I finish out the five minutes in my cage. Not that I couldn't have left immediately; it's just that I needed that time to gather my wits about me in preparation for what I know I'm walking into by agreeing to go back to a room with him.

After stepping out of the cage and descending the stairs, I meet eyes with the twin as I approach him. But before reaching him, I angle my head toward the hallway leading to the back rooms.

He follows at a slower pace behind me, and I look over my shoulder to see that he's there.

The man is staring at my ass like he wants to take a bite out of it, and the shiver his expression sends through my body is yet another warning.

I need to keep this professional.

Danger lurks behind me.

It's too bad I'm too broke to heed that warning.

Choosing a room I know is always set up for the very basics, I open the door and step inside to see a platform and pole set up in the center with an overstuffed chair positioned to face it.

Can't do much here except a private show, and that's all I plan to give him.

The twin walks in behind me, surveys the room then locks those enigmatic, amber eyes on me. I meet his stare, refusing to give ground or even hint to the anxiety I'm feeling.

"Take a seat," I tell him.

His lips crook at the corner. "I wasn't expecting something so ... boring."

"Sorry, Champ. If you want something a little more exciting, there are other girls willing to—"

"This will work," he says, cutting me off.

Our eyes remain locked.

"Then take a seat." I tilt my head. "Unless you were wanting to dance for me."

There's a storm around this man. Hot and wild, something so untamed that I have a visceral reaction to him when he brushes past me to the chair.

My curiosity gets the better of me.

"What's your name?"

He sits down then tucks his bent arms behind his head to lounge back. Straightening his legs over the floor until they are almost touching the platform, he is giving me a perfect view of his incredible, muscular physique.

My attempt to keep from staring is a losing battle, and by the time I look up at his face again, he is watching me with knowing eyes.

"Like what you see?"

"Any woman would." I take another quick look down and up. "Your name?"

He watches me for a few seconds, taking enough time to survey my body again. It's a slow and languorous crawl of his attention, stopping on my tits, my stomach, my hips and down my legs.

The man could be using his hands, and it wouldn't feel any different.

Slightly dizzy from the way he studies me, I clear my throat to repeat the question.

“What is your name?”

Amber eyes are suddenly meeting mine.

“Does it matter? You've called me Champ twice now. I don't mind if you continue to use that name.”

One bark of laughter escapes my chest.

Stepping toward him, I set my feet on either side of his legs then lean down to plant my hands on his chest. He doesn't move to touch me, a smirk tilting his lips as I lean so close we're face-to-face.

“Well, I've seen you before, Champ. And either you're the one who started a fight here a few weeks ago, or you're that one's twin brother. So, I'll ask you another question. What's your brother's name?”

His eyes leave mine to crawl down for another view I'm giving him, his lips parting just slightly at the better sight of my breasts. I can feel that heated stare, the need that has now entered the storm that surrounds him.

I can't claim I'm not affected. My thighs tighten, and my heart beats a little faster. It's a fight not to react.

“How much for you to take your top off?”

Oh, he is a crazy boy. Dirty minded and filthy. It sucks because this is my favorite type, which makes him that much more dangerous for me.

“It'll cost the answer to my question.”

Why so cheap?

Because I'm dying to know who I'm dealing with. And knowing there's another one out there who's identical to him, I

need this information before ending up a game to both of them.

“Damon,” he finally says, his voice rough with want. “I’m the one who was in the fight, and my brother’s name is Ezra.” His eyes dart back to mine. “Now take it off, Blue.”

More a command than a request, his tone of voice spears through my body to all the places I’d rather it not touch.

I must be slowly succumbing to his storm because the heat that swirls behind his eyes is palpable in me too.

It’s a mistake I can’t afford to make, but I find myself playing along regardless.

Pushing off his chest and standing to my full height, I keep our stares tangled together as I reach behind and undo the studded bra top. It falls to the floor, and I feel more naked now than I’ve ever felt in my life.

I feel completely exposed, even though I’m still wearing my panties and shorts.

They’re just tits.

All the other dancers have seen them at one point or another while we were getting in costume in the dressing room, and Granger’s seen them a dozen times. I’m not shy about them. But for some reason, his eyes make me want to cross my arms over my chest, cover myself up because I can’t handle his scrutiny.

Damon looks down at my chest, his biceps flexing as his upper teeth scrape over his bottom lip.

A stupid woman would want to know what those teeth would feel like on her body, and I think my IQ just dropped down to that of a rock because I want to know more than that.

The physical pull between us is unimaginable. I’ve never felt this way before, and it scares the hell out of me.

For that reason alone, I know I need to keep this professional.

“You’re beautiful.”

That may be so, but I still want to know if this is a game.

“Where is your brother tonight?”

The storm changes so suddenly that I catch my breath. Sharp lightning replaces the distant rumble of thunder, his eyes narrowing on mine.

“Does it fucking matter?” he asks.

His jaw tics after answering the question, and I know I’ve approached a line that leads to violence.

You can’t look at him without knowing he’s been through some shit. And whatever the hell it is may just be dark enough to rival mine.

Hoping the truth will soothe whatever rage is running through him, I answer honestly.

“I’m trying to make sure I don’t end up a game between you two. That’s all. I know you’re identical and—”

“Why were you at the governor’s mansion?”

I’m not exactly stunned by the question, especially because it tells me this is the twin who brushed past me on the way to the stairs that night. But the threat in his voice does nothing to settle my concern at being alone with him.

“I was with a friend.”

“Which friend?”

“Brinley. Do you know her?”

He shakes his head.

Silence falls between us for a few moments, that storm around him calming down.

“How about we promise to keep this a secret between us? Ezra doesn’t know about you. I plan to keep it that way. I already share too much with the bastard.”

Something dark flashes behind his eyes, but I refrain from asking about it. If he's got family issues, that's for him to work out. I can wiggle my ass to cheer him up, but I'm not a damn therapist.

Appeased by his response, I flash him a game smile.

“Then I'll dance for you.”

Stepping away from him, I walk across the room to hit a button on the wall that dims the lights and starts the strobes and music. It's something with a slower beat, sultry and seductive.

Our eyes meet across the room as I make my way to the platform and grip the pole.

Damon watches me like he wants to fondle, taste, bite, lick, pin me down and fuck.

But that's not what I'll give him, even if the thought hadn't already crossed my mind.

I need to keep my head together in this. Losing even the slightest bit of resolve would be dangerous for us both.

My hips sway with the slow beat, my hands sliding up as I grab the pole above my head then turn to make a slow circle around it. I close my eyes so that the only thing I know is the music.

By the time I complete the rotation, I open my eyes to find Damon standing at the side of the small stage.

“How much to touch you?”

To say this man is eager is an understatement. Starving would be a better word, and I can't figure out why. With looks like his, he can get any woman he wants, so why is he staring at me like a virgin at his high school prom?

I let go of the pole and step back because something is off about him.

Behind me is a button on the wall that I can hit if I need help. There's one on every wall, in fact. Only rarely have the

girls needed to use them, but with the rage and desperate need now shrouding this man, I'm not sure how he'll like my answer.

"It's not on the menu. Not with me, at least."

He tilts his head just a touch, challenge dripping into his expression.

"Is that why I was kept from approaching you the last time I was here? You had one hell of a bodyguard at the base of your stairs before the fight broke out later."

Hell, with the way he's looking at me, I wish I had a bodyguard right now.

"Is that guy your boyfriend?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Nope. He's the manager here."

"Why does he guard you like that?"

"Because he wants what he can't have. And apparently, men can be jealous."

He laughs softly, which surprises me.

His head drops down as he rubs at the back of his neck.

"Yeah, I know the feeling."

Dropping my guard a touch, I walk across the platform to squat down in front of him. He lifts his head, and our eyes meet. We're face-to-face again, our height just the same with the way we're positioned.

Fuck, I feel bad for Damon. You can plainly see the demons dancing in his gaze. And sadly, there isn't a damn thing I can do for him.

"I don't think you need a dance, Champ. I think you need something I can't give you."

Brows tugging together, he licks his tongue across his top teeth. "Oh yeah? And what's that?"

The storm is spinning faster again, but I say what needs to be said regardless.

“You need a friend.”

Laughter shakes his shoulders, his eyes narrowing on me like I’m so far beneath him my opinion isn’t worth the ink it would cost to write it down.

“You don’t know me. And you have no idea what I need. You’re just a woman in a cage who likes flashing her tits for spare change.”

You’d think I’d be used to insults like his. But for some reason the one he just tossed out stabs me in a million different places.

Probably because he’s not wrong.

“I also think you need to go,” I tell him, my voice leaving no room for argument.

Damon stares at me long and hard. At first, I think he’ll refuse the suggestion, that I’ll have no choice but to hit the emergency button to alert security that I need help. But then he mutters something too soft for me to completely make out.

We’re at a standstill for what feels like forever but is really only a few seconds.

Damon shakes his head. “Have a good life, Blue.”

He flips me off as he rounds the platform to head toward the door, jerking it open and slamming it shut on his way out.

Tears burn the rims of my eyes that do nothing but piss me off. I refuse to let them run down my cheeks.

People don’t scare me easily.

Especially not cocky men who think they can throw money at a woman and buy anything they want.

Insults don’t usually affect me. I’ve been called damn near every name in the book.

So why did Damon’s words affect me?

I promise myself that I’ll never have anything to do with him again. But something inside me warns this won’t be the

last time we see each other.

It shouldn't excite me to think he'll be back.

It should terrify me instead.



Damon

A friend.

The dancer thinks I need a friend.

I was still laughing about that bullshit when I woke up this morning, her stupid suggestion a joke that was tumbling around with the rest of the crap in my head.

Why she thought she knew anything about me or could recommend what I need is beyond me. It's like she thought she was counseling me instead of flashing me her body as a momentary distraction from life.

What I'd like to know is when they started offering psychology degrees to women shaking their asses in cages?

Blue must have thought she had one to be able to diagnose me so quickly.

I know I shouldn't have called her out like I did. She might have had good intentions and all that, but unfortunately for her I'm not in the best place in life to give a damn.

The problem is I never tipped her for what little time she gave me, and that's not fair to her.

Blue is simply trying to make a living just like every other person in this world, and I cut her down at the knees, dismissing her as nothing more than a broke bitch when I know those girls bust their asses trying to scrape by.

That's why I'm back at Myth tonight, my stare keeping Patrick in view as I approach him.

He probably has two reasons to kick my ass to the curb tonight: the fight Shane and I started and the fact that I got a free show last night without even bothering to pay the woman.

He eyes me like he's about to give me another strong elbow to the spine, but instead, his eyes narrow down and a smirk stretches his lips.

“Really?” he asks with laughter in his deep voice. “Man, I thought you learned last night. Dickheads like you always have money to burn.”

This jackass is going to rob me blind every time I show up, but I respect the corner he's crushed me in.

Grabbing my wallet, I pull out five, crisp, hundred-dollar bills then slap them in his palm.

Patrick's lips roll over themselves, the corner of his mouth tilting up.

“Did I tell you I went to an eye appointment today? Got some new contacts. They work so much better than what I had last night. All that fog is gone, you know?”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, sarcasm dripping from every damn syllable. “You'll have to give me the doctor's name. Guy sounds like he performs miracles.”

With a laugh, Patrick nods. “That he does, my friend. But I think the blindness could still come back ... at the right price.”

This son of a bitch is going to demand I mortgage my house before long. “The price keeps getting higher.”

He shrugs. “Inflation. You know how it goes.”

I pull out another two hundred and hand it over.

“Ah, yeah, a little blurry, but—”

I slap another hundred in his hand.

He smiles. “Guess I need to make another appointment soon. These contacts ain't worth shit.”

My eyes roll. “Never mind on that recommendation.”

His boisterous laugh echoes through the parking lot.

“Hands to yourself,” he reminds me as I head in the door to the club.

Patrick's not a bad guy, and I laugh to myself as I step foot inside.

As usual, I'm met with the same high-energy music thumping the walls. Myth is packed tonight, but that's to be expected on a Saturday.

Still, the crowd parts as I walk through. Either I'm doing a shit job of hiding what I'm feeling, or most of the bastards here remember me from one fight or another.

There are certain perks when your violent reputation precedes you but also drawbacks. The first of which is standing at the base of Blue's cage after I climb the stairs to the second floor.

Knowing Blue's manager won't let me within fifty feet of her, especially after the recent fight, I make my way to the bar instead, catch the bartender's eyes then hold up a finger to let him know I'll take a beer.

He's quick about sliding it over. I give him a fifty and tell him to keep the change.

Turning back to have Blue in view, I admire her dancing again. She may not know shit about me, but she definitely knows how to move.

Sliding my eyes to the manager guarding her cage, he watches her with the same intensity. I wonder about what's really going on between them, and if a bitch he thinks is loyal just flashed her tits to me last night.

Wouldn't surprise me. Red has been the only example in my life of a woman worth a shit, and that turned into a hellscape of epic fucking proportions.

I doubt there's a woman alive now who can convince me that any of them mean what they say or give the first fuck about how they affect people.

Maybe I'm being unfair.

It's not that Red didn't care.

She simply made a choice to dismiss Ezra and me.

The blow to my heart was my fault for giving a shit in the first place, for believing there was somebody out there who could love the fucked-up mess I've become.

I can't blame Red. Not entirely. I know the problems I have are more than any person can tolerate.

I guess I'll just remain homeless.

Unloved.

Fucking alone and trapped in whatever cage my life has built for me.

There is no way in hell I'll let anybody breach those walls again just to tear my heart from my chest and toss it in my face.

It doesn't stop me from watching Blue, though. But then I'm not here to fall in love.

I'm here to forget.

To be numb.

To escape memories that refuse to stop haunting me.

The music changes as I lift the beer to my mouth and swallow down what's left. It's a slower beat, the music darker.

My eyes remain locked to Blue's body as her dance transitions with the music, my gaze an easy slide up and down as I memorize her shape, the way she moves, a set of tits and full hips that lure me in like nothing I've ever felt before.

I've seen a lot of beautiful women in my day, but Blue takes the cake. She's exactly what I've always envisioned as the perfect female form.

All guys are different in what they want, in what attracts them, in what seduces them until they're feral.

And Blue was created from the exact mold that calls to everything male inside me.

Just like last time, her eyes are closed as she gyrates those hips and her body moves like she's fucking. I keep staring, not giving a damn about anybody around me or the environment itself.

I'm more than just fascinated by her; I'm obsessed, and I keep having to remind myself that she's just a distraction.

But the weird part — the fact that probably makes me insane — is that I don't want to worship the siren who is up there dancing.

I want to destroy her.

Rip her the fuck apart.

Her mind, her heart, her soul.

All of it.

Just because I hate being so alone in the misery of my life.

And in a sick fucking way because I want to punish Blue for the sins Red committed against me.

I thought Ezra was in the same place with me once.

I thought Emily actually understood me instead of just lying about it.

But no.

It's just me.

Locked away and rattling the bars of my cage.

All I want is to drag someone in with me.

How fucked-up is that?

Blue doesn't deserve it.

I don't know her, and she doesn't know me.

Yet here I am, staring at her like a deviant with ideas in my head that should land me in the nearest psych ward.

The thought is enough to spin me back to the bar, slam the empty bottle down, and lift a finger to the bartender for

another.

I should go.

If I give a damn at all about not hurting people who don't deserve it, I should walk the fuck out of this club and never return.

But after paying for my second beer, I can't shake whatever magic this chick has over me, and I turn back to her anyway ... to find she's opened those violet eyes and is staring back at me.

Blue never stops moving, and I would swear she's dancing solely for me. It's too bad the look in her eyes is one of surprise, of curiosity, of challenge.

Only fear should exist in a set of eyes that are such a rare color, especially while staring at me. So far, everything about her is one of a kind, and the only thought in my head is the need to possess her.

She turns her head away as soon as the thought plays across my mind, and for a second, I believe that she somehow intuited what stared back at her.

A smart woman would reject me.

Emily did.

But not Blue.

Instead, she steps out of her cage and descends the stairs.

After stopping briefly to speak to the manager who protects her space, she turns my direction as if to approach me.

Blue is ten feet away when her eyes meet mine again, but she doesn't close the distance before turning left to walk down the hallway.

Watching her walk away with those fake ass wings bouncing with every step, I glance over at the manager to see he's watching her closely.

I don't like what I can see clearly in his eyes.

It mimics what's in mine.

After waiting a full minute, I step away from the bar and follow Blue down the hall.

It's not until I have a clear view of one of the last rooms that I find her standing at the door, our eyes tangling one more time before she lets herself in and shuts it.

Reaching the room, I glance back to make sure her manager isn't also following before I open the door and letting myself in.

It clicks shut behind me.

Blue is on the far side of the room, her wings pressed up against a wall where she's keeping as much distance between us as possible.

"Why are you here, Champ?"

I like that she calls me Champ. Not sure why. Maybe because it helps separate me from a life I'm not sure I want anymore. My real name would only drag me back to that place. At least, here, I can pretend there's an escape.

"Not sure, *Blue*." I emphasize my nickname for her with a smirk. "Maybe it's to see you."

Taking a few steps forward, I keep my approach as slow as possible. Her eyes remain glued to mine, but she does nothing to move away.

"I thought I told you last night to leave. There's nothing I can give you."

Oh, on that, she's wrong.

But I refuse to tell her.

Once I'm within a few feet of her, she slides along the wall to place more distance between us. Pity for her there's not much space for her to run.

The theme in this room is different from last night. It's smaller in size and has nothing but a table in the center. I

glance down and laugh to myself at the cuffs and shackles that hang down from the sides.

“They’re easily broken, if you know the trick,” she explains, drawing my attention back to her. I stare at her without answering, her voice shaking a touch when she adds, “Just so you know.”

I shouldn’t be here.

This isn’t me.

I’m not a bastard who enjoys scaring women or pushing them around.

So why the fuck am I?

“Like I said, there’s nothing I can do for you, and I don’t think any of the other women here can either. It’s probably best you leave.”

Blinking at that, I snap out of my thoughts long enough to realize what I’m doing.

My feet stop in place, my expression softening. Genuine curiosity rushes in to replace whatever the hell it was that I was feeling.

“Why did you come back here if you want me to leave?”

Relaxing a touch at the question, she looks me up and down, a sad smile stretching her lips when our eyes meet again.

“I don’t want you getting yourself in trouble like last time.”

Confused by that, I don’t respond.

For whatever reason, she relaxes more, her shoulders no longer tense and her voice less careful.

“Maybe you should look in a mirror before leaving the house,” she suggests. “You have the same look on your face tonight that you had before the fight that got you thrown out of here.”

My brows tug together. “I was smiling and laughing that night.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds, her eyes dropping to her shoes before she swallows hard and looks back at me.

“You’re still angry. I don’t care how much you’re smiling. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter, Champ.”

Her words force a resurgence of anger through me, my mind muddled with the need to strike out at someone.

Hurt someone.

To fucking destroy *whatever* I can get my hands on.

“You need to leave.”

She’s right. I’ll give her that.

Standing here feeling this way will only lead to more destruction than Blue deserves. She wasn’t the person who stole me away for those fucking weekends. She didn’t pretend to understand and care about me only to disappear for ten years.

She didn’t use me then toss me aside.

But I’m still fully focused on her.

I step toward her again, but stop immediately, pull my wallet from my pocket then pluck out money.

Tossing a thousand dollars on the table between us, I fight to control my voice.

“That’s for showing me your tits last night.”

Blue eyes the money and shakes her head, refusing to outwardly react to the implied insult.

“You can keep it.”

Smirking at that, I turn to leave the room.

“Guess it’s for whoever gets strapped to that table next. Or you can do the intelligent thing and take it. I’m sure you need it.”

It's impressive that Blue doesn't immediately jump for the money. But that doesn't mean she won't scoop it up as soon as I'm out of view.

I know her type, and she's not dancing in those cages for the fun of it.

Reaching the door, I grip the handle but stop and look over my shoulder.

Blue continues staring, emotions I can't interpret or understand rolling behind her violet eyes.

My curiosity about this woman is out of control. And I can't help but dig deeper.

“Why do you think you know me?”

Her eyes hold mine, those mysterious emotions still swirling.

Blue's not afraid, and it's intriguing. Normally, people avoid me when I'm like this.

They run away.

But not her.

She walks toward me instead.

Stepping up so that she's just outside of my reach, she smiles, the gentle curve of her lips lined with empathy.

“I know nothing about you. But what I see in you is familiar.”

Soft laughter shakes my shoulders. There's nothing about me she would understand. Not the hell from my past or the bullshit I'm going through now. She's just a fucking dancer who enjoys being in a cage.

She's a fantasy and nothing more.

I close the distance between us, expecting her to back away. She holds her ground, though, our cheeks brushing when I lean down to speak against her ear.

She shivers at the contact, the energy between us tugging at something in me as much as her.

My voice is a bare whisper.

“I don’t think you understand what I’m thinking or that you know me in the slightest. I want to possess you. Own you. Treat you like a toy I bat around for the fun of it. And I can’t figure out why. If you know me so well, maybe you can tell me.”

Her head turns just slightly, enough that our eyes meet. The corner of my lip curls, and she stares at me intently.

“You need to leave. The only thing you’ll find here is trouble.”

Pausing, she smiles again, the expression anything but friendly. “And I’m no man’s toy. Never will be.”

We’re way too fucking close. My heart beats faster as something dark inside me comes to life. Memories assault me. My anger. My violence. It’s a goddamned storm brewing just on the horizon.

“We’ll see about that.”

Without warning, I reach up to grip the hair at the back of her head. She resists at first, our eyes locked in some fucked-up battle.

I pull her closer, turning my head so that our lips brush together and our breath collides.

Speaking against her mouth, I ask, “What happens if I kiss you right now? Would you fight?”

Silence stretches between us, and I can almost hear the indecision running through her head.

Still, she refuses to back down, her voice shaky. “You need to go. Now. Granger will come looking for me.”

I already have an idea who she’s talking about, but I ask anyway. “Who’s Granger?”

“My manager,” she answers, her voice soft yet steady. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

My lips brush against hers again, our hearts beating in tandem. “Then why are you here?”

She smirks before mimicking my words from earlier. “Not sure, Champ. Maybe it’s to see you.”

Fuck ... This woman checks every single box for me. My muscles are tense with the need to consume her, my mind spinning in so many directions that I’m losing any semblance of control.

I shouldn’t be here.

This is too close.

What the hell am I doing?

Without bothering to respond, I release her and storm out of the room.

I’m losing my damn mind or something. Emily’s return has taken me straight back to a time and place I don’t want to remember. And whatever the hell it is that I’m doing now won’t fix it.

Hurting someone else isn’t the answer.

Losing myself with a stranger won’t heal all my wounds.

It won’t change things, and it won’t clear the bullshit that jumbles my mind every damn day.

But I can’t shake Blue from my thoughts. Every time the storm appears, there she is, waiting for me inside it.

Granger stands in the middle of the hall when I turn to leave, his dark gaze targeting mine immediately. Suspicion runs through his expression when he quickly glances between the room and me.

Fuck this place.

Fuck Granger.

And fuck Blue.

This entire scene is toxic.

All I wanted to do was give her the tip owed to her, but I lost my mind with the need to touch her.

Stalking forward, I move to step around him, but the son of a bitch blocks my path.

We stare each other down, and I make the quick assessment that there's nothing he can do to me. Yeah, we're approximately the same size, and I'll admit the guy is a little intimidating.

He's dressed in all black, except for a ridiculous silver belt buckle that stands out. His jacket, shirt and slacks are all business, but his boots are definite shit-kickers that have been worn in through the years.

I can tell by looking at him that he's not exactly hard, but not soft either. There's no way in hell he's lived the life I've lived, but that doesn't mean he can't hold his own.

His eyes meet mine, and he rounds his shoulders, as if that will send me running.

“How did you get back in the club?”

Sucks for him that I'm not the type to rat people out. Patrick's ridiculous entry fees will be our little secret.

“Through the front door. How else? I'm leaving now. So if you'll get the fuck out of my way, I'll leave through that door, too.”

His stare narrows on me, but he refuses to let me pass.

My hands fist at my sides, but I refuse to knock him out of the way.

I don't need more problems.

Especially in this place.

I hear a door open and close behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch Blue step out of the room, her eyes widening to see Granger and me together.

When I turn back to him, his eyes are observing Blue, something feral in his gaze as he stares at her before returning his attention to me.

Anger rushes through me from the way he watches her.

There's something not quite right.

"She's off limits," he warns, his voice stern and unwavering. "And you need to leave."

Laughter shakes my chest. "So I've been told. It's a little difficult, though. You're standing in my way."

His stare hardens, a few tense seconds passing as he makes up his mind.

I'm fine with moving him.

And I think he's wondering if I have the strength.

Thankfully, he decides to step aside and let me pass without the need to find out who would win.

Nodding at him, I step around then stalk through the second floor, down the stairs, and across the first floor to the front door.

Patrick pipes up as I pass.

"Learned your lesson finally? An eight hundred dollar entry fee is a little much if you only stay thirty minutes. Hope it was worth it."

Stopping in place, I turn to look at him, the corner of my mouth tilting up.

"Actually, I think I spent around eighteen hundred. But who's counting, right?"

He shakes his head and laughs.

"You'll never learn. But if you can afford it ..."

Ignoring him, I stalk off into the parking lot having learned two fucking lessons.

The last place I need to be is at Myth.

And I have zero fucking control when it comes to that blue-haired dancer.



Amélie

What am I doing?

The second I saw Damon, I knew I had to get him out of Myth.

Don't ask me how or why I can plainly see the storm that surrounds that man, but I can.

The mood he was in would lead to nothing but trouble.

For him.

And for me.

He's like a damn magnet, though, and I'm pulled to him, his presence alerting me as it tugs me from the world I'm escaping to while dancing.

It makes no sense.

That scares me.

Now I'm left in this room by myself practically shaking.

Taking a few minutes to gain control of myself, I clench my eyes shut to remember how it felt when he was against me.

Heat burst beneath my skin at what he said, and it took everything in me to tell him to go. I wanted him to kiss me, wanted his hands in more places than just his grip in my hair. But I also knew nothing good would come from me allowing him that chance.

Damon wants a toy, and that's not me.

I'm not that woman.

I can't afford to be.

Not with everything that hangs in the balance.

Of course, I take the money he tossed down on the table. I'd be an idiot not to. It'll pay my rent for a month and give me some breathing room. I won't have to worry for a few weeks, not until the next month is due.

After rolling the bills and stuffing them down my bra, I step out of the room to find Damon and Granger facing off. Panic runs down my spine, my steps frozen in place, and any words I might have spoken are caught in my throat.

I want to run over to them and shove Damon away so I can escort him out of the club, but doing so would only anger Granger more.

A few tense seconds pass, the two men saying something to each other that I can't hear. But rather than the meeting turning violent, Granger steps aside to let Damon pass.

My eyes follow Damon the entire way, my heart sinking into my stomach when he leaves the hall and steps out of view.

What is it with Damon that makes me feel this way?

It's danger, and I need to remember that.

I need to *care* about that.

Unfortunately, he's not my immediate problem.

Once my eyes lose sight of Damon, I shift my gaze to find Granger walking my way. He stops just a few inches from me, using his height to force my neck to arch back so I can stare him in the face.

"I think you got a little lost going to the bathroom. Want to explain that, Ames?"

He grabs the back of my neck to hold me in place. His touch is different than Damon's. Possessive, just the same, but Granger makes me feel cold instead of hot.

Lying is the only option I have.

"I saw him walking back to the room unescorted. I didn't know if he was lost or up to something, so I went to check."

Granger's eyes are so dark brown, they're almost black. It freaks me out when he locks his stare on mine. Pure ego rolls behind it, but not the fun type.

Like Damon, Granger wants to possess me, too.

Own me.

Treat me like a toy to be batted around.

But it's somehow not the same.

With Damon, it's purely sexual. There's an instant pull between us that I can't explain.

But with Granger, warning alarms go off in my head. This man is the type who rarely hears the word *no*.

Searching my face, he attempts to see beyond the lie, but after a few seconds, he scowls.

"Get back to your cage. We'll talk about this when I drive you home."

My voice is small when I answer, "Brinley's supposed to be driving me home."

His fingers tighten on the back of my neck, pain shooting down my muscles. What's worse is I know he's still restraining himself. Granger could do so much worse.

Yanking me closer, he presses his mouth to my ear, ignoring the curious stares of the employees and other dancers walking down the hall. They all suspect something, but nobody has been brave enough to address it.

"You can let Brinley know I'm driving you home. That or you lose the extra tips you would have earned tonight. Understand me?"

Closing my eyes, I swallow down what I really want to say to him. Eventually, I'll be able to tell Granger to go to hell, but not until I have my finances under control.

"Yeah, I'll call her and let her know."

“That’s good.” His fingers loosen, then he pulls his hand away. “Now go do what you’re good for.”

Biting my tongue to keep from telling him off, I run down the hall toward the main room, my wings bouncing behind me.

One day, I’ll be rid of his ass.

One day, I’ll be able to stand on my own.

But today’s not that day, and tomorrow isn’t looking much better.

So instead of ruining the hustle by telling him exactly what I think, I run up the stairs to my cage and *do as I’m told*.

...

“Are you sure you won’t come in? I know the fight thing freaked you out, but it’s over. Nothing else has happened.”

Brinley glances at me from the driver’s seat, her blue eyes barely meeting mine before she looks at the club and shivers. I know the panic attack she suffered after the fight was terrible, but I didn’t think the lasting effects would continue this long.

“No. I’ll come back later and pick you up. I have a lot of studying to do, and the library is the perfect spot for most of it.”

My lips tug down with sympathy. I hate that she feels this way. But no matter what I say or do, she won’t leave the college campus for longer than it takes to drive me here.

Granger and Patrick have added more security, and I’ve explained all that, but still ... she refuses.

We’re idling by the front door, Patrick staring at the car when I look over. He taps his watch to warn me I’m late again.

Shrugging him off, I return my attention to Brinley and give up the argument.

“Maybe next time.”

She flashes me a forced smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

Or maybe not...

With the way Brinley is retreating, I’m starting to feel guilty for a fight I had no control over. What sucks the most is the amount of time it took me just to get her to accompany me to Myth in the first place.

Now I feel like we’re starting all over again.

Leaning across the car, I give her a quick peck on the cheek. “Love you and all that. Thanks for the ride.”

She nods, and I feel like a spoiled brat for accepting the ride home. Brinley does enough for me; she doesn’t need to be making other trips like she’s my mom doing school carpool or something.

Not that my mom ever did those things, but I can imagine what it would have been like.

With my hand gripping the door handle, I pause before letting myself out.

“Actually, you know what? I think I’ll just have Granger take me home tonight.”

Her face lights up, but she tries to hide it. “You sure? I don’t mind—”

“Woman,” I say, cutting her off, “let’s just say I’m feeling a bit frisky, and Granger is a sexy beast.”

When I wiggle my brows at her and smile, her lips tug up at the corners.

“You have fun with that. Granger’s nice to look at, but a touch too serious and scary for me.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not the one messing around with him.”

Finally, she laughs, and I feel comfortable enough to let her drive away. I know how she gets on the road.

She never speeds.

She checks her mirrors and buckles her seatbelt religiously.

I have no doubt those images she remembers of how her mom died play through her head every time she's behind the wheel.

And it breaks my heart for her.

So ... I lie.

I make her believe this thing with Granger and me is mutual. Let her worry less.

Around Brinley, I always keep a smile on my face. Always crack a joke or act like all is well in the world.

It helps her stop being so scared.

“Okay, I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Let you know how my night went.”

Letting myself out of the car, I meet eyes with Patrick as he shakes his head, stands from his stool and moves to open the door for me.

“Granger’s going to be pissed again.”

“Fuck him,” I laugh, not stopping long enough for Patrick to respond.

He’s not wrong, though.

As soon as I lift my head to look around the first floor, I see Granger waiting at the bar, his dark stare fixed on me, a deep scowl on his lips.

It’s a common expression when it comes to me, the lines of it deepening the shadows of his cheeks so that his cheekbones run like sharp blades beneath his eyes.

A tremor courses through me, but the wrong damn kind. Still, I plaster on my usual lie. The smile. The cute, childish pout. All the indications he needs to think he maintains some semblance of power.

“Get upstairs and get in uniform. Don’t waste my time with your bullshit excuses.”

Relieved by his quick dismissal, I run upstairs, make quick work of getting ready, and find myself in my usual cage within minutes.

It’s an escape for me here. A place where I can lose myself to the music that consumes me. I can close my eyes and pretend that I’m anywhere else.

That I’m somebody else.

That I’m free and simply part of the beat that drives me.

All my fantasies come alive in this place, and I can stay right here for hours.

I’m not struggling to make ends meet or constantly running from a life my mother never told me about. It was always some scary shadow that chased after us, Kane and I always suspecting mental illness over anything real and tangible.

Music is my solace.

The driving beat.

The highs and lows.

The harmonies and discordance that grip the mind in an ever-elusive expectation of what comes next.

I don’t have to think in this place.

Just be...

Granger can’t affect me from where he stands guard. The people littering the club don’t bother me. Nothing gets to me, and I’m happily dancing, the beat never stopping, my body keeping perfect time as all the stress of my life bleeds out of me.

I’m not Amèlie Hart: *girl on the run*, a hustler and poor. I’m not spending every last second of my day pretending to be what I’m not.

I simply exist.

There's only one influence I've ever discovered that can somehow yank me straight from this freedom and back to the world.

Something I can't describe.

Someone I know, but not because of any true details.

It's his energy that pulls me in.

So strong and familiar.

His darkness matching mine.

That man hides as much as I do, but he refuses to see it. I can see it, though. Only because we're two of a kind.

Every time I've seen him, I've wanted to dig into that head of his and extract everything he knows. I want to see what he's been through and what's he going through now.

I want the truth of him.

Just so I can know.

But I know better than to ask because once certain memories are inspected too closely, they become a nightmare of your own.

The last thing I need is more nightmares.

Still, I can't stop wondering.

It's too bad he hasn't returned since I last told him to leave. And while I'm glad that means less trouble for me, I still can't stop hoping that each night I'll feel that strange tug again.

That my eyes will open.

And that I'll turn to see him staring at me with those fierce and dangerous gaze.

How stupid does that make me?

Very.

I'm smart enough to know that much.

Shaking off the fascination, I let go of the questions swirling in my mind and become the music once again.



Damon

I've been thinking a lot. It's a little dangerous for me to do so, especially with the way the thoughts get jumbled. My emotions are out of control, and I can't stop the incessant whispers that drag me to a past I'm still unable to outrun.

But I've been trying, and I think that's progress.

First, self-control.

The last time I was at Myth, I realized something was breaking apart in me. I'm not a bad guy. I don't hurt women for the fun of it. I'm not cold like Ezra or Tanner. I try not to lie like Gabe. I'm not afraid of losing my heart to a woman like Shane.

I've already lost my heart once ... to Red. Back in high school when she would stand waiting for us on the Mondays following those weekends. There was always something in her eyes that could chase away the pain, the degradation, the shame and betrayal.

Maybe to say *I lost my heart* is the wrong phrase.

I happily gave it away.

Just tossed it out there because I thought it was safe.

And maybe it's fear now that makes me think I need to protect it.

But then maybe, just fucking maybe, I'm wrong.

Ezra, Red, and I have had four 'dates' since the first. All three of us, which makes it awkward.

Ezra is always a complete ass to Emily, but I'm not. It doesn't matter what I feel before seeing her or even after she

leaves, but while I'm near her, I'm calm. We joke around and laugh. We keep things lighthearted, and I think, for once, that she's not the problem in all this.

It's Ezra.

Or me.

Tonight is another date, and the timing couldn't be more perfect. I have all these questions, but they're impossible to ask with Ezra around. Emily can't relax, and we can never talk alone.

Not tonight.

It's not that I'm happy something happened to Luca and Ava, but it dragged Ezra away for a few hours, giving Emily and me time without him.

When she arrived at the house, I couldn't help myself. I pulled her into a hug, nuzzled her neck with my face, fucking breathed her in, the scent of her shampoo and light perfume easing the barrage of memories and emotions assaulting me.

I can think when she's around. But then, I guess that's what happens when your heart returns and you feel it beating.

When your *home* returns and you're no longer lost.

After leading her into the back room with the bullshit lie I was interested in watching a movie, I sat her down on the couch and took a seat in front of her.

I poured out all the words I had for her ... again.

Only for her to reject me ... again.

Only for Ezra to come home and start a fight ... again.

They'd run off to Ezra's room like I didn't exist. As if I wasn't part of the fucked-up threesome. But then I heard my name being mentioned in their argument. Something about telling me the truth. Only that truth didn't come out. Not even when I went in there to stop the fighting and Ezra attacked me for the attempt. Emily demanded I leave, but I didn't go far. I

wanted to hear the truth they had between them that neither had bothered admitting to me.

It never came.

I'm standing in the hall when Emily finally runs out of his room.

Quiet as a mouse, I'd listened to most of the conversation, not scared off too far by Ezra attempting to beat my ass when I'd first walked in there.

I'd only retreated this far because Emily asked me to leave, and I refuse to hurt her like he does. I refuse to treat her like she doesn't deserve respect.

Not like Ezra.

Not like he always has.

Anger flashes through me as soon as Emily turns the corner to find me standing there waiting for her. She knows what they said to each other and that I overheard.

Pausing for just a split second, hesitation runs through her expression, her red hair flying forward over her shoulders when her guilty eyes meet mine.

I'm sorry ... she doesn't say.

She doesn't even need to say that much. I love her enough to give her that peace while all my asshole brother can do is torment her.

He's tearing down our home without giving the first fuck what it does to us when she's gone.

I won't do the same.

I'm better than that.

I'm better for her.

But she'll never see it.

Nodding once, I acknowledge the apology she couldn't speak and move out of her way, the scent of her perfume left behind to haunt me as she runs past.

When she's gone, I listen to Ezra punch the walls of his room, a monster attempting to break apart his cage.

For any other reason, I would walk in there and fight him down.

Calm him down.

Remind him that we're not in this alone.

Never have been.

But when it comes to Emily, I'd tear him apart.

I'd cross a line.

And I'm not risking that.

Not risking what it would do to Emily.

What it would do to Ezra.

Or what it would do to me.

Instead, I break free of my own cage. Fuck what I promised myself, and to hell with self-control.

I'm pulling into Myth's parking lot within twenty minutes of all the bullshit going down.

I have these feelings I need to burn.

And I know the perfect outlet.

I shut off the engine of my truck then spend five minutes staring up at an old, out of business feed store. The walls look like they're crumbling, but I know they're solid, the parking lot barely illuminated except for just enough light to keep from tripping and falling. Patches of grass grow out of the concrete, and Patrick sits on his usual stool by the front door looking more like a lone, rental cop than a bouncer for a bar.

Really, the entire scenario is hilarious because nothing about this place explains the amount of cars in the lot. But then, unless you're looking for chicken feed in the late hours of the night, a person would have no reason to come down the two-lane side street that leads to Myth in the first place.

I don't want to know how much money it takes to keep this place hidden, but that's not my concern.

Climbing out of my truck, I don't waste time pulling my wallet from my pocket, Patrick already shaking his head and laughing as I amble forward, not really in a hurry to walk inside and fall back on a habit I know I shouldn't be developing.

But the escape is needed.

There's that.

I'll lose my mind if I go home tonight and face Ezra.

It gets to a point where you need to choose the lesser of two evils, and I'm starting to believe Blue has pulled the short straw in this fucked-up situation.

What's worse is she doesn't even know it.

"One week, my friend. Is that all it took?"

Patrick eyes me with his dark brown eyes, a genuine smile stretching his lips. He doesn't mean any harm, and I can't blame him for finding this shit funny. If the tables were turned, I'd laugh my ass off just the same while emptying some idiot's wallet.

"How much tonight?" I ask, knowing damn well I'll pay it.

For the first time, concern rolls behind his stare.

"What's so important in there that you're willing to go broke for it?"

I ignore his question. He's here to rip me the fuck off, not talk about my hopes and dreams.

"Will eight hundred do, or is inflation out of control again?"

Instead of allowing me to slap the bills in his palm, Patrick crosses his arms over his bulky chest, one brow arching. He might as well just call me a dumbass instead of aggravating me with the expression.

“What’s so important?”

Heat slowly drapes my skin, the aggravation already crawling closer to the very thing I’m trying to avoid.

“How much?”

He ignores my question.

“I don’t think anybody needs to tell you this, not with the energy you’re carrying right now, but maybe this isn’t the place for you tonight.”

Actually, it’s exactly the place for me. This fucker can give up on his psychobabble bullshit.

What the hell is up with this place? I step back and look the building up and down to make sure it’s still a club and not a shrink’s office.

I pull out two hundred more.

“A thousand. That sound right?”

Another shake of his head.

Fucker isn’t budging besides that, his arms still crossed, his eyes still pinned on my face with that question mark of an eyebrow arched high up his forehead.

“You look angry.”

Chuckling at that, I enlighten him. “I’m always angry. Tonight, I’m probably just doing a shit job of hiding it. And your questions aren’t making it any better.”

I pull out another five hundred.

“Fifteen hundred.”

“Put your money away. Answer the question, and I’ll let you in.”

My fingers fist over the cash. Not enough to ball it up tight, but enough to grab Patrick’s attention. It’s just a minor reaction, anger creeping out, making itself only slightly visible.

It takes effort to relax my hand.

My thoughts scramble again, decisions rolling through emotions, tripping over memories, some so old they're barely shadows, and others so new, I'm still technically living them.

Regardless of the turmoil, the storm, the heat that blossoms around me and would make it so damn easy to land my ass back in a jail cell from letting loose on this one aggravation, I chose another option instead.

“A dancer. That’s what’s so important.”

He smiles. “I knew it.”

Pausing, Patrick scans the parking lot before landing that knowing gaze back on me. “Lemme guess, blue hair, big black wings?”

She must be a favorite. There are at least twenty here a night, all of them scattered throughout the first and second floors. How I should feel about that is beyond my guess, but I nod in answer.

Seconds tick by in silence, my frustration growing thicker, blending into this desperate need I have to escape inside. To feel something other than what Emily and Ezra left me holding.

Their *secrets* ...

Something my twin brother never bothered to mention in the ten years since Red left us.

Shaking that thought off, I clench my jaw and take a breath. My nostrils flare to pull in the cool night air.

It wouldn't do me any good to shove Patrick aside and strongarm my way into the club because I'm losing my shit. I'd only be dragged right back out before I could get to Blue. I'd be tucked into the confines of a cop car and hauled away.

But that doesn't mean I don't consider it.

He sees it, too, his posture shifting on the stool, almost daring me to make the first move.

The corner of his lips curl in challenge, but he doesn't say the first word about what we're both thinking.

"Granger won't let you near her," he admits.

"Fuck Grang—"

He laughs again, cutting me off.

"Now I know you two have met, and you may want to listen to me before you go running in there to look stupid."

We stare at each other, Patrick attempting to convey some message I'm missing entirely.

"I'm not leaving."

A single bark of laughter shakes his shoulders.

"You aren't getting in there if I don't let you. Let's just get that clear first. But that's not where I'm going with this, so pull your bullshit back before we're both standing in your spot. You haven't pissed me off ... yet."

My jaw clenches again, but I do the intelligent thing and listen.

"Like I was saying, Granger won't let you near her. The asshole guards her like she's his property, you get me?"

Not really.

But I don't tell him that.

There's a slight roll to his eyes, like my head is denser than I know.

"Women aren't property. And she doesn't belong to his creepy ass. So this is what I can do. I can give you a half hour with her if that's what she decides. If she doesn't come out of her cage, she's not for you, and this will be the last night you drop an insane amount of money on a habit that's not good for you."

"If she does?" I counter.

"Then you have a half hour. Not one second more. Understand?"

My brows tug together wondering what the fuck he's getting at, but fuck it, I'll play along. If it gets my foot in that door.

If it gets me to her.

"Fifteen hundred," he says. "The half hour starts as soon as Granger walks away from her stairs. Don't fuck around and fuck her up. She happens to be my favorite, too."

There's no point in arguing or asking questions. I need inside that club.

He nudges his chin at the door.

"Go park yourself at the second-floor bar. You see Granger walk downstairs, start the timer."

Patrick returns his attention to the parking lot without another word. I'm not dense enough to not know when a conversation is over.

Letting myself in, I make my way through the first floor, the crowd parting as usual because there is a storm around me filled with so much aggression that I'm sure the walls around this place are fighting to keep from breaking apart.

Reaching the second floor, I head left to the bar and wave off the bartender because I'm not here for a drink. I take one fucking breath to steady myself before turning to look at Blue.

She's staring right at me.

Her body continues swaying to the music.

And everything feral about her is calling to everything feral inside me.

Without losing the beat, she glances down at the prick guarding her stairs, surprise barely evident in her expression when he's approached by another dancer who points downstairs.

Annoyance flits across Granger's face, but he abandons his post and the timer is now ticking.

As soon as Blue meets eyes with me again, I angle my head to the back hallway and start walking. It isn't until I reach an available room that I glance over my shoulder to see her following me.

With my hand on the doorknob, I'm not sure what to think of Blue following without question. Especially knowing what she's walking into.

Or maybe she doesn't know.

Maybe she thinks simply telling me to leave will work again.

I let myself into the room then walk to the opposite wall, placing distance between us because I can't trust myself.

Blue steps into the room and quietly clicks the door shut behind her. Her violet eyes find mine and hold them, a million questions rolling through the unique color.

There's no point in waiting on what she'll say, so I beat her to the punch.

"I shouldn't be here."

She laughs softly. "Strange. I was about to say the same."

"We have thirty minutes before your manager notices you're gone."

Blue barely blinks. I figured she'd ask how I know that. Or how I managed to buy us this time. But neither question floats free of her full lips. Not about that, at least.

"What happened?"

I still at the question, my neck and shoulders tight with tension. Closing my eyes, I take another breath and attempt to hide what I'm feeling.

With anybody else, I can pretend that everything is okay, but this woman sees it all.

It pisses me off.

And I have no idea why.

Maybe it's because she thinks she knows me just by taking a quick look. Or maybe she's treating me like she does every other bastard she runs across in this place.

Like I'm a game.

Or ever could be.

Ego has never been my biggest hang-up in life, but something about Blue feels like she's dancing all over some line, and it plucks at every fucking nerve in my body.

Flashing her a smirk lined with the truth that she's nothing more than tonight's entertainment, I answer, "Not a damn thing. Just got bored and thought I'd like to see your tits again."

If the words had any effect at all, you wouldn't know it by looking at her. Her expression remains calm, her eyes holding mine like she's got me by the balls. There's nothing even remotely submissive about her demeanor or posture, and it makes me wonder about the life she's lived.

"Don't lie to me, Champ. And don't patronize me or attempt to insult me. I've heard worse, and you haven't been all that creative so far. Stop wasting my time and yours. You need something. I know the look."

"What fucking look?"

Her lips tug down at the ends.

"The look of a junkie."

Rage simmers to the surface. How fucking dare she? Who the hell does she think she is?

"A junkie?"

Laughter bubbles out of my chest as I push away from the wall and stalk toward her.

Blue has her usual fake wings outstretched behind her, but her full thighs, hips and ass are barely contained in a pair of red shorts, the top swell of her tits pushing out from a half corset top, the strings barely holding the piece together in

front. You could bounce a fucking quarter off her stomach, and I imagine running my tongue over the flat surface to trace every shadow of feminine muscle.

Fuck!

What this woman does to me isn't natural.

She holds her ground much like the last time we were alone, and I tower over her, our chests brushing together as I bend down low enough to speak against her ear.

From this angle, I can see the quick flutter of her pulse in her neck, can hear every quick breath she draws over parted lips.

She's frightened.

I'm angry.

And for some reason I can't explain, the need to touch her is damn near impossible to resist when we're like this.

"I said I want to see you without your top on. I want to taste your fucking tits. Can you do that for me?"

My voice drops to a demeaning croon.

"Don't worry about money, Blue. I've got plenty for you."

Lips curling at just one corner, she turns her head enough that our eyes can meet.

"Like I said. A junkie. You need something. Just man the fuck up and admit it."

My hands fist at my sides, my entire body hard as stone.

It's a fight not to shove her against a wall and taste the arrogant words that drip from her lips.

"Yes or no, Blue. Will you give me what I want?"

It's out of my control at this point.

This need.

This addiction.

I've never felt this before, not like this, not with some woman I barely know.

It's driving me harder than when I itch for a fight. It's filling my veins faster than any alcohol I've ever swallowed. It's crushing me so thoroughly that the pain in my heart and the words in my head are numb and silent.

For once.

For fucking once.

No, not for once.

I've felt this before.

But where Emily was a peaceful and safe spot I could run to and hide, Blue is a blazing inferno that razes everything around me. She splits me apart and reveals all my scars. She draws the anger out of me like a needle to a vein, all while standing so confidently within my storm.

Where Emily healed me, Blue destroys.

So effortlessly that it consumes me. So thoroughly that I can't remember where I've come from or where I'm going.

My hand splays over her stomach in challenge, and the heat of her skin matches mine. It burns the tips of my fingers and scorches my palm.

I'm daring her — fucking daring her — to say no. To do the intelligent thing. To take back her bullshit comment that I'm simply a junkie here for his next fix.

Blue refuses.

Her stare holds mine.

Her comment stays trapped between us.

And in her own way, she's daring me, too.

Pity for her, I accept the challenge.

Keeping my touch soft, I slowly drag my hand up until I'm grasping at the strings of her top, pausing in wait for the refusal I know is coming.

Of course, she'll say no. Any woman in her right mind would say no. She must be testing me to see how far I'll go.

Instead of refusing, this stubborn woman surprises me by pushing her chest tighter against my hold. One strong tug at the strings and her top flies open, her breath catching in her throat when my palm cups the weight of her breast.

Silence seduces me.

A sense of calm.

The type of relief you feel when a lifelong agony is finally finished and the pain of existing stops.

It's quiet in this place.

In my head.

No memories. No words.

Just Blue and me locked in this battle and this moment.

Pressing even closer into my hold, a shiver runs down her body, her breath hissing over full lips as my thumb brushes over the tight nipple. But her eyes never soften and never let mine go.

"Take what you need, Champ," she whispers. "If it helps you."

Her eyes search mine, empathy trickling in ... Understanding.

"But then you have to go."

Slowly guiding her up against a wall, I caress her chest, explore it.

Fuck, I feel like an idiot because I never expected it to go this far.

Her lips part as she stares up at me, those stupid wings crushed behind her back as I dip my head to kiss her, only for her to turn her face so that my mouth brushes her cheek.

"I can't give you that."

“You said take what I need.”

Our mouths brush together when she turns her face back, but then she angles her head up so my lips catch her jaw, my teeth nipping at the skin as I taste the light salt and sweat from her dancing, my mouth tracing down lower to run along her neck.

Apology saturates her words. “Not that.”

Speaking against her skin, I tease, “How much would it cost me?”

Pushing one leg between hers, I suck in a breath when her thigh brushes against my dick, every male instinct I have demanding I take this woman right here and now. That somehow her body can absorb everything I don't want to feel anymore and make me whole again.

“I need more.”

I'm practically growling against her pulse, my body shivering just as much as hers.

Blue hisses softly when my hand squeezes her breast. She takes the pain beautifully ... the anger ... my rage.

“I don't fuck for money,” she breathes out as I grip her ass and lift her up so that my mouth can close over the hard nipple of her breast.

Neither do I...

I've never paid for it and never will. And the fact that I'm standing on some fucked-up precipice now considering it jolts me out of this delusional place I've found.

I let go of her all at once and step away, our stares twisted together in something I'm not sane enough to explain.

With her back against the wall, Blue looks up at me with eyes that can't possibly know the first thing about me.

“You done?”

I shake my head of the haze, but confusion has settled in like a heavy storm cloud, and I can't escape it.

“Why?” I ask.

Her eyes leave mine as she looks down to fix her top, nimble fingers making quick work of the strings as she tugs them back in place.

“Why don't I fuck for money?”

“No. Why do you keep following me back here?”

I'm genuinely confused by her. Why walk back to one of these rooms knowing you're not into whatever may be expected?

Blue ties off the strings to her top and glances up at me, her demeanor changed, the heat that had exploded between us gone as fast as it had come on.

A sigh falls over her lips as she looks at me with that damn knowing behind her eyes.

“I don't know a thing about you—”

“I could have told you that.”

She rolls her eyes and continues despite my snapped interruption. “But what I do know is that you've been through hell.”

I still in place. An argument hangs on the tip of my tongue, but I can't shake it loose. She's not wrong.

I hate that she's not wrong.

Unfazed, she keeps talking, her tone matter-of-fact. Just a normal, everyday conversation.

“We've both been through hell, that's how I recognize it. Takes one to know one. But every time you show up here, that anger you're carrying swirls around you for all to see. Sometimes it's mild, and sometimes it's a bomb ready to explode.”

Finally securing her top, she pushes from the wall and straightens her posture. Her violet eyes lift to mine, but she doesn't take a step toward me.

"I'm simply defusing the bomb. You needed something, like I said. Something that could snap your mind out of whatever nightmare it was trapped in. If a nice set of tits does it for you..."

Shrugging a shoulder, she shakes her head. "They're just tits, you know?"

Searching her face, I expect to see condescension. An insult. Some question regarding my worth.

Something.

Blue simply stares at me like she's known me for years.

"We're both are going through problems. And if I can help you out, I'm willing to do you that favor. You need that favor. Maybe I'm just doing for you what very few have done for me."

Another shrug of her shoulder then she turns to walk to the door, pausing with her hand on the knob.

She glances back at me from over her shoulder.

"I hope whatever happened to you before you got here tonight wasn't too horrible. You seem like a decent enough guy. But I need to get back to my cage, and you need to leave before we both get in trouble. I'll see you again next time."

Blue opens the door, and I can't choke back my next words.

"There won't be a next time. I'm not a fucking junkie like you claimed."

A barely there smile tilts her lips, more sad than anything. "You'll be back, Champ. I have no doubt about that."

Her first step out the door has me moving toward her.

I stop myself just out of reach.

“What makes you so fucking sure? There are a dozen more just like you.”

With a simple nod of her head—the insult understood—she glances back at me again.

“Because you haven’t paid me yet. Seems as good an excuse as any to return.”

With that, she leaves the room and shuts the door behind her.

I don’t bother following, don’t bother chasing her down to deny what she said.

It’ll won’t do either of us any good.

Fuck what she said.

I won’t be back.

It doesn’t matter what she thinks I owe her.



Amélie

“Do you work tonight?”

Brinley glances up at me from behind one of the many books she has stacked and scattered across the library table. Nibbling on the end of a pen, her blue eyes meet mine with exhaustion behind them. Dark smudges stain the skin beneath them, a sure sign that something has been nagging at her.

It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have dragged her to Myth so many times. The chaotic environment is difficult for her, and that fight really threw her off balance.

I hate how she works so hard to escape the panic she still feels about Myth.

The guilt seeps through me like ice water in my veins. But the fight was a one-time deal. She needs to learn to let go a little and stop worrying so much.

Thankfully, I’m good with a smile and an upbeat voice. Faking it has always been my forte.

“Yeah, but I was thinking instead of you scampering away like you normally do after dropping me off, you could stay this time and have a drink with me when I’m on break.”

She shakes her head, but I won’t give up.

With as much drama as I can muster, I lean forward and lay my head on the table, making sure to keep my stare locked to hers.

“Please, Brin? You can save me from Mr. Dark and Gloomy. He only lets me out of my cage to have a drink with you.”

It's not a lie unfortunately. Except for that one night that Damon managed to make Granger disappear. I'm still trying wrap my head around how the hell he pulled that trick off.

Another week has passed since then and he hasn't returned to pay me. I'm a little shocked, given his temperament ... and a little proud of him.

When Damon walked through the door, I thought I had him pegged just like every other man I hustle.

He's the arrogant type, a man who owns his space and fills a room with the energy he carries. You can't miss him ... or ignore him. Even when you want to.

He's the perfect mark for a girl like me. And don't judge me for it either. Not only does my side hustle pay my bills, but the men I choose deserve it.

I specifically seek out narcissists.

Men like Granger.

Simply because they're so easy.

And hell, most of the men I've played my games on have left behind a line of women who would high five me for the games I've played in return.

The thing is though, after the few moments we've had alone, I stopped pegging Damon as the usual.

Not by his intent, anyway.

The man is hurting.

I can tell you that.

Memories swirl around him like apparitions, clear as day to someone like me.

I carry them just as closely.

It's too bad that he lets that storm of his take control and hurt the people around him. His arrogance trips him up, and his anger is infectious. There are so many sides of him that

I've seen already. And the secrets I can see behind his amber eyes are what scare me the most.

I'm torn every time I see him. The hustler in me wants to bleed him of every dime possible, but in the moments we're together, I can't help the need I feel to pull him back from his next tragedy.

Imagine a man standing on the roof of a building, the front of his toes lined up at the edge. His eyes peering down at the city beneath him, at the cars and people that pass.

That man is thinking.

Considering.

Attempting to imagine how quickly and painlessly life can be snuffed out with a quick and violent splat.

Those secrets and ghosts of his stand behind him, shoving him forward, whispering for him to take that step, their voices too loud for him to ignore.

That man is Damon every time he walks into Myth.

The poor bastard has no idea just how close he is to stepping off that edge.

“Why would I need to rescue you from Granger?”

Brinley's question snaps me out of my thoughts and drags me back to why I'm laying half my body on this table like a moron.

I pretend to flail, my arms and legs moving like a toddler's tantrum in slow motion.

“Because he's a bastard.”

She rolls her eyes. “Then stop sleeping with him.”

Pushing myself up and off the table, I grin. “You know how it goes, Brin. I can't help myself. I'm young and— “

“In control of your sexuality.” Her tone is drab. “Yes, I know the spiel.”

Brin's tone changes, a saccharine sweet that makes me laugh. "But women who control their sexuality also have to suffer the consequences of who they knock boots with."

She's relaxing and joking. Which is exactly what I was hoping to achieve.

Yes, I'm a liar. But I justify the deception by remembering that Brin doesn't need to worry about me on top of everything else in her life.

I protect her with those lies.

She's like a sister to me, and I would never harm her or add to her already anxious mind.

"Busted," I tease.

Pouting my bottom lip, I beg, "Just one drink, Brin? So you can see the club is much safer now that they added the new security."

She closes one book then opens another. "I have studying to do." Her eyes flick up to catch mine. "You should also be studying if you hope to pass your exam next week."

Waving the comment away, I play it off that the exam is no big deal.

Really, it is. I'm barely passing my classes, but again, I don't let her know.

"Piece of cake."

"Yet I haven't seen you crack a book once."

The suspicious arch to her eyebrow is all she needs to say. If not for Brin, I wouldn't still be in school. Not that I'm advancing all that quickly or have any hope of earning a bachelor's degree.

College is my brother's dream for me because he doesn't want me to turn out like our mother. While lying to him and Brinley that everything is okay, I already know the walls are slowly caving in.

Nothing about my life right now is easy.

Not work.

Not Granger.

Not my living situation.

And definitely not school.

If I don't figure something out in the next couple weeks, I'll have to admit to everybody that I'm an epic failure when it comes to just about everything.

Changing the subject, I offer, "You don't have to drive me tonight. I can take an Uber."

Not that I can afford it. But that's not her problem.

"I'll drive you," she answers on a yawn. "It'll be good for me to get away from this library for an hour or so."

Her eyes flick up to mine.

"Will Granger be taking you home? Or do I need to pick you up when you get off?"

A deep sigh rolls over my lips. "Most likely Granger will take me home. So don't worry about staying up."

Brin yawns again then attempts a weak smile. "I don't mind staying up. Gives me more time to study."

Right.

And more time to worry.

My attempts have failed. And I know when to give up. Brin is not yet ready to venture out into the world again.

That fact is made even more apparent two hours later when she practically peels out of the Myth parking lot after dropping me off. I stare at her car as it turns onto the street then hauls ass away, dust flying up from the tires.

Sighing, I turn to look at the club.

Its run-down façade is in complete opposition to the sleek decor inside. Somehow it looks more rundown today with

peeling paint and decaying wood in places I'm sure don't threaten the structural integrity. Despite looking like it hasn't been kept up since the feed business closed, I know that the building is sound.

The front door opens as I approach it. Patrick steps out, his big brown eyes assessing me.

"You expecting any visitors tonight?"

There's humor in his voice but also a knowing expectation. He can't possibly be talking about Damon. Patrick is never upstairs unless there's a problem. Lately, there haven't been any problems.

Stopping in place, I look down at my feet and back up at him.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't."

He wraps an arm around my shoulders to block my attempt to step around him and walk inside.

"You know that guy has problems, don't you."

"Granger? Of course I know."

He laughs.

"Not Granger, although you're right...He has his own issues and I'm not judging you for whatever it is you're doing with him. I'm talking about that rich asshole who likes to cause trouble. Damon or whatever. The one with a twin brother and a bad attitude."

My heart sinks. Of course, he knows Damon. Patrick was the person who tackled him the night of the fight.

Still, denial runs through me, driving my need to continue playing the game and keep up appearances.

"Why do you think I know some guy named Damon? Granger never lets me in the back rooms, much less out of his sight. I have no time to meet anybody while I'm working."

Patrick laughs, a deep belly chuckle that vibrates his body against mine. His fingers tighten on my shoulder.

“Yeah, except there are times Granger isn’t around to watch you. And I make a lot of money to ensure those times happen.”

Fuck.

Damon’s been paying off Patrick to spend time with me. I try not to think about how much he’s been shelling out between the two of us.

Fine. I’ll admit the truth. My voice is weak when I do so.

“I know Damon has issues. But I’m not doing anything with him that’ll cause problems.”

Another squeeze of his fingers on my shoulder.

“Not worried about the club, Ames. I’m just reminding you that a man with the kind of issues Damon carries makes him a dangerous playmate in those rooms. Be careful is all I’m saying.”

Nodding my head, I take a breath then plaster on my best smile. My eyes meet his. “No worries. I can handle myself.”

Voice low, he releases my shoulder. “Yeah, Ames, but can you handle Damon if he loses his shit again? I barely got him under control when he was fighting in front of a crowd. I hate to think what he could do to you if he loses control in private.”

The same concern has already rolled through my thoughts several times. Hell, the concern practically screams in my head every time I’m alone with Damon.

But that doesn’t mean I can stay away.

“I doubt he’ll show up again. Our last ... session ... didn’t go so well. He didn’t even pay me.”

Stepping forward, Patrick opens the door for me. “Yeah, okay. But when he shows up again, do you want me to distract Granger?”

Understanding that he's asking me if I consent to Damon's presence, I nod my head.

"Yes."

One bark of a laugh escapes me. "Maybe he'll even pay me this time."

I walk inside and almost miss Patrick's response against the heavy beat of music in the club.

"He'll definitely be paying me."

Patrick's deep laughter follows me until the front door closes.

Rushing past the bar, I race upstairs and attempt to make it to the dressing room without running into anybody. Granger sits at the upstairs bar, his dark gaze tracing my path as I run past him.

Thankfully, he doesn't follow me, and I'm able to get into costume without him watching me get dressed.

Granger's patience is wearing thin with me. He hasn't demanded sex in the months I've been using him, but I can see in his expression lately that the day is coming when he'll lose that patience.

That just happens to be the same day I'll stop playing the game with him and switch to a new game with a new man.

The problem is, the only man I've had a chance to meet is just as dangerous as Patrick said. But his wallet is deep, and I'm sure his bank account is something I could tap without worry of it bleeding him dry.

Once dressed, I haul ass up to my cage then shut the door to dance to the beat that surrounds me.

Granger takes his usual place at the bottom of the stairs and I attempt to lose myself to the music without worry of all the problems stacking up in my life.

It's too bad I only get an hour of being worry free before one of those problems climbs the stairs to the second floor and

traps me in his amber stare as he makes his way to the bar.

I look down to see that Granger has spotted him too, a scowl stretching his lips.

What have you paid for now, Damon?

Shutting my eyes, I dance like no one is watching. And like there aren't two men with their possessive stares pinned to me.

The sound of the cage door opening forces my eyes open again. The bastard was brave enough this time to walk up my stairs and retrieve me.

“If Granger sees you — “

He grips his strong fingers around my arm and tugs me forward. Fury rides the color of his beautiful eyes. But it's not directed at me.

“We have two hours tonight. I decided that time would be best spent in one of the back rooms.”

I don't even want to know what those two hours must have cost.

My attempt to pull my arm from his iron grip fails. Our stares collide in that moment, my pathetic attempt at refusal warring with his desperate need for something I'm not sure I recognize.

The fact I can't read him terrifies me.

This isn't just some guy wanting to be teased. Damon's expression is set on more than just a backroom dance.

“You never paid me for last time.”

He reaches in his pocket with his free hand then pulls out a wad of hundreds. Holding them up, a snarky smile curls the corner his lips.

“This enough?”

Yeah, I think. Enough to pay my bills for the rest of the year. I can't even begin to guess how much he's holding. The

wad of bills is too big.

“Maybe.”

His lips curl up into a knowing grin.

“Let’s go, Blue. Time’s ticking.”

Another tug and I’m following him without protest. My easy willingness surprises me, but then again, I am curious about the odd mood he’s in tonight.

You know what they say about curiosity. The damn cat never stood a chance. And neither do I.

Damon’s stride is long and fast. It takes me two steps to his one. I can’t deny he’s powerful. Nobody can if they notice the tense strength in his broad shoulders, or large biceps that fill out his shirt sleeves.

He’s dressed in a button-down shirt tonight, the navy color so dark it looks black. My eyes trail down to his ass. Down lower to his muscular thighs.

Sadly, my slow — and appreciative — perusal ends abruptly when Damon walks me into a backroom, shuts the door then lightly shoves me up against a wall to lock his amber stare to mine.

“Why do you think you know me? And don’t bullshit me with your head games, Blue. Give me an honest fucking answer because I’m not in the mood to play tonight.”

There’s a lump in my throat I can barely swallow. Somehow managing it, I fight to smile past the small trickle of fear down my spine. He’s acting out of character.

Or maybe this is just another side to him.

“I’m telling it like I see it, Champ.”

The corner of his lips curl higher.

“No bullshit, Blue. And no fucking head games. You said you know me. So now you’re going to tell me how.”

When I don't answer immediately, his eyes dip down to my chest. "What's wrong? Is it easier to talk with your tits on display?"

Anger chases the fear, the warmth of it replacing the cold chill I felt just seconds ago.

"Go to hell, Champ. And let me go."

Attempting to move away is useless; he only cages me in tighter.

We're practically sharing our breath, our faces close enough that the end of his nose touches mine.

My eyes narrow. "I'm not doing this with you tonight."

It's obvious he doesn't care about my feelings, his expression seemingly at ease and charming while a fragile hold on his temper pulses beneath.

Damon's eyes are hooded. His mouth relaxes into an arrogant smirk.

"I think we both know I'm not leaving without an answer."

I push him away far enough that I can keep my stare on the wall at the opposite end of the room behind him and escape the burning fury of his glare.

His hands lock over my chin enough to control where I look, but not hard enough to bruise.

Not yet, at least.

The threat is there, though, and I grit my teeth because of it.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you."

Ha! This fucker thinks he's an authority figure now. I refuse. He can turn my head wherever he wants. I'm still not looking at him. He's not getting an answer simply because he's demanding it.

Leaning in, he speaks softly against my ear.

“You weren’t lying when you said you’re no man’s toy, were you?”

I don’t need to answer for his mouth to curl into a smirk. Whatever is going through his head right now has nothing to do with what’s occurring in this room. I don’t know where he’s been, who’s been fucking him, or what woman broke his heart, but the pieces of it are dribbling down his chest, a large hole missing from where the damage was done.

None of that is visible though.

Not to the eye.

But I can feel it around him.

I can hear it in his voice.

And there’s no way in hell I’m going to submit to whatever storm this man is becoming.



Damon

Blue's not so sure of herself now.

Not in this moment.

Not when I have her trapped like a fish out of water, her mind flapping and flailing.

If she wants to act like a goddamned therapist, a psychic, or someone who fucking knows me, then she needs to back that up with information about me.

About what I've gone through.

About who I fucking am.

Most days I don't even know that answer, so I can almost promise there's no possible way that Blue knows.

She's conning me.

That's what woman like her do.

My fingers tighten on her chin, then I slowly force her face to mine. Our lips brush, her violet eyes finally meeting mine in a show of refusal, of *intentional* disobedience, and mostly of respectable force.

She's strong.

But not stronger than me.

The look Blue is giving me now would scare most men.

Too bad I don't give a shit.

"You gonna talk?"

Stubborn as a mule, this one. Her violet eyes somehow deepen into a dark purple with rage sharpening the edges.

But that damn smile that curves her lips is surprising.

“Why don’t you tell me her name, Champ, and we can go from there.”

Confusion tugs at my brow. “Her name?”

The level of anger in me is creeping to a disastrous level, and her next words push me over the fucking edge.

“The woman who’s fucking up your life.” Her smile slinks higher. “It’s the only reason I can figure that you’d be here taking your shit out on me.”

I push away from her, not stopping in my retreat until my back is pressed to the opposite wall of the room. She took her shot, and it hit home with the force of a fucking sledgehammer.

“Fuck you.” My teeth clench on the words because they’re the only ones I can manage, my anger so hot that I can feel it staining my face a dark red.

I take a breath to calm down enough that I don’t charge back in her direction. My body and voice are shaking when I growl the only words I’m able to think of in response.

“Nobody is fucking up my life.”

“Except you.” She argues.

Blue shrugs, her eyes holding mine as she steps away from the wall toward me. She doesn’t close in on me, though. The distance between us is making her act more confident again, but I know if I suddenly close the distance, she would crumble in front of me.

I’m dangerous to be around with the way I’m feeling right now. Nightmares are crawling up from the depths until they’re all I can see.

A woman.

Blue thinks it’s just a woman.

Too bad she doesn't know that *woman* is so interwoven with violence that there is no tearing them apart.

Of course, Red is fucking with my life, but so is everything else. I can't even speak to my brother anymore without it becoming an argument or a war. I have nobody who's just mine in this world. And that isolates me in place, leaving me alone with memories that refuse to stop haunting me and a phone that won't stop ringing.

I haven't answered any of my father's calls.

And I haven't listened to the voicemails he keeps leaving.

But that's because I already know what the bastard wants.

A pathetic chuckle escapes my lips.

"So that's what you think it is, huh? A woman? And here I thought you were intelligent enough to read me. Apparently, I'm wasting my time."

"And mine," she answers without missing a beat. "But here we are. So we might as well work through this."

My glare should warn her away, yet she sneaks closer, those damn wings spreading out behind her like she's escaped from the dark recesses of my memory to antagonize me into violence. Both angel and demon, her expression mocks me.

"What's the point? You've got nothing better than a stereotypical guess that it's a woman who keeps driving me here. You don't know me for shit."

Time must have slowed down somehow because it feels like forever for Blue to blink her eyes, glance down at her feet then back up to me to lock her gaze with mine.

"Then let's talk about the scars, Champ. The ones on your face and the hidden ones inside that nobody sees."

My hands fist at my sides.

More memories roll in, and I close my eyes from the force of them. Glimpses coming into focus and fading away as the

next takes its place. They're like still frames of the most fucked-up experiences a person can endure.

My brother's fist.

The door to a room.

Blood staining the floor and my skin.

A melody of screams and laughter plays like a soundtrack, all of it combining into a toxic stew that only Red could pull me away from when we were in high school.

Her hair flashes in my mind next.

The scent of her shampoo.

What it felt like as it brushed my cheek.

The calm place she'd become.

The home she'll never be again.

Fury fills me and surrounds me.

It's a goddamned storm that follows me wherever I go.

I open my eyes, and there stands Blue in the center of that storm, her knowing expression pulling me in.

Hate swells inside me.

Even though she's done nothing wrong.

Simply because I need a target and she has the ability to affect me.

I hate that I want to hurt her.

To own her.

To taste her.

Keeping her in my stare, I wince from my muscles locked painfully tight, my teeth grinding. It's difficult to swallow or breathe.

When I allow myself to take a slow glance down her body, I feel a surge of something else behind the anger.

Want.

Need.

An undeniable desire to tame this woman like life tried to tame me.

The difference is where my life failed to keep me on my knees, I won't fail with her.

She doesn't know me.

And I don't need to know her.

Not for this.

“You know nothing about scars.”

I didn't mean to step forward so quickly that Blue trips over her own feet in an attempt to back away. Her ass hits the floor with a heavy thump, her neck craning back so she can look up at me with eyes that can see the scars I keep hidden.

She'll never force me to admit to them, though. Not some cage dancer who gets paid to show skin.

Still, my mouth waters to look at her.

Red would never surrender so easily in a moment like this, not like Blue.

Her blue hair falls over her shoulders, the ends dusting her bare stomach. I study the skin of her abdomen, pale like Red's but defined by muscle she gained from dancing.

Eyes creeping up, I stare a little too long at the black leather bra top she wears. Her tits are barely contained by it, her breath causing her chest to heave as she sits so agonizingly still.

Our stares lock, violet against amber, rage running behind mine, while fear runs behind hers.

I don't notice the deep silence of the room until she speaks and destroys it.

“I know you've been through hell.” Her voice is shaking, but she doesn't move as I step closer. She also doesn't shut the

fuck up. “Probably more than me. But I’ve walked through hell just the same.”

The corner of my mouth curls. “Doubt it.”

There’s an audible pop of my knees when I squat down in front of her.

Blue’s arms are at her sides holding her upper body up, her legs bent in front of her, crossed at the ankles.

Normally, the floor of a dirty back room would be the last place I’d want to fuck, but...

“Here we are. Let’s work through this.”

Her head tilts in confusion at the same time I reach out to grab the calf of her leg to tug her body to me. Blue’s upper body falls back, and I grip down on her hips to hold her in place.

“What would happen if I tried to kiss you right now?”

Her eyes narrow. “I’d scream.”

A thought pierces the haze of anger in my head, and I laugh softly while raising her ankle to my shoulder. She doesn’t resist or try to pull away. Blue just keeps staring at me with those impossible violet eyes.

“And you think your boyfriend would come running to save you? Hate to tell you, but he won’t be showing up again for another half hour.”

Her glare intensifies. “Bet you paid a fortune for that?”

How the hell does she make me laugh when the nightmares are still assaulting me?

“Too much, if I’m being honest. But who’s counting?”

Turning my head, I place a gentle kiss on her calf before she can answer me. I open my mouth then scrape her calf with my teeth on a warning. The control it takes me not to bite down is staggering.

As much as I can’t stand her, I want her.

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

Surprised by her response, I look across her body to lock eyes with hers.

Silence beats between us.

One second.

Two...

“Then what is he?”

Blue attempts to tug her leg away, but my hand clamps down. Not tight enough to hurt her but just enough to keep her in place.

“A means to an end,” she answers on a small growl as she attempts to tug away again.

Letting her go, I stay in place as she scoots away.

It’s interesting that she doesn’t stand up and run for one of the buttons to call security. Instead, she huffs in frustration and shifts her body to sit up again. Her angel wings are caught beneath her, making the effort more of a struggle than it should be.

We’re back at eye level, the anger bleeding out of me as curiosity rushes in to fill it.

“Explain.”

Blue shakes her head, her expression softening until all I see in her is regret. She’s hiding something, just like me. My anger subsides even more to see it.

Her voice is so soft in response that what she says doesn’t make me angry again. It makes me want to hold her down and demand answers.

“We all have our scars, Champ. Some of us have more than others. And some are so well hidden that we forget we have them.”

She’s not wrong about that. My hidden scars are still tapping at the fringes of my thoughts, quieter than before but

still present and persistent.

My body hitting the floor.

Ezra screaming.

The goddamned laughter that never seems to stop.

I clench my eyes shut as if that will dispel them.

It does no good.

If not for Blue's voice, I would have been lost to them entirely.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

My eyes open and I slowly crawl to her. Grasping her chin with my left hand, I pull her face to mine, ignoring the way her eyes narrow and her jaw clenches above my fingers.

"Like I said before, you know nothing about scars."

I'm lying. She knows something. It's obvious in the way her body trembles just enough that I can feel it in the hold I have on her.

Blue tugs her face from my hold and scoots her body back far enough that I'm kneeling near her feet. "Then what the hell do I know?"

Soft laughter shakes my shoulders.

"Judging by your dancing, I assume you know how to fuck. That's gotta get you somewhere in life. Is that why the dickhead you keep around is nothing more than a means to an end?" Tilting my head, I tease her. "Thought you said you don't fuck for money."

Pain explodes across my jaw, the bottom of her foot catching my face just right. I fall back, my hand going to where the bitch kicked me as she pushes to her feet and runs to the door. Light bursts behind my eyes, the pain easing until it's only throbbing.

By the time my vision clears, Blue is gone, the door left open and the music from the club pouring in.

“Fuck...”

I shake my head from the impressive kick and push to my feet.

Any second now, security should run in to drag my ass out. I walk to the door expecting Patrick to appear, all three hundred pounds of muscle ready to tackle me to the ground. But when I get to the hall, it's empty of any threats.

Only a nervous couple walks down, stopping at the second door a few rooms away from me. They don't bother to look my direction before laughing nervously and walking into the room.

Assuming Blue called the cops instead, I walk down the hall, ready to be cuffed and hauled into a waiting car. But the club is normal without a single soul paying attention to me.

The bartender is wiping away a condensation ring from a drink left behind.

People are dancing.

The music is pumping, and nobody is running up the stairs in pursuit of me.

Confused, I glance up at Blue's cage to see I was wrong that nobody was paying attention. Violet eyes peer over at me as she closes the cage door. We stare at each other for what feels like forever, but then she breaks that connection to start dancing again.

As if nothing happened.

As if the pain in my jaw hadn't come from her.

What's fucked-up is I still had time with her before Granger gets back from the fake emergency I paid for.

But much like I fucked up with Red, I fucked up with Blue, too.

I can't do anything right.

My damn words were wrong again, but not for the same reason.

My phone vibrates, and I pull it from my pocket.

Where the hell are you? I've been waiting here with Priest for an hour. Get your ass moving.

A text from Shane. I sigh heavily.

I'd completely forgotten I agreed to meet them tonight at the shop. Looks like I fucked that up too.

Glancing at Blue one last time to see she's ignoring me, I rub at my jaw and head out of the club.

Patrick makes some snarky comment as I burst through the door, but I ignore him and walk to my truck.

Fuck this place.

Fuck Blue.

And fuck Patrick.

I have better things to do.

...

“What took you so long, princess? Is your time suddenly more valuable than mine?”

Priest sits at the makeshift reception area that is nothing more than an old desk with papers, tools and small car parts tossed haphazardly across it.

Turning to walk his direction, I spot Shane coming out of the office behind the desk, his perceptive gaze zeroing in on my face just before his eyes narrow and he storms toward me.

“The fuck happened there?”

Shane grabs my chin to turn my face, narrowed eyes examining what I assume will be a noticeable bruise tomorrow morning.

I jerk out of his hold.

“It’s nothing. I—“

“Don’t tell me Ezra did that.” He traps me eyes with his. “This bullshit with Emily needs to end. You two are going to kill each other over her.”

Fighting not to roll my eyes, I rub at my jaw, wincing to feel the tender spot where Blue’s foot caught me just right.

Beside us, I hear the squeak of Priest’s chair followed by the sound of his retreating steps as he walks into the office. When the door clicks shut behind him, Shane grimaces and steps back to look me over entirely.

“That fucking party was bullshit. Not only is Tanner losing his damn mind over the crap with Luca but Gabe is starting his shit with Ivy again, and now you and Ezra are at each other’s throats over Emily. What the hell is wrong with all of you?”

“Ezra didn’t do this. If you’d let me talk for one second, I could tell you that I—“

“Beers for everyone,” Priest interrupts as he steps out of the office. “‘Bout time too, because the emotional bullshit I can feel now that the princess has arrived is driving me crazy.”

Snatching a beer from his hand when he steps up, I narrow my eyes on him. “I’m not a fucking princess.”

“If you say so, Your Majesty. But my shop didn’t feel like a bunch of females sitting around getting their nails done and bitching about their feelings until you arrived.”

“I’m not the one bitching. Blame Shane.”

Shane grabs his beer from Priest.

“I’m not bitching. I’m just pointing out the obvious. And where the hell have you been anyway? You were supposed to be here over an hour ago.”

The last thing I want to admit is that I’d blown them off to see some dancer at Myth. Shane’s already angry enough, and Priest would have a fucking field day to find out I’m bleeding out money to a fucking bouncer just to spend time with Blue.

Not that I'd give them all the details, but still ... it's none of their damn business.

“Got caught up watching a movie at the house and—“

“Probably some damn chick flick,” Priest grunts.

He pops the cap from his beer then grabs mine. “Let me open yours before you break a nail or something.”

“Fuck off.” I wrench the beer from his hold.

Priest smirks and scratches at his beard. “There’s the Damon I know. So can we stop the bullshit now and drink while tinkering with cars? I thought that was the plan for the night.”

Shane shakes his head and pops the cap on his beer. Despite Priest attempting to lighten the mood, Shane stares at me with concern written across his face and refuses to drop the subject.

“Your dad still calling you?”

He’s plucking at every nerve in my body tonight, and I clench my teeth when the memories resurface again.

You call yourself a man?

Blood, so much blood...

Screaming and laughter.

My father’s face.

You look more like a pathetic bitch to me.

Forcing them back into that place in my brain where I don’t have to remember the past, I shake my head and pop the cap on my beer. “I haven’t talked to him.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s not calling,” Shane counters. He dead-stares me for a solid minute, the tension between us rising. He breaks it with another question I refuse to answer. “Have you told Ezra?”

“Man, fuck this shit,” Priest grumbles as he pulls a greasy wrench from the top of the desk and walks off to one of the

cars they have up on a lift.

I move to follow him, but Shane blocks my path. We square up to each other, but it won't lead to blows. While Shane and I have no problem fighting with other bastards, we've never fought each other.

His voice is low when he reminds me, "We don't need a repeat of the past, Damon. That's all I'm saying. The shit between you and Ezra after we left for college lasted a full year because of Emily. And she wasn't even around at that point."

Taking a sip of my beer, I swallow it down before dragging in a steady breath.

"Your point?"

Shane's jaw tics. "How much worse will the fight be between the two of you while she is here?"

Too much of the past is coming back to haunt me, everything colliding together to a point where I can't separate Emily from Ezra and those damn fights.

Why did she have to come back now? Everything was good until that fucked-up engagement party. Now the storms are returning, and I can't escape them no matter what direction I turn.

My thoughts go to Blue for a split second ... the thought of how she stands in that storm like she's somehow part of it.

"Everything is fine," I lie. "Ezra and I aren't fighting, and I don't give a shit about Emily."

Shane eyes me with suspicion. "And the shit with your dad?"

"I'll block his number. Problem solved. Now can we get to working on the cars? I'm done with this interrogation."

After a few seconds, Shane nods his head.

We both head over to where Priest is cussing at a seized bolt. But before we reach him, Shane nudges my shoulder with

his.

“Where’d the swelling on your jaw come from?”

I laugh because the truth is funnier than what he assumes happened. “Some cage dancer kicked me in the face when I accused her of fucking for money.”

Shane stops in place, and I stop right beside him.

“You serious?”

Shrugging, I figure he’ll never believe me, so why not tell him what actually happened. “Yeah.”

Shaking his head, he looks over at Priest who’s now pitching a fit, threatening to scrap the entire car.

“Liar,” he says.

I laugh again. “Come on. You two have been putting way too much time into that Chevelle for Priest to make good on scrapping it.”

Priest kicks the side of the car, and Shane’s attention snaps to him.

Thankfully, he forgets all about me as he rushes forward to save the body work they’d already done on the Chevelle.

And just as easily as Shane forgets about my bullshit, I do, too.

At least in the shop, I can pretend like the past isn’t creeping up on me as my entire world threatens to crumble.



Amélie

I'm not going to make it much longer. Not like this anyway. Not with so many problems pulling me in every direction that I can't get my head straight long enough to begin to deal with one before the next comes along.

In the past few weeks, Granger has been getting more frustrated with me. He wants something for his money, and I'm still refusing to give in.

Normally, this would be the time to move on to greener pastures and end the game I'm playing, but there's nobody left to play the game on.

Giving in to what Granger wants isn't an answer, and soon, I'll probably be fired from the club and booted out on my ass without a dime to my name. I won't be able to pay my rent, which means I'll lose my apartment and then what?

I'll have to drop out of school and finally admit to everyone that I'm as bad at life as my mother. Not that dropping out will be so horrible. At least then I can hide the fact that I was failing all my classes anyway and would've been kicked out eventually.

"Ames? You there?"

Sighing heavily, I grip my hand over my phone. The bill is due next week, and I'm not sure I'll have the money to pay it.

It's just one more thing for me to lose.

But for now, I'll lie. Keeping up appearances is what I do best.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, I'm still here. I just got distracted by some students walking past me. You wouldn't believe the shit

these rich assholes do around here. Did I tell you about what I saw the night Brin took me to the governor's party? They were getting it on out in the open—“

“You told me. Twice, actually, since the night you went there. But that wasn't what we were talking about.”

My brother's voice softens. He called me ten minutes ago and was keeping the conversation light until bringing up the last subject I feel like discussing.

“When are you going to call mom back, Ames? I can't keep lying to her to spare her feelings.”

A knot forms in my throat. My mother is one of the scars that are hidden inside me. I love the woman for raising us but hate her for the fears she crammed in our heads. Not that she could help it.

“I've been busy,” I argue, the lies continuing to roll off my tongue at a rate that is surely creating a cozy little spot for me in the fiery bowels of hell.

“Between school and work, I haven't had time. And you know how it is with Mom. She's going to question every little detail about my life and get all worked up with the belief that I'm going to get abducted and human trafficked or some shit. Then she'll demand I leave school to live with the two of you again and continue our lives on the run. She hates that you helped me escape that.”

It's always been the same with Mom.

She's why we ran so much my entire life.

I was always the new kid in school during the years she actually let me go to school, but then I'd get ripped out again as soon as her inner demons whispered to her that it was time to run.

The woman has a mental illness.

That's the sad truth of it.

Every second of our lives, Mom was convinced something horrible was going to happen to Kane or me. But Kane doesn't want to believe it.

“We haven't moved in over two years,” he argues. “She's getting better, and I'm still convinced something happened to her—“

“Oh yeah? Then tell me what that was, Kane. Because in all your digging through the years, you've found nothing. And there's nobody out there who's as good with a computer as you. If there was something to be found, you would have already found it.”

This is the same argument we always have. I think mom needs a psychiatrist or a pretty, white straitjacket, and my brother wants to believe that something caused her to be so neurotic.

“She's running from something.”

“Yeah, probably from a nice job with a tranquilizer needle or a soft, padded room where she can't hurt herself.” I bite the inside of my cheek.

I don't mean to speak so poorly of my mom. I love her with all my heart, but I can't deal with her baseless fears while dealing with the very real concerns I have about where the hell I'll get my next paycheck.

Kane changes the subject, probably because he knows the topic of Mom will make me lose my mind.

“How's school going?”

It's not a better subject, but I'll take it. At least I can toss him the same bullshit assurances I normally do, then we can move on with our lives.

“Great. In fact, I need to get to class soon. I have a test coming up and I don't want to miss the lecture.”

“Gotcha. Have you made any new friends?”

Another sigh escapes me. I have to hand it to Kane. He is fighting harder than most brothers would to give me a better life than we had as kids. I think he hopes I'll meet some rich guy at college and fall in love. That we'll get married after graduating with our degrees, get jobs and have babies.

Sadly, that will never be the life for me.

"I have Brinley. She's the least snooty of the bunch."

He laughs. "Maybe if you stop referring to them as snooty, you may actually get to know some of them better and make more friends."

I lean back against the headboard of my bed. The truth is I really do have a lecture coming up in a half hour, but I haven't been able to crawl out from under the safety of my covers to face a class I'm failing while also worrying about what work will be like tonight.

Granger and I argued last night for over an hour about him wanting to take things further, and I don't want to face him. I don't fuck for money, and if things went there with Granger, that's exactly what I would be doing.

The amount of anger that surged through me when Damon even suggested I was nothing but a whore was unstoppable. I kicked him without even considering the consequences.

Since that night two weeks ago, work has been depressing as hell. Damon hasn't come back, and while I shouldn't want to see him after what he said to me, I still can't get him out of my head.

He was a mess the last night he came to see me. Basically at a breaking point, and there was nothing I could do to reach him. It was all I could do to calm him down enough that he didn't stalk out of the room and start a fight with someone just to ease whatever pain he's obviously going through.

And that right there is the consequence of caring.

I'm stuck thinking about a guy I should hate. Wondering about how he's doing while knowing I'll probably never see

him again.

Kane clears his throat, dragging me back to the conversation.

“They are snooty,” I answer weakly. “But I’m handling it. All I have to do is smile and nod while they discuss their yachts and mansions and shit. We all get along just fine. Brinley’s the only normal person I’ve met so far. She doesn’t let money go to her head.”

He laughs. “Uh-huh, and what do you talk about while they discuss their yachts and mansions?”

“I tell them about Mom’s 1970 wood paneled station wagon that was big enough for us to sleep in during the weeks we couldn’t find a better place to stay.”

His voice weakens and I can almost see the smile fade from his expression. “Very funny, Ames.”

“Yeah. Well...”

I need to end this conversation before he asks a question that’s worse than the ones he’s already asked so far.

“How’s work going?”

Like that one.

“Great,” I chirp. “I’d tell you all about it, but I’m going to be late for class—“

“You’re right. Sorry for holding you up. It’s just that I don’t get to talk to you that much anymore. You’re always so busy.”

Or just ignoring my phone.

But I’m not about to admit that.

The problem with Kane is the questions ... and asking me to talk to Mom ... but mostly the questions. Especially since all the truthful answers I can give him would only worry him enough to drive four hours down here to pluck me from my life and drag me back to the one I’m attempting to escape.

I've been in this apartment for two full years.

Two.

For most people, that's not much of an accomplishment.

But for me, it's everything.

I own actual furniture. I keep my clean clothes in a closet instead of black trash bags. There aren't days when I'm living out of a car, and Kane has to stand guard in some wooded patch someplace while I pee behind the bushes.

I get that all the people going to my school and frequenting the club I work in couldn't care less about the luxury of a clean toilet. But that's because they've never had to live without one.

"I love you, kid. How about I call you again next week and try to catch you at a better time?"

"Sounds good," I answer just as my phone vibrates from a text. "Love you too."

Hesitating, I bite the inside of my cheek before adding, "And tell Mom I love her."

"Maybe you can tell her next week."

Not likely.

"Maybe."

Kane ends the call, and I close my eyes trying to escape the memories of my childhood. Nothing *horrible* ever really happened to us except for the lack of money or a secure home.

No.

My scars cut deeper than that.

They're from the nights I listened to my mother crying for hours. The way she would always panic and start screaming if she lost sight of Kane or me at a playground or park for even just a second.

The months we would stay trapped inside a car or dirty hotel room before she'd let us go near a park again after

something like that happened.

Where most kids were read bedtime stories or got to believe in magical things like the Easter Bunny or Santa, the stories Kane and I heard were always warnings about the evil that exists in the world. Stories about all the horrible things people would do to us if they ever got the chance to steal us away.

Maybe something did happen to Mom before we were born, and maybe Kane is right. But that doesn't explain why she was always running from something like it would show up again to do the same thing to us.

When my phone vibrates again, I remember the text I still haven't checked.

I assume I'll be driving you home tonight after your shift so we can finish our conversation.

Rolling my eyes, I toss the phone on the side table then force my body out from beneath my covers. Granger can go fuck himself with his assumption, but the only way he's wrong is if I can convince Brinley to stay at Myth for once to drive me home.

After showering and getting dressed, I check the time before calling an Uber to take me to school to pester Brinley.

Except...*fuck*.

It's too late to haul ass down there now.

Not wanting to race to the school just in time to ask Brinley to rush out of class or the library to drive me to work, I glance at my phone and ignore the tension in my body at the thought of Granger.

The last person I want to see or talk to is him.

But money is money.

And right now, I need it.

Grabbing my phone off the bed, I shoot him an answer to his text.

You assume right. And can you give me a lift to work too? Brinley's got class.

My phone lights up immediately with his response. I want to puke my guts out just looking at it.

...

Three male stragglers wander up the stairs to the second floor of the club, the late hour of the night giving them roughly fifteen minutes to down whatever drinks they can before closing is announced.

With sweat dripping down my body from the hours I've spent dancing, I watch them turn toward the bar, the tallest one holding three fingers up while speaking loudly to the bartender with what I assume is their order.

The fast beat of music keeps pounding the walls, but unlike a few weeks ago, I'm having trouble finding solace in it.

I keep closing my eyes with the hope of getting lost within the music I love so much, but they open again after a few seconds, my gaze skating left with the hope of seeing a familiar face ... or staring straight ahead at the stairs leading to my cage where Granger stands watch.

After two weeks, I'm sure Damon won't be returning to see me again.

Damn consequences.

They'll sneak up and bite you when you act without thinking.

And now all I'm left with after kicking Damon for what he said is the disappointment that he hasn't bothered to show up

again to give me a few hours of breathing room away from Granger.

I laugh to myself while struggling to keep dancing with the weight of the fake wings on my back. It's like choosing between the lesser of two evils. It's unfortunate that the best choice would be the younger man who has nightmares behind his eyes and a shroud of anger that swirls around him.

Still, after listening to what Granger had to say to me on the way to the club tonight, it's a better choice to be accused of being a paid whore than the nagging fear that my side hustle has finally turned on me ,and I'll have no choice but to become one.

No, I tell myself.

Not that.

Never that.

This isn't the first time in my life I've been terrified. And as far as the pattern of things has gone since my mom brought me into the world, it almost certainly won't be the last.

But I got some good advice once from a teacher who was kind to me when I was the new girl at one of the countless schools I'd attended.

Back then I was a tall, skinny, leggy girl. My clothes fit poorly, and I mostly wore Kane's hand-me-down shirts and some cutoff shorts Mom had made from a pair of jeans that ripped to the point of no return. There was nothing about me that screamed I was better than a single kid there. I was shy and didn't talk to anyone. Just kept my head down as I walked from class to class.

But I had boobs, and apparently that offended another girl and her circle of friends.

For a few weeks, they followed me through the halls. Tripped me. Whispered around me. Laughed and basically made my life a living hell. It wasn't until one of them dared to

finally approach me and call me some stupid name that I snapped and fought the girl.

Kane taught me to fight, so I was winning our little squabble before two teachers pulled us apart and dragged us into separate classrooms.

I didn't know the teacher, but she was pretty with short brown hair. She wore thick, black-rimmed glasses that kept slipping down the bridge of her nose. I remember that. Not her name, unfortunately, but I remember those glasses ... and her advice.

After explaining that I had nothing against the girl I'd fought, but that she'd finally pushed me to a point of rage, the teacher sat back and sighed.

You have two choices in this life, Amélie: You can let the world change you, or you can change the world.

The words stuck because she was right.

I wouldn't let that girl at school change me.

I wouldn't let my mom's problems change me.

And I'd be damned to let all the terrible stories that Kane and I had to constantly hear about the world change me.

When I was younger, I had a plan to make my own way.

Change the world and all that.

It's just too bad my story didn't turn out as perfect as I'd hoped it might.

Despite it all, and despite the choices I've had to make to squeak by and survive, I sure as hell won't let Granger change me either.

Not even if it means I'll have to crawl home to my mother's place and admit defeat.

"Time's up, Ames."

Glancing up, I swallow down my disappointment.

Obviously, it wouldn't be Damon standing at my cage door. Not at this time of night. But the flicker of memory rolls through my head about the first time he appeared on the other side of the cage door. He'd stared at me with amber eyes full of arrogance.

But even on that first night, I noticed the white outlines of old scars. I knew he was damaged. His story is written clearly all over his beautiful face.

Guess I'm the dummy for having a soft heart for damaged people. but I can't help myself. I was raised by one. Maybe taking care of Mom all my life has prepared me to take care of all the damaged people ... People like Damon.

Now I'm staring at Granger's dark eyes. Disgust rolls through my stomach.

He's in his typical dark attire, this time a short sleeve T-shirt that hugs his biceps and a pair of dark washed jeans. His worn black boots complete the ensemble, scuffed at the toes like the man couldn't care less about his appearance.

I know that to be utter shit. Granger has to maintain control over every small detail of his life, including the lives of the people around him. It makes him a good club manager, but a shitty human being.

"Get dressed, then meet me at my car," he demands. "I have something to take care of in my office, then I'll be out to deal with you."

Deal with me...

Lovely wording.

Of course he can't tell me I did a great job or even acknowledge that I'm a large portion of what brings men back every night. I'm the one dancer nobody is allowed to touch, and Granger makes sure they all know it.

Yet they return anyway because there may be one night where the restriction has been lifted.

Only Damon has found a way around Granger. And for that, I have to give the man credit. Not only is he gorgeous, but he's intelligent enough to get around a manager who thinks he owns me.

Kicking him was one of the worst decisions of my life.

It left me stuck with Granger.

But I made this bed for myself, and I might as well lie in it. I'm the dumb girl who chose to play reindeer games with the big bad narcissist. What complaint can I really make at this point?

Doing as I'm told, I step out of the cage then brush past Granger on my way down the short set of stairs en route to the dressing room.

I can feel him watching my every step from behind me, that laser focus of his touching me in a way that drives bile up my throat.

He'll *deal with me* when he gets out to the car.

I have to wonder if tonight is the night I finally have to end this game with him ... and lose my job at the same time.



Damon

This situation with Ezra, Red and me is reaching a boiling point. Not just the fighting with Ezra, but the way I have no choice but to watch him browbeat Red every time we have one of our stupid friend dates with her.

It doesn't make sense. She has the choice between the two of us, yet she keeps running to my brother who only treats her like crap.

Why are women like that? Why can't they see a good man in front of them who wants nothing more than to show her how he can love her with every ounce of his heart?

Good guys finish last, I guess, but then that's always been the issue with Ezra and me.

He loves me.

He's my twin brother, for fuck's sake.

Of course, he loves me.

And I love him.

But that doesn't mean he's able to drop that cold temper of his long enough to feel an ounce of what it means to love someone. What it takes to love someone.

Would he die for me? I have no doubt he would. He's proven he would. But does he allow himself to understand, take control and handle his emotions?

No.

Not Ezra.

Not Violence.

He couldn't care less that his lack of emotion is the worst type of abuse for a woman like Red.

That's why now, instead of accepting the gift that Emily keeps trying to give him—the one she'll never be able to give me—he continues battering her around like some opponent.

Not physically.

Ezra would never lay a violent hand on her.

But mentally and emotionally, he's dragging her through the dirt.

It only makes me angrier.

Red deserves better than him.

She deserves better than me.

But my words weren't enough to keep my home, and they'll never be enough to protect her from Ezra. Which isn't fair. Every day it feels like I'm giving up something I would have once died to possess, only to watch him tear it apart with the claw end of a hammer, simply because he won't take a second to look at her and realize just how much she's worth.

As of yesterday, we'd decided that both of us were done with her. Ezra was going to walk away entirely while I secretly promised Red I'd still be her friend.

At least, that was until this morning when I caught Red in bed with my brother at the cabin, her expression one of shock, apology and pain when she realized how Ezra had set her up.

While my twin sat there with a smirk on his face, watching Red's and my heart breaking, there was not one ounce of regret or shame for what he'd done.

Ezra fucked up.

I fucked up.

And so did Red.

In truth, all of us are fuckups.

The entire damn Inferno.

Tanner finally fixed his shit with Luca, but then Gabe's war with Ivy reignited. I thought they were done with that shit in high school and that his only interest in her was to get to the governor and find out what the fuck is on the servers everybody wants so damn much.

It's how we ended up in bumfuck nowhere at Emily's family's cabin in the first place. We went there to run Ivy to ground, and we left with so much resentment and hatred between us that it exploded into another argument with Ezra when we got home.

We decided to be *done* with Red again.

Except I know he's lying.

He'll never be done with her.

I'm starting to think those weekends away turned my brother into a sadist, his favorite target being the only girl who would kiss our bruises away after those fucked-up weekends.

After our argument, Ezra took off, and I was left at the house alone long enough to realize I'm slowly losing my mind over this.

I have nowhere I can go that's just mine. No person I can turn to. Not a single soul who gives enough of a damn about me to take one second to realize how quickly my control is slipping through my fingers.

That's my fault.

I did have one escape.

But, once again, I couldn't find the right words to keep her.

They all swirled together in my head with the memories of those weekends until I said the wrong thing and got met with the business end of Blue's foot for it.

Which sucks because she was the perfect escape.

One I've been searching for since Red left.

One I've been fighting myself not to run back to for the last three weeks.

One I've needed more and more with all the bullshit that's happening.

She's the only person who can endure my storm.

Not stop it like Red used to do.

Instead, Blue drags it out of me into the open, freeing me of the agonizing pressure of rage inside my head.

She can make me laugh when all I want to do is fight.

How she accomplishes it, I have no fucking clue.

Blue somehow leaves me with a few moments when I don't feel like I'm about to destroy myself and everything around me.

I feel confusion instead.

I feel a desire to pull someone close to me rather than pushing everyone away.

Blue can see all the scars, both inside and out, even when all the guys I grew up with can't.

Maybe that's my fault again—for always smiling and joking around the guys.

Maybe if I just said something to them, they would forget about all the games they're running to recognize I'm a timebomb that's ready to explode.

Maybe I need to get away from everyone for a while so that none of them are damaged when I finally lose control.

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like escaping is going to happen today.

Within a few hours of Ezra leaving the house after our last argument, I got a text demanding I head to Gabe's house for another family meeting.

Now I'm stuck on a couch barely listening to all the problems everybody's discussing, until Shane says something

that draws my attention.

“Why me? Why not Taylor or one of the twins?”

I glance around the room in a feeble attempt to figure out what the hell Shane’s talking about.

First, I look to my brother because I can read Ezra better than everybody else in the group. He sits across the room from me slumped in a chair, his head hanging slightly back like the ceiling is more interesting than the conversation.

Unable to blame him for the boredom, it still pisses me off that he doesn’t react to Shane’s question. Ezra’s lack of a reaction fails to clue me in.

Until Shane brought Ezra and me up, I was struggling to understand why I’m even here. I get why Tanner and Gabe like forcing everyone to attend these damn meetings. It’s so we’re all caught up, but only half of us barely pay attention most of the time.

Like now, for instance ...

Gabe’s standing near the alcohol as usual, slamming down drinks and refilling them so fast, the ice barely has time to melt.

Sawyer’s puffing on a joint, the smoke drifting to the top of the room like a white cloud hanging over our heads.

Tanner is standing in his usual spot at the front of the group while Taylor types furiously on his computer. Shane looks like he’s about to spontaneously combust. Mason looks as bored as Ezra, and Jase glares at all of us because nobody gives a flying fuck about his constant questions about Everly.

Beyond the group, Ivy is sitting primly on a couch near Ava and Luca, but her behavior is off to the point where you’d think she’s attempting to imitate a robot.

But again, I don’t give much of a shit about all of them right now. The only thing I care about is what task Shane is trying to offload onto Ezra and me.

“Because the twins are busy with Emily,” Gabe answers, his eyes targeting Ivy as he brushes off Shane’s bullshit question with a bullshit answer.

Now Ezra wants to pay attention, but only enough to drop his head down to glare across the room at me. And only because Emily’s name was mentioned.

Fucker.

For the second time, we’ve agreed to be *done* with Emily.

I have no doubt he’ll chase her down again as soon as he gets the chance.

After seeing them in bed together, I’ve given up on ever making her my *home* again, but I love her enough not to sit back and watch Ezra shred her to pieces. And judging by the way he treats her when I’m there to witness, I assume that it’s much worse when it’s just the two of them alone.

Thankfully, Gabe’s response to Shane was enough to shut him up, and that means I’m not stuck with some stupid task Tanner wants to assign.

The meeting carries on, just as boring as ever until Gabe drags Ivy off to speak privately. A few minutes go by while the two of them argue in another room. But then that argument turns into fucking, and every single one of the Inferno groan to hear it.

Seriously, Gabe?

I’m wasting my time on this shit?

I’m about to haul ass and leave when Tanner storms out of the room to break up the fuckfest. Gabe and Ivy finally return to the meeting, and the boring words start again.

I get why they are so concerned about the servers.

But it’s not a *me* problem; it’s a *them* problem.

Ezra and I settle problems with our fists. There’s not a damn thing I can do about all the other intricacies of this war.

Why can't Tanner and Gabe just call us when they need someone pounded down? Why force us to listen to all this other bullshit?

Just get to the damn point.

I close my eyes and lay my head back to take a nap.

"Is she at Myth?"

My eyes snap open at Ivy's question.

Who's at Myth?

Fuck. I wasn't paying attention.

"Yeah, Tanner answers, "which is why I assigned Shane to her. She has a reputation for going there."

Who, dammit?!

I keep my head tilted back like I don't give a shit about this part of the conversation. The last thing I want is for them to see that I'm interested.

But fuck am I interested.

"You could have mentioned that before," Shane answers, his voice more upbeat at the mention of returning to Myth.

He hasn't been there since the fight, and he has no idea just how many times I've returned to see Blue.

But that's my secret.

My escape.

And I'll be damned to let any of them figure it out or destroy it.

"I'll take this asshole with me. Maybe we can find somebody to get him over Everly.

Like hell he will.

Especially not Jase.

"Fuck off," Jase snaps.

A smile tugs at my lips to hear he won't be going.

“But yeah,” Jase adds, I’ll go.”

Nope.

Not gonna happen.

I will beat them both down then lock them up somewhere for however long it takes to make them rethink their decision to go to Myth.

I can’t ask who they’re talking about, but I need to get out of this house.

Now.

“Thank fuck because I want to go home,” Tanner breathes out.

That makes two of us...

The tension in the room subsides, but a new tension is building in me..

Glad that the meeting is over, all I can think about now is racing to Myth.

For three weeks I’ve avoided going back.

Three weeks that I’ve worried that I fucked up my escape in Blue just as much as I fucked up my home in Red.

It’s also three weeks that may have given Blue time to calm down.

I know Ezra will probably rush out of here to go harass Red tonight, which is perfect for me. It means nobody will notice that I’m rushing off to go see Blue.

...

“Back again? I was wondering why it’s taken you so long.”

Patrick lets out his typical, deep-bellied laugh as soon as he lays eyes on me.

“Thank the heavens, brother. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to make the payments on that new car you’re buying me.”

I shake my head and laugh. “How are the new contacts working tonight?”

Patrick stares up at me from his stool. Not that it makes him that much shorter than me. Even sitting, he’s tall and massive. The white T-shirt he’s wearing barely wraps his biceps, the seams most likely threatening to rip apart every time he moves.

His brown eyes scrunch up when he laughs again.

“They’re doing okay, but Granger’s got better ones. He’ll see you the minute you step up to the second floor.”

Reaching for my back pocket, I sigh, already knowing what this is going to cost me.

“How much for two hours?”

It’s the longest amount of time I’ve requested since this shit started, and judging by Patrick’s expression, it may be an impossibility.

He tilts his head to the side and squints up at me like I’m an idiot.

“How in the hell do you expect me to keep Granger away for that long? Do you have any clue about the bullshit I have to go through just to get you a half hour?”

Rolling my shoulders back, I pull out fifteen hundred then wave the bills in his face. “Will that do?”

“Hell no.”

Patrick crosses his arms over his chest.

“Two hours? Are you fucking serious?”

I pull out twenty-five hundred more.

“Four thousand. It’s the highest I’ve ever paid you. Can you work a miracle for that?”

His eyes widen at the amount. “What’d you do? Rob a bank on your way here?”

“No.” The corner of my lips curl. “Just hit the ATM.”

“Rich fucking idiots, all of you,” he mumbles under his breath.

Patrick looks away to stare across the parking lot.

“Best I can do is an hour and half. And that’s pushing it.”

Snatching the money from my hand, he pins his stare on mine. “Hour and half, you got me? Ninety minutes and not a second longer.”

Unsure how many seconds I’ll actually have considering what happened between Blue and me last time I was here, I nod my head once in agreement.

This could be a waste of money. It’s up to Blue whether she leaves her cage and follows me. And given she must hate me after the last time, there’s a good chance she won’t give me any time at all.

Patrick curses beneath his breath again.

“Better get inside. You know the drill. Don’t approach her until Granger is out of sight, and don’t you dare cause trouble in my club. Keep your damn hands to yourself.”

“Yep,” I respond as I turn to walk through the door.

The thump of loud, fast-paced music hits me instantly, my heart kicking up its rhythm in response.

My nerves are on edge as I walk through the crowd on the first floor, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. I’m not angry for once, not when anxiety and dread drown me.

What if she refuses to talk to me?

What do I do then?

And the worst part is I wouldn’t be able to hold it against her. What I said was out of line. But then I’ve never been good with words.

I lost Red because of them.

I was homeless because of them.

Now I get to find out what happened to my escape because of them.

Approaching the stairs, I release a breath and roll my neck over my shoulders. The tension in my muscles is intense, my heart racing the beat of the music to see which can go faster.

I ascend the stairs, refusing to be a pussy and turn around to leave this fucking place instead of facing the consequence of my fucked-up words and my fucked-up head.

You think you're worth anything?

You think a boy who will crawl on demand will become anything?

You'll become what I want you to become.

The memories start whispering louder with each step I take up the stairs. Mostly my father's voice. If I close my eyes, images will come with the whispers, so I refuse to give in to them.

Instead, I reach the top of the stairs, and my eyes lock on Blue. On her hips as she dances. On her face, hoping she'll open her violet eyes and look at me, too.

Struggling to stop watching her, I make a quick right to walk to the bar but turn my just enough to keep Granger in view.

The stupid son of a bitch has his dark stare locked on me. It's too bad for him he won't be able to remain in place, blocking me from Blue.

Granger runs a hand through his black hair then rolls back his shoulders. His feet are set at shoulder width like he's ready to take down any man who tries to approach her.

All I have to do is wait.

I keep telling myself that to keep from walking over to him to accept his silent offer for a fight.

Doing so would get me kicked out of this place, and how would I find my escape then?

You're worth more when you're beaten and bloody....

I could make so much more if I let them break your bones, but I can't afford to lose the time it would take for you to get out of a cast...

Lucky you.

Closing my eyes, I see my father's face.

I hear the laughter.

I smell the metallic scent of spilled blood.

What are they doing to Ezra?

And where are they taking me?

I force my eyes open and turn my head to look at Blue.

Violet eyes grab onto mine and chase away the nightmares. They hold on. *She* holds on.

Even after what I said to her.

Even when I don't deserve for her to care.

There she stands in the middle of my storm, dancing within the chaos.

This woman isn't Red. She isn't a calming influence who can't understand what's in my head as she kisses all the bruises.

No.

Blue has bruises of her own. And because of whatever happened in her life before I showed up, she's somehow able to see the same nightmares in me that she's endured as well. I doubt her scars are identical to mine, but she has as many as me, except hers are all hidden inside.

Breaking my stare with her, I glance at Granger. His eyes are targeting me until an employee walks up, needing his attention.

I can't help but smirk.

It must suck being in charge.

When problems pop up, you have no choice but to drop what you're doing and run to fix them.

Granger glances my direction, his eyes narrowed. He steps forward to follow the employee but stops, his indecision obvious.

After what I assume is an internal argument he's having with himself, Granger finally gives in and follows the employee, his gaze dancing between me and Blue until he descends the stairs to the first floor.

Now that he's out of sight, I return my attention to Blue.

She's staring back at me, her own internal struggle occurring. But like Granger, she gives in and exits her cage, descends her set of stairs then storms in the direction of the back rooms.

Chuckling at the way her fake, black wings bounce behind her, I follow a few feet behind, giving her space while keeping pace.

Choosing a room, Blue opens the door then steps in. It takes me a few seconds to reach the room to step in behind her.

I close the door then turn to lean against it.

Blue is standing against the opposite wall from me, her expression as tight as her shoulders.

"I know," I say before she can utter the first word. "I shouldn't be here."

Her shoulders shake with soft laughter, tired violet eyes making me nervous. Her lips move like she's biting the inside of her cheek.

Blue glances down at the floor then back up to me, hesitation now written across her expression.

“It’s me who shouldn’t be here, Champ. Not after what you said.”

“Then why are you here?”

She closes her eyes and rests her head back against the wall. I study everything about her. The way her throat moves when she swallows. The way her shoulders slump with defeat. Her long blue hair is a mess around her body, and her chest heaves with heavy breath from dancing.

Blue is such a magnificent creature, even when she stands like she might collapse.

What the hell is wrong?

This isn’t like her.

Blue fights, just like me.

But from the looks of her now, she’s given up.

Fear douses me, my storm rising, but not from the nightmares or the feeling that I need to protect myself.

No.

This time, my rage is rising to protect someone else.

To protect Blue.

She finally looks at me again and shrugs a shoulder. “I won’t be here much longer.” A bark of sad laughter escapes her chest. “My time is up.”

I cross the room with a quick stride, closing the distance between us so fast that her posture tightens.

She’s scared of me, but I ignore the reaction and press my body to hers, caging her against the wall.

“What are you talking about, Blue?” My voice is a soft threat, a bare whisper that barely contains all the emotions stewing in my veins.

Her lips part, then I run my eyes over their gentle curve. It's torture that she won't let me kiss her. All I want is a taste.

Unaffected by the storm brewing around us, Blue lifts those gorgeous violet eyes to meet mine.

"I won't be working here much longer. Hell," she says on another sad laugh, "I won't be living around here much longer either."

Pausing, Blue taps her fingers against the wall, her posture surrendering to me instead of fighting against how I'm trapping her in place.

"Time's up, like I said."

She shakes her head, her hair falling to partially hide her face.

"I'm out of money and won't have a job soon. So, I gotta go, you know?"

Another pause, her eyes studying mine.

"Who am I kidding? Of course, you wouldn't know. I bet you've never had to worry about where you'll get your next meal, or if you'll have a roof over your head at night."

Her words crush my heart.

I'm angry at myself for taking advantage of her by giving her money. What I'm buying are small pieces of a woman who has no choice but to sell the parts of herself that she's willing to give.

"You got me there," I answer meekly. "But I've had to worry. Most likely about things you can't possibly understand."

"We all have our scars," she says on a sigh. "All of them different, but the same for the way they mark us for life."

There's no way in hell I'm letting this happen.

Not to Blue.

Not to my escape.

I want to see her scars.

I want to know everything about her.

“Explain.”

She glances at my chest, not bothering to look up and meet my eyes again. “Aren’t you the bossy one? Always with the demands.”

I grab her chin and tilt her head up, forcing her eyes to mine. “I’m not playing with you right now. Why won’t you have a job? Is Granger firing you?”

A thought comes to me ... The way the asshole she calls a *means to an end* was glaring at me as soon as I appeared upstairs.

Is it my fault she’s being forced out?

Have I ruined the only person and place that’s mine?

I’ve kept her a secret from the guys because I craved something that was mine alone. But she’s not a secret from Granger, and the consequences for the games I’ve been playing may have landed squarely on her head.

My fingers tighten on her chin. “Answer me.”

A small amount of fight returns to her when she tugs her chin from my fingers and glares up at me defiantly.

There she is...

There’s the woman who can withstand the chaos that follows me.

“I’m not being fired. I’m choosing to leave,” she admits as she shoves at my chest to push me away.

I don’t move.

Instead, I press against her tighter.

My lips lower to her ear, softly brushing the rim.

“What if I won’t let you leave?”

She shivers at my voice, her body stuck in place, her hair brushing my face.

Turning my head slightly, I breathe in her scent. Something floral maybe, with the faint aroma of her sweat from dancing.

The scent seduces me, my body hard against hers. I can't help myself.

Reaching down, I grip her hip, staking a claim I don't have the right to make.

"Things with Granger aren't working out. And when I cut him off, he'll fire me. So rather than going through that bullshit, I'm choosing to leave. You can't stop me."

"We'll see about that," I warn.

I'm not losing her.

Not so soon after finding her.

Our cheeks brush when she turns her head. Blue is a fucking tease when the corner of her mouth touches mine. "There's nothing you can do."

I could kill Granger.

It wouldn't be the first time somebody died because of me.

It wouldn't be the first dousing of blood on my hands.

What are you going to do about it, Damon?

Grow some balls, son.

Be a fucking man...

Shaking myself of my father's voice, of the memory of those weekends, I grit my teeth on a question.

"How is Granger a means to an end? What arrangement did you have with that bastard?"

She shoves at me again, this time so hard that I step back just to keep myself from falling. Blue slides along the wall to move away from me. But rather than leaving the room, she sits

on the edge of the small stage they have set up for private dances.

Her face falls to her hands, her hair a thick curtain hiding her from me.

“Granger wants to fuck me. Always has. The jackass wants to fucking own me.”

Not possible.

I already own her.

She just doesn't know it yet.

“Over the past couple of months, I've been letting him think he might get somewhere. He's a piece of shit, so fuck him. I played a game. The only problem is it's gone on too long.”

A game.

Or a deal...

Much like the ones the Inferno makes when they want something.

“Is that why he guards you? Or is there something else you're not telling me? Why deal with him if there's nothing for you to get out of it?”

Forcing myself to stay in place—to give her room to feel like she can get away from me—I stare at her with curious eyes. Don't let me find out that Blue plays the same games as me and the guys.

She lifts her head to look at me.

There is nothing but resentment rolling behind her eyes.

“He pays me, okay? Is that what you want to know? Granger gives me money with the agreement that I don't go in the back rooms with people in the club like the other girls do. He thinks he'll finally break me down and use me as a cum dumpster or some shit. And I let him think that because the

money was too good to turn down. He called it a better tip than I would have gotten in the back rooms here.”

That may have been true before I met her, depending on what he paid her. But I’m here now, and I can guarantee my pockets are a hell of a lot deeper.

I can’t lose her.

It’s the only thought running through my head.

I don’t care about Granger or the deal she made with him. All I care about is keeping her right where I fucking found her.

“How much?” I ask, my feet slowly moving as I approach her.

“Fuck off,” she answers, her voice strained.

Blue stands from the stage then moves around it, her stupid wings bouncing with every step, her head turned so she can keep me in view.

It’s a game of cat and mouse, Blue moving away every time I step closer.

The stage is between us, giving her a sense of security. What she doesn’t know is that if I wanted to grab hold of her, I could do so in a heartbeat, outmaneuvering her before she realizes what I’m doing.

“I’m serious, Blue. How much?” Tilting my head, I grin. “What will it cost me to keep you from leaving Myth?”

Both of us move cautiously, our pace slow as we circle the stage. I could move faster and close the distance, but this is too important to fuck up with my usual method of solving problems.

I can’t lose her.

Not like Red.

Not like when I lost my home.

A few seconds pass that feel like hours, time moving as slowly as us ... At least until Blue stops in place, not caring

that I'm still moving toward her.

When I'm within reach, I stop, the two of us locked in a stare that holds too much weight.

"You don't even know me," she answers. "Why do you care?"

She's right, and this is weird as fuck. I can't lie about that. I don't have the words to explain what I'm feeling, much less why I'm feeling them.

But it's there.

"How much?"

I won't let my words fuck this up. So, I'll keep asking the same question. I'll keep the focus on her. Keep Blue in a position where she's the one who's talking.

"Two to three thousand a month."

She says the amount like a challenge. As if it's something that should shock me.

It's pocket change.

"I paid four thousand to Patrick for an hour and a half of your time tonight."

Her eyes widen, the shock I was supposed to feel clearly written into her expression instead.

I step closer.

"How much, Blue? How much will it cost for you to stay here?"

"Here?" she asks while gesturing at the room around us. "At Myth?"

Unsure why it matters to me that she remains a dancer here, I ignore the hard questions I can't answer and charge forward in my plan.

I can think about the answers to those questions later.

All I need right now is for her to agree she'll stay.

“Yes. I want you to keep dancing here.”

Bemused laughter shakes her shoulders.

“How much are you planning on paying Granger? Because that’s the person who’ll decide whether I can step foot in this place if I break things off with him.”

Not if I can help it.

Fuck! What the hell am I even doing? I’m acting without thinking, my need for Blue to stay exactly where I need her is driving me insane.

But goddammit, this is my place. My secret. And my escape. It won’t end until I’m ready for it to end.

Blue backs away, her expression twisting in confusion. She holds her hands up in placation, like it’ll keep me away.

“Just stop, Champ. This is too much for me to handle.”

Her eyes meet mine.

That makes two of us...

“But this is going too far. First, we don’t even know each other.”

I’ll fix that.

“And second, I’m not a commodity to be bought and sold. What is it with you guys and your damn money? I’m not for sale. I’m a human being just like everybody else.”

Blue moves to leave the room, but I block her path. It’s cute the way she glares at me as if she could really escape if I didn’t want her to.

“I’m not trying to buy you.”

She steps left to go around me, and I block her again.

“I’m just trying to help you.”

Her eyes lift to mine, that deep purple I remember from the last time she was angry replacing the violet.

“Help me how? By purchasing my ownership papers and making me do what? The same shit Granger wants? Because it won’t happen, Champ. Stop thinking with your dick, because regardless of what you think, I don’t fuck for money. Knowing that, do you still want to help me?”

I want to own her ... but it won’t be because of money.

Relaxing my posture, I paste on a smile that has charmed many women out of their panties. What sucks for Blue is I already have all the answers on how to fix this, I just need her to agree to the deal in order for me to start the process of making our arrangement possible.

Figuring I’ll also figure out the small details of that issue after she agrees to stay, I make my offer.

“I want to make a deal with you. One that doesn’t involve sex ... unless of course you want things to go that way eventually.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fat chance.”

“A deal,” I remind her. “I’ll give you five thousand a month so you don’t have to leave. And all you’ll owe me is —“

“Sex?” She asks, cutting me off.

I shake my head once. “A favor.”

It’s the typical arrangement the Inferno uses to get what they want. I’m simply altering it a bit to get something I desperately *need*.

“Ten thousand a month,” I say, upping the ante so that she’d be stupid to refuse it.

It gets her attention.

“A favor,” she repeats, her lips pulling into a scowl. “What kind of favor?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Don’t know. I may not ever need one. That’s just how the deal works. I give you the money, and

should I need something from you in the future, I come to you for a favor.”

Her lips purse. “What happens if I don’t do you the favor?”

My grin widens. “Very bad things, but I highly doubt I’ll ever need anything from you. So take the deal and don’t worry about the consequences of not doing the favor.”

Technically I should be setting an end date regarding this arrangement. Ten thousand a month over who knows how many years could get insanely expensive, but if it keeps her in place, I’ll pay it.

“And the favor won’t end up being sex?”

Another shake of my head. “No. I told you before, I don’t pay for sex.”

Her head slumps forward, that long blue hair of hers falling around her face like a curtain cutting off my view of her.

Blue taps the toe of her right foot against the floor, her hands fisting and releasing a few times before her head snaps up and she levels me with her stare.

“I’ll think about it. But that’s all I can give you tonight. And I’m sorry for whatever time you bought, but I’m also leaving this room and going back to my cage. Maybe Patrick can issue you a refund.

I laugh at that. “I highly doubt it.”

“Knowing Patrick, I doubt it, too.” There’s no humor in her response.

Blue pauses for a few seconds. “Please move so I can leave.”

“Promise me you’ll think about it.”

She nods her head once in agreement, then I step aside. The edge of her wing brushes my body as she passes.

Blue leaves the door open on her way out, a silent invitation for me to leave the club. Normally, I’d linger, but

there are few issues I need to clean up first.

Stalking out of the club without even bothering to look up at Blue's cage, I pass Granger on my way across the first floor. Our shoulders collide, knocking neither of us out of place. He glares at me, and I smile.

Because fuck him.

That's why.

By the time I'm done with that piece of shit, I'll have everything I want, and he'll get to live with the agony of knowing I made it happen.

Patrick glances up at me as I step out the front door.

"You almost got caught," he says on a chuckle. "I think Granger's figured out this game, he just doesn't know all the players involved in it. That is ... except you."

Ignoring what he said, I change the subject. My mind is set on one objective, and idle chatter isn't part of it.

"Would Granger fire Blue?"

"Blue?" His brown eyes pull away from the parking lot to catch mine. "You mean Ames?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, he shakes his head. "Not likely. She's the main event in this place. Everyone wants a chance to get some time with her."

"Right. But if she told him to fuck off, would he care enough about that to keep her here?"

With one raised eyebrow, Patrick huffs. Apparently, he knows more about Granger and Blue than he's letting on.

"Damn good question."

"I have a second. Is Granger the only owner of this club?"

Patrick shakes his head. "There's a partner. But he usually stays out of shit and let's Granger run the show. The only time he gets involved is when there's something threatening the

club legally or whatnot. The man will protect his investment,\ but otherwise doesn't care what goes on."

Perfect.

That's all I need to know.

I wave goodbye as I walk off then pull my phone from my pocket. Hitting speed dial, I wait the two rings it takes Taylor to answer.

"Damon? Everything good? Why are you calling so late?"

"I need information, and I need it kept secret. Nobody in the group can know."

Sheets rustle like he's moving around in bed, but with how much he loves his computer, I wouldn't be surprised to learn he sleeps with it. The damn thing probably has its own blanket and pillow.

"What do you need to know?"

"I need to know who owns Myth."

"The club?" he asks, surprise lining his voice. "Are you helping out with what Tanner needed—"

"No. And this doesn't get back to Tanner. You can't tell anybody about this. Agreed?"

"Yeah, agreed. But can I get you the info in the morning? I'm half asleep."

"The morning works. Just call me when you have it."

I hang up the call then climb into my truck. Starting the engine, I have one last place I need to go.

When I walk into our law office to find the place shut down for the night with only dim, security lights illuminating the hallways, I head to my office with one question in mind...

How much would it cost a club legally if a co-owner was hit with sexual harassment charges?



Amélie

The universe has jokes again.

And if you ask me, it's a sadistic bastard.

First, it worked its heartless magic to create a set of twins who are too gorgeous for any woman's good, but then it blessed them with bank accounts that I can't imagine ever having.

Now the new joke is the universe leading a damaged man straight to me, one so messed up in the head that he thinks he can purchase me from my current wannabe owner.

Sadly, though, that's the horrible truth about life. Especially for women who have had the unfortunate raw end of the deal since the beginning of time.

From what little I know of history, women have always been bought and sold. Traded and herded like sheep by men who want to control them. Refused education and told they belong in the kitchen. Used as whores for men's amusement and birthing centers to produce children.

You would think through the centuries that women would have gotten sick of the bullshit and gathered together. We outnumber men, but most of the time we're too busy arguing and being catty with each other to ever organize and take over.

It's why I am where I am.

Stuck between a rock and hard place. Or more to the point, between a narcissist and a damaged man.

Damon wants a favor.

A fucking favor.

What the hell does that even mean? Only the good Lord knows what horrible things he could ask me to do if I take the deal. And I don't want to know what the consequences will be if I refuse to do what he asks of me.

I used to think I knew how to run a good game. But it seems like that game has turned on me lately. It was a bad roll of the dice, maybe. Or a crappy hand held tightly in my fist from a deck of cards that were stacked against me from the beginning.

Either way, I have to consider my choices:

One: Sleep with Granger and lose the last bit of self-respect I have

Two: Leave the club, leave school and let go of my apartment. I could return home to my mother's insanity and the potential of being on the run again if she loses the tenuous hold she has on reality.

Or three: -Make a deal with the devil. A Faustian bargain is what I think people call it. One where I agree to some unknown favor that could end with the loss of my self-respect, all for an insane amount of money that would dig me out of the hole I'm in.

None of those choices leave me in a good place. And none of them will benefit me entirely. So it becomes a choice between the lesser of three evils and deciding which one will screw me up the least.

I have no clue what to choose.

For almost two weeks, I've been bouncing the choices around in my head while still carrying on with Granger. Every day he grows more impatient, following me into the dressing room when I show up for work to stare at me like I'm a tasty piece of meat.

A few times, he's locked the door and touched me in places that shot bile up my throat, but I never let him push it further. I haven't fucked him. I haven't gone down on him or let him go down on me. And I sure as hell haven't kissed him.

Kisses are reserved for a man who deserves them.

And so far in life, I've never met that man.

I wonder how many people who really know me would look at me in shock if they found out I've only had sex twice in my life.

Neither experience was worth a shit.

The first time was in high school with a boy I'd only known for a couple weeks. Yeah, it was dumb of me, but I was too stupid back then to understand what love meant. The kid didn't last much longer than a few minutes, and I was left lying there with jizz on my stomach, a sore twat and a head and heart full of disappointment.

Thankfully, Mom moved us away a few days later, so I never had to break it off with the guy. I just left without saying anything.

The second time I slept with someone was a guy I met at one the motels we were staying in. He was a decent person—an artist. Older than me by ten years, at least. He had talented hands and a keen eye, and he asked if he could paint a portrait of me one night.

I agreed to it.

We got to talking.

I stripped down for him to finish his painting, and one thing led to another.

I thought maybe, with his age, the experience might be worth it.

It was ... *okay*, I guess. But not something that left me wanting more with him or any other guy for that matter. All the movies and books make love and sex seem like such a wonderful thing.

In my experience, it's not worth all the hype.

Just like with the first guy, I never had to say goodbye to the second because we dipped out of the motel the next day

when Mom ran out of money.

A year later, Kane shipped me off to college, and I learned to side hustle with shitty men to get by.

It worked for a while, and I never felt guilty for doing to those men what they had done to so many others. I could have been truthful with Kane and told him I couldn't afford the cost of my apartment, but doing so would have meant he would work harder to send me more, and that money could be better used to take care of my mother.

By the time I started the hustle with Granger, I was desperate. He was the only person left that I thought I could manipulate without it becoming sexual. I knew it was a stupid idea from the beginning, but desperation leads to stupidity, and now I'm sitting squarely in the consequences.

The problem is that Granger not only expects sex with me, but he's to the point of demanding it.

Either I give it up, or my happy ass is fired.

That's why every time Granger traps me in the dressing room, I consider Damon's deal.

Accepting it would only be another act of pure desperation.

And that means doing so would be stupid.

But the other choices aren't much better.

To be fair, I'm no longer sure the offer is still on the table.

I haven't seen Damon since that night, and I'm pretty sure he's changed his mind in the two weeks since he made the offer.

Not that it should matter.

I can't let it matter.

If I do, then it'll have a hold on my heart with the potential of being a way out of this mess. But with Damon as messed up as he is—with his scars and nightmares that he's fighting

against—I fear he’ll only end up twisting my heart and ripping it from my chest until I’m left bleeding out and a broken mess.

A knock on my door alerts me to the time. I’ve been getting ready for another night of work and praying that Brinley will stay at Myth this time after giving me a ride to the club.

“You’re going to be late again,” Brinley censures as soon as I open the door. “You know how Granger gets.”

It takes effort to pack away all the worries and shame I’m feeling to protect her from the truth of my life.

My lips curve into a mischievous smile, and I look her up and down.

Shaking my head, I tease her just to get the spotlight off me.

“Baggy clothes again, Brin? Do you have anything in your wardrobe besides T-shirts and jeans that are two sizes too big for you?”

I love Brinley more than life itself. And with the choices I’m considering, I can’t lie and say the thought of what will happen to her if I leave isn’t tangled up in the mix. She’s the only friend I’ve ever had in life. The only person who’s ever loved me back simply because I’m me.

Brinley doesn’t want something from me, and she will bend over backwards to help me out. How can I repay that loyalty by walking away and deserting her?

With her constant fears about the outside world, Brinley needs me as much as I need her.

Abandoning her isn’t an option.

Brushing her brown hair away from her face, Brinley scowls in response to my comment.

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere important or have anybody to impress. As soon as I’m done dropping you off, I’m heading back to the library to finish studying.”

I grab my bag and keys, step out to stand beside her then lock my door. “Or...” I suggest, my voice saccharine sweet, “You could finally face your fears and give Myth another chance.”

My smile widens and her scowl becomes a grimace.

“Don’t start with me Ames—”

“Come on, Brin, just one drink? Or maybe a few sodas? A bottle of water? I don’t care, just stay with me and protect me from the big, evil, snooty dude. He’s been a serious grouch lately.”

He’s been more than that, actually, but Brinley doesn’t need to hear the details. Telling her the truth would just scare her to death. For being so scared of the world, there’s another side of her that’s protective. Not many people see that side. But I know it’s there.

She rolls her eyes. “Then break it off with him. Why do I have to protect you from a guy you are willingly sleeping with? I’m not even sure I can protect you just by being there.”

“You can,” I explain, “by going into the dressing room with me and sitting up at the second-floor bar. Granger won’t mind me leaving my cage and taking breaks as long as you’re there with me.”

Wrapping my arm with hers, I beg her to stay tonight as we descend the stairs from my floor to the parking lot.

“Everything will be fine. You can ask Patrick before going in. The security is super tight now, so nothing will happen. No fights. I promise.”

She groans and attempts to tug her arm from mine. I refuse to let go.

When we reach the car, Brinley finally frees herself from my hold and turns to face me. She leans back against the car door.

“I have studying —”

“You always have studying. You’re a straight A student, Brin. But you need to let loose occasionally. Have some fun. Be social.”

Another groan, but her defenses fall, and defeat slumps her shoulders. “It’s only been two months, Ames. Can you really promise everything has changed in so little an amount of time?”

I nudge her shoulder with mine. “Two months without a single fight. And I highly doubt tonight will be the night someone starts some shit.”

Giving her my best game smile, I beg, “Please?”

At first, I think she’s going to agree. I can practically see the submission bouncing around in her thoughts. But at the last second, she shakes her head and continues her refusal.

“Not tonight. I have a test next week that’s going to be a killer. I’ll stay with you after that test is over.”

Now I’m the one who’s defeated.

“That’s fine, Brin. But I’m holding you to it. I won’t let you fester and rot in that library anymore.”

Nodding, she opens her door, and I run around the car to open mine. We arrive at Myth fifteen minutes later.

“You’re late, Ames.”

Patrick taps his wrist like he’s wearing a watch, his expression grim as I approach him.

“What else is new?” I joke but stop in place when he grabs me as I attempt to walk past him. Gesturing for me to get closer so he can whisper, Patrick waits until my ear is near his lips before issuing his warning.

“You need to be careful tonight, you hear me? Granger is in one hell of a mood.”

Brushing his warning off, I laugh.

“When is Granger not in a mood? No worries, I know how to deal with him.”

I wish that were true and my feigned confidence is real. Granger has been getting worse every night, and my stomach rolls at the thought of seeing him.

Patrick grabs my upper arm and squeezes it to keep my attention.

“I’m not playing with you tonight. There’s something different than his usual shit. He’s lashing out at everyone who crosses his path. Two girls have already left crying.”

A knot forms in my throat. “Did he fire them?”

Is it possible I’m not the only girl he’s trying to fuck?

“Don’t know. They were so upset; they ran past me without saying a word. That’s why I’m warning you. The man is on a rampage.”

What the hell can I do?

I have to work.

My rent is coming up due, and I barely have half the amount I owe them.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise, but even I don’t believe the words. “Maybe he’s already calmed down, and he won’t be a complete asshole when I walk in.”

Patrick lets me go and twists his lips. “I doubt it. Those girls ran out of here only ten minutes ago. I doubt the man has calmed down at all.”

“It’ll be okay.”

Patrick shakes his head, knowing it won’t be *okay*.

It hasn’t been *okay* in the past couple weeks, and I feel like I’m walking into a lion’s den while wearing a pair of porkchop panties.

“Just take care,” he finally says, the concern on his face causing my stomach to drop into my feet.

Sighing heavily, I roll my shoulders back with every intention of walking in the club confidently, but fear chases through my veins, making my legs a little wobbly.

As soon as I walk through the door, I see Granger standing at the bar waiting for me. He doesn't bother with our usual routine of letting me approach him and get my scolding for being late. Instead, he storms forward and grabs my arm to drag me through the first floor and up the stairs to the second.

Practically shoving me into the dressing room, he slams the door behind us then leans against it to block me from leaving.

“You little fucking bitch. Do you think I don't know what game you're playing?”

Damn it. This is not normal for him. Granger may be a handsy son of a bitch who thinks he has every right to my body, but he's never looked at me like he's already planned my murder and knows exactly where to bury my body.

I step away from him, but he marches forward until I hit a wall and can't escape. His hand goes to my throat, his fingers squeezing so tight, I can barely catch my breath.

Keeping me pinned to the wall by my neck, he gets in my face, his expression a mask of pure, red rage.

“You're done. I hope you know that.”

I'd ask him what the hell I'm done with if I could draw in a full breath of air.

Granger doesn't appear to give much of a shit about getting an answer. His lips are held in a tight line, his eyes narrowed into a dark glare. Patrick wasn't wrong to warn me. There is something seriously wrong with Granger tonight.

Reaching up to grab at his hands, I dig my nails into his skin. It does nothing to help the situation, he only pushes up until I'm barely on my tiptoes, my back tight against the wall.

“Our deal is off,” he growls, his hot breath bursting against my face. “But you still get to dance in your cage.”

Okay, so I'm not fired. Then again, if this is how my nights will start, I'm not sure I want to work here.

I have no choice but to defend myself. My head is getting woozy from the lack of oxygen, and I'll be damned to die at the hands of this narcissistic prick.

Kicking out, I land the blow squarely between his legs. He releases me immediately with a groan of pain as my body slides down the wall. I land flat on my ass then attempt to crawl around him, but he grabs me by my hair to pull me to my feet.

The blow from the back of his hand knocks my face to the side, the skin where he hit me swelling up instantly, my blood rushing to the surface until it's hot. I drop to the ground again, and he kicks me in the side, catching my arm where it had fallen to drop next to my hip.

“You think you have something on me?”

He's standing over me now as I curl around myself to protect what I can from another kick of his boot.

“You want to play with sexual harassment charges. You dumb fucking whore. You just lost your meal ticket. Have fun fucking in the back rooms to pay your rent. I was *saving* you, but you're too stupid to see it.”

When I think he's going to kick me again, he backs away.

I push my body up on an elbow and look over at him, refusing to cry from the pain he caused.

Granger stares down at me and shakes his head. “I should have known you're nothing more than a fucking cock tease. Suing the club isn't going to work out for you, Ames. Good luck proving shit.”

What the fuck is he talking about?

I push myself up into a seated position, ignoring the throbbing in my cheek and arm. My throat is on fire from the way he gripped it, but I'm gulping in air again now that he let me go.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I answer in a raspy voice.

Glancing around the room, there’s not much I can use as a weapon against him, but I push up to my feet and plan to fight like hell if he comes at me again. He’d taken me by surprise the first time because it’s never been like him to be outwardly violent, but apparently, he thinks I’ve done something to threaten him or the club.

Rubbing at my arm with one hand, I wonder if there’s a hairline fracture. The pain is flaring through my nerves all the way down to the tips of my fingers and up to my shoulder.

“Yeah, of course, you’ll fucking lie about accusing me of sexual harassment and threatening to sue to the club.”

He laughs, the sound anything but funny.

“Good luck if you thought that was your new meal ticket. You can’t prove a thing. Why do you think I always paid you in cash?”

Dumbfounded, I find it difficult to respond. Not that he gives me time. Before I can say a word, he grabs the black angel wings from the wall and tosses them at me.

“Get dressed for work. As usual, you’re fucking late.”

Granger opens the door and walks halfway out before stopping in his path. Turning his head so that I can only see his profile, he barks out an arrogant laugh.

“I hope you have a ride home, Ames. Otherwise, it’s going to be a long fucking walk.”

The door slams behind him, and I stand in place, not understanding what the hell just happened.



Damon

Granger won't be a problem anymore. Not after the conversation I had with his business partner.

Turns out his little deal with Blue put the entire club at risk. And if he's doing it with one of the dancers, who knows how many others he's had deals with before Blue?

Charles Copper III, also known as the silent owner of Myth, tripped over his own words when I called him pretending to be Blue's lawyer. He managed to keep a calm demeanor. But I recognized the anger brewing just beneath it.

Playing on that anger, I was hoping to get the bastard to break off his partnership with Granger and buy him out of the club entirely. But the negotiations for that result fell through. Just last night, which is why I'm walking through Myth's parking lot right now.

Knowing Granger still has access to Blue is rubbing me the wrong way. And with the shit still going on with Ezra and Emily, I haven't had a chance to get to her sooner.

"Those are some impressive bruises and cuts you got there."

Patrick studies my face with a curious look. "Did you get in a fight with a dozen other guys somewhere else and lose?"

No, actually. These bruises are from a fight I got into with Ezra on the morning he showed up at our house to tell me he was dating Emily.

He gave me no other option but to deal with it with violence, choosing a fight to work out our problems because we're not exactly the types to talk.

Bastard caught me in the kitchen and without saying a word, he grabbed me by the shirt and slammed me against a wall. I was the one to throw the first punch, and it was while we were wailing on each other, that the truth finally came out.

I don't know why I bothered to fight him. Maybe it was a release of pressure I needed before finally exploding.

But, oddly, it helped.

We needed the release of tension.

And we needed to use our fists to finally come to an understanding.

The following morning, I drove to Emily's house to give her my blessing about her relationship with Ezra. I finally and fully gave my old *home* away to Ezra that morning while promising her I would still be her friend.

The past two weeks have been hell.

Between the shit I'm doing for Blue, Ezra running behind my back with Emily, and my father calling ... I'm just about ready to lose my mind entirely. Add to that the Inferno's continued games and problems with finding some stupid fucking servers, and I'm about to quit this shit entirely.

The only thing saving me from packing my truck and hauling off into the sunset is working with Shane and Priest at the shop. It's the only place where my head clears up, and I feel a sense of normalcy.

Earlier tonight I was out with Shane. He didn't want to let me out of his sight, but after a few beers and a few different bars, we decided to call it a night.

Shane went home to do whatever the hell he does, and I hauled ass here.

"You should see the other guys," I joke.

Patrick snorts and leans back on his stool.

"At least you were intelligent enough to keep it out of my club. I would hate to have to tackle your ass down again. You

might not come back to finish buying me that car.”

Speaking of which...

I pull my wallet from my pocket to pay whatever ridiculous amount he demands, but he waves it away.

My brows tug together, confusion flooding my head.

“What happened to the entry fee?”

This isn't normal...

Panic sets in, my heart rate climbing so high, it can't be healthy.

“Blue is still here, right?”

He stares at me with a blank expression for a few seconds. I'm about to jerk him up by his collar and demand answers when he finally speaks.

“If you mean Ames, yeah, she's here.”

He pauses, studying my face a little longer.

“And by the looks of her, she got into the same fight as you.”

The fuck?

Rage explodes around me, the need to destroy everything and everyone who threatens me or the people I love. The whispers and laughter resurge in my head, the memories and images I can't stop seeing.

It's all there as the storm erupts around me, lightning cracking like a whip's crack before thunder shakes the ground.

Controlling my voice so Patrick doesn't pick up on the threat that now faces him, I speak slowly.

“What the hell do you mean?”

He tilts his head toward the club's front door.

“That's why admission is free tonight. You need to get your ass in there and take a good look at your favorite girl.”

Anger bleeds into his expression and does nothing but add to mine. I don't say another word, my mind racing as fast as my feet when I walk inside the club, force my way past the congestion of people on the first floor then take two steps at a time on my way up to the second floor.

My eyes lock on Blue where she's dancing in her cage, her movement normal except for the way she barely uses her right arm. Gaze sliding over to Granger where he guards her stairs, I clench my teeth together so hard that pain shoots along my jaw.

I like the pain, though.

I crave it.

Especially when I have a bastard in sight who is the best target for my rage.

Closing the distance between us with a long stride, I stop just in front of him, his shoulders rounding as he squares up for a fight.

The corner of my mouth curves into a lethal smirk. This man has no idea he's dancing with a quick and violent death.

“Guess you can't stop me anymore, can you? Those harassment charges must sting like a bitch.”

Eyes narrowing, Granger steps up to me like he has what it takes to take me down.

It sucks for him I spent the majority of my life fighting. This jackass is nothing compared to the nightmares that run through my head.

“She's all yours,” he says with a grin. “Let me know how my dick tastes when you're done fucking her. I've been all over that bitch already and was done with her before you pulled your bullshit.”

My hand clenches into a fist, but I gain control again when I feel a woman's touch on my back.

“Let's go, Champ. He's not worth it.”

Granger's gaze flicks to Blue then back to me. He studies my face before letting out a bark of laughter. "Looks like somebody else has already fucked you up. That's good enough for me."

Pussy...

There will come a time when I teach him the lesson he needs—there will be a day of reckoning—but not while Blue is standing nearby.

I still don't know the scars she carries, and I'm not about to run the risk of becoming another bad memory that runs through her head.

The entire point for what I did was to get her away from this son of a bitch.

But I can't say my efforts were entirely selfless.

I knew that forcing Granger to break the deal would also corner her into accepting the one I've offered.

It would be a tether I could attach to her to keep her in place, to ensure my escape is always where I need her.

"Damon," Blue says just loud enough to be heard over the music. "I'm serious. Just let it go."

My smirk fades, my eyes still firmly locked on Granger.

"Bother her again and it'll be me you're dealing with. And it won't end with threats of legal shit. I'll bury you so deep the world will forget you ever existed."

Granger doesn't so much as blink. The arrogant son of a bitch is too stupid to be scared. "Have fun with her. Hope her pussy is worth the war you just started."

I step back, hating to be the first to break our stare.

Turning, I follow Blue to a back room. It isn't until we walk through the door that I see the first bruise.

Grasping her shoulder, I gently turn her to look at me, and that storm brews again at the sight of her neck, her cheek and

her arm.

“He’s a dead man,” I growl as I study the bruises I know all too well.

A hand over her throat.

Knuckles across her cheek.

A blow to her arm that blossoms in a swollen red, the bruise so new, it hasn’t had time to become black and blue.

“I’ll take the deal,” she says, her voice meek. She tips her finger beneath my chin to guide my gaze back to hers.

I can’t shake the storm of emotions from my head, a steady thudding of my heartbeat making it difficult to notice anything else but what sounds like the distant warning of war drums.

“Did you hear me, Champ? I said I’ll take your deal.”

I can’t hear anything but the taunting voices and the laughter, her bruises so similar to mine.

Drawing her closer, I direct Blue to sit on a chair in the room. I drop to my knees beside her.

There’s only one thing I know to do.

The only kindness that was taught to me.

Taking Blue’s arm, I glance up at her face and hold her stare as I lean in to softly kiss the bruise.

She doesn’t tug away, her eyes scrutinizing my face instead.

“What happened to you?”

My jaw tics, the tension inside ripping my self-control to pieces.

He’s only a hallway’s distance from me. It would be so easy to—

“Damon? Please answer me.”

Our eyes meet again, and I refuse to answer.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you the same?”

Where her question has been soft, almost submissive, mine comes out razor sharp. My voice didn’t shake like my body does, adrenaline pouring into my veins.

My attention lifts to the red handprint over her throat then I push my body up to kiss that injury away too.

It’s the only thing that can be done once the new scars have been added to the old.

Blue stills in her seat on what I assume must be a decision between letting me close or pushing me away.

I know her that much.

What would happen if I kissed you?

I’d scream...

Judging by your dancing, I assume you know how to fuck. That’s gotta get you somewhere in life...

The blow from her foot had shaken me awake, cleared the hatred I was projecting on her.

Blue doesn’t submit.

She fights.

But she’s submitting now, and I can’t figure out why.

I run my hand up the back of her arm, silently begging her to let me do this. I need to do this.

Maybe she is psychic.

Maybe she really can see what’s going on in my head.

Blue lifts her chin, giving me access to her throat, and I plant a gentle kiss to the bruise, knowing the pain she endured, knowing that as the injury heals it’ll become darker before it fades.

“Damon...”

A plea, but for what? Is she just now experiencing the only kindness she’s been shown? Blue is a fighter, and yet, in this,

she doesn't struggle to break away.

One left ... Her cheek.

Pushing to my feet, I grab her hands and lift her up.

We stand together staring at each other, her neck craning back due to our height difference. I may tower over her, but she doesn't feel small.

My fingers slip through her hair, then I turn her face to examine the marks on her cheek. The swelling skin is most evident across the bone and beneath her violet eye.

"He did this," I say, half question, half statement.

Most likely because of me, because of the shit I was pulling with his business partner. The truth of it hits like knife to the heart.

I did this...

Rage surges like molten lava pouring through my veins.

Just a hallway. That's all I have to travel to get to him.

"You can kiss me there too. Just there."

Her words pull me from the edge, and I take the offer, lightly brushing my lips over the swollen skin. I can feel her pulse thudding through her hand. My fingers clench down tighter where I hold it.

"I'll take the deal," she says again, her free hand reaching to cup my face. "Do you hear me?"

I do hear her.

But my mind is rushing with too many thoughts to respond in the way she wants.

"We have two options right now." My voice is barely controlled, the warning clear. "We can either leave this club right now, or I'm about to kill a man."

She doesn't argue.

I'm thankful she doesn't argue.

Any other person might.

But not Blue.

She knows me ... somehow.

“Let’s go.”

This time her voice is firm.

Like a command.

Like she’s taking control of me because I’m so quickly losing control of myself.

Blue’s hand clamps down on mine, then she leads me out of the room and into another one. I’m so focused on killing Granger that my chest shakes with a low growl when Blue attempts to pull her hand from mine.

“I just need to get my stuff,” she explains.

I finally blink my eyes and shake my mind free of the sardonic laughter, of my father’s voice, of the screaming, the blood, the memories and the red haze of violence to glance up and see we’re in a dressing room.

Different costumes are hung on a rack, a large metal hanger is mounted on the wall the Blue uses to place her wings after stripping them off.

There are no screens to block off a portion of the room for a person to change in private, so Blue strips off the rest of her clothes right there in front of me.

My attention locks to her body, naked except for a pair of purple, lacy panties. She glances over at me and shrugs.

“You get used to it,” she says as she reaches for a bag and pulls out a pair of jeans and a silky, silver top.

Stunned silent by her beauty, I stare as she pulls on the jeans and the shimmies into the top. Cinching the bag closed with a drawstring, she gives me a weak smile.

“Like what you see?”

The haze fades faster, my mind on something else entirely.

“I always have.”

Hiking the strap of the bag onto her shoulder, she steps closer to me.

“Then let’s go.”

I ignore Granger and the rest of the crowd as we make our way through the second floor, down the stairs and across the first floor. Patrick is silent as we pass him, and I’m thankful he knew to let us pass without a word.

It isn’t until we’re sitting in my truck that a question comes to me.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. A place where we can talk?”

She’s nervous to be with me. I can hear it in her voice. But without answering, I start the engine and head to the only place I can think of.

I head home.

Ezra is over at Tanner’s tonight and will probably go to Emily’s house after. I have the house to myself. But for once, I won’t feel so alone. Not with Blue there.

We’re quiet as I navigate the streets, my engine revving every time I hit the gas and pick up speed. Most people would tell me to slow down, but not Blue. Instead, she stares out the passenger window without a care in the world, the streetlights we pass brushing over her skin every so often.

When we pull up to my place, Blue looks forward and let’s out a slow whistle.

“I should have known,” she says on a half-hearted laugh.

“Known what?”

“You’re one of them. The snooty folk. Then again you were at the governor’s house for that party so…”

Her voice fades for a second before she quips. “I bet you have a button that turns on all the lights in your house or some

shit. All the snooty folk have it.”

I hit a Bluetooth remote at the top of my truck. The house lights up instantly.

Blue cackles with laughter. “I knew it!”

A smile tugs at my lips, a feeling of joy washing through me so quickly that the nightmares disappear, and I no longer hear the voices and laughter.

Her head rolls over the back of her seat so she can look me in the eyes.

“Got any other neat tricks that cost a fortune?”

I smirk at the suggestion.

“I have a few actually, but they don’t cost me a dime.”

The charge in the air changes and takes both of us by surprise.

Blue’s lips part slightly, her eyes hooded and tired, but I can see the flutter of her pulse along her neck, my eyes dropping lower to her chest to notice she’s breathing heavier.

She shrugs a shoulder and opens the door to step out of the truck. Once out, she glances between me and the house.

“What are you waiting for? Show me your tricks.”

Pure need douses me, my cock coming to life, the muscles over my shoulders tight again, but not with the need to fight.

I need this.

Somehow, she knows I need this.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say as I kill the engine and step out of the truck.

Rounding the hood, I walk over to her and pull her to me, our bodies colliding. I look down at her, just to be sure this is what she wants.

Blue looks up at me with eyes that seduce. Her indecision is absent, and her hand is clinging to mine as she waits for me

to lead her inside.

So many words bounce through my head, but I'm afraid of them. They've screwed me before. The wrong ones pushing people away because I've never learned how to express myself.

I stay quiet and tug at her hand to lead her into my house.

As soon as we step across the threshold, Blue looks around the house in fascination while a familiar vibration occurs in my pocket.

Pulling my phone out, I glance down at the screen and clench my teeth.

Blue turns to look at me, concern filling her eyes because she always seems to know when my moods change.

“Do you need to answer that?”

My father's number flashes up at me as the phone continues to vibrate in my hand.

Hitting a button to send the call to voicemail, I shake myself of the nightmares that usually come with his calls and look back at a woman who can somehow chase the memories away.

“No. It's a number I don't recognize,” I lie. “Probably someone wanting to talk to me about my car's extended warranty.”

Laughter rolls over her lips. “Oh man, I hate those calls. I usually answer them and ask if they have time to talk about our Lord and Savior. They end the call every time.”

I tug her closer so that her chest rubs against mine. There are a few words I'm almost positive I can say that won't fuck this up for me.

“You sure about this?”

She considers it for a second, fear traipsing down my spine that she'll change her mind.

Blue tilts her head and stares up at me.

“Depends on what you’re offering, Champ. But I know I need something. So I’m willing to find out what neat tricks you have.”

That’s all she needs to say for me to push her forward and shut the front door.

I’d intended to take her upstairs to my room, but my need for her takes over before we make it through the kitchen.



Amélie

Consequences...

Cycles...

They're always repeating because the same mistakes are made.

It's the definition of insanity, really. Always doing the same thing while hoping for a different result.

I'm hoping this cycle isn't just another example of the universe's jokes. And I'm terrified of the consequences I'm facing for the decisions I'm making tonight.

Leaving the club with Damon might have been the first mistake. But I knew when he saw my bruises it was either I fuck up by leaving with him or watch him fuck up and kill Granger ... his life forever ruined from the murder charges.

The lesser of two evils, you know?

What happens tonight probably won't have consequences that last the rest of my life.

So that's why I chose to leave.

I can handle Damon.

I have plenty of experience with damaged people.

I wasn't all that surprised when we pulled up to Damon's house. I knew he had money. No other person would be dumb enough to pay thousands to Patrick just to enter the club and then a few grand to me for five to ten minutes in the back room.

I've never given him anything more than letting him see and touch my boobs. None of it was worth the amount he paid.

The only reason he would keep coming back is if the money didn't matter to him. Those thousands were just a drop in the bucket, but I'm not surprised by that either. The clientele at Myth have always been the super wealthy. That's the only reason they would even know about the place.

Still, it hits a little different to be walked inside a mansion where the foyer alone is bigger than my apartment. I had to crane my neck up to look at the vaulted ceilings, had to wonder about all the different hallways and where they led.

It's interesting that we ended up in the kitchen of all places, but even this space is more picturesque than any place I've seen in my life.

I barely have time to admire it when Damon grabs my hips to lift me up onto the counter of the center island. He spreads my legs then moves his body to stand between them. It draws my attention away from the gleam of stainless steel appliances and the ebony color of his hardwood cabinets.

Damon's dark hair is a disheveled mess, like he's been running his hands through it all day. His amber eyes are glimmering with desire instead of rage.

I can't help but to react to the need I see inside him. I feel the same need too, which is dangerous.

Never in my life has it felt like all my senses have gone wild. He touches me in one place, yet I feel it all over. My breath catches in my lungs while my heartbeat pounds in my head. The nerves in my body are heightened to a point where I swear if he doesn't run those strong hands over every inch of my skin, I'll go crazy.

The scent of cologne is barely there, but it brushes past me like a phantom, drawing me in. I want to reach out and touch him, pull him closer, bury my face into the side of his neck and breathe him in.

But it's the cuts and bruises on his face that hold my attention the most, the new scars added to the old.

I touch one, softly running my fingertips along the edge of it. The bruise isn't brand new. It's had time to darken into a deep purple.

Each of these marks—these scars—are a narrative telling Damon's story. It's as if you can read his life in the patterns of the small white lines that run beneath the bruises.

What cycle does he repeat constantly that I'm becoming a part of?

Will his damage become mine as well?

“Who did this to you?”

My fingers run over another bruise above his eyebrow.

He sighs, the heat between us still stifling even while I risk destroying it with the distraction of my question.

Releasing my hips, Damon runs his hands down my legs, removing one of my shoes when he answers, “I got in a fight with my brother.”

There's a brief pause in his response as he peels off my other shoe. He laughs softly. “In this kitchen, actually.”

Taking a moment to look around, I notice the broken cabinet doors. “And here I thought this was just some new fancy schmancy trend. The urban poor look or whatever they want to call it.”

Another laugh as he looks up at me and runs his hands back up my legs. Tingles trace up my spine and my skin feels tight across my chest.

“How do you do that?”

Damon's amber gaze finds mine, the skin wrinkled at the sides of his eyes from his smile.

He's charming when he smiles.

I bet when he's in a good mood, he's a riot to be around. Somebody you can kick back with and joke back-and-forth, your face and belly hurting after laughing so much.

“You’ll need to help me out there, Champ. What do I do?”

His fingers squeeze my thighs then roam up to a dangerous place. Shivers course through me and I fight to keep him from seeing it.

The smirk that pulls at the corner of his mouth tells me he is reading me as easily as I read him.

“You make me laugh, even when the memories...”

His voice trails off and he shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

It does matter.

I want to know about those memories.

All the intimate details.

I can see the shadow of them, the outlines—the scars they left behind—but the core of his story is hidden from view.

Leaning in, he presses his mouth to my ear, and I melt against him.

“You still ready to see the other neat tricks I have?”

No.

I’ll never be ready.

But my body is betraying me and practically begging for more.

Damon trails his fingers up my spine and a small squeal escapes my lips. Just from the simple touch, I’m already losing myself to him.

He turns his head, and the corners of our mouths meet.

A sigh falls over his lips, his breath warm against my skin.

“Can I kiss you, Blue?”

I shake my head and try to speak, but it’s impossible to breathe with his fingers softly rubbing up and down my back.

He rests his forehead against the side of my head, another breath leaking out of him. “One day, I’ll break that rule of yours. I hope you know that.”

Closing my eyes, I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from telling him I’ve never kissed a man in my life. It’s a rule I’ve never broken.

Will Damon be the man who’s worth it?

Or will he be the one who breaks me apart?

He tugs at the back of my shirt, the movement so quick that my arms raise up for him to pull it off. I moved without thinking, our bodies perfectly coordinated. He tugs his shirt off just as quickly, moving slowly to kiss along my neck, my jaw, careful and meticulous as he kisses the bruise on my cheek.

Damon’s lips move against my skin.

“I’m going to kill him for what he did to you.”

I press my hands against his chest and feel the strength of him.

“We chose to leave, remember? Murder comes with too many problems, and I don’t really feel like dealing with them.”

Another laugh, his chest shaking against my hands. “It wouldn’t be you who’s dealing with them.”

“Not true,” I quip. “The police will want to interview me, and I really don’t have time for all that.”

His lips fall to my neck again, and I lean my head back to give him access.

So many thoughts roll through my head—refusals, choices, cycles and consequences.

Deals that still need to be made.

Pushing at his chest, I stop the kisses.

His eyes lift to mine, hooded with desire.

“You never answered me at the club. I agreed to take your offer.” I hiccup on the words, terrified of what the favor could be or what happens if I refuse. “Your deal.”

His eyes search mine, a small twitch of his lips pulling into a smirk.

“We’ll make the deal after this. I don’t want to make it now.”

Trepidation pours through me. “Why?”

Is he planning on getting what he wants just to renege on the offer after?

Fucking men.

They do this shit every time.

I shove my hands against his chest to push him away, but he grips my wrists to stop me.

“Blue...calm down. I only want this before the deal, so you know it’s not expected *because* of the deal. This is separate. I’m not paying you for this. I’ll never do that to you.”

“So, this won’t be the favor?”

He shakes his head.

“No. That’s not how it works. I don’t pay for sex, remember?”

Pausing, he meets my stare, holds it, trapping me in place so that I listen and believe what he’s telling me.

“You don’t fuck for money either. I apologize for ever accusing you of that.”

Relaxing a little at his explanation, I try to turn off my mind to stop the surge of questions. My trust issues have always kept me from letting go around men, wary of all the horrible things my mother told me could happen.

The way she ran all the time ... always attempting to save her children from some unknown danger. I never want to be

hurt like her ... or run scared. I never want to feel I have to run constantly to escape the inescapable.

Mom taught me never to let anyone close.

Especially men.

It's a cage that wraps around my heart like barbed wire, never letting go.

“And I'm supposed to trust you on that? I don't trust people. That's not my thing. Most men just want to—“

He presses his thumb against my lips to shut me up.

“We all have our scars,” he says, repeating the words I said to him at the club, “And I'm not most men.”

My breath catches at that hard truth.

I do have scars, and my trust issues are a major part of them.

“Do you want me to stop?”

No.

Don't you fucking dare.

Don't leave it to me to make the choice and be left the one to blame for the consequences.

Struggling against all the worries and choices and the unshakable independence I've always demanded of myself, I take a deep breath and shove away those thoughts.

I want to feel this.

My body *wants* this.

It's just my mind that screams out in warning that I could get hurt.

With a shake of my head, I pull him to me because there was never a choice to begin with.

The universe shoved us together, and our scars entangled, making it impossible for us to pull apart.

Our fate is somehow written in the stars, the ghosts of our pasts locking hands the day we first spoke to each other, a bond that may never be broken.

My decision is made regardless of the consequences.

“Show me your tricks, Damon. Just shut up and show me.”

His eyes hold mine as he slowly moves his hands down my arms, his thumbs just barely brushing my nipples as he drops them lower to trace his fingers along my bare stomach.

Sparks burst across my skin where he touches me, my thighs clenching tight against his body.

Letting go to the sensation, I become distinctly aware of every stroke of his fingertips, every spot where his lips gently kiss me along my jaw and down my neck.

I move to touch him as well, but he catches my wrists again, his voice so deep and soft that I shiver at the sound of it.

“No, Blue. You don’t have to do anything. This is only for you.”

For me?

I’ve never had that before...

He pushes my arms until I’m leaning back with my elbows against the counter. I feel exposed in this position, trapped in a way that makes me want to fight.

Damon stares down at me as if he knows my struggle, his eyes adoring as he takes me in.

Slowly, he studies my face, my neck, my shoulders and my breasts. Taking his time, it’s like he’s memorizing every part.

I’ve only experienced this once. This rapt attention. The artist. But that was for a portrait.

Somehow, it’s more intimate with Damon. His slow perusal of my body isn’t so he can replicate the image on canvas.

This moment is just for him.

A new memory.

Something I hope is beautiful enough to replace whatever haunts him.

Gripping the sides of my jeans, he tugs, and I lift my butt just enough that he can pull at them, his eyes studying every new part of me that's revealed when he slides them down my legs.

Leaning down, he kisses a slow trail up my left leg, his hands gripping my calves to keep me in place.

My head falls back from the rush of sensation, a warmth blossoming between my legs that's foreign to me.

Confusion fills my head, the realization that for the first time, I *actually want* this man.

This moment.

This act.

I crave what he can do for me.

The warnings in my head are finally silent, having lost their battle to my need for him.

But if he goes any slower, I may scream.

It's never felt this good before.

Reaching my pussy, he presses a kiss to my panties then opens his mouth to breathe out.

It's more warmth against that area.

More electric sparks bursting inside.

"Stop teasing," I beg, my eyes clenched shut, my fingers gripping tight over the edge of the counter.

Damon laughs softly, and there is so much arrogance in that sound.

The bastard knows exactly what he's doing.

"Yes ma'am."

He tugs my panties off, and a rush of breath bursts from my lungs. I'm fully exposed, every part of me.

Both fear and want battle in my head, but the rest of me shivers from the cool air across my skin ... from the heat that erupts inside me to know this man has me at his mercy.

“You're gorgeous, Blue.”

His palms run up the inside of my thighs, slowly pushing them apart.

“Every inch of you is perfect.”

Leaning down again, Damon wraps his mouth over my nipple. His teeth scrape just enough as his tongue does ungodly things.

It's sensual torture.

My back drops to the counter, moans and soft pleas falling over my lips that are coming from somewhere inside me that I never knew existed.

Bending my knees up, he places my feet on the edge of the counter so that I'm completely exposed, his warm, talented mouth trailing small kisses down my stomach.

But that is nothing compared to the sensation of Damon placing his mouth at the inside of my thigh next to where I need him the most.

One kiss on the left and one on the right. I'm going to explode if he doesn't ease the desperate need inside me.

My body is ready for him, the inner walls of my pussy contracting and relaxing over and over.

I can't take it anymore.

I grab his hair and direct him to where I need him, ignoring the knowing laugh he lets out before his tongue finally—*finally*—licks along the slit, a slow path up as he tastes me before finding my clit and sucking on it gently.

Another moan escapes me, my back arching up, my butt lifting off the counter to press my pussy tight against his face.

He grabs my hips to control me, taking his time to tease me with tiny nips that sting and a tongue that soothes the ache.

When his tongue circles my clit then licks down to push inside me, I lose all sensibility.

I don't know what's going on.

This sensation.

A slow build of pressure inside me that needs an escape.

My body is practically shaking, my breath held as he licks back up my clit to nip at it while pushing two fingers inside me to toy with me and tease at the clenching muscles, a small push inside before pulling out again.

My fingers clench in his hair.

“Goddammit, Damon. Just ... just please...”

I can't think straight to make a demand.

What am I asking for?

“Just get me off, you fucking bastard.”

His mouth presses down harder, his tongue hitting all the right spots as he pushes a third finger inside me, spreads them just enough to stretch the muscle and finger fucks me so hard that I'm losing control ... seeing stars ... experiencing all the things the bullshit romance books always promised I would.

Maybe they were right all along.

The pressure inside me, the sparks, the electrical pulse builds higher and higher. It's almost painful, a wave of sensual poison cascading through me. And when it finally takes over my mind, I scream out.

I don't recognize the sounds rolling over my lips as mine.

I don't understand how it feels like I've been catapulted into a different plane of existence.

But here I am, trapped in a cage of pleasure, the feeling undulating through my body as my fingers grip tighter into his hair.

My back arches up at the violence of this feeling, but then lowers again as the orgasm releases me from its hold, and I'm left weak and boneless.

Damon pulls his fingers from me and his mouth from my pussy. I can feel him straighten his posture, somehow know he's watching me.

After what feels like forever, he speaks to me with a voice full of masculine approval and amusement.

“You okay?”

What's okay? I don't know the meaning of that word quite yet.

Right now, I'm just ... suspended in a place I've never known before.

I haven't opened my eyes yet, haven't been able to make sense of what I just felt and how he was able to do it to me.

With shallow gasps of air, I wait for my heartrate to drop down, for the aftershocks I hadn't expected to stop bursting through me.

I'm left lying on the counter, completely naked without concern, happily floating on waves of exhaustion and whatever hormones my body has spilled down my veins.

“That's a neat trick,” I finally answer, still breathless.

He kisses my bellybutton and squeezes my hips.

“Stay there for a second. I need to grab something.”

Forcing my upper body up, I blink away the haze of sex, my trust issues rushing back, worrying about what he's doing.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

Damon is leaving the kitchen, but he stops in the doorway to look back at me.

“I’m heading to the bathroom to grab a washcloth and soap.”

“For what?”

He leans against the doorframe and shakes his head.

“The trust issues are strong in you.”

“You’ll learn to accept them,” I say, not really joking because I’ll always question everything.

“Maybe. But for now, I’m getting a washcloth to clean you up. Hasn’t anybody ever taken care of you after sex?”

Not that we had *sex*, but I’m not sure that’s what matters.

“No.”

His expression drops, but it’s anger I see swirling behind his amber eyes.

“We’re changing that now, Blue.”

“Nobody takes care of me,” I blurt out, unsure if it’s a confession or a demand.

I take care of myself.

I don’t need anybody else.

At least, that’s what life has always taught me.

He pushes away from the doorframe and asks, “Have you never let a man take care of you, or has one never offered?”

When I don’t answer because the truth is too difficult to admit, Damon’s full lips pull into a tight line.

“You don’t need to answer that. You’ve never been taken care of ... and it shows.”

He walks through the door then disappears around a corner.

And I’m left with the heavy weight of the truth of sitting squarely on my shoulders.

I don’t need a man, I tell myself.

But that doesn't mean I don't *want* one.



Damon

I should never have brought Ames to my house. Not that I'm upset over what happened or unhappy to get her away from the bastard who put those bruises on her body. But this is too close.

She was supposed to be a fantasy I could escape to.

A person in a place that was just mine.

Having Blue here feels like I'm mixing her together with all the problems in my life—the fights with Ezra, the loss of Emily, the games all the guys keep playing that never seem to end.

The battle with our fathers.

It doesn't surprise me to find seven missed calls on my phone after cleaning Blue up and helping her get dressed. All from my father, the entitled bastard believing he deserves even a second of my time.

After the engagement party, his calls weren't often, maybe one every few days. But as the weeks have gone on, his calls have been more frequent, from a call a day to two calls, three...

Every time, he's left a message. I've deleted them all without listening.

It's the same bullshit with him, even after all these years. William will always attempt to charm you in the beginning, just a father reaching out to check on his son, just a bastard lying with a demon's forked tongue.

Always concerned about his image, he leads the world to think he's a brilliant businessman, an expert when it comes to

money and a family man who raised two powerful sons.

Anybody who buys that shit should be sent for a mental exam.

The image he keeps couldn't be farther from the truth.

I know where he made his millions, and it wasn't in some stuffy office, wearing a chokehold tie, scamming the middle class out of their hard-earned money while breaking every law.

No.

That was Daddy Dearest and Warbucks, also known as Tanner's father and Gabe's father. The rest of the Inferno fathers simply tag along, taking advantage of the backroom deals and elbow rubbing of the elite class in this state.

Where my father made his money was far more insidious than that, leaving Ezra and me to bear the scars of it.

And I bet the old man is running out of money now that enough time has passed since the last weekend he could drag us away from here for lessons in life no son should have taught to them.

The daily calls didn't surprise me, but I can't lie and claim the seven I just received in the past hour didn't make my brow cock up and my muscles tense with caution.

I toss the phone back on the counter then turn to watch Blue walk through my kitchen studying all the high-end bullshit and the damage Ezra and I caused.

"Gonna cost a fortune to fix this shit, you know?"

She glances up at me with those gorgeous violet eyes, a color I've never seen in another person.

"Why were you and your brother fighting? Is he the reason you're always so pissed off?"

"He's a part of it," I breathe out, not interested in getting into the details of my life.

Leaning against one of the counters, I cross my arms over my chest and continue watching her. I don't know what to say or how to act. I'm thinking of every possible way I can suggest getting out of here without it becoming awkward.

The woman has issues, and I assume most of them come from the men she's known in life. If Granger was just one example of the type of scumbags she gets involved with, it's no wonder she finds it so difficult to trust.

But that can't be my problem.

I didn't go looking for her as a project to rehabilitate. All I need from her is to be a place I can go when the rest of my life is insane.

“This is awkward, huh? Me being here.”

There's no point lying.

“It wasn't my plan for the night.”

She tilts her head and gives me a half smile.

“You like me better at Myth. I get that. I'm not usually the type the snooty folk invite home for dinner.”

I just made her my dinner but refrain from reminding her of that.

Cocking a hip, she tangles her eyes with mine.

“Then let's agree on that deal of yours, then you can take me home. With the kind of cash you're offering, it's not like I'll go hungry leaving work early tonight.”

But that's the problem.

I want her at work.

In her cage.

I enjoyed watching her dancing.

It made the pain go away.

Fidgeting with the bottom hem of her top, she looks down at her hands, her voice less confident.

“The deal’s still up for grabs, right? I mean, if it’s not then I guess I could just—“

“It’s still on the table, Blue. I wasn’t lying to you earlier. I’m simply concerned about the circumstances now.”

She looks up, confusion behind violet eyes. The swelling across her cheek makes my teeth clench, the handprint bruise forming across her neck.

“Circumstances? You just went down on me, Champ. It’s no big deal. Nothing’s changed—”

“Except for Granger,” I say on a growl, cutting her off. “I can’t ask you to stay at the club knowing he’ll be around.”

She waves off my concern, a bright smile stretching her lips that I know is fake. It’s the mask she shows the world to hide the pain.

It’s the same mask I wear daily.

“Don’t worry about Granger. He was pissed off about some bullshit sexual harassment shit. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I think it had to do with the two girls he fired before I even got there that night. Probably thought I was mixed up in it.”

So her bruises are my fault...

I had a direct hand in why Granger put them there.

“But it’s fine now. The asshole thinks I’ll go hungry if I keep working there. That I’ll never make enough on my own to make up what he was paying me. He also thinks I’ll have to walk back and forth to work all the time because he’s not giving me rides anymore. But my friend Brinley takes care of that. He’s got nothing on me except the hell he thinks he’s causing in my life, so he’ll keep his distance.”

The name of her friend rings a bell with me, but I can’t remember why. Probably because I’m too busy calling bullshit.

“Granger was at his usual place at the bottom of the stairs leading to your cage when I got there tonight. Didn’t look like a lot of distance.”

Granger’s got it coming to him in more ways than one, and it would be nice to include Tanner and Gabe in figuring out just how to destroy him.

But Blue’s a secret.

So, dealing with Granger is for me alone.

Blue shrugs.

“Like I said, he thinks he’s watching me starve. But he can’t stop me from walking out of my cage anymore. Club rules and all that.”

“That doesn’t work for me either.”

“What doesn’t?”

Her long blue hair falls over her shoulder when she pulls her attention away from examining the kitchen again to look back at me.

“You leaving your cage. That’ll be part of this deal, too. You have no reason to go to the back rooms with the amount I’m paying you.”

“Possessive much?” she jokes.

I fail to smile. “Very.”

Even though I don’t want a relationship with Blue, I still can’t handle the thought of needing my escape one night only to get there and find her missing from her cage while she’s back entertaining another guy.

I can’t stand the thought of another man touching her.

Laughter shakes her shoulders.

“Well, damn. Am I allowed to date?”

The urge to say no is hard to resist. But what she does outside of the club is none of my business.

It can't be.

Especially when I have nothing to offer her.

“That’s on you. I don’t really care, as long as you’re where I need you at night.”

Her expression falls, but just for a moment before she pulls her usual mask on again.

“Deal,” she says.

I never see the need to ask Blue for a favor. I’m just offering this to keep her in place. But there are still rules that come with the deals the Inferno makes.

“You remember the rules, right?”

“Yeah. One day you may ask me for a favor, and if I don’t follow through with the favor, something super awful will happen to me. How very mafia of you.”

She has no idea.

While the guys and I aren’t planning on becoming like our dads, we do plan on taking over their businesses. And with that comes the agreements they have with city officials and cops, with congressmen and governors.

I have no interest in keeping that shit running. It’ll ultimately be up to the rest of the guys. As far as I’m concerned, they can burn it all to the ground and pretend like our fathers never fucking existed.

But still, while our fathers aren’t the mafia, their setup might as well be.

I need to take Blue home. Just having her here is making me antsy, the fear that Ezra may show up and my secret becomes known.

“So, are we good? The deal is made and all that?”

Blue nods her head. “Yeah.”

I snatch my keys from the counter. “Then I’ll drive you home.”

Disappointment fills her expression. There and then gone again. She doesn't say a word as she grabs her bag from the kitchen island and pulls the strap up her shoulder.

We're quiet as we walk to the foyer, but a shadow falls across the frosted glass of the front door that has me grabbing Blue and pushing her behind me.

Fuck...

Ezra's home.

This is exactly why I don't want Blue here.

I turn to look back the way we came, thinking I can sneak Blue out through the kitchen, into the garage and come around the side of the house to get to my truck.

But there's no time. I didn't lock the door and Ezra—

The doorbell rings.

My body stiffens at the sound, my head whipping back to look at the door as tension spreads across my shoulders. I must have gripped down a touch too hard on Blue's arm because she lets out a small yelp and attempts to pull away.

“Damn, Champ. What's wrong?” she asks.

I release my grip on her but keep my eyes trained on the door. The doorbell rings again and my mind races through who the fuck it could be.

Any of the guys would try the knob first because none of us bother knocking when showing up at each other's houses. And it's too late at night for people trying to sell shit—not that they could get in the neighborhood anyway.

The third ring is quickly followed by a fourth until someone is pushing the button repeatedly.

“Are you going to answer it?”

Seven calls within an hour...

The thought floats through my head, but there is no fucking way.

“Turn around,” I say, grabbing Blue by the arm again without giving her the option to protest. “We’ll go out the garage.”

“Damon, stop dragging me.”

We’re halfway through the foyer when a heavy banging starts, the thump so hard it threatens to break the glass.

“Open the door you ungrateful piece of shit! If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t even have this fucking house!”

The familiar voice stops me in my tracks while nightmares assault me.

Get off your knees, boy, and earn the money I’ve given you...

Stop fucking crying and learn to be a man...

I knew Ezra and you wouldn’t be worth a shit. You’re freeloaders just like your gold-digging whore of a mother..

Adrenaline pours through my veins, undiluted anger infecting my mind until all I can see is red.

The knob turns, then the front door opens.

The face I see in the nightmares that haunt me incessantly is staring directly at me with a sloppy grin on his face.

Time ticks by, the rush of blood in my head like a wave crashing over me. I listen to the war drum beating of my heart.

My father leans a shoulder against the doorframe, slipping for a second before catching himself again. The strong scent of alcohol wafts past my nose, as if he’d doused himself in it.

Eyes that match the color of mine stare back at me.

“How’re you doing, Damon. It would be real good of you to answer your goddamned phone every once in a while. It would save me the drive over.”

His words slur together, the asshole so intoxicated that he has no choice but to brace himself against the doorframe. He wouldn’t be able to stand straight otherwise.

Blue steps around me to stand at my side, and my father's eyes slide to her immediately.

A sick grin twists his lips.

"I recognize you," he says, his eyes trailing down her body. "You're that whore who was at the engagement party. And here I thought you were one of Governor Callahan's new toys."

He grabs his crotch, his eyes sliding my direction. "How much is she charging? I wouldn't mind a ride."

We're making some money of you now, kid...

The laughter. Always the fucking laughter.

Think they may throw in a couple extra thousand if you scream some more...

Hate.

Pure and seething.

The reason for the devastation of my life is standing at my door.

I hate this man, and I understand how strong that statement is.

To hate is to want to destroy.

To tear apart.

To annihilate.

It's all I feel.

My anger.

My hatred.

I shove my truck keys at Blue while keeping my eyes locked on the source of my hatred.

Voice low, I tell her, "Take my truck and get out of here."

Blue argues, getting only a few words out before my voice roars so loud it shakes the windows. "Get the fuck out of my

house!”

She takes the keys then moves several steps forward, but the source of my eternal storm moves to block her path.

Stopping in place, violet eyes dance between me and a man who attempted to desecrate me—a man I have every intention of destroying.

She hesitates in place, unsure what to do.

I didn't want Blue to become part of this life.

She's my escape.

Bringing her here was a mistake.

“It's all right, Damon. She's welcome to stay. I can think of a few ways she's useful.”

Scream a little louder, Damon. Maybe it'll convince your brother to fight...

I hated those weekends as much as I hate this man. We were taken to an abandoned warehouse, forced through a larger space with ceilings twenty feet above us. Through a door into another smaller room that was in the center of the building.

The sound wouldn't carry as much in that smaller room.

Nobody would hear us.

And in that room, there was a second door that led to an even smaller room.

An office.

A large closet, maybe.

With just enough light to make out the silhouettes of the men who entered it.

That's where they took me when we refused to fight.

I remember Ezra screaming from the other room.

I remember the blood.

But what I remember the most is the laughter.

It's never-ending, a constant noise inside my head.

It won't hurt so much if you stop fighting...

This will be our little secret...

You call yourself a man...?

Stop crying...

“Move the fuck out of her way, William. You want to talk to me, and that's fine. We'll talk. But I suggest you let her walk out that door untouched.”

The fat bastard slides into the house, giving Blue just enough space to squeeze by.

Still hesitant to leave, Blue looks to me in question.

“Get out!” I yell.

I'm being a bastard to her.

I know that.

Especially after what we just did.

But I can't control the storm that's brewing.

The rage.

The *hatred*.

I can't see past the red haze of destruction I know is coming.

And she can't be here for that.

She can't be part of it.

As usual, she somehow knows how to handle me, how to stand in the middle of that storm unwavering. It doesn't trip her up or make her cry. She just rounds her shoulders, clutches my keys in her hands then moves to walk out the door.

It's taking everything inside me to remain still.

To keep from rushing forward.

I want to rip this man apart and destroy his voice inside my head.

But I stand still, barely moving a muscle, waiting for Blue to leave.

Just as she steps past William, she turns to glare at him, her lips a tight line.

Voice low, she says, “You should know I’ve dealt with men like you before. But they were much younger and a hell of a lot nicer to look at. All I see in you is shriveled balls and a dick that won’t work without the help of a little blue pill. Sorry, jackass, but a ride wouldn’t be worth it.”

William’s expression morphs into the face I remember, a sadistic grin with amber eyes full of anger.

You’ll never amount to anything, boys...

I’m just getting a return on my investment...

Be a MAN...

He reaches out to grab Blue, but I’m on top of him before he can touch her. I don’t remember moving. I’m not sure when my hand wrapped around his throat. I barely remember the hard thump of his back crashing against the wall.

But I do remember Blue’s expression when I turn my head and shout, “I said get the fuck out!”

Pain.

Distrust.

A look that tells me I’m just like all the other men.

A spark of understanding that the bastard I have pinned to a wall is the reason for my scars.

She hesitates again. A bare second. But then she rushes out of the door, slamming it closed behind her.

His voice is strained as he continues to taunt me.

“Looks like it’s just me and you now, kid. It’s too bad you don’t like sharing your toys. Isn’t that what I taught you and

Ezra when you were younger? To share? Isn't that what we all taught you?"

As I lock eyes with him, my hand clenches tighter.

This close to him, the putrid scent of alcohol is even stronger. The bastard is so drunk that this would never be a fair fight.

But who the fuck cares about the circumstances?

This will be our little secret...

It got your brother to fight...

Ezra always refused. Always took whatever beating they gave him because he would never give them what they wanted.

Not at first, at least.

Not until they dragged me into the dark.

Into the smaller room.

He gave in then.

They left him with no choice.

With one arm, I throw William across the foyer, his back and head hitting the stone floor, his body sliding from the force.

I'm on top of him. This moment coming to me like the nightmares.

Images without continuity.

Sounds that are as soft and fleeting as echoes.

Laughter.

I'm straddling his body, my hand over his throat again, my fingers crushing down, and still, he tries to laugh.

Lifting his body up by his throat, I slam him down. The back of his head bounces on the stone, a grunt barely escaping his mouth. Four, maybe five times, I do it again until I see a

small line of blood follow the grout in the tile, my eyes locked on the crimson color.

It's just a little blood...

My hands are covered in it.

Stop crying...

William's eyes are glazed, and I hate that they're the same color as mine. I punch him once, twice, over and fucking over until his cheekbones are cracking, his orbital bones collapsing in.

It's not enough.

I want this face out of my head.

It's been following me for as long as I can remember.

My fist collides against him, blood bursting from his nose, his skull cracking beneath the skin. I don't want to see this face ever again.

His body slumps beneath me, yet I keep going. Unable to stop until the face is unrecognizable.

Standing up, I hold my hand up to see the blood all over it, dripping.

So much blood...

Be a man...

My boot slams into his fat stomach, but his body doesn't curl over to protect itself like mine did. He's dead weight. Unmoving. Blood now sprayed across my floors, running in tiny rivulets until pooling.

So much blood...

My brother's and mine...

But who would know the difference?

We share identical DNA.

Blood spurts from what's left of his mouth as I keep kicking. I stomp on his neck. On his head. On his arms to hear

the bones break. On his fingers to destroy the hands that held me still.

He's dead, but I can't stop fighting.

He's dead.

He can't hurt me again.

Looking down at my clothes, I see the wet stain of the blood that splattered. I look at my knuckles to see how the skin split.

It's just new scars added to the old.

Nothing to worry about.

But these scars feel so much different.

Reality sets in.

I stare down at the body of William Cross and finally understand what I did.

...

“Fuck, man! When people tell you to call them because you need to move a body, they don't *actually* mean to call them when you need to move a damn body. It's a fucking joke.”

“Just shut up, and help me figure this out,” I snap, the chaos of fear and anxiety rolling through me.

Priest and I stand in the foyer, careful not to step in the blood. While I'm staring down at the body of my father, Priest eyes me like I'm a madman.

Huffing out a breath, he rubs at his jaw.

“Okay. We need to cover this shit up,” he says.

My head spins his direction. “No shit. Why do you think I called you?”

“I don’t know!” he bellows. “To implicate me in a fucking crime? Thanks for that, by the way. I had nothing better to do tonight than be an accessory to fucking murder.”

“Seriously, Priest. Shut the hell up.”

Silence passes, both of us staring down at William’s body.

“This is your father?” he asks.

Without waiting for my response, he quips, “I would say you look just like him, but he doesn’t have a face, Damon! For fuck’s sake, how long did you beat the man?”

I don’t remember.

The memory is hidden away.

It’s now entangled with all the others, locked in that space in my head where I try to forget.

Priest releases a long sigh, scrubs a hand over his face and then rolls his shoulders.

“Okay. We got a body, and we got a car, both of which shouldn’t be found at your place.”

“The guys can’t know about this,” I remind him. “Especially Shane and Ezra.”

“Oh? You mean the only two people in your group I actually talk to? Those guys? Thanks for that, fucker. I hate keeping secrets.”

Pulling my stare from the body, I meet eyes with Priest.

“I’m not playing with you on this. They can’t know.”

His expression tightens.

“Yeah. I got you. But you owe me big time for this.”

It reminds me.

I owe somebody.

I owe Blue.

I don’t want her to be part of this life.

But there's nothing else I can do.

I should never have brought her here.

"I'm going to need another favor from you tomorrow."

He glares over at me. "Oh, because this one isn't fucked-up enough? What do you need tomorrow? For me to rob a bank or something? Are we on a crime spree?"

If I wasn't staring at my father's dead body, I'd laugh.

"I need you to pick up my truck from someone. A woman named Blue. You have to call her that. She'll understand. And when you get my truck, I need you to give her ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand?" He cusses under his breath. "What is she doing? Holding the truck hostage?"

I shake my head.

"Just do it for me. She works at Myth. You'll find her there. She has blue hair and dances on the second floor."

"Why the fuck can't you do it?"

I close my eyes, hold them shut for a few seconds to block out everything, then open them.

"Because I have a feeling the guys won't let me out of their sight tomorrow. And they can't know about her either."

Turning to face me fully, Priest plants his feet at shoulder width.

"Are you living a double life or something? Do we need to have a little talk about this?"

I'm staring at the body and can't pull my eyes away to look at him.

"Just tell me you'll do it."

"Fine. Yeah, I'll handle it. But first, let's deal with this shitshow."

More silence falls between us.

Priest shakes his head.

“Man, he’s so fucked-up, it’s going to be hard to stage something. Are we sure he won’t fall apart when we move him? What do we do with all the extra ... bits ... that flung off?”

“You’re the best when it comes to destroying cars. That’s why I called you.”

Pausing, I think back. “He was drunk as fuck when he got here. His blood alcohol level must be through the roof.”

“Then we’ll need to get this shit done before all that *blood alcohol* leaks out of him onto your floor.”

I nod my head, barely retaining my desperate grasp on reality. This all feels like a dream I can’t escape.

“Damon, man. Are you okay?”

I brush off his concern. “I’m fine. We just need to get this done. If Ezra comes home—“

“I got you. I brought the tow truck with me, so I can get his car to another place, stage it then shove him inside with the hope they’ll think the meat pile you left of him happened because of the crash.”

We wrap the body in a plastic tarp from my garage. I help Priest carry it out, tucking it into William’s car before Priest tows both away.

I run back inside, barely shutting the front door.

All that’s left is the blood.

Stop crying...

Be a man...

It’ll make Ezra fight...

So much blood.

It’s on my hands and pooling on the floor.

They made us fight each other.

I snap back to the present then run into the kitchen to grab bleach and rags. I need to clean this up before Ezra gets home. I need to wash my hands. I need to—

“Damon!”

I stop in place.

“Damon, you better answer me right now!”

Ezra appears in the doorway to the kitchen, his stare dropping from my face to my hands. As I hold them under the water that turns pink, I look over at him with a frantic stare.

He storms over to me. “What happened?”

I can’t.

I won’t

Ezra doesn’t need to know what I’ve done.

“Grab the bleach and help me clean up the blood throughout the house.”

It dripped from my hands when I was done, a trail of it leading into the kitchen so I could grab my phone to call Priest.

“What the hell happened?” Ezra roars.

“Just grab the bleach...”

He can’t find out.

I won’t let him know.

All I can do is lie to him.



Amélie

Never let men tell you they're not the same.

I don't care if they're white-collar, blue-collar, young, old, rich, poor, sophisticated or crude. If they have a dick, they're the same; it just takes the right moment to bring it out of them.

A man's brain works differently than a female's. Sure, many women know that already—it's a fact as old as time. But scientists with all their new technology have finally proven it to be true.

I read an article on it for some class I had. An intro into biology or psychology—one of the ologies. Whatever class it was doesn't really matter, but that article stuck with me because I've experienced what they were attempting to prove.

It's kind of like the difference between a complicated interchange of roads and highways versus a simple country road, where women are the interchange and men the lonely road that leads in a single direction.

I've heard men even have a *nothing box* where they can escape to and literally think about ... nothing.

Kane told me about it.

How in the hell is that possible?

My brain could never.

Thinking of nothing?

It's hard to imagine what that would be like.

My mind races at a thousand miles an hour all the time. Different thoughts and emotions all scattered about, bouncing off each other until I'm ultimately a victim to the cacophony

of thoughts, while men supposedly think in more linear ways, one simple thought at a time.

I wish I had a nothing box like them or the ability to think about one thing at a time, but my mind won't ever shut up. Not on its own, at least.

That's why I find an escape in music.

In sound.

In a beat that changes in tempo but always strikes me deeply on the inside.

Letting the music take over, I don't have to think about where I'll get my next meal or if I'll have a place to sleep at night. The music stops the racing thoughts ... It brings me peace for the hours I become lost in sound and dancing.

But what I experienced last night...

All the different parts that tumbled together in less than a few hours...

My mind has never raced faster than when driving home from Damon's house.

The entire way, I gripped my hands over the steering wheel, Damon's scent filling the truck as worry overtook me.

Should I have gone back?

Should I have left at all?

Should I have listened to him when he told me to leave?

Was there something I could have done to help him?

Or would my presence there have made things worse?

Those thoughts were running through my head with all the rest, colliding and bouncing as I arrived home, climbed into bed and stayed awake for most of the night, the thoughts preventing sleep.

After spending the day in bed, I regretted the choice I made. Not because I thought I could be there for Damon, or that he'd even have let me. But because of the puzzle he

becomes every time we talk—the hidden scars he keeps locked away.

I have a feeling the man at his door was the key to those scars.

It takes effort to get dressed for work like nothing happened, and I drive to Myth wishing I would have stuck around to demand answers.

Not from Damon.

He doesn't work that way.

But from the man I know scarred him.

I wished I would have had more time to ask Damon why he was screaming at me the way he was.

At his worst, he's never spoken to me that way.

But that's what makes him a man just like all the rest. His mind went linear, one objective, one thought ... without concern for how it affected me.

I'm a selfish bitch for even thinking like that.

I know it.

My feelings should have been the last thing he needed to worry about.

Not when faced with a monster.

I remember that man from the governor's party. He stood with a group of other old men, all of their sick stares pinned on me like I was the night's entertainment.

A chill ran down my spine at the sight of them, and I hurried away to go someplace they couldn't see me.

They were the type of men my mother always warned me about.

Seeing Damon's reaction to the one who showed up at his house didn't surprise me. I was right about just what type of man he is.

The worst kind.

His linear thinking aimed directly at all the ways he can hurt people.

All those thoughts return as I drive into work, my hands tight over the steering wheel again. Every question, every worry, but within them there is a spark of hope:

I may see him again.

Tonight.

At Myth, where he always comes to find me.

Those thoughts—and that hope—are running through my head with all the rest, colliding and bouncing, until I arrive at work and let the music steal me away.

Once in my cage and the beat takes over, I don't think about why Damon would strip me naked on his counter, make me feel *something* for once, then tell me to get the fuck out of his house when he's done.

Hell, within the music, I don't have to wonder if he was lying about the deal or if he'll ever show up to get his truck.

But it's only momentary tonight, the thoughts rushing back, bouncing off each other until colliding with darker ones I don't want to acknowledge.

Whoever that man was at Damon's door must be a part of the nightmares that haunt him. I recognized Damon's anger as soon as it erupted and knew I didn't want to hang around after Damon pinned that man to a wall to witness what happened.

Call me a coward, or call me smart, but when a storm brews that intensely, nothing good will come from it.

I barely know Damon.

And I didn't want to be there as much as Damon didn't want me there.

The music soothes me. That freedom I find within it. But the freedom is only fleeting until the thoughts return, and I

open my eyes to scan the second floor hoping to lock my stare with familiar amber eyes.

Hours go by, the night getting late until it's one in the morning. Last call is an hour away.

He's not coming...

Something bad happened...

He was lying about the deal...

He's just like every other man, got what he wanted then tossed me away.

The damn thoughts are back. Circular. Repeating. A hundred different roads traveling in a hundred different directions, all running through my mind at the same time.

Forcing my eyes closed, I'm not sure how much time passes, but my heart kicks up a beat, my eyes flying open and to the door of my cage when I feel the vibration of heavy footfalls up the stairs.

Is everything okay?

Disappointment douses me when it's not Damon I see.

The man staring back at me rubs at his beard and opens the door.

Giving him a quick look over, I note the plain white T-shirt, a crap ton of tattoos, grease-stained jeans with a chain hanging between his belt and back pocket, and the heavy work boots he wears.

He motions for me to step closer with two fingers. I assume he's a customer, thinking he's in for a good time.

"I don't go in the back rooms," I tell him, raising my voice to be heard over the music. "You'll have to go ask one of the other dancers."

He cocks a brow, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a charming smirk.

"You Blue?"

My feet stop in place, the music forgotten.

“Who’s asking?”

“A friend of Damon’s,” he says.

I rush out of the cage without thinking and follow him down the stairs, ignoring Granger’s dark stare as we pass.

Taking the lead, I direct the guy to one of the back rooms, my heart beating in my throat with both hope and fear.

Maybe he’s just here to get the truck...

Maybe Damon’s in jail for attacking the man at his house...

Maybe it’s much, much worse...

Those thoughts crush in and collide with the rest.

As soon as I shut the door, I start questioning him, unable to stand another second passing without knowing.

“Is Damon okay?”

“What happened after I left?”

“Are you here for the truck?”

“Who are you? And is Damon okay?”

Yes. I repeated the same question.

The most important of the bunch.

The man reaches back then runs his fingers over his head and down the length of his hair.

“Ah, yeah. Uh, I’m Priest. Damon’s fine. I’m just here to pick up his truck—”

My heart falls to my feet.

I fucking knew it.

“And to give you some cash for a deal you have with him.”

My heart climbs back to my chest so fast it can’t be healthy. I feel dizzy with relief, a surge of different hormones

and chemicals dumping into my veins that make my legs wobble so much I sit down on the stage in the room.

“But he’s okay? Damon’s okay?”

Priest shifts his posture, his biceps bunching as he crosses his arms over his chest and leans against a wall facing me. His chain thumps a few times against the wall from his movement, the sound becoming softer each time.

“Damon’s ... uh ... well,” he rubs at his jaw again. “He’s fine. He’s spending time with his brother and friends. That’s all I can say.”

He’s okay.

He’s not dead.

Nothing bad must have happened.

My brows pull together. “Then why didn’t he come for his truck?”

“Yeah, that’s a long story, and I don’t really like telling long stories, so all I can say is he sent me for his truck and to give you the cash.”

Still, the questions won’t stop. I have to ask them.

“What happened last night? Was that his father? Did they work it out?”

Priest’s eyes round and then go back to normal so fast you would have missed the reaction if you blinked.

“Last night? No clue. I was at the shop all night. I worked on a new Ford that was brought in until around midnight or so and then headed home to tuck into bed. That’s all I know about last night.”

Annoyance overtakes me. He knows something.

“So, when will I see Damon again?”

A shrug of his shoulder. “Unfortunately, that information is above my pay grade. I’m just here to—”

“Grab his truck and give me the money. You’ve already told me.”

He nods. “Yep. So, I need his keys, and I’ll give you what he owes you, and then I’m getting the hell out of here.”

I sigh and bury my face in my hands. Although knowing Damon is fine is somewhat helpful, it doesn’t answer all the other questions battering my mind.

Lifting my head, I stand from the stage.

“His keys are in my bag in the dressing room. Follow me there, then we can make the exchange.”

My shoulders slump as I lead him out of the back room, my stomach rolling with dread, but it’s my head that hurts the worst.

The damn questions.

You would think the money Priest is about to hand me would relieve some of the stress, but I realize something as we make our way to the dressing room.

I don’t really care about the money.

I just want to see Damon.

Whatever the fuck that means. Maybe I’m doing what I always told myself I wouldn’t do. I’m letting someone close. And the worst part is I’m doing it despite all the red flags flapping in the chaotic winds around him, every one of them a warning that Damon is the last thing I need.

We enter the dressing room, and I don’t bother to look at Priest as I yank my bag from my cubby and pull out Damon’s keys.

Turning to Priest, I place the keys in his hand. He slips them in his front pocket then reaches to pull a wad of cash from his back pocket.

“The full ten grand,” he says, shaking his head. “Not sure what you did to deserve this, but—”

“I made a deal with him. That’s all.”

Priest seems like a decent guy. I don’t get the creeps from him at all. But I’ll be damned to let him think I got that money because of sex. I’m weird about that, I guess. None of this is his business, but I still don’t want him thinking that about me.

Then again, maybe I should be more worried about the smile that stretches his lips.

“What? Why are you smiling like that?”

He shakes his head. “You made a deal with an Inferno member?”

“Who’s the Inferno?”

Confusion topples in to mix with all the other questions racing through my head.

“Nobody,” he says, brushing that topic off quickly. “Just remember if Damon asks for a favor, you need to do what he asks.”

Dread creeps in to dance with the confusion.

“Why?”

His eyes meet mine and his voice is soft, yet serious. “You don’t want to find out the consequences of refusing is all I’m saying. Just a warning.”

He turns to leave, so I talk to his back. “What are the consequences?”

I hate that damn word.

It’s haunted me my entire life.

Lifting a hand without bothering to turn back, he answers, “Nope. That’s not my department, so that’s all I’m going to say. Nice to meet you, Blue.”

Walking through the door, he rounds the corner to leave the hall. I remain standing in place, holding way more cash than I’ve seen in my life with my jaw still hanging open from all the questions I didn’t have time to ask.

I shake it off and stuff the cash in my bag just to feel my phone vibrate.

Pulling it out, I see a text from my brother.

Call me when you get out of work. URGENT.

For fuck's sake.

Why does it feel like every time I win one small battle, a larger one pops up to take its place?

...

“Mom was missing for a few months. It wasn't easy to find this because it was around twenty-five years ago. But I sent a buddy of mine to the library back in the town where she grew up. The article was in the newspaper there, scanned to microfiche.”

The phone goes quiet for a second. I have nothing to say at first.

“Did you hear me, Ames? I found something.”

Falling back against my pillows, I'm not as excited as Kane.

“Mom has a history of disappearing. Maybe that's when it started. We don't know because we don't have family who knew her before us.”

Kane and I never had a chance to meet our grandparents, and by the time Kane started looking for them in his late teens, they were already dead.

We questioned Mom about her parents and other family, but she would never answer us. She just got upset to the point where we dropped the subject quickly.

Then again, that was nothing compared to when we asked questions about our dad. Mom flipped her shit then and would only tell us that we have the same father, but he took off. She refused to give us so much as a name.

We both took those mail order DNA tests, hoping to find someone in our family, but the results came back to show we share the same parents, but that's it. No hints were given about our family.

“We don't know when her mental issues started, Kane. Maybe she started running then, and just never stopped. Is there anything about when she resurfaced again?”

“No,” he sighs into the phone. “Just that, but I'm going to keep digging.”

I sigh along with him. “So this is the urgent info? Don't scare me like that. I thought something bad happened.”

Kane is quiet for far too long, his mind finding a linear path like all men.

“You sound tired. Bad night at work? How's school going? Why haven't you called Mom?”

Always with the same questions.

His linear path focused directly on me.

“I've just been working a lot and studying for upcoming tests.”

“You need sleep,” he suggests. “I can send you some extra money so you don't have to work so much.”

“No. Save that money for taking care of Mom. You two need it more than me.”

“Okay,” he answers, drawing out the word. “That still doesn't answer why you haven't called Mom. It takes ten minutes, Ames. She just wants to hear your voice.”

Except the thing is, her voice is very much like mine. Not just that, but mom and I look alike. Many of our preferences are the same. And many of our habits are the same.

It worries me that our minds are the same, and one day, I'll be running from some dreamed-up threat, never staying in one place long enough to consider it home.

How do I know I don't have the same mental illness as her? I've researched that a few times. Schizophrenia can be genetic.

Talking to Mom comes with a resurgence of my fear that, one day, I'll be just like her.

"I'll call when I'm less busy."

His voice is disbelieving. "When do you think that will happen?"

Glancing at the cash I pulled out of my bag and dropped on my bed, I consider all the different tethers tugging at my life.

"I don't know. In a few weeks?"

"I'm holding you to that. If you don't call her soon, I'll drive her down to see you. You know how she gets."

Yeah, I think.

I know exactly how she gets, which is exactly why I'm avoiding her.

"Get some sleep, Ames. I'll talk to you soon. Love you."

"Love you, too," I say before ending the call.

When silence hits, I close my eyes only for all the questions to come rushing back.

But one sticks out the most among them all.

One question.

One warning Priest gave me before he left.

If Damon shows up and asks me for a favor I refuse to do, what the hell are the consequences?



Damon

“Shane is a fuck up.”

Snorting at the way Tanner chooses to begin yet another family meeting, I lounge back next to Shane, happy that someone else is suddenly in the hot seat.

Not that I want that for Shane, but since my dad died, all the guys have been treating me like a headcase.

I swear, the guys have a schedule for watching over me, a new one showing up just before the last leaves. Tanner and Gabe especially have been extremely careful with me.

I haven't been able to leave without one of them demanding to tag along. Which means I haven't had a chance to go to Myth to explain to Blue about that night.

The guys are preventing me from doing anything. From escaping.

But when it comes to who's the absolute worst as a babysitter, that falls on Ezra.

For the past week, when it's his turn to babysit, he interrogates me about what happened with Dad.

I keep giving him the same story; William showed up at the house, we had an argument, I beat his ass, then Dad limped away to leave the house. I know nothing about what occurred after that. What I did mention is that William was three sheets to the wind, the scent of alcohol all over him.

That's probably what caused the crash, I said.

And I've stuck to that story since.

I made it through the funeral without blinking an eye, knowing good and goddamned well what was being dropped in that hole. A man whose face was crushed to being unidentifiable and a burned carcass that resulted from the crash.

Watching that coffin being lowered, I didn't feel a drop of guilt for it.

I felt free.

Still, everyone thinks I'm acting differently, and maybe I am.

The voices have stopped.

The laughter.

The fucking nightmares that would wake me up at night.

Well, okay, I can't say they've stopped completely, but it's rare they resurface now.

A storm's not always following me, not like before. It was worth everything I did to that prick to finally make the memories stop.

My phone hasn't rang once since with that bastard's name across the screen.

If anything, I've felt more at peace than ever before, but the guys still treat me like I'm insane.

It sucks having to be careful about everything I say and do. It's only a matter of time before Tanner and Gabe decide on tossing me in a padded room with a pretty, little, white jacket.

But now, with Shane's apparent fuck-up, the spotlight is no longer on me. I'm just so left out of the loop at this point that I have no idea what Shane's fuck-up could be.

Shane tenses beside me. "This shit isn't my fault. Stop dropping everything on me."

I'm barely paying attention.

Maybe I'll finally be able to dip out to go see Blue tonight...

Tanner's eyes are pinned squarely on Shane. I prefer them there. Means they're not on me.

"Were you or were you not responsible for cornering Brinley and getting the information on her father?"

My brows tug together because that name sounds so familiar. Where have I heard it before?

The group launches into a lengthy discussion about a bunch of people I couldn't give two shits about, and of course Jase is still crying about his hard-on for Everly, but one name keeps tapping at my noggin.

Brinley.

I know I've heard it.

I scratch my head.

Why do I know that name?

And then it comes to me.

He also thinks I'll have to walk back and forth to work all the time because he's not giving me rides anymore, my friend Brinley takes care of that...

Blue.

She mentioned that name when we were arguing about Granger.

It has to be the same person. How many women can be running around this town with that name?

By the time I turn my attention back to the conversation at hand, Jase fires off some bullshit which has Shane lunging for him.

Both Ezra and I jump from our spots in the room to grab Shane, while Mason and Sawyer grab Jase. Meanwhile, Gabriel and Tanner are losing their shit as we drag the idiots away from each other.

Tanner storms in our direction to get in Shane's face.

"And you, calm the fuck down, and stop fighting with your brothers. How is Brinley worth that?"

Shane glares at Tanner, his shoulders rounded for another fight. Ezra and I clamp down our hold on him a little tighter. He keeps trying to tug away like he may lunge at Tanner.

Maybe I should start paying more attention at these meetings.

Some of this shit is entertaining.

"Oh, you're one to talk," Shane quips. "I seem to remember a night at Yale when you were chasing Luca—"

"Shut your fucking mouth." Tanner's face is a deep crimson.

But Shane won't back down. He's never been the type.

"If anybody is going after Brinley, it'll be me. I won't budge on that."

I glance at Shane, surprised like hell to hear him so adamant about any of the tasks Tanner assigns us.

Studying him, I wonder if he's simply pissed because he couldn't finish the job, or...

No way.

There's no fucking way.

The way Shane is acting, it leads me to think he's actually *interested* in a woman for once.

Having made the connection between Blue and Brinley, I wonder if I can somehow assist Shane in getting his girl.

I nudge him with my shoulder.

"If you need help, I'm here for you," I whisper.

It's possible if I ask Blue to introduce me to Brinley, I can smooth things over so Brinley will listen to whatever Shane wants.

The man has never been interested in a woman beyond his one-night stands. We've been ragging on him for years about it. But just the mention of this Brinley chick sets him on edge.

I know that behavior.

I've seen it in Tanner and Gabe when it came to Luca and Ivy.

I've seen it in Ezra when it came to Emily.

I once felt it myself when it came to her.

Shane shakes his head. "This is between Brinley and me. She's mine to find and mine to deal with when I find her."

Yep.

He wants her.

I almost laugh to see Shane growing the hell up.

It takes effort not to pat him on the head. But in the mood he's in, he may attack me next.

Tanner and Shane work out their issue and the family meeting adjourns, leaving Ezra, Shane and me in the room once the group clears out.

Emily is one of the last to leave, and I hate the worried look she shoots Ezra. I know it has nothing to do with Shane and everything to do with me.

I'm surprised she hasn't attempted to talk to me one-on-one since William's death. It used to be her job. She used to be the only person who could calm my mind down after those weekends.

Not anymore, I guess.

She's Ezra's girlfriend and just my *friend*.

Which means she won't be around that much when I need her.

"You good?" Ezra asks Shane, his energy cool and tempered.

“Yeah,” Shane answers then pauses, “Yeah, I’m fine. I just need to figure this out.”

My brother is attempting to restrain his laughter. Being witness to this newly discovered side to Shane, I’m not doing much better myself. It’s funny as shit to see a man who’s always sworn off relationships become so flustered over a woman.

Ezra grins. “You sure? Because you looked like you were about to take Jase’s head off his shoulders over the idea of him laying a finger on Brinley.”

“And ain’t that some shit,” I pipe up, unable to help it. “I’ve never seen you act possessive over a chick before.”

Shane locks his stare on me. “I’m not being possessive.”

“If you say so,” Ezra answers.

We argue back-and-forth, Shane’s cheeks growing a funny red color at our accusations.

Deciding to give him a break, I offer, “If you need any help, I’m here for you. Got me?”

He shakes his head to decline the offer but then stills in place, turns and catches my gaze. “Actually, I think you can help, and here’s why...”

My brow cocks in interest. How can any idea of his be better than mine?

“I happen to know you’re messing around with a friend of Brinley’s. And I also know you have a deal going with her.”

It’s my turn to still in place, my body rigid.

Ezra’s cold stare bounces between Shane and me.

“Priest told you.”

It’s the only way he could know.

I’ve been too careful keeping Blue away from my life.

Shane nods. “Yeah, and isn’t that all sorts of interesting?”

Ezra's stare locks on me hard. "Got something you need to share with us?"

I'll fucking kill Priest for talking.

Ignoring Ezra, I keep my attention on Shane. "What else did Priest tell you?"

"There's more?" Shane asks, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise as he takes a few steps back from me. "What else haven't you been telling us, because handing ten grand to a fucking stripper sounds like something the rest of us would like to know."

"Ten grand?" Ezra's voice booms through the room.

"She's not a stripper, number fucking one. And what's ten grand to us? You'd blow that on a part for your precious car."

Ezra moves around Shane and gets in my face, his eyes matching mine.

"What other secrets are you keeping? Now would be a good time to tell us."

Shoving him away, I round my shoulders when he steps back my direction.

Shane gets in the middle of us.

"You both can stop. I'm not trying to cause a fight by bringing this up. The only reason Priest told me is because he's concerned you're making deals for that kind of money. What's the reason for wanting her under control?"

"That's for me to know," I say, wanting the topic off me and back where it should be. "But I think she's friends with the chick, Brinley, you're after. She mentioned someone by that name who gives her rides back-and-forth to work."

Shane runs a hand through his hair and nods.

"It makes sense. That's where I met up with Brinley originally and sabotaged her car. It's still sitting at Priest's shop, so I guess those rides to work stopped."

I shrug. “Great, so I’ll just ask Blue to introduce me to Brinley. We’ll work this out and get her to talk to you. Problem solved.”

“Blue,” Ezra says under his breath. “You call her Blue?”

I know what he’s getting at, and I won’t let him go there. This is nothing like Emily. “It’s her hair color. Get over it. I’m not really interested in her name.”

Except I know her name.

She told me the first night we talked.

“That won’t work,” Shane answers. “Were you even listening to the meeting? The governor has Brinley convinced that I’m out to hurt her. She’ll never agree to talking to anybody in the group. I’m sure he mentioned all of us. Probably drew her a flow chart or some shit.”

Not the thinker of the group, I grow quiet and wait for someone to make a better suggestion.

That was my mistake because the idea Ezra and Shane come up with is something I don’t want to do.

By the time they’re done working out the details, Shane glances up at me.

“Go up to Myth tonight. Tell Blue to have Brinley in the right place at the right time. If she needs a car, we’ll loan her one. I’ll take the rest of it from there.”

Pissed at what they’re asking me to do, I turn to leave the room.

“And hey,” my brother calls out at my back, “if she doesn’t go along with the favor, she’s just like everyone else.”

My head drops and my teeth slam together.

“The gauntlet stands,” Shane says. “Just want to remind you of that.”

...

It's been a week and some change since I've seen Blue. Time enough for her to wonder where the hell I've been since making the mistake of taking her to my house, having some fun with her then yelling at her to get the fuck out.

Not that I was using her and tossing her away. The circumstances were more complicated than that.

But she doesn't know that.

For all I know, she probably thinks I've been blowing her off—got what I wanted then couldn't bother with even driving her home.

She'll ask about William, which is another problem to figure out. I can't answer those questions, and knowing Blue, she'll somehow see the truth. She's good at reading people, and I haven't figured out how to hide the parts I don't want her to see.

It's why I'm dragging ass up to Myth tonight, my hands fisting and releasing beside me, but not from anger.

From nerves.

“Pleasure to see you back, my friend. It's been a while.”

“How's the new car? Did you get the color you wanted?”

Patrick lets out a booming laugh. “You're damn right I did, and with all the fancy features. What're you planning on buying me next? A yacht?”

I pull out my wallet. “How much tonight?”

“Two hundred,” he says with a sly grin.

My brows rise at that. “Seriously? I haven't proven myself yet?”

His big brown eyes look me over.

“Listen, you did Ames a solid, so I'm giving you the friends and family price. But I also know Granger hates your guts, and you have a bad habit of punching people. So before

that happens and I have to break the shit up, I'd like to get something out of the deal."

It's better than two thousand, I guess.

I slide the money into his hand and let out a deep breath before opening the door.

The music hits differently tonight.

Instead of the escape I'd once felt, it feels like I'm being walked to my execution.

It shouldn't matter this much.

She's just another woman.

But for some reason, the thought of forcing Blue to do something she most likely won't want to do is rubbing me the wrong way.

She has trust issues already.

Most likely because of men who took what they wanted and treated her like shit.

Now I'm becoming one of them.

I walk through the first floor, my nerves on edge, my shoulders tense. The crowd practically parts for me, as usual.

Hesitating at the stairs to the second floor, I roll my neck and look up. Thirteen steps between Blue and me, and I don't want to climb even one of them.

I should never have brought her to my house...

Now she's wrapped up in my life whether I like it or not. Just another chess piece on the Inferno's fucked-up board. My escape has been ripped from me and infected by the bullshit, which means beyond this favor I'll ask tonight, I'll no longer have a use for her.

I may as well consider Blue gone because now she's a problem to be solved just like everything else—another person to be manipulated.

It was never my intention. But she won't see it that way. The only hope I have is that I'll luck out, Blue won't like Brinley that much and she won't put up a fight over what we're asking.

Another deep breath then I stomp up the stairs, my eyes meeting a violet gaze instantly.

She doesn't wait a second before opening her cage door to run down the stairs.

Blue passes Granger without bothering to look his direction. Her eyes are for me only, and what I see in them breaks my heart.

Excitement.

Hope.

Relief.

All of Blue's emotions are crushing down on me like ten-ton weights.

Her black angel wings bounce behind her as she runs to me, takes me by the hand, and pulls me toward the back rooms.

Picking the only door that's open, she walks in ahead of me then waits for me to close it.

"Where have you been, Champ? I was starting to get the feeling that I'll never see you again."

Hoping to avoid answering those questions, I run a curious eye around the room.

"Interesting choice tonight."

Blue follows the direction of my stare then snorts.

"Unintentional, I assure you."

There's a St. Andrews cross on one wall and a padded, pleather bench in the center of the room. A plethora of toys hang from a rack, but it's all cutesy shit. Nothing that would leave too bad a mark.

Easing my way over to it, I pluck a crop off the wall.

“I’m not against using this, but you don’t strike me as the type who likes spankings.”

“Then you haven’t been paying attention,” she answers, my brow arching as I turn to her. “And it was the only room left.”

Blue’s arms are crossed over her chest. It makes her cleavage push out of the corset top she wears, and I suddenly regret getting Priest involved.

I’ll tear him a new one as soon as I see him again.

But in for a penny, in for a pound. If I’m losing Blue tonight, I might as well make the most of it.

“Take off your top.”

She shakes her head. “Not until you answer my questions.”

Tilting my head, I half-tease, “What if I don’t want to answer your questions?”

“Then you aren’t seeing my tits or ass.”

Well, damn.

I didn’t think both would be involved, but if she puts it like that.

“Do I get to touch as well?”

Blue smirks. “Depends on your answers.”

My fingers tighten on the crop.

Swallowing down the intense need this woman drags out of me, I tap the end of the crop against my leg. “What were your questions again?”

“Where have you been?”

Crossing the room to step up to her, I place the crop on the bench then tug at her corset. “Start unbuttoning and I’ll talk.”

Her lips twist into an adorable pout, but her fingers get to work.

“My friends have been playing prison guard keeping me in sight. Not sure why. But I was released on my own recognizance tonight, so I rushed over to see you.”

Yes, I’m a liar.

No, I don’t feel bad for it.

Fuck off if you have a problem with what I’m doing or why.

Nobody can possibly understand what this woman does to me.

I don’t understand what this woman does to me.

But I’m like a moth to a flame. Too bad for Blue, she’s the one who’ll end up getting burned.

Her corset hits the floor, then I grab her ass with one hand, lift her up so she can wrap those long, strong legs around my waist, press her against a wall to hold her weight, then lean down to suck a nipple into my mouth, resisting the urge to bite down.

Her fingers stab into my hair, and my dick comes to life. I hope she likes it hard and fast because that’s about all the time I’ll have before telling her the reason I’m here.

Blue wraps her arms around my neck as I place one hand on the wall to balance us and use the other to palm her other tit, the weight of it made for my hands. Blue’s breasts are high and tight, homegrown and not surgically enhanced. They drive me crazy every time I see just a hint of them.

“I have other questions,” she says, already struggling to pull in a full breath.

Lifting my head, I plant a kiss on her jaw before nipping at the skin with my teeth. “That’ll cost you.”

I grind my body between her legs, and she lets out a small squeak.

“I have more questions than clothes. That may be a problem.”

“Not if you include favors in the deal.”

I’m a jackass and I already have a first-class ticket straight to hell. What’s one more sin on top of the others?

“What kind of favors?” she asks, a moan rolling over her lips when I squeeze her breast.

The kind you probably won’t like.

But I keep that to myself like a bastard.

“It’s just sex, right? Just two people having fun.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep better at night, Blue. But I can leave if you’re having doubts.”

Her fingernails clamp into the back of my neck, and I growl at the feeling. Fuck, this woman does things to me that aren’t natural. But judging by the way she clings on, I have the same effect.

“Why’d you tell me to get the fuck out of your house? Who was that man? Why did he make you so angry?”

“I’m always angry. And those questions will cost you three more pieces of clothing.”

Our eyes lock, a mischievous curve to the corner of my mouth doing nothing to dissuade her.

“Pity I only have two. Unless the wings count.”

My lips press to her ear. “Nah. Those stay on. I’ve always wanted to bounce a dark angel on my cock.”

“A favor then.”

Blue arches her eyebrow like she has any chance of winning this war.

I love the fierceness in her.

Always have.

But this time, it’s going to lead to trouble.



Amélie

“Take off the clothes, then I’ll answer the questions.”

My head tilts, those wild amber eyes staring down at me with pure lust.

“Kinda hard for a girl to remove her shorts when she has her legs straddling a man, don’t you think?”

He releases his hold just enough that I can lower my legs to the ground.

When I don’t immediately strip the rest of my clothes off, he arches a brow in expectation, mimicking my earlier expression.

What the hell am I doing?

I can’t help myself.

Not with him.

Not when I’ve been waiting so long to silence the questions inside my head.

What’s worse is that it’s not just the answers I want from him. It’s the way my heart pounded when I finally saw him appear on the second floor. Something in him pulling to something in me.

We’re like fucked-up magnets, our scars so thoroughly entangled that it draws us to each other, pinning us together until it’s impossible to pull us apart.

I want this man.

Not just the answers

I crave what I know he can do to me.

“Snap, snap,” he whispers. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

He places a finger beneath my chin and tilts my head up to his. “Doesn’t a certain angel need to run back to her cage?”

I’m a tall girl but Damon still towers over me at 6’5”. The size of his body makes me feel so small, his shoulders twice the width of mine.

His hands are rough on my skin, the knuckles scarred from old injuries, but with new, healing wounds as well. He squeezes tight on my breast, claiming it ... claiming me.

I want to see more of him.

I want to see all his scars.

I want to know the narrative of what made him this way.

“Am I the only one losing clothes in this?”

Soft laughter shakes his shoulders. “I’ll lose clothes when I have questions.”

Fair, but not what I was hoping to hear.

I slip my shorts and panties off then kick them away. His eyes slide down my body, a sound of pure masculine approval crawling up his throat.

He reaches down to touch me, but I grab his wrist.

“You have two questions to answer.”

Another low growl, this one in frustration.

“I told you to get out because I didn’t want you to witness a fight. I have a feeling you’ve seen enough in your life already.”

Surprise traces down my spine.

He’s reading me.

Just like I’m reading him.

“And the man was my father.”

I loosen the grasp I have on his wrist, and his hand slides down.

Damon's not taking this slow tonight. He pushes three fingers inside me, his thumb rubbing over my clit. My knees buckle from the rough pleasure that ripples through my core.

"Already wet." His eyes flash with amusement. "You've been wanting to see me again."

After the orgasm he gave me at his house? He's damn right I've wanted this again. It's just sex, though. I keep telling myself that. It can't be love, because if it was, his mouth would be devouring mine.

Slowly, he pumps his fingers inside me, and I moan, my legs weak as he holds me up with one strong arm wrapped around my body.

"Would an angel like to ride me?"

It a mere whisper against my ear, and I nod my head without thought. I'm already chasing a wave of disastrous heat that washes through my body.

"W-wouldn't that mean you'd have to l-lose your jeans?"

"Good question, Blue." His fingers pump faster, and another moan crawls up my throat.

Soft manly laughter against my ear.

He knows what he does to me.

"I have a question for you. Why is it so hard for you to trust?"

I don't want to answer this question, don't want the details of my life to spill out into a moment when I don't feel the pain.

Skating around the truth, I give him a short answer like the ones he's given me.

"My life hasn't been easy. Nobody has proven they give a damn about me."

Not nobody.

Brinley has.

But Damon doesn't need to know that.

Pulling his fingers free of my pussy, he licks the taste from them, his eyes trapping mine.

“You taste sweet. I meant to tell you that the last time, but you were somewhere else in your head.”

I want to go to that place again.

Sex with Damon is becoming a drug.

He pushes my mind to a place where only pleasure exists.

But I'm not an addict.

Never have been.

Not that I've ever tried drugs.

They only muddle the mind until you're captured in whatever lies they tell you.

Damon pops open the button of his jeans, lowers the zipper then tugs out his dick. My heart lurches at the size, an odd fear tapping at my skull.

What will it feel like inside me?

From what little skin he shows on his thighs, I see a single scar. Just the first half inch before it runs down the leg into his jeans.

I have more questions now.

What will they cost me?

Ride him.

I'm supposed to ride him.

But I want to know his story.

Dropping to my knees, I take his dick in my hands and slide the head into my mouth, swirling my tongue over it to

taste the salty pre-cum. I've always been a fan of salt. Most people have a sweet tooth, but not me.

Damon stills in place, and I can feel his hard stare on me. But I don't care. The palm of his hand wraps around the back of my head, and I force my jaw open wider, ignoring the pain in the joints to take his dick into my mouth fully.

“Fuck ... You weren't ... Goddamn it, Blue.”

His fingers grip down into my hair, and he helps me choose a rhythm. I swirl my tongue over the shaft as he directs me back-and-forth. My upper teeth scrape over the ridge of the head and Damon groans.

His cock grows stiffer—wider—somehow longer, and I struggle to breathe around it. Saliva slides over my lips and down my cheek, the sound of suction and slick pumping causing my body to respond. My excitement drips down my inner thigh while my core contracts and releases.

I need him inside me, but I can't stop taking him in my mouth and slipping my tongue over the head to play torturous games with the shaft.

Damon's grip in my hair becomes painful.

“Blue...” He can barely talk. “Stop. You need to ... Fuck woman, what are you doing to me?”

The same thing he did to me, hopefully.

His dick hits the back of my throat, and I fight not to sputter and choke. Pulling back, I push forward again, forcing my throat to vibrate around him. His fingers grip tighter, my scalp beginning to burn.

But I don't mind the pain.

Not when a growl erupts from his throat, the flat of my tongue sliding up the shaft, the tip of my tongue teasing.

“Fuck...”

He comes in my mouth, a hot, salty, liquid that I swallow down as my hands slide up the back of his thighs to hold him

place. I keep pumping my head, enjoying every aftershock that shakes his body.

When his body goes still and his cock softens, I sit back on my feet and look up at him while using the back of my hand to wipe away the saliva.

Damon stares down at me in shock, red coloring his cheeks from the orgasm.

“Woman...” he warns, shaking his head, his fingers releasing my hair. “That’s not what riding means.”

“You still liked it, though. So what’s the difference?”

I liked it, too. It was my first time doing that to a man, and I never imagined it would feel so good.

I like Damon’s taste.

It lingers on my tongue.

He reaches down, and I accept his hand for him to pull me to my feet. Using his body to crush mine against the wall, he shakes his head.

“That wasn’t our agreement.”

“I had a third question you didn’t answer. So we’ll call that a favor. Your terms, remember?”

He steps back from me and tucks his dick away then buttons and zips his jeans.

“I guess you’re paid up.” His voice sounds almost regretful and sad.

The energy in the room changes, an abrupt shift that sends chills down my spine as goose bumps erupt on my skin. Damon won’t look my direction—instead, he assesses the room, distance growing between us as he moves about.

I remain naked, just standing in place wondering what happened.

“Was I not supposed to do that?”

Damon flicks a glance my way but won't give me his full attention.

“It was incredible, Blue. But we have a problem.”

He grabs the crop from the bench where he left it then slowly taps it against his leg.

Confusion douses me, a million questions bouncing and colliding, doubts and suspicions jumping in to dance within it.

Squatting down, I grab my clothes from the floor then push to my feet to get dressed. Suddenly, I feel more exposed than ever.

I feel tossed away.

Used...

“What problem?”

The tapping becomes faster, his fingers tightening over the handle of the crop until the red wounds over his knuckles darken.

Still, he refuses to look at me.

“You have a friend named Brinley, right?”

My fingers stop over the buttons of my corset, the top still hanging open.

“Yeah. Why do you want to know?”

Suspicion takes a nose-dive down my spine. It screams louder than the rest of the thoughts and questions.

Maybe women aren't so different than men after all.

Given the right circumstance, our thinking can go linear like theirs.

And my linear thinking is solely on protecting Brinley.

“Why do you want to know, Champ?” There's no weakness in my voice, only the hint of anger.

The handle of the crop snaps in two in his grip.

He places the pieces on the bench with far too much care.

“Sorry about that. I’ll pay for it or whatever.”

I don’t respond, just hurry to finish buttoning my top.

“That’s not an answer to my question.”

He turns to face me fully.

“Aren’t you supposed to lose a piece of clothing for my answer? I thought that’s the game we’re playing.”

My eyes narrow.

“Except I’m not playing anymore. What do you want with Brinley?”

Rubbing his thumb across his bottom lip, his mouth curves into a cynical smile.

Who the fuck is this man and what happened to Damon?

Sure, he has a storm that follows him, and within those chaotic winds are all the nasty emotions most people are lucky to never feel.

However, this side of him is new to me.

And I sure as hell don’t like it.

“Answer the question, or get the fuck out of here.”

His head barely tilts to the side, something rolling behind his gorgeous eyes that makes them ugly.

“You owe me another favor, Blue. And unfortunately, I’m here to collect it.”

The deal.

That fucking favor.

The *consequences* if I don’t do what he asks of me.

He leans against the bench, crossing one ankle over the other, his arms spreading out so he can grip his hands over the opposite ends. It’s a masculine pose that makes him appear bigger, stronger ... threatening.

“What does that have to do with Brinley? I made a deal with you, and I owe you the favor.”

“Yeah, but see that’s the problem. I don’t want anything from you. However, I have a friend who needs something from Brinley. And she’s not willing to give it to him.”

“Sucks for him,” I quip. “Maybe he should have asked nicely.”

“He already did.”

His slick smile transitions into a smirk.

“And that’s the problem. She’s not exactly happy with him and won’t answer a few simple questions.”

Okay. I’m not tossing Brinley to the wind to save myself. I made this deal. I’ll face the fucking consequences. But I still want to know what Damon and his asshole friend are planning so I can warn Brinley.

“Did those questions involve removing her clothes? Because if that’s the case, I’d like to meet your friend so I can ___”

“We don’t want to hurt her, and she can keep her clothes on. Brinley has information we need, and she’s now involved in something that isn’t good for her.”

Brinley?

How the fuck did she get involved in anything while holed up in a library? It was only within the past few nights that I finally convinced her to come out to Myth again.

The events of last night hit me.

“Does this have anything to do with her car breaking down?”

He shrugs. “It may.”

Holy fuck. I should have made the connection. I spoke with Brinley when I got home last night. After she told me to

have Granger drive me home, I took an Uber instead then called to make sure she was all right.

She was fine, but she was detailed in describing the tow truck driver.

“It was Priest, wasn’t it? The guy who towed her car. Is he the one who needs these questions answered?”

Damon’s smirk disappears and he rolls his neck over his shoulders.

“Fucking hell, I should have known you two would talk. Sending Priest here for my truck was stupid.”

His eyes meet mine again.

“I’m offering you a solution to everyone’s problems. We just need you to drive Brinley to a restaurant tomorrow. We’ll even loan you a car to pick her up. Does she know you broke shit off with Granger?”

I shake my head. “No. Then I’d have to explain how I have money to hire Ubers on the nights she can’t drive me to work. And Brinley might question why some guy I barely know was willing to give me ten thousand dollars. Especially when that same guy was involved in the fight that fucked her head up so much, she’s been terrified to leave her dorm and the library ever since.”

His brows pull together.

“Seriously? That was two months ago.”

“She’s got an excellent memory.”

Shoulders slumping, he blows out a breath.

“Listen, we just need her to answer a few questions. That’s all. And unfortunately, the governor has told her some pretty shitty things about us.”

Okay.

I need more information.

“Why doesn’t the governor like you?”

“I can’t get into that. You’re already closer to this than I wanted you to be. I don’t want you to be part of this ... problem.”

“What happens at the restaurant?” I ask. “And why can’t I tell Brinley the truth that we’re meeting you all there? I can escort her, then if anybody pulls some bullshit on her, I can kick their ass.”

“I wish it was that easy,” he breathes out. “You won’t make it to the restaurant. And all I’m asking of you is to go along with what happens. Once Brinley gives us the information we need, she’ll be fine. We’ll never bother her again.”

“Why—”

“Stop asking me questions, Blue.”

He closes the distance between us with a ground-eating stride. I step back to escape him, but my head smacks against the wall, and he cages me in place, his amber stare glued to mine.”

“Here’s the hard truth. You made a deal with me, and I’m calling in the favor. You either go along with what I’m asking, or the consequences will fall on you both. We don’t play around on that. And I don’t give a shit what it does to Brinley and you. What I’m offering is a way for this to happen where nobody gets hurt.”

“I’ll call the cops,” I warn.

“You can try, but it won’t do you any good. It’ll only makes things worse.”

Even if the cops won’t help, I still have other people who can. I’ll call Kane to come get Brin and me. I can warn her, and we’ll take a bus out of town. She could call her dad and maybe he can help us. There has to be a way to get out of this.

“You’ll both end up running forever.”

I glare up at him, pissed that he knew what I was thinking.

He grins. “We’ve been doing this for a long time, Blue. And we happen to have long memories as well. We won’t stop until we have what we want. Is that what you want for the rest of your life? Always running? Is that what you want for your friend?”

It takes effort to suck in a breath.

I don’t want Brinley to live the life I grew up in.

I don’t want that life for myself.

“You want me to lie to my best friend.” Not a question, but a statement.

He nods. “And then take her to a restaurant in the car we’ll drop off at your apartment.”

The fuck?

“How do you know where I live?”

“I know your name is Amélie Hart. Your mother is Emma Hart. Your brother is Kane Hart. I know their current address as well. Although, I will admit that your childhood addresses were difficult to track down, but with the number of schools you attended across several states, I assume that’s because you moved around a lot. Am I close?”

He lowers his head so that our noses brush together.

“I know that your mother was missing for a year or so before your brother was born...”

Blood rushes in my head, the full force of my heart thumping against my chest.

How does he know that?

It’s taken years for my brother to find that small bit of information, yet Damon knows it in so short a period of time?

“Who the fuck are you? And how long have you been stalking me? Is that the reason you’ve been coming around? To use me to get to Brinley?”

“No.”

He pushes away from the wall then walks to the padded bench in the center of the room, leans against it and crosses his arms over his chest.

“I was curious about why a cage dancer would think she knows anything about me. Turns out you don’t know much.”

This son of a bitch...

He smiles.

I’ll kill him with my bare fucking hands.

“Wanna know what else I know?”

What else is there for him to know? He’s already stolen all the scars from my life and laid them out like a buffet of amusement, not giving much of a shit how deep they cut.

Damon doesn’t wait for me to respond.

“I know what happened to your mom when she first disappeared. And I can take an educated guess as to why you spent your childhood running.”

My heart stops in my chest.

The rush of blood stops in my head.

All I hear is static.

“Bet you and your brother would kill for that information. So maybe you can do me a solid and drive Brinley to that restaurant like I asked. I’ll happily give it to you then.”

“I don’t need it that bad.”

But fuck I want it.

Kane wants it.

That information could explain so much.

I would finally know why my childhood was such a trainwreck. And why I’m living a life now where I never let anyone close.

Except Brinley. I let her close.

And Damon...

Look where the fuck that got me.

Maybe Mom was right about the monsters.

I'm staring at one now.

“Come on, Blue. Do what I ask, and you'll have fulfilled the terms of our deal. Refuse and you'll go back to a life of running, as well as your friend, Brinley, your brother and your mom. We won't stop until we get what we want. I wasn't joking.”

What choice do I have?

Judging by the straightforward expression on Damon's face, I'm fucking cornered for once in my life.

My mind races again, testing every boundary, playing out every possible scenario that might get me out of this fucked-up mess. Yet, for as fast as I run through the choices, I keep ending up in the same place.

There is no choice.

Except for the one he's giving me.

Tears burn my eyes, but I refuse to let them escape. Not in front of this asshole. Not when he stares over at me with the knowledge that he's already won.

Even Kane couldn't find that information...

“Make a choice, Blue. Time's wasting.”

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I make the choice to betray the only friend I've ever had. The taste is bitter and acrid, my stomach knotting up from the churn of bile.

I'm defeated.

I just have to accept it.

“You swear you won't hurt her?”

He holds up three fingers. “Scout's honor.”

I snort. “I highly doubt you were a Boy Scout.”

“You’re right about that.”

I blow out a long breath.

“I’ll do it,” I say, barely able to speak around the unshakable need to scream or cry or lunge at Damon to scrape my fingernails down his face before ripping off his fucking balls.

“Good girl,” he answers. “The car will be in the parking lot of your apartment. The keys hidden in the glove box. Look for a black Mercedes. In the dump you live in, I highly doubt you’ll miss it.”

Damon goes to leave but stops at the door to take another assessing look at the bullshit props around the room.

“Would have been fun to try out some of this stuff with you.”

His eyes meet mine. “It’s too bad we’ve run out of time.”

When he closes the door on his way out, my legs lose all strength, and I sink to the floor.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?



Damon

“You dumbass motherfuckers! For all the bullshit you supposedly *know*,” Blue makes air quotes with her fingers, “one would think you’d know that Brinley has fucking panic attacks! Why couldn’t you just meet us in the parking lot of the restaurant like normal people? Do you have to be so goddamned extra? I’ll cut off both of your balls if something fucking happens to Brinley after running us off the road!”

Blue’s threats are muffled by the hood over her head.

“I fucking mean it, you twisted, sadistic assholes! She better be okay, or both of you will be running scared after I find out something bad happened to her! I don’t give a single flying fuck about your piece of shit *Inferno*. You both can go fuck yourselves.”

My eyes narrow on her, wondering how she knows about the *Inferno*, while Ezra steps back, takes off his helmet, looks Blue up and down then over at me.

“This is the stripper?”

“I’m not a fucking stripper,” she barks.

Chuckling at the absurdity of Blue’s behavior, I yank the hood off her head. The hair at the top of her skull sticks up from static electricity.

It would be adorable if her brows didn’t slash down into a deep vee between her eyes, her lips curled into a sneer.

“I hate you both.” Her eyes cut to me. “And you can take the fucking helmet off dickhead. I know who the fuck you are.”

What’s interesting is that she can tell Ezra and me apart.

Very few people have ever been able to.

Then again, Ezra's already opened his mouth with his stripper comment, so it makes sense he would be my twin and not me.

It's impossible not to laugh, not with the concerned expression on Ezra's face and Blue's continued tirade.

He stabs a thumb her direction while staring at me.

"Is she mental? Leave it to you to stick your dick in a woman who belongs in a psych ward."

Blue's stare cuts Ezra's direction, then she kicks dirt onto his shoes.

"Sure, because having to abduct a woman to get her to talk to you ranks high on the fucking sanity scales. Go piss in the wind, you piece of shit."

He stares down at his shoes then up at her, a low growl emanating from his chest.

"Fucking save it, dipshit. You don't scare me."

Eyes rounding in surprise, Ezra stares at Blue before his stare meets mine again.

"She's got a mouth on her."

I nod in agreement. "Works pretty good, too. I enjoyed it when it was nice to me once."

It's interesting that Blue didn't shut up in response to Ezra's growl. Most women—and men—tend to grow quiet when he gets in their face. But then again, Blue has been dealing with me for a few weeks, so it makes sense she's not scared into submission by my twin.

If any woman can put up a fight, it's her.

Even if it's just verbal.

I get the feeling Blue might not survive if someone was intent on killing her, but she'd definitely keep shit-talking until the bitter end.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Blue's eyes fill with bitter contempt. "Just for that, I'm feeding your balls to you when I'm done cutting them off."

"Careful," I tease. "Little girls who say mean things can walk home instead of getting a ride back. How long do you think it would take you to hoof it to your apartment?"

"I'd rather walk. It's better than riding on the back of one of your motorcycles and having the stench of your bullshit on my body for a week. I'd never be able to scrub it off."

She huffs out a breath and swipes at her messy hair to shove it out of her face.

"Where is Brinley, and who took her? More importantly, when do I get her back?"

Ezra gives Blue another once over then nods his head in approval.

"I think I like her. It'll take a psychopath like her to put you in your place. Nice choice, brother."

If glares could kill, Ezra just died a nasty death.

"The only place I'll be putting him is in a shallow grave."

"Brinley will be fine," I say, snatching Blue's attention away from my twin. "Like I said, we're not hurting her. I'll send you a picture of her with a newspaper everyday as proof of life."

She crosses her arms over her chest.

"How long are you planning on keeping her?"

"As long as it takes," I answer as I yank my helmet off and look out in the distance.

A dust cloud kicks up, a haze against the bright sunlight. Thank fuck because that means Jase and Sawyer are almost here.

As soon as they grab the Mercedes, Ezra and the two of them can take off, leaving me to take Blue back to her place.

“That doesn’t work for me. And neither does the ride home. I’ll take the Mercedes—”

“Not happening, Blue. We’ve already got people who are picking it up.”

“Why the fuck not? You let me drive it out here. One of your cronies can follow me home then pick it up from there.”

“Cronies?” Ezra’s face is blushing red from laughing. “Who the fuck do you think we are? The mafia?”

“Ez,” I warn, shaking my head. “Don’t go there. The less she knows about us, the better.”

“Oh, because me knowing where you live—”

Wrapping my hand over her mouth doesn’t shut her up fast enough. Ezra’s curious stare slips to me.

“The fuck is she talking about?”

“Nothing,” I groan when Blue’s teeth clamp down on my finger, and she attempts mumbling out an answer. “I took her to our place and fucked her one night. It was a one-time thing.”

She tries to bite again, but I tighten my hold over her mouth. I’ll lose a damn finger before letting her explain what happened at my house the night she was there.

Ezra can’t find out.

He’ll know I lied to him about the details of the night William showed up, and a new interrogation will begin.

Nudging my chin at the road, I refocus the topic of conversation.

“Jase and Sawyer are here. We can take off. You head to wherever you need to go, and I’ll take Blue back to her place.”

I release her mouth—slowly—but stand at her back to shut her up again if need be.

“I’m not riding on your damn bike,” she mutters.

“So you’re walking?” I ask, amusement in the words. “I know you’re upset about how we captured Brinley, but I never thought you’d become stupid because of it. It’ll take four hours, at least, for you to walk back. Stop being a bitch, and accept the ride.”

Leaning in and dropping my voice to a whisper, I remind her, “Plus I have some information I owe you. Are you willing to give that up because you’re being so stubborn?”

She seethes, her face a mottled pink. Blue’s not the type to give in easily, but in this fight, I still have something she needs.

Prior to heading to Myth, I’d gone to Taylor for more information on Blue. I knew she wouldn’t simply hand Brinley over. She’d rather run the Gauntlet, even if it means losing her life, than turn on a friend.

There may be no trust in this woman, but she has loyalty in spades.

Thankfully, Taylor was able to give me more information than I’d expected ... information that revealed more of Blue’s scars than I’d thought he could dig up.

But that’s Taylor.

He wouldn’t stop running his fingers over the keyboard of his computer until he had the entire picture.

And what a picture it was.

I’m not looking forward to telling her what I know about her mother.

No person would want to hear how their mother was used in such a way.

But she did the favor I asked of her, so she earned the truth Taylor discovered.

“Fine. I’ll take the ride. But I never want to see you again after that.”

Sighing heavily, I hate that I had to be such a dick to her to make her do what I wanted. Especially after letting her go down on me while knowing what I would say to her after.

Ezra's not wrong about her mouth, though. Many women have tried conquering me by slipping their mouths over my dick, but Blue came so damn close to accomplishing it.

What I can't understand is why.

"Deal," I snap.

I slap her ass and grin when she glares at me over her shoulder.

"Best get moving, Blue. Time's wasting."

I nod at Ezra to tell him we're leaving then lead Blue to my bike, making sure she doesn't drag ass long enough for her to get a good look at Jase and Sawyer after they pull up. The less she knows, the better.

After this last stunt, I hope I've managed to keep her as far away from the Inferno as possible. She doesn't need our problems on top of her own.

I hand her the extra helmet I brought for this event then tug on mine.

She's hesitant to climb on the back of the bike behind me but gives in without a fight. Her body presses to my back, and her arms wrap around me.

It shouldn't feel this good to have her so close, but I take a moment to enjoy the way our bodies touch before turning the bike on and starting our drive down the road.

Blue clings on for every curve on the road, every turn, every full stop when we finally reach the congested part of the city where red lights hold us hostage for a few minutes or so.

She doesn't need to cling on so tight, but she rests her helmet against my back, her fingers entwined where they come together across my chest.

Believing this means she forgives me is hopeless.

After what I did, and the way I went about it, Blue will hate me for eternity.

But in the end, that's what I wanted and why I was such a dick to her.

I want her away from this.

From the Inferno.

She'll never be my escape again because my words ruined that.

But for the first time, it wasn't an accident.

I'd carefully selected every word, every barb, every insult I knew would cut her deep.

I need her to hate me because that's the only way to protect her from my life.

Pulling up to her apartment, I grind my teeth so hard my jaw tics.

This place is a fucking dump and it's dangerous for her to be here.

From my bike, I see used needles on the pavement, some junkie simply tossing another one aside before passing out on the sidewalk.

Garbage bags spill over the dumpster with a cloud of flies buzzing around it. And as we pull up to the stairs that lead to her apartment, I see a drug deal occurring in the shadows beneath the stairs, both of their shadowed faces turning to look at me without concern for being caught.

If this is what occurs in the daylight, how much worse is it at night?

I know Blue's work schedule. She comes home at late hours when anybody could be lingering about, searching for a victim.

My shoulders tense as we turn into a parking spot.

Blue jumps off the bike immediately, as if she can't wait to let me go and move away.

I push the bike on its kickstand then climb off. I've barely pulled my helmet from my head when she shoves hers against my stomach.

"Thanks for the ride. Now stay the fuck out of my life."

She storms away, completely done with anything to do with me.

Shaking my head at her behavior, I take her helmet and put it on the passenger seat, while still holding mine.

What does her apartment look like?

I'm dying to know.

"I can't just yet. I have information to give you, and we still have Brinley. I thought you wanted to know about both."

Blue stops in place then pivots on her feet to stare back at me. Her eyes squint against the sunlight and her hair is a mess around her head.

"You're not coming up to my place."

"It's the only way I'll give you the information," I volley back.

Blue curses under her breath and kicks away a needle that was near her foot. This place is pure trash.

"Have I mentioned how much I hate you today?"

Grinning, I'm starting to really enjoy her spunk. "That would be the first time."

"Well, you can expect more."

She pauses, looks around the dumpy parking lot then up to the shitty apartments.

"Fine. You can come up. But stay ten feet away from me at all times, and as soon as you give me what I want, you leave immediately."

“Deal,” I lie.

I’m not leaving until I take a good look at her life.

Blue can’t be my problem anymore, but I’m finding it difficult not to give a fuck.

Why? I don’t have any clue. But I want to protect her from herself in a way I’ve never felt before.

Especially after learning the details of her childhood—and after learning what happened to her mother. I would never want that for Blue, and I pray to everything holy that she hasn’t already experienced that kind of treatment.

It would explain her inability to trust.

And it would explain why she took one look at me and thought she knew me.

Like recognizes like.

Blue leads me up to her apartment and is slipping the key in the lock when she stops, glares back at me, then sighs in resignation. She’s letting me into her personal space and can’t stand it.

Not after what I did.

I deserve another kick to the face.

“Back up,” she demands. “I said not to come within ten feet of me.”

Amused, I take a few steps back, lifting my brows to silently question if she’s satisfied.

“Keep that distance, or I’ll see it as an invitation for a fight.”

As if she could fight me and win.

But I let her think that.

Content that I’m far enough away, Blue unlocks the door and steps inside. I can see her hesitation over letting me in, but eventually she shrugs and hurries to the other side of her living room before I step foot through the door.

As soon as I close the door behind me, she crosses her arms and demands, “Okay, tell me the information, then leave.”

I’m too busy to pay much attention to Blue because I’m running an assessing eye over the home she’s created for herself.

A quick glance surprises me.

You wouldn’t think this apartment exists in the complex.

Blue has modified the space with bursts of colors, all of them both complementary and contrasting, but somehow still coordinated.

A plush blue couch sits against one wall with a small coffee table in front, painted a rustic mint green.

Two potted plants sit on the table, their leaves shiny and healthy.

A circular glass dish sits in the middle of the table with three pillar candles that have been used often based on the way the wax has burned down. At the base of the candles are a mixture of stones and glass beads, all colors of the rainbow.

Beyond that, there’s a small hutch on the opposite wall with a television and a side bookshelf.

I turn to peruse the titles. “Romance?” I pivot on my heel to glance back at Blue. “I wouldn’t have thought you the type.”

She shrugs, her arms still crossed.

“Gotta find a decent man somewhere. Sadly, fiction is a hell of a lot better than reality. Now give me the information so you can leave.”

Pity for her, I’m not going anywhere just yet.

Instead, I turn to look at a small kitchen behind a half wall that divides it from the living room. Not a speck of dirt in sight. She keeps her space immaculate.

I want to see her bedroom but wonder how I'll get past her to walk through the door.

She wants me ten feet away at all times.

I wonder what she'll do if I creep closer.

“Your mom was abducted and taken to another country, from what we assume.”

Blue's eyes soften, pain clearly wiping away the obstinance from her expression.

“Why do you assume that, and how did you find out? My brother has been searching for years.”

I step closer—she moves right towards the main part of the living room to keep me at a distance.

“Let's just say that I know a guy who is good with computers.”

“So is my brother. He's one of the best.”

“Then my guy is clearly better.”

As we talk, I step forward, and she moves deeper into the living room to keep distance between us.

“Do you want the full story about what happened to your mom, or would a summary suffice?”

“Start with the summary.” Her voice is quiet, growing weaker. So wrapped up in what she's afraid to hear, Blue doesn't realize I'm a few steps away from her bedroom.

“She was raped,” I say carefully. “And worse. She had your brother seven months after reappearing in the States. I'll let you figure out what the math means.”

A sound emerges from Blue, quick and full of pain.

“That explains so much.”

I step into her bedroom, not caring that I'm invading her space.

Refusing to give her the full and devastating truth about her mom, I leave it at the summary to protect Blue.

Anger swells in me to think about what was done to Emma Hart. A lot of it was similar to the shit done to Ezra and me.

Stop crying...

I know how to make you crawl...

So much blood on my hands and legs...

I'm thankful when Blue's voice drives the whispers away.

"Hey," she yells at my back. "You're not supposed to be in there."

Too late.

While her living room is a damn rainbow of colors, her bedroom is full white. The bedspread, the curtains. All the furniture. It's like she's created a cloud in this space where she can rest and float away.

My feet stop in place, and I glance at her from over my shoulder.

"Somehow this works for you. A dark angel at work and a light one at home."

"Pfft. I'm no angel. I just needed a space that was clean. No trash. No dirty gas station bathrooms. No stains on the ceilings and walls like the shitty motels I've stayed in. It took me two years to create this space, but I'm sure you already know that."

I do.

I know the exact date she signed the contract to move in.



Amélie

How is that possible? None of what Damon told me is making sense.

While I'm not surprised to hear my mom was violated in that way, the timeline doesn't explain how Kane and I have the same father.

The again, she was always running ... as if someone who hurt her might find her again.

"Please get out of my bedroom. I don't want you here. You've given me the info, and you can get proof to me that Brinley is okay later tonight. Get out of my place."

Damon stares across the room at me curiously, his fingers resting on top of a small glass trinket box.

Ignoring what I said, he studies the box, then turns and notices the others spread across my bureau, on a small table, and on the shelf built into my headboard.

"Why so many boxes?"

What he doesn't know is that there are a dozen more stacked on the shelf in my closet.

The truth is, I adore trinket boxes. I have a particular spot for all my things. Everything is in its place and easy to find, unlike the garbage bags we lived out of my entire childhood. I could never find anything when I needed it back then.

Damon's curiosity overtakes him. He opens the box to peer in.

He lifts a cheap necklace with one finger, letting it dangle as he admires the fake stones.

“Plastic,” he murmurs, more to himself than me.

Dropping that, he picks up a ring that’s nothing more than a silver-plated band with a small obsidian stone. It wasn’t worth much when I bought it. But it’s mine. I earned it. I can’t recall how long I’ve owned the ring, but again, it’s mine. I won’t lose it while running from place to place.

The ring slips off the tip of his finger into the box. His amber gaze slides to me.

“Do you own anything that’s real?”

Fury licks up my spine.

Fucking people born with silver spoons up their asses.

“It’s time to go. Get the fuck out of my house.”

Yeah, I’m mirroring his words to him. But at least I didn’t strip him down before doing it. Both times we’ve done anything sexual, he turns around and treats me like shit after.

But it’s just sex.

I’ll continue reminding myself of that.

Sex doesn’t equal love.

In fact, between us, it’s becoming a good indication of hate.

“Damon—”

“For fuck’s sake, Blue. Fine, I’ll leave.”

There’s an audible click when the box closes.

Damon walks my direction, but I don’t give ground this time and move away. I want him out. I plan never to speak to him again except to keep tabs on Brinley. But I refuse to fear him.

Stepping close to me so that his shoulder brushes mine, he stops.

“Where will you be tonight so I can let you know about your friend?”

“In my cage,” I snap. “Where else?”

He leans over to whisper in my ear. I fight the shiver his soft voice causes.

“Good. I like you there.”

Bastard.

Rage courses through my veins and burns the shiver to ash.

“Get out—”

“Calm your tits, Blue. I’m leaving. Just remember to go along with not knowing what happened today. It would suck if your only friend found out you took part in her abduction.”

I stare at my bedroom, refusing to look at him and listening as he walks through my apartment and out the door. As soon as I hear the soft click of the knob, I run to a window to watch the parking lot.

Damon crosses the lot, turns to look back at the apartments then pulls on his helmet to climb on his bike.

For some damn reason, my heart sinks into my toes when the bike engine revs as he pulls out of the lot and out of view.

...

The music does nothing for me tonight. I try and I try, but the beat doesn’t sink inside me like it normally does, the tempo doesn’t pull me along with it.

I close my eyes and all that occurs are the questions and thoughts colliding and bouncing.

The loudest ones right now are that I lied to my best friend, and I need to keep lying because she can never find out. And when that horrible truth runs its course, thoughts of my mother comes to mind, what I now know happened to her.

I haven’t told Kane yet.

Several times, I picked up my phone to call him to give him that information, but I hit end after dialing his number, the call never going through.

Here's the problem: I'd call Kane to tell him what I know, then he'd demand answers I can't give him.

He'd want to know how I found out, who Damon is—the circumstances that led to me knowing the truth.

I'd have to lie to him, too. And I can't bring myself to do it.

I don't know how much time I spend battling the thoughts while dancing in a cage that's becoming the perfect metaphor for my life, but when I open my eyes and see a familiar face ascending the last step up to the second floor, my heart hammers against my chest.

Relief drops the weight from my shoulders that she's alive.

But dread crawls up my spine for the lies I have no choice but to tell her.

Brinley's not alone, and I wonder if Damon and his friend I recognize from the governor's mansion are here to ensure I keep the story going.

It is what it is.

I have no choice but to play along.

I wave at Brinley when she looks up at me, throw the cage door open then run down the stairs, passing Granger in his usual spot without bothering to give him a second of my attention.

“Holy shit, Brin. Are you okay? What happened today? I've been worried.”

Lie.

Lie.

Lie...

Brinley asks me if I called the police to report the abduction and I lie again, assuring her that I did. Then I lie again, pretending not to know exactly who took her. I'm the unwilling actress when I ask her if I should call the cops now to report that she's resurfaced.

I hate myself for lying.

I hate Damon even more for making me do this.

But I play along like a good little liar, my eyes following the direction of her gaze when she looks at where Damon and his friend are standing.

"Is that who I think it is?"

I know exactly who they are.

Lies, lies and more lies.

"Are those the guys who took you?"

Brinley sighs, her blue eyes locked to mine.

"Don't call the cops, Ames. I'll take care of that. This entire thing has been a big misunderstanding. They're..."

She pauses, and I realize she's lying, just like me.

"Uh, they're new friends."

What kind of fuckedup situation leads to best friends blatantly lying to each other? Why was I dumb enough to get wrapped up with Damon in the first place? And what have they done to Brinley to drag her in?

Neither of us are reckless.

We're not the type to let people close.

Yet here we are, bound to whatever they're asking of us.

And still, knowing what they're doing to us, I continue playing the part. But not just to continue the lie. Because I want to stay involved enough to know exactly what they've done to Brin to force her to play the part as well.

Brinley keeps glancing at Damon's friend. She doesn't seem scared like she normally is.

For the first time since I've known her, she seems at peace with her surroundings.

So many questions.

I don't know whether to kick the other guy's ass or thank him for whatever he's done to make Brinley feel safe for once.

I need to find out what's going on.

"So they *are* your people? I fucking knew it. Why have you been holding out on me? Let's go talk to them. Introduce me."

She hesitates to lead me over to her *new friends*, but within a few seconds, she makes the choice to introduce us. I walk directly to Damon as if I have no idea who he is.

"I'm Ames," I say, extending my hand to him. A silent bark of laughter shakes his shoulders before he grasps my hand in greeting.

"Damon. Nice to meet you."

His fingers squeeze my hand tighter than they should, and when I go to pull away, his grip prevents me from doing so.

My eyes lock with his, and all I see in that amber gaze is amusement.

I wonder where the anger's gone and who this new version of him is.

Thankfully, Brinley buys it.

Thinking I'm just making new friends, she walks off with the other guy, leaving Damon and me alone.

Voice low, he looks over to where his friend is standing then back to me.

"I told you we wouldn't hurt her. You satisfied now?"

As if I ever could be...

“Not at all. I still think you’re a piece of shit for what you’ve done.”

“Good to know,” he answers, the corner of his mouth curving up as if this entire situation is a joke.

Nothing is funny about it.

“I still have questions. Lots of them.”

His eyes blaze bright, a single tic of his jaw. “Those will cost you.”

Fuck the cost.

“Are we done now? Is Brinley free to go and we can all say our goodbyes and return to our regularly scheduled lives like we never met each other?”

Damon shakes his head then casts a quick glance at Brinley and his friend. They’re heading back in our direction.

“I hate to break it to you, Blue. But we’re not even close to being done.”

He pushes away from where he was leaning against the bar, his eyes skating over to Brinley and his friend as they approach.

“Gotta go,” he says, flashing an arrogant grin.

Brinley rushes up to me. “We need to leave, Ames. But I also need you to talk to your brother.”

Kane? But why?

My brows tug together. “About?”

“I need to know if he was able to decrypt the flash drive we gave him.”

Holy shit, I’d forgotten all about the flash drive from the governor. It’s odd that Kane hasn’t brought it up both times he’s called.

“Just call him. Okay?” Brin leans in to give me a hug and I wrap my arms around her not wanting to let go.

She walks away to stand next to Damon's friend before all three of them head in the direction of the staircase.

Damon pauses before they are far away then takes a few steps back to stand next to me.

Leaning in, he warns, "And when I said we're not done, Blue, I wasn't just talking about the thing with Brinley. I know you still have a lot of questions. I'll be happy to answer them..."

With a finger, he pulls at the shoulder strap of my costume. "For a price."

He winks at me and runs to catch up with Brinley and his friend.

I glare at his back.

Of course I have questions.

I still don't know how he found out that stuff about my mom. Or if what he told me is even true.

It's not like he gave me proof.

Also, why the hell is Brinley suddenly going along with them?

What is so important about the flash drive from the governor?

And the worst question of all—despite how much I hate Damon for what he's done—there's a small part inside me that still wants to know about his scars.

...

Although I usually love the music in the club, the dancing, the freedom, there's another moment I love more than all ... When the music stops.

It means I get to go home.

“Closing time!” the bartender calls out. He’s a new guy, hired within the past week or so. I think his name is Charles or Chris. “Everybody drink what you’ve got, then get out.”

The crowd begins to slowly disperse, and I leave my cage to run down the stairs.

About to make the turn to run to the dressing room so I can change, Granger steps in front of me, his dark eyes looking me up and down, hunger in his expression.

“You ready to give up yet?”

He’s dressed in a black button-down tonight, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to reveal the corded muscle of his forearms. A glint of light bounces off his large silver belt buckle, his perfectly pressed black slacks doing nothing to hide the muscle in his thighs.

With a strong jaw, plump lips, and high cheekbones where the end of his black hair usually touches, Granger is a beautiful man.

It’s just everything on the inside of him that’s ugly.

“Give up on what?”

He tilts his head just slightly.

“You have to be out of money, Ames. I played along with your little independence game, but it must be getting old now. How many more Ubers can you afford before you lose your apartment?”

Fucking prick.

Everything about him makes my skin crawl.

But that’s the thing with narcissists. They can’t handle thinking you can live your life without them.

Pausing, his eyes drop to my chest then crawl back to my face.

“Let me take you to dinner.”

A hand lands on my shoulder, causing me to jump in place.

“She’s got dinner plans for tonight already. Better luck next time.”

I spin in place to find Damon standing behind me. My heart does this weird tapping beat, picking up speed. I shouldn’t be excited to see him.

But when I remember that I want nothing to do with him, the tapping beat turns into a deep and steady pounding, adrenaline pumping into my veins because all I want to do is punch him in the face for his bullshit.

Stepping away so that his hand falls off my shoulder, I look between the two of them.

“Sounds like you’re both hungry. Maybe you can take each other out.”

I spin on my heel then walk quickly to the dressing room, slamming the door shut. Or at least, I tried to.

“We need to talk.”

“No. You may need to talk, but I need to get changed and get the hell out of here.” I turn to Damon. “How did you get in? Patrick stops people at the door forty-five minutes before closing.”

Trying to hide a smile, he shrugs a shoulder. I try not to admire how his shirt moves with the movement. I remember what’s under that shirt from when we were at his house, and while I had time to study the muscle in his chest and a set of abs that made my mouth water, I also got a peek at more scars.

“Guess Patrick likes me,” he says, drawing my eyes up to his.

He grins. “It’s okay to look. I like looking at you, too.”

Bastard.

Well, I hope he likes this show because while he can look, he’s not allowed to touch anymore.

“How much money did you lose to Patrick this time?”

Without giving him the chance to respond, I pull my bra top off, and toss it into the dirty pile to be cleaned. Glancing back, I notice Damon's feral stare, his eyes pinned squarely on my tits.

"They bounce a lot, too," I tell him. "Especially when I'm riding someone. Pity you'll never find out."

Shaking himself of his reaction, he leans against the closed door, his arms hanging at his sides and his fingers lightly tapping on the wood.

"Brinley is okay, Blue. Just like I promised she would be. She and Shane have worked out their ... issues."

"Oh yeah? That's great for them. Does that mean I can I confess my part in her abduction now so I don't have to carry around these lies anymore? They're getting heavy."

I'm in the middle of tugging my shirt over my head when he answers.

"Probably not the best idea. And the lies get lighter as time moves on."

Shirt on, I huff out a breath and brush the hair out of my face.

"You would know. All you do is lie. One day you'll get caught for that shit. Hope you know that."

"Hasn't happened yet. And we've been doing this for years."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't put that on your Tinder profile or any other dating app. Most women wouldn't be impressed by it. I, sure as hell, am not."

Shoving my shorts down so I can kick them off my feet, I hear Damon curse beneath his breath behind me. Guess he likes the thong I'm wearing tonight. Also pity for him, that's all he'll see.

I grab my jeans to pull them on, but Damon moved closer when I wasn't looking and wraps his hand over my wrist.

“You had more questions. I wouldn’t mind answering them now.”

“Oh yeah? How much is that going to cost me?”

He grins, a boyish dimple indenting his cheek.

“At least let me drive you home. I know Brinley can’t do it.

I tug my wrist from his hold and continue getting dressed.

“I’m not riding on your motorcycle. The less of I touch you, the better.”

“That’s a good thing since I don’t have my bike anymore. It got torched tonight with all my other cars.”

My eyes meet his. “Torched?”

“Long story.”

“Lemme guess. One of the women you used and abused finally decided to get even? You happen to know who she is? I’d like to shake her hand.”

He chuckles. “Something like that.”

Damon runs his fingers through his hair then rubs at the back of his neck.

“No motorcycle. No touching. You’ll have your own seat all to yourself.”

It’s better than an Uber. At least, he’s already here, and I won’t have to wait outside for ten minutes.

A thought comes to mind.

“Since accepting a ride from you is torture, I consider that a cost.”

His brow arches. “Okay, so what are you saying?”

“I accept the ride, and you answer some questions.”

The brow somehow arches higher. “How many?”

I'm not pushing my luck with this one, and I really need to know why Brinley got caught up in their shit. Plus, what's so damn important about that flash drive? I need to know before I call Kane.

“Two.”

“Let me get this straight ... I'm doing you a favor, and you get to ask questions if you accept?”

“Precisely,” I retort. “Because with that long memory of yours, you should know that I can't fucking stand you. The ride home will be a nightmare.”

Damon smiles, and I try not to melt at the sight of it. Just like earlier tonight, his usual anger isn't wrapping around him like I cloak. I'd be a liar to claim I don't want to spend time with this other side of him.

Even if it is just a ride home.

“And you can't come up to my apartment. A ride only.”

“Those are your terms?” he asks.

I nod my head.

Another smile. I'm beginning to like them more than I should.

“Fine, Blue. I'll agree to your terms. Let's get out of here.”

Grabbing my bag, I follow along behind him, wishing like hell this will be the last time I'll have to deal with him but somehow knowing it won't.



Damon

Nobody ever said life is easy. We all have problems, it doesn't matter where you're born, who you're born to or what you eventually make of your life if you're lucky enough to survive.

There were times when I thought I wouldn't survive.

Times I prayed I wouldn't survive.

After the abuse of those weekends, I didn't want to live with the memories of what was done to us.

It was Ezra who kept me tethered to this life.

Our bond.

The fact that I knew if I dipped out ... it would only be a matter of time before he dipped out too.

Knowing him, he'd chase me into the afterlife with the single-minded intent of kicking my ass for giving up, for letting our father kill us both after we fought so hard to live.

Stepping out of the shower, I wrap a towel around my hips and catch sight of myself in the steamy mirror. I swipe away the steam then stare at my image, my eyes following the faint white lines that run across my body.

Against my olive skin, those marks stand out, not as noticeable as they used to be, the years fading them until they're barely there.

"Let's talk about the scars, Champ. The ones on your face and the hidden ones inside that nobody sees..."

When Blue and I first met, I wondered how she could stand so still within my storm. I didn't want to believe that

some chick dancing in a cage could see through me so clearly. I sure as hell didn't want to accept that someone who was supposed to be an escape would call me out and point directly at my past.

She was never supposed to know.

To be part of my life.

To be wrapped up in the daily bullshit I deal with because of all the Inferno's fathers and the way we all have been changed.

Each of our monikers—Treachery, Fraud, Violence, Heresy, Anger, Greed, Gluttony, Lust and Limbo—was a result of what our families did to us when we were young. None of us have been able to escape their grip.

Not yet, at least.

Not even Ezra and me now that our father is dead.

The only thing I can be thankful for is that Ezra will never have to bear the scar of killing our father. I wear that one alone. But then, I've always worn more than him.

Allowing the steam to build on the mirror so my image blurs, I shake my head at how thoroughly I've fucked everything up.

My escape became part of my life.

Maybe I'm not meant to get away.

Maybe I'll always be shackled to my past.

And judging by the scars I see in Blue, she's shackled just like me.

Stepping into my room, I think about our conversation last night when I drove her home. She grilled me about Shane's thing with Brinley, then demanded the story about the flash drive stolen from Luca's father.

We were sitting in the car Priest loaned me, parked outside her apartment, when I finally gave up on keeping her out of

this shit, and I sang like a fucking canary.

“Thanks for letting me know...”

Her eyes had lifted to mine as her hand reached for the door handle.

“But except for what happens with Brinley and what Kane can do with the drive, there’s nothing else for us to talk about.”

Blue let herself out of the car then walked up to her apartment without looking back. I waited until she was inside to start the car. I fought with myself for another hour before finally driving away.

I wanted to follow her up to her place.

I wanted to apologize for everything I’d done to her.

But as hard as I thought about what to say, I couldn’t think of the right words.

They ran around in my head again. Yet none of them were good enough to make her understand.

Blue hates me.

Probably wants me dead.

And I can’t think of a way to make this up to her.

My phone vibrates over the wood of my bedside table, Tanner’s name flashing on the screen.

Gritting my teeth, I hover my thumb over the green button, undecided.

Can’t I just have one day of peace?

I hit the button and pin the phone between my shoulder and ear as I drop the towel to get dressed.

“Yeah?” The word comes out in an annoyed growl.

Tanner is silent for a second, most likely deciding whether he wants to deal with me or not.

“Why does it sound like you don’t want to hear from me right now? Something I should know?”

“Nope, just not feeling it today.”

“Feeling what? Are you fucking kidding me right now? Our shit was vandalized and our cars torched last night, and you’re not feeling it?”

“That’s what I said.”

I hear a pen click several times from his end of the line and roll my eyes. He’s in his usual mood, apparently.

“Well, fine, then. I’ll just send your brother or Jase to go pick up the stripper, and you can take a day at the goddamned spa or some shit. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

The fuck?

I reach up to grab the phone and hold it closer to my ear.

“What are you talking about?”

“Brinley’s friend. She needs to be picked up and taken somewhere she won’t be found.”

Anger taps at my head, trickles down my spine.

“Who’s looking for her?”

“The fucking governor. She was with Brinley at the engagement party, and Brinley told him it was the stripper’s friends who are decrypting the drive. That makes her a target. But if you’re too busy taking an emotional day, I’ll have someone else grab her.”

The hell he will.

Nobody else in the Inferno will lay so much as a finger on her without me tearing it off.

“She’s not a stripper.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck. She needs to be handled, and since you had a fucking deal with her that none of us knew about, I might add, I figured you’d like to pick her up.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I snap. “How quickly does this need to be done?”

“Yesterday,” he barks back, his pen clicking furiously. “Glad to hear you got over your feelings enough to pull your head out of your ass and remember we’ve got problems.”

We always have problems.

And Blue’s not going to be easy to grab.

I have a feeling I’ll be carrying her out of her apartment kicking and screaming.

“Consider it done.”

Tanner starts flapping his fucking lips again, but I end the call, not giving a shit what else he has to say. Tanner is a man for details, while I’m more the type who wants the bare basics; who, what, where, when, how.

The *why* doesn’t fucking matter. Tanner, Gabe and them can worry about the fucking why. Again, that’s a *them* problem.

Unfortunately, the *why* left Blue as a *me* problem.

Knowing this is going to be one hell of a fight, I roll my neck over my shoulders to ease the tension and grab my keys to head to her apartment.

...

“Wakey, wakey.”

I tug at the bottom of Blue’s blanket, hoping like hell she sleeps nude because I wouldn’t mind the sight.

When I walked into her bedroom, I found her fast asleep in bed, her long blue hair the only touch of color over a pillowcase of pristine white. Her mouth was partly open, a spot of drool on her pillowcase. And the softest noise drew my attention.

I wonder if anybody has ever told Blue that she snores.

Blue groans at the sound of my voice, still mostly asleep.

I kick the foot of the bed.

“Rise and shine, Blue. Don’t make me steal the covers.”

Please be naked...

I can’t help what the sight of her body does to me.

This girl can hate me with every cell she has, but that doesn’t mean I’ll stop trying to find ways to get her out of her clothes, her legs spread wide in front of me.

I pull the covers down with a hard tug, disappointment washing over me to see she’s wearing a pair of tiny shorts and a cami.

“What in the actual fuck?”

She sits up in bed, swipes the hair from her face and peers up at me with sleepy eyes.

Assuming it takes a minute for her brain to catch up from the rude awakening, I chuckle when her violet eyes round into large saucers to finally realize I’m standing here.

“How did you get into my apartment?”

The slight tilt of my head matches the way my lips curve up at the corners.

“I told you we’re not done.”

I dodge the pillow that’s slung in my direction. It hits the bureau behind me with a heavy thump.

Turning, I look at some of the boxes that were knocked to the ground, the contents spilling out.

“Careful, you may fuck up your entire organization syst—”

The words are barely out of my mouth, when Blue launches at me next.

“Get the hell out!” she roars, her weight knocking me back a step, before I wrap my arms around her and toss her on the

bed.

Rubbing at my jaw, I grin.

“Didn’t know you like it rough. You should have said something the first time.”

“If you don’t get the fuck out of my apartment—”

She’s got a hell of a voice on her, but mine booms louder.

“That’s what I’m trying to do! If you’ll calm down and fucking listen for once.”

“You shouldn’t be here in the first place, asshole!”

Leaning down, I plant my hands on the mattress on either side of her body, and get in her face, unconcerned by what she can do to me.

“Unfortunately, you’ve got a problem, and I’ve been sent here to solve it for you. Now either calm the fuck down, or I’m going to—”

Blue punches me, my head wrenching left from the force of it. A growl erupts in my chest as I turn back and lock my eyes with hers.

“You’re going to pay for that, beautiful. Lucky for you, I happen to like it rough myself.”

Grabbing her ankle, I yank her body down then drop my full weight on top of her. My body grinds between her legs, my erection grabbing her attention.

Blue stills in place and bares her teeth.

“That will never happen.”

I’ve never been one for a hate fuck, but Blue is starting to convince me of its benefits.

Lowering my face to hers, I jerk back just a touch when she snaps her teeth at my nose like she is trying to bite it off.

Damn this woman doesn’t know what it means to give up. And I love that she’s practically feral.

I press my body tighter between her legs. Blue stills at the touch.

“Seriously? This is what turns you on?”

“It didn’t used to, but then I’ve never had a woman fight back before.”

Swinging her hand at me, I trap it with mine at her wrist. She comes up with the other arm, and I catch that one, too. Locking them together and trapping them on the mattress above her head, I stare down at where her tits are busting out of the little pink cami.

Our eyes meet again, and Blue wiggles her hips trying to kick me, the movement forcing a frustrated growl to rumble over my lips.

“Keep moving like that, woman, and I’m not to blame for what happens next.”

She stills in place finally, her chest heaving with her breath.

“Why are you here?”

“Like I said a minute ago, you have a problem, and I’m here to save the day.”

Her eyes narrow.

“That’s great. But would you like to enlighten me as to what that problem is and why you suddenly think you’re my hero?”

My stare drops to her lips. I resist the urge to kiss her, but it takes a hell of a lot of effort. What I can’t resist is the question that runs through my thoughts.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?”

She balks.

“Not that I would ever give you that information, but what does it have to do with you being in my apartment, claiming I have a problem that you can somehow help me solve?”

“You haven’t,” I guess.

“You don’t know that.” Her cheeks blush red, telling me I’ve guessed correctly.

“Maybe I just refuse to kiss you. Probably because you’re a dirtbag maniac who likes abducting women and running people off the road.”

I find it interesting that the question of her refusal to kiss me has distracted her from yelling at me to get out of her apartment.

“You can’t kiss a dirtbag maniac, but you can let one eat you out or stick his dick in your mouth?”

“It’s just —”

“Sex,” I say, finishing what she’s said to me before.

I grind against her again, and she whimpers, her previous anger at me lost.

“If it’s just sex,” I argue, trapping both her wrists in one hand, “then you won’t mind me lifting this shirt to see what you have underneath.”

I run a fingertip down Blue’s arm, watching her expression change the lower it travels. Her lips pull into a thin line when my fingertip hits her shoulder then continues down to trace the side of her body. She squirms when I pass her breast but bites her lip and attempts to jerk out of my hold when I move down the side of her rib cage.

Interesting. I didn’t know she’s ticklish.

Hooking my finger beneath the bottom hem of the cami, I cock a brow and give her the chance to tell me to stop.

She doesn’t.

Instead, she parts a set of perfectly shaped lips and says, “I have a question, and according to the terms of your game, you can’t remove my shirt until you answer it.”

I still in place and watch victory dance behind her violet eyes.

“What’s your question?”

How bad can it be? I’m sure she’ll demand more information about Brinley.

“What caused the scar beneath your right eye? The tiny one. And I want a detailed answer, so let me rephrase my question. What is the complete story behind the scar beneath your right eye? Who caused it, and if you say it was a fight, I want to know why you were fighting.”

You call yourself a man?

Stop crying...

I release her wrists then climb off the bed.

Backing away until my back collides with her bureau, I stare down at a bitch who is dragging back the voices.

“This conversation is done. Either get up, get dressed and pack a bag of clothes to bring with you, or I’ll carry you out like you are, not giving a shit who sees.”

Blue sits up and eyes me.

“Or...” She swipes more hair from her face. “You can get the fuck out of my apartment like I told you.”

“Not happening unless you’re leaving with me.”

I cross my arms over my chest.

“How did you even get in here in the first place?”

I open my mouth to answer, but she holds up a finger to silence me.

“You know what? Never mind. I’m sure you have a lock picking set in your back pocket.”

“I’m not playing with you, Blue. You’re leaving with me.” My voice is a warning.

This was fun until she asked a question that cut far too deep.

This will be our little secret...

It got your brother to fight...

I shake off the memories that are sneaking out and focus on the task at hand.

“I’m not going anywhere with—”

My voice roars, the windows of her crappy apartment shaking from the loud noise. “Just get your shit and follow me to my car! I’m not giving you another choice!”

Blue sits back and assesses me.

“There he is ... The man I met the first night you followed me to a back room.”

“He’s not a man you want to play with. I assure you.”

Blue rolls her eyes. “I’ve played with worse.”

Finally pushing to her feet, she crosses the room en route to her closet.

“You know, maybe talking about your issues will finally keep that storm from erupting. You don’t fool me.”

Opening the closet door, she turns to look at me.

“And you don’t scare me, either.”

I smirk at that and ask her a question. “Then why are you following orders?”

She smirks in return. “That question will cost you your shirt if you really want an answer. Bet you won’t take it off now that I’m talking about something you prefer to hide.”

When I don’t respond, she walks in her closet, her voice drifting out into the room. “Thought so.”

Licking my tongue over my top teeth, I turn to look out the window.

Some junkie shuffles through the parking lot, bends down to pick up a baggy that fell from his pocket then goes from one crappy car to another, trying the door handles to see what he can steal.

Hangers bang against the closet rod and I assume she's gathering clothing together.

"I have work tonight. I hope you're planning on driving me."

My head snaps her direction.

"Did you not hear me earlier? You're not going to work."

"You never told me what the problem is."

Her head pokes out of the closet. "And I have a job, Damon. One that if I fail to show for will fire me. One that if I lose will mean I can't pay my bills. So, unless you're offering to support me the rest of my life..."

Her voice trails off as if she's waiting for me to offer to support her.

"Not happening."

A full smile stretches her lips. "Then I'm working tonight whether you like it or not."

"The governor will be looking for you, Blue. He knows your brother is working on the flash drive. If I don't grab you first, his guys will happily take my spot."

Fully back in the closet, she answers, "Then watch over me at work and make sure nobody grabs me."

Her head pops out again. "Or I could ask Granger to—"

Oh, fuck that!

"I'll watch you. Granger can go fuck himself."

Her lips perk up in a grin. "My own personal bodyguard," she says in a saccharine tone. "Either that or you like me."

"I welcome you to pump your hand on my dick and see just how much I like you."

She's walking out of her closet, the strap of her bag tugged over her left shoulder when she responds.

"Would love to help you out there, Champ, but I absolutely despise you for what you've done. Playtime won't happen for us again unless you're willing to pay the price for it."

"And that is?" I ask, crossing the room on a ground-eating stride to fall in step with her.

"Answer my questions."

Blood ... So much blood...

I force the memory from my head.

"You're a bitch, you know that?"

"So I've been told. Glad we're all caught up."

The storm around me threatens to brew, and there in the center of it is a smiling dancer. With violet eyes, and a body that calls to me like I've never felt before, the wind whips at her pastel blue hair without knocking her over.

It's unreal how easily she can call to my demons.

It makes her unlike any woman I've ever known.

I can't stand that about her.



Amélie

It's just another night at Myth. Thankfully a Tuesday, so the crowd is light, but the music is still pumping.

I'm in a much better mood tonight than last night.

Brinley's alive and well, so I no longer have that worry bouncing around in my head with all the others. What shocked me was the lack of fear I saw in her when she was with Shane ... The freedom.

A twinge of jealousy rolled through me to see her so ... normal. I've been trying for years to help her face her fears, and then some jackass—albeit a gorgeous one—comes along, abducts her from the side of the road then somehow manages to bring out the warrior I've always known was inside her.

Smiling to imagine her continuing on with her life without a care in the world, I allow the driving beat of music to sink inside me, my body moving with each pulse. Yes, my ass is shaking and my boobs are bouncing, but that's what dancing does ... Why it's so seductive.

They say you can tell how a person would fuck by the way they dance—their ability to keep a rhythm. I don't know how much of that is actually true, but the thought conjures a memory, one that makes my heart stutter and my face burn red.

Judging by your dancing, I assume you know how to fuck. That's gotta get you somewhere in life. Is that why the dickhead you keep around is nothing more than a means to an end?

Asshole.

He was only repeating what many people have said, but I still hate him for the insult. At least that's how he meant it the night I kicked him in the face, and he left the club.

Opening my eyes so I can peek over at the bar, I see Damon watching me intently. Everything about his expression shows me he wants me. Regardless of how I feel about him ... or how he feels about me.

I was hoping after he dropped me off and said he had something to do that he wouldn't return to watch over me.

Yet there he is in his usual spot, staring at nothing but me.

This situation with the governor is bullshit, but I'm smart enough to know that I'd rather be stuck with Damon than whatever goons the governor would send over.

Still, being with Damon isn't making things easier.

Especially after the argument we had at my apartment.

Damon and I spent an awkward day at his house. One where I did everything I could to avoid him, and he did the same.

His twin, Ezra, isn't so bad. He was surprised I can tell them apart. He said nobody except some girl named Emily and the guys they grew up with have been able to do it.

I didn't want to mention that they may be twins, but they don't have the same scars. Sure, they both have them, but I've been studying Damon's for months now. Every time I see him. And while Ezra has scars that are faint against his olive skin, it's Damon's scars that cut the deepest.

They affect them differently, too.

Ezra is cold, while Damon is always hot.

I assume that means Ezra has somehow moved past the scars, while Damon is still trapped in the story of what caused them.

Even now, I can sense Damon's storm.

It's not blazing around him so that intensely that people are keeping their distance or glancing at him with caution. It's mild as he tips a beer to his lips, his throat swallowing down the liquid.

Right now, he's just ... beautiful.

Angry ... but beautiful.

I pissed him off with the question I asked this morning, but I'm still too intrigued to let it go.

I'm not sure if I can ever forgive him for what he's done, but I'll still do anything to know.

And what does that say about me?

Curiosity and all that. I'm way beyond the simple cat that dies because they got too close.

I'm now stuck in a box somewhere with a flask of poison and a radioactive source, some guy named Schrödinger watching this experiment wondering if I'm dead or not.

Why do I even care?

Damon is on his third beer now, his attention fully on me, except for moments here and there when he glances at Granger and sneers.

I worry that if he drinks too much, he'll start a fight. That concern follows me into the music as I force myself to close my eyes and become lost again for who knows how long.

Damon's energy keeps drawing me away from the music, something changing in him that calls out to me.

My eyes slam open, and I stare at a face I've seen before.

Damon wears the expression of a desperate man. One haunted by nightmares that nobody knows, the scars of his past the only hint to his story.

It's the same face from the first night I met him.

The same one that kept coming back to argue with me and insult me.

It's the face of a man who needs something to soothe the rage that threatens to consume him.

Any intelligent person would avoid this man.

They'd run like hell in the opposite direction.

But I know what it is to be damaged.

So I step out of my cage instead.

Running down the stairs, I ignore Granger and approach the bar. Damon meets my stare, the gold flecks in his eyes that I only rarely see, now blazing like hot lava.

I take Damon's hand and lead him to a back room, my heart beating so hard, I think it's doing the smart thing by climbing out of my chest to run the other direction.

That's what I should be doing. Running. Especially after all the horrible ways Damon has treated me.

I can't resist him, though. Can't leave him alone in his tumultuous storm. My traitorous mind wants to know the truth about him, and my traitorous body wants to be shown again what he's able to do to it.

Damon steps aside to let me in then closes the door far too carefully. He's trying to hide what's going on in his thoughts, the nightmares I know are speaking to him.

When he turns, what I see in his eyes forces blood to my cheeks. Pure lust runs through him, drowning out the normal storm. Unfortunately, where I was sure-footed in the angry winds that often tore at me, I'm losing my balance in what feels like a hurricane that fills the room with his emotions, his lethal power and his unrelenting need.

He stares at me curiously.

Fuck what he thinks, I have way too many questions. And the first is why has he reverted back to the asshole I originally met?

"We're doing this again? I thought the deal was over once Brinley was happy."

My level of hatred for this man is only equaled by what he is currently feeling for me. Yet, we both stand here, hating and wanting—unable to disentangle ourselves from each other. All of this could have been settled a long time ago, but I guess my questions are too high a price for what he wants.

Good, I'm glad I could give back to him what he's been doing to me, even if I need to stab at his scars to do it.

"Take it off," Damon demands, nudging his chin at my corset.

I'm surprised he's going there.

After this morning, he is keenly aware of the cost.

But still, I refuse him. This man isn't out to do anything for me tonight. With the way he's eyeing my body, this will be all for him.

I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest.

"I paid your fucking price, Damon. I lied to and screwed over my best friend because of you. She's on her way to Georgia right now with that jackass who took her, thinking I've filed a missing person's report for her."

It can't matter that Brinley sounded happy with Shane. The sad truth is that I still carry the weight of the lies Damon forced me to tell on my shoulders. I can't look at him without thinking about what he said to me that night. How I was a *good girl* for playing along. He stabbed at my scars just as deeply by threatening to return me to a life on the run.

Damon tilts his head, asking a question that we both know has an answer he can't handle. "How much this time, Ames? You know I want inside that body of yours, and you know you want me there just as much. Why fight it?"

"Because I hate you for what you made me do," I answer.

That and he's had too much to drink, so his head isn't in the right place for what he's demanding. I don't want to take advantage of him in this state, but maybe it's the only way I'll get answers.

His lips curl. “I feel the same. So take it the fuck off. Might as well drop those shorts while you’re at it, but leave the wings. They remind me of just how much of a liar you are.”

Only because he made me one.

Although, that’s not entirely true, is it?

I lie when I play games against narcissistic men.

I lie when I pretend everything is all right so Brinley doesn’t worry.

I lie to my brother every time I talk on the phone so he doesn’t know my life is still shitty.

Damon didn’t make me a liar.

He only used that part of me to potentially hurt somebody I love.

There’s pure venom in my stare.

The price will be high for Damon’s bullshit.

He tilts his head in question, knowing full well I want this as much as he does. I can’t help myself when it comes to him, regardless of what he’s done.

Keeping my eyes locked to his, I slowly unhook the corset and allow it to fall to the floor.

Damon’s gaze slips down my body to study my breasts then lower to watch me slide the tights shorts off my hips and down my legs.

That’ll be two questions already.

Staring at him, I decide to keep count so I can ask them later.

For whatever reason, what’s happening now is taking priority. My body winning over my thoughts. Damon is like poison running through every vein and artery, my will to resist him becoming weak as fire tears through my body.

He steps forward, and I back away until my wings are trapped between my body and the wall.

One of his hands grips my hip as the other claims the weight of my breast, his thumb rubbing over the tight nipple.

He leans forward and speaks to me in a whisper.

“Touch me, Ames. The way you know I like it.”

A third question for this favor. I’ll continue keeping count.

Reaching forward, I unbutton his jeans then slip my hand in to stroke nimble fingers over the length of his cock.

Damon’s eyes close, his full lips parting.

I take this moment to memorize every detail of his face.

Fuck, he’s perfect. With dark hair and olive skin, shadows dance along the line of his strong jaw and high cheekbones. The scar beneath his right eye draws my attention—the faint white line he refused to tell me about.

That’ll be the first question I ask.

While I stroke his dick, long and hard, he punishes my breast with his hand, running his lips up my neck and along my jaw.

He moves to kiss me, and I turn my head away.

Kisses are for love, and my feelings for Damon will never go there.

Not after what he’s done.

“I’ll already told you what this is, Damon. You won’t make me change my mind.”

He laughs against my cheek.

“Whatever you say, Blue.”

He directs me to my knees wanting my mouth on his dick again.

That’s a fourth question I get to ask.

The price is adding up.

Taking him into my mouth, I swirl my tongue the way I know he likes it, his fingers already sliding into my hair to grip down and decide my rhythm. Saliva fills my mouth, making it easier for me to move back and forth. The salty taste of his skin and pre-cum add flavor that drives me crazy.

Heat blooms between my legs, my nipples tight and my body needy. Tingles run across my skin, my heart beating faster when Damon moans and squeezes my breast harder.

He's about to come. I can tell by how fast he pumps his hips, his fingers tighter in my hair.

But at the last second, he pulls his dick from my mouth and stares down at me intently.

“How high is the price so far?” His voice is breathless yet full of grit.

Mine is equally as breathless. “Four questions, Champ. And you need to answer them honestly.”

I'll know if he lies. His body language will give it away. But for all the bullshit this man has done to me, lying hasn't been part of it.

Damon has always been straight forward. Even if what he said were insults, even if he kept his mouth shut and took what he wanted all while knowing he would kick me out of his house afterward, or demand I betray my loyalty to a friend.

Perhaps that can be considered a lie of omission, but he's never told me something strictly false only to reveal the truth later.

Maybe it's the alcohol talking, but he pulls me to my feet then places a hand on the wall next to my head so he can lean in close.

I add additional terms to ensure he'll answer the way I need him to.

“And you need to give me the answers before we leave this room. Complete answers, not the surface shit you usually give me.”

Anger flares behind his eyes, but it makes the gold flecks more beautiful. We stare at each other long enough that I finally see a small amount of green in the amber.

“Your eyes are beautiful.”

I can't help the admission. There is so much about him that draws me in.

He laughs, the sound not happy. “Do you have any idea how much I want to destroy you? How much I want to leave you here and never come back? You're like a thorn in my side that drives me insane. And all you are is a dancer who shows her skin—”

I place a finger over his mouth. That's a truth I'd rather not hear right now.

“Save your insults for later. Take what you want while we're in this room. And then give me what I'm after.”

Another laugh. “While you tally up the price?”

Blinking my eyes, I refuse to respond.

He knows the terms. There's no reason to repeat them.

What I'm giving up just to know his story is bullshit. But he can tell me to get the fuck out or insult me after. It won't matter anymore because I've protected my heart.

This will never be love.

He's too damaged.

I'm too damaged as well.

But we can hate each other.

Then again, I've heard between the two, there exists the finest of lines.

I'll be careful never to cross it.

Damon tugs my panties down. They fall off my legs, and I kick them away. His mouth presses to my ear, the heat of his breath sliding down my neck when he says, “Keep the wings,

Blue. And I hope your legs are as strong as they look because tonight you're riding me."

"That'll cost you another question."

His teeth nip at my ear. "You don't think I already know that? Just be careful what you ask for, Blue. I'm not sure you'll enjoy the truth."

I'll enjoy the questions shutting up in my head.

And maybe once I know, I'll finally be able to stop thinking about him.

I'll enjoy that, too.

Gripping one strong hand over my hip, Damon tugs me from the wall and leads me to the small stage set up in the middle of the room. He pushes his jeans and boxer briefs all the way down until they're bunched up over his boots.

I glance down and smother a gasp that threatens to burst from my lips. The scars are heavier on his thighs, a long one running from his knee down his calf.

Damon stares at me with a blank expression, then takes off his shirt to show me the rest of the scars that cover him.

There must be something in my face that makes him laugh.

"You should see my back. You'll never accrue enough questions to ask about all of them."

What has been done to this man?

He sits down on the stage before I can force him to turn around for me to see his story, then he pulls me down so that I straddle his lap, his erection rubbing just where I need it as pleasure bursts through me.

My hands go to his wide shoulders, then I push up with my legs so he can notch the head of his cock at my pussy. Slowly sliding down, I can't help the moan that escapes to be stretched so thoroughly.

Damon's hands cup the cheeks of my ass, his eyes sliding down my body to watch my tits bounce when I pull back up and slam down again, my muscles clenching at him until I'm so painfully tight.

This is purely physical, our bodies coming together to scratch an itch that has existed since the first time our eyes met. I'm a fantasy to him. I know that. And he's a demon to me.

That's why when his fingers grip my hair with a rough tug, I groan, the pain blending into the pleasure of our bodies coming together hard and fast, my legs burning from the effort of pushing myself up, over and over again to a demanding rhythm he's setting. His hands on my ass help me lift up to the head of his thick cock, and down the shaft then back to the head again.

I'm so embarrassingly wet, my inner muscles gripping at him, being forced apart by how he fills me. The skin beneath my breasts burns from how hard they bounce, but the pain turns me on.

Using his grip in my hair, he pulls my body back, forcing my spine to arch, his mouth and teeth dragging down from my neck to bite my shoulder, sucking on the skin so hard it'll bruise.

Moving lower, he does the same to my breasts. His tongue sweeping out to soothe the pain of his marking me.

Damon owns me in this moment.

I can't deny it.

He uses me.

Maybe I'm using him, too.

I'll never kiss him.

Never let him that close.

He's done everything he can to prove he'll never be worthy.



Damon

This is all Blue was meant to be.

This right here.

Two people using each other as a way to get off.

But then she called me out that first night.

She saw beneath the lies I wear like a second skin to see the scars beneath. Then she crawled beneath that skin, took me by surprise, and is now a woman I want to run from rather than the escape I'd intended.

Blue wants my story?

I'll give it to her, but only one scar at a time.

Meanwhile, she'll pay dearly for it with her beautiful body, soothing the voices in my head for short periods of time, before asking her damn questions and bringing my past back to life

I can't claim she doesn't still mesmerize me, though. Even now, I stare at her face. Her eyes are closed just like when she's dancing, her mind free of all the congestion I know is inside her head.

Blue is always so busy looking over her shoulder and asking those damn questions that it's easy to guess her mind never relaxes.

In that way, she's a lot like me.

Her body is displayed before me, but I can't help tracing my eyes over the line of her jaw, taking in the way her lips part on a heady moan.

That sound.

What I know I'm doing to her.

It makes me harder than I've ever been, tension running over every muscle in my body because I can't get enough of her.

Her fingernails dig into the back of my neck, and I punish her in return by digging the tips of my fingers into her hips. Blue rides me faster, the slick sound of our bodies coming together, blending with the moans that crawl up her throat.

I take a moment to watch the fluid strength of her movement, the beat she pumps her hips to as if she's dancing. Her damn hips make my mouth water. The way they swirl with the rhythm of her pushing up and down over my cock.

A man starving for more, I begin to lose control.

She's taking what she wants, and I want to steal that from her.

It's uncontrollable, my reaction to her.

I need more.

I lose my patience letting her ride, and I hide a smile when I move suddenly to flip our position so that her back is against the stage.

A gasp falls over her lips, her eyes flicking open at mine in surprise.

Blue thinks it's her body that makes her beautiful, but there's more to her than a set of perfect tits, a heart shaped ass and an abdomen that is nearly as cut as mine.

It's her eyes, though, that make her unique, a woman unlike any other.

Her eyes make her beautiful because of how she sees the world around her.

Even though she gives herself to me, it's not all of her, not even close. I get the feeling she keeps the best part to herself.

I stare at her mouth again, wishing I could part her lips with my tongue, kiss her with as much hatred as I do in the way we're fucking now.

My body grinds against hers, my dick filling her.

“Damn it, Blue. What the hell are you doing to me?”

From my thrusts, her back shoves up the wooden stage and I hope she's not getting splinters.

“I need ... For fuck's sake, Damon...”

Pressing a finger to her mouth, I slow my thrusts to toy with her.

“I know what you need. And I get to choose when you get it.”

She bares her teeth at me, and a storm erupts inside. Memories again, but not the ones that haunt me.

I want to possess you. Own you. Treat you like a toy I bat around for the fun of it. And I can't figure out why.

I'm owning her now, possessing her entirely.

The way our bodies grind together punishes her clit. I claim hold of one of her perfect tits, pulling one up so I can wrap my mouth over the tip. When my teeth scrape the nipple, she trembles, her legs wrapping around me so tight, it's painful around my ribs.

“Tell me who owns your pussy, Blue.”

She opens her eyes again. “You own nothing.”

On that she's got me.

Not until she gives me her mouth.

One day, I'll own that, too.

I stop thrusting and a whine falls over her lips.

“Please...just...Please.”

Pressing my mouth to her ear, I gently bite the lobe before whispering.

“Tell me and I’ll give you what you want.”

“Why just my pussy?” Why not me?”

My gaze drops to her mouth. “Can I kiss you, Blue?”

“Hell no,” she bites out.

Blue is so damn close to an orgasm that her body jerks beneath me, her hips lifting and dropping as she attempts to take that pleasure for herself. I pull away farther, just the tip of my cock teasing the outer muscles of her pussy.

“You’re a son of a bitch! You know that?”

Softly, I laugh. “So, I’ve heard. Glad we’ve got that covered. Now tell me what I own, and I’ll give you exactly what you want.”

Her head rolls over the stage and she breathes out, “Fine. You own my pussy.”

“Good girl.”

I start thrusting again, a punishing depth, a hard and fast rhythm.

She comes and I keep my stare glued to her face enjoying how her eyes clench shut before she becomes boneless beneath me. It makes me come just watching her.

Sweat drips down both our bodies as we pull apart.

She stares up at me as I attempt to figure out what to do about our mess.

“Just like that? You just jump away when you’re done?”

Side-eyeing her, I smirk. “Were you hoping to cuddle?”

She snorts. “No.”

I look around more and don’t want to just tuck myself in with her come on my dick.

As if intuiting my struggle, Blue says, “There’s a small drawer on the other side of the stage. You can find wipes and paper towels in there to clean up.”

Refusing to think why a drawer would be necessary in the room, I find it then pull out enough wipes to clean us both.”

It doesn't matter how we feel about each other, I'm still taking care of her.

Blue deserves that much.

Once done with myself, I pull my jeans up to tuck my dick away and walk over to Blue to clean the mess I left between her legs.

“You're taking care of me again.”

Ignoring her, I ask, “They got a trash can in this place?”

“Another drawer, on the other side of the stage.”

I find it quickly and dispose of the wipes.

Blue starts her interrogation without bothering to get up from the stage to get dressed.

“Your right eye,” she says, her breath coming out in short huffs.

Stop crying...

Be a man...

It made Ezra fight, didn't it?

Seriously? What is so important to her about my scars? She's driving me crazy and not in a good way. Rage trickles down my spine.

I guess what they say is true. Twins draw in so much more money...

It's only five damn questions, and I have at least four times that in scars. She won't get the full story. At least not tonight. Not ever if I can just keep my hands off her for once.

Easier said than done.

I can't look at Blue without wanting her.

I can't find the words to explain the answer to her question. They're stuck in my throat, and I'm choking on them. I've

pushed those memories so damn deep that the words are lost inside that locked box I'd shoved them in. Letting them out is too painful.

“Don't you think you should get dressed before jumping down my throat about this shit?”

Snatching my shirt from where I tossed it, I pull it over my head and stab my arms through.

“Or are you an arm-chair therapist who does her best sessions in the nude? Is that all you're fucking good for?”

I can hear Blue move behind me, but I refuse to look at her. I can't. Not when the voices start up again and the laughter is so close to deafening.

She doesn't move fast enough. Not in this storm, not when the memories are spilling out of that locked box in my head like a tidal wave of horror, grief and fear.

Grabbing her corset, panties and shorts, I turn and sling the clothes at her.

“Put on your damn clothes!” I yell.

She stares up at me with violet eyes that are unlike anything I've seen. I both love and hate the color. And everything about this woman aggravates the hell out of me.

Unfazed by the way the clothes hit her or the volume of my voice, Blue shrugs a naked shoulder. “The scar under your right eye, Champ. Start talking.”

Fuck the agreement.

I'm not telling her shit.

“And before you tell me you're not sticking to the agreement, remember how easy it will be for me to walk back into the club, talk to security and escape from you and your buddies. Or I could just hit one of the handy dandy buttons in here and watch as they drag you out.”

My eyes narrow on her.

If Blue escapes from me, Tanner will just send somebody else after her. And there is no way in hell I'll let that happen.

She shrugs again. "Just saying. If you think I would make an agreement with you again without having something to hold over your head in return, then I'm not the dumbass in the room this time." Her eyes meet mine. "I'm on to the games you play."

Blood heats my face, the room suddenly hot and uncomfortable.

My hands curling into fists, I pace one side of the room. Every few seconds, I cut glares her direction before looking away again, thinking of how I can get the fuck out of this.

Crawl, Damon...

You think you're a man?

The blood is all over my hands...

"God fucking damn it! Why do you have to be such a bitch?"

She might as well be filing and painting her nails for how primly she sits, her voice calm despite my behavior.

Blue always stands so calmly in that storm.

"The scar beneath your right eye."

Anger explodes, the voices and laughter flooding free, a twisted discordance of bullshit in my head. It had been quiet before—so damn quiet since I killed William.

But now, because of her, it's all returning. It's too much to think about. I've spent years avoiding thinking about those weekends, and Blue might as well be dragging me right back to them.

"My father gave it to me. Is that what you want to hear? He backhanded me when I refused to do what he wanted."

Blue winces, my words a blow to something inside her that she attempts to suppress or hide.

Her voice is gentle. “What did he want?”

“That’s two questions!”

With a yank she tugs her corset together to begin hooking the fasteners. “Shall I remind you of the terms or hit the button?”

“You must seriously think your pussy is made of gold to be pushing this shit. I don’t need you, Blue. I got what I wanted.”

“What did he want, Damon? You owe me this. You agreed.”

I grind my teeth and the pain of it shoots down my jaw. Nobody knows what happened on those weekends. Nobody but William, Daddy Dearest, Warbucks, the other Inferno fathers, Ezra and me. Plus ... the others.

I can’t remember all the faces.

“He wanted me to fight a man twice my size. I was only fifteen.”

Seconds pass that become minutes, the room silent except for the faded music outside the door. I’m praying that she’s done, that the truth is too painful, but then she asks a question and draws out all my hatred.

“Why?”

Fucking why.

I don’t give a fuck about the *whys*.

I hate the whys.

Let’s call it a return on my investment...

You both are worthless...

Just like your gold-digging mother...

The answer spills out of me along with the voices and laughter. “So he and his friends could make bets on who would win.”

I spin to face her.

“Fucking happy now? Is this what you plan to do to me with all your damn questions? Do you have any idea what I’ll do to you for asking them?”

Blue looks up at me with her brilliant violet eyes as she pulls her shorts into place. Jutting out a hip, she plants her hand on it and shows no fear, no terror, nor any sorrow for what I told her.

But there’s anger.

Despite what she attempts to hide, I can see it clearly in how she carefully controls her expression.

“Your father is a dick. But I already knew that. I hope you killed him that night he showed up at your house.”

She shakes her head and glances down at her feet. “Bet he’s still out there planning new ways to fuck up people’s lives. That’s all men like him care about.”

Shock tears through me, a tingle on my skin from what feels like lightning down my spine. It chases away the voices, muting them enough that I can think clearly.

“You know men like him?”

Her eyes lift. “Unfortunately, I have a habit of running around with shitty people.

She gestures to me. “I mean look at my present company.”

My stare hardens. “What’s wrong with your present company?”

Her brow arches. “That question will cost you a shirt.”

The fuck?

“That’s not how this works.”

“That’s exactly how this works,” she retorts. “Our agreement goes both ways, Champ. So, question equals shirt.”

There is no way in hell I’m playing along with this bullshit game. We stare at each other, neither of us looking away. Her brow arches higher.

Fuck this shit. I want to know, and it's just a stupid shirt.

I pull it off and drop it to the floor. Blue's stare drops to study me, heat flowing behind her eyes, the corner of her mouth tipping down.

"Answer the question." I demand.

"You have more problems than I can count, number one. And instead of dealing with them, you've been coming here to harass me. I'm a target, and I didn't ask to be one. On top of that, you lie by omission and take from me before dropping bullshit on my head. You abduct women, break into apartments, and —"

"Okay, I get it. You can stop."

"Second question," she says without missing a beat.

I grind my teeth again, standing stock-still as she walks up to me with a hip sway that has me thinking another few questions may be worth fucking her again.

She places a finger at the tip of a scar that runs from my shoulder down along my chest. My body goes rigid at the touch. But she waits for the memories to invade.

Grow the fuck up...

Be a MAN!

Ezra screaming from where he's held back.

"Another fight," I growl. The memories are assaulting me harder now. It's like I'm back at that warehouse in my sixteen-year-old body, facing a man who flips a knife between his fingers.

With a delicate touch, Blue traces a line. "For what?"

"Money. What else?"

"Your father," she correctly guesses.

"The stakes were higher when my opponent was allowed to use a weapon."

"And?" Her eyes peer up at mine.

Blood...so much blood.

“I disarmed him and rammed his knife through his trachea.”

That's how to do it...

That's my son...

My father would count the money in front of us.

Blue stills in place, her fingertip still pressed to the bottom tip of the scar.

Instead of crying about it, or attempting to kiss it away, the rage in Blue grows, her face a tight expression, but I can almost see the gears grinding in her head.

Too much silence passes and I'm about to pull away from her when she says, “It was often that we stayed in shitty motels.” Her eyes lift to mine. “My mom, my brother and me. I think I was eight, maybe nine.”

Pausing, she sucks her lips between her teeth, chews on them, just a touch of tears welling in her eyes.

They never fall down her cheeks.

“There was a man there. My brother and I had run out to grab food to bring back. The man grabbed me and slid his hands between my legs. Kane attacked him right in front of me. He's five years older, so he was bigger than me. I saw my first dead body that night. Kane wouldn't stop punching, even when I was trying to pull him away.”

My eyes widen, not at the story she told me but that she chose to reveal what I'd already guessed about her life.

The voices and laughter disappear.

Now I just want the younger version of me to find the younger version of her so we can help each other.

“I didn't kill the man, so the blood wasn't on my hands, but I caused it, so in a way it was.”

She was eight.

Her brother did the right thing.

I would have made the same choice.

Dropping her arm to her side, Blue's eyes examine more scars. I can tell her the story of each and every one.

When she looks up at me again, she tilts her head.

"I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours."

It was what she told me back when I first started coming to Myth to see her.

Banging on the door to the room has both our heads snapping in that direction.

"Time's up, Blue. Back to your cage."

I don't recognize the voice, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Blue may annoy the hell out of me, but I still feel the need to protect her.

She doesn't bother looking at me.

"Gotta go. I'll save the next three questions you owe me for later."

"Who the fuck was that?"

Finally, she turns. "Frank. He's the security guy who watches the rooms."

"There are time limits?"

Blue nods. "And if I don't leave here in the next minute or so, he'll be coming in after me. It's a security thing to make sure none of the girls are trapped and can't get to the button."

Sounds reasonable.

"How much longer do you have tonight?"

A wry smile curves her lips. "Can't wait to get me alone again so I can finish those questions?"

I smile right back, knowing something she doesn't know.

"Not at all. I'd just like to get some sleep tonight."

Her brows tug together with suspicion. “Why?”

“We’ve got a plane to catch. Tomorrow, we leave for Georgia.”

It’s too bad I can’t grab my phone in time to snap a picture.

The look on Blue’s face is priceless.

...

“Apparently, you’re as lost on the road as you are in your head, Champ. You missed the turn to the airport.”

Rolling my eyes, I refuse to respond to the barb.

Blue has been pissed off all morning that I ignored her damn questions last night on the ride home and locked her out of my bedroom when we got to my place.

Thankfully, Ezra and Emily were there and showed her the guest room where she could sleep.

Blue dived right back into the shit when we got in the car, and I’m intentionally ignoring her again.

Lying by omission as she calls it, I’ve yet to tell her what I learned a half hour ago.

“Why are we even leaving now? I thought we weren’t supposed to leave until later today with all your friends.”

Brow furrowing at that, I glance at her. “Who told you that?”

“Emily,” she says with a shrug, her attention focused out the passenger window.

Great.

Just fucking great.

Emily is the last person I want Blue talking to.

The woman who used to be my *home* knows way too much about me, and I prefer that information not be shared with the

woman who used to be my *escape*.

Now Blue is just my mistake, her constant questions annoying the shit out of me.

Do I owe her the answers?

Yes.

But I can't let those memories take over my head now that we're headed to meet Shane.

"Plans changed. So we're leaving a few hours early. The rest of the guys will fly down later tonight."

She glances at me. "It's going to be hard to fly when we missed the airport."

Letting out a heavy sigh, I keep my attention on the road.

"Wrong airport, Blue. We don't fly commercial."

Turning the wheel, I direct us down a road to the right, the private, executive airport coming into view.

Blue goes quiet beside me. I glance over and admire the purple top she's wearing. It's some material I can't name, loose and flowy over her arms and snug at her waist. The neckline dips low enough to give a peek at her ample chest.

Running my gaze lower, I admire a pair of jeans that are snug around her ass and hips yet wide through the legs.

Memories of her riding me come to mind, and I lose myself in the memory.

"If you don't watch the road, we'll never make it to the plane, not with the ditch you're about to drive into."

Eyes back to the road, I jerk the steering wheel left and curse beneath my breath. "Thanks."

Blue laughs softly. "It's okay to look. But you have a price to pay if you ever want to touch me again."

Fucking hell.

Why did I ever start this bullshit game?

“Listen, I get why you may not want to discuss the scars while driving, but we have a two hour flight and that gives us plenty of time—”

“Not a chance.”

Blue’s head snaps my direction. “Why not?”

“Because I need to keep my head clear for the rest of the day.”

I’ve been trying to think of how I can get around telling her the truth of what’s happened. Blue will lose her damn mind as soon as it comes out.

“What’s so important that you can’t answer my questions? And don’t lie to me, Damon. Eventually, I’ll find out.”

We pull up to a security booth, and I hand my identification to the attendant. Checking it over, he hands it back and nods. “Have a good day.”

Yeah, sure, buddy. That won’t be happening.

“What are you not telling me, Damon? Why are we rushing to Georgia early?”

She’s not going to like this.

Blue’s staring holes into the side of my face.

She won’t like it one bit.

Blue slaps at my shoulder to grab my attention.

She’s going to lose her shit.

“Will you please tell me what’s going on?”

Driving down the tarmac, Gabe’s plane comes into view. Blue is too busy staring at me to notice her surroundings.

“If I have to kick your ass to find out what’s going on—”

“Brinley’s been abducted,” I admit.

Blue stills in place, her eyes locked squarely on my face.

“What? That’s not possible. Is this just another game?”

I shake my head and look over at her.

“I’m not playing around this time. None of us are. When Shane and Brinley got to Georgia, she was abducted at gunpoint.”

Her expression falls, her body curling over itself as if she’d been stabbed in the heart.

Tears fall down her cheeks, and she swipes them away.

Finally turning her head to look at the plane, she hides her grief behind her usual bullshit.

“Should have known the snooty folk only travel by private plane. Let’s get out of here so I can find my friend and fix what you and your asshole cronies fucked up.”



Amélie

I'm sitting in the lap of luxury, my butt planted in the most comfortable chair I've ever felt, the soft leather of the armrests cool against my skin. Yet I can't enjoy any of it because I fucked up and betrayed my best friend.

Without saying a single word to Damon since he admitted what's going on, I followed him up the stairs to the plane, took my seat and tossed up a prayer to the universe that Brinley hasn't been harmed.

This is all my fault.

I should have told Damon to go fuck himself the night he asked for his favor. I should have run to Brinley immediately and warned her. Should have told Kane, and made Brinley call her dad.

One of them would have helped us.

We could have escaped.

But I was so terrified about another life on the run that I believed this would all be over after they talked to Brinley and let her go.

Because of me, she fell for their bullshit, too, and agreed to drive to Georgia with Shane. I don't understand how any of this happened. I just spoke with her yesterday, she sounded so happy, teasing Shane with the money he spent on her clothes and assuring me she was safe.

Who took her?

The governor?

Or someone else Damon hasn't told me about because he's the master of secrets, never giving up any information?

My anger meter hits red, and it feels like steam will erupt from my ears if I don't relieve some of this pressure.

A uniformed man steps out of the cockpit and smiles professionally.

“Miss Hart and Mr. Cross, I just want to let you know we're completing our flight checks now and will be taking off in a few minutes.”

Unable to help glaring at the man, I wonder why they can't hurry the hell up.

Brinley's in trouble. I need to get to her now.

But then my expression eases, and I give the man a half-hearted smile.

His shoulders relax.

“Thank you,” I say, not sure what the correct response is in these rich folk situations. Damon sure as hell isn't saying anything to help out.

The man nods his head then pivots to return to the cockpit.

It's not his fault. The man was just explaining the delay. He didn't cause the situation, and he's simply keeping us safe.

I spin the seat around to face Damon.

Because if anybody is to blame, it's this jackass.

“I have questions.”

He rolls his eyes but keeps his voice low. “Don't start this shit.”

“I'm not asking about your past, dickhead. I have more important people to worry about right now, so you're going to answer my damn questions. Who took Brinley?”

“Her father,” Damon snaps. “And some other guy named Scott.”

Everything in me relaxes, a weight lifting off my chest so I can breathe again.

“Then she wasn’t abducted.”

Thank fuck her dad finally figured out what’s been going on. Brinley hasn’t told me much about him, but I know he used to own some security firm. He most likely found out she was in danger with these guys and rescued her.

It doesn’t matter that they still have me.

I’ll be fine.

Just as long as Brinley isn’t hurt because of the stupid decisions I’ve made.

“She’s safe,” I breathe out, relaxing against my seat.

Back to ignoring Damon, I spin my chair around and watch out the window as the plane speeds down the tarmac and the lifts into the air at a steep angle.

“Apparently, Scott works for the governor.”

I’m too busy smiling and watching the earth turn into sky for his words to sink in.

“Did you hear me, Blue? Brinley isn’t safe. Her father is working with the governor.”

Dread falls into my stomach like a boulder when his words finally sink in.

Spinning back to face him, my voice shakes from the adrenaline trickling into my veins.

“But her father wouldn’t hurt her.”

Damon scoffs. “Then explain to me why he allowed some bulldog psychopath to walk her out of a hotel with a gun to her head?”

A gun?

To Brinley’s head?

How can a man who loves his daughter ever take a chance like that?

My thoughts go back to everything Damon told me the night we sat in the parking lot of my apartment.

The issue with their fathers.

The servers they can't find.

The flash drive I still haven't asked Kane about because I haven't had time.

Oh my god.

More memories rush back to me. Mostly of Brinley, of the comments she would make nonchalantly with her nose buried in her books.

She hasn't heard from her father much in the past year. Their relationship, which had been close at one time, has become almost non-existent.

Panic rushes inside me, and I find it hard to breathe.

My heart is doing funny things, the thumping too hard, worse than the days Kane and I were woken up to start running, worse than all the hours I've spent worrying about my life crumbling around me.

This is worse than the hatred I felt for Damon the night he demanded I betray a friend.

The beat of it is in my stomach, my feet, and my throat. The sound of rushing blood a white static that drowns out the sound of the plane's engine.

I unclip my seatbelt then push to my feet, not giving a damn that the plane hasn't leveled off yet, not giving a flying fuck that it feels like at any moment, I'll lose my balance.

This feeling isn't right, the questions and thoughts and worries colliding and bouncing like they never have before until all I want to do is tear at my hair to feel something besides my fear ... I want this plane back on the ground so I can open the fucking door and *run*.

For the first time, I sympathize with my mother, with what she must have felt every time she got that funny look in her

eyes and wouldn't listen to reason.

I called her crazy.

I swore she needed therapy.

Was I wrong?

The monsters are out to get you...

All the horrors of the world...

They can't find us here, baby. We're safe for now.

Damon stares at me, a mumbled curse falling over his lips when he unclips his seatbelt and walks across the plane to me.

The moment his hands gently grip my shoulders, I turn to him and break down in tears, the fears assaulting me so violently that I don't know whether to curl up in a ball or fight and scream.

I have nowhere I can run.

No way I can help her.

The monsters didn't get to me, they got to Brinley *because* of me.

Choosing to curl in a ball since there's no place to run, my knees give out from under me, and I fall to the ground.

Damon drops to the ground beside me, his presence too intense, his storm brewing so large that it blends with mine.

Kneeling down at my feet, he reaches up to cup the side of my face, his thumb wiping away a tear that's quickly replaced by another.

"She'll be okay, Blue. You should take a breath and calm down. We'll get her back."

"Get her back?" My eyes meet his. "Alive or dead, Damon? Can you tell me that?"

His eyes close slowly before opening again. "We'll get her back."

This is what my mother was always running from. This fate. This feeling of losing a person you desperately love and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

I tremble as sobs tear through my body. I'm losing my mind over this.

The fear is all-consuming.

Damon's voice is a soft murmur beneath the thoughts screaming in my head, the rush of blood in my ears. But it's not his voice that I need right now. I need something more.

"Damn it, Blue. You need to trust me. For once in your fucking life, trust one person to help you."

His voice is a roar now, breaking through the haze.

Trust him?

After everything he's done?

How can I trust the person who made me betray Brinley in the first place?

I shake my head, flat-out refusing.

He's exactly the type of person I should never trust. And for this exact reason. I was right to never let him close. I was right about every man I've ever known.

Regardless of everything I knew not to do in this situation, I still let him get to me a teeny tiny bit. And look where I am now? On some silver-spoon shitting, rich guy's plane, flying over I don't know how many states, on the way to Georgia to save my best friend.

A gun?

Please let her be alive.

If this is another one of the universe's screwed-up jokes, nothing about it is funny.

A keening sound leaks out of me at the thought Brinley could already be dead.

“For fuck’s sake,” he grinds out between clenched teeth. “I bet you have questions. Don’t you, Blue? An entire list of them written on a never-ending scroll somewhere in your annoying head. Why don’t I answer them now? Don’t you want to know? How many were left? Three?”

He pauses as he gathers me to him, his shoulders rising and falling with his breath. His heart beating nearly as hard as mine against my ear.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Isn’t that what you said?”

I don’t answer.

I can’t.

“The scar from my knee to my ankle,” he says, the tone of his voice bitter and sharp. “It was given to me by Tanner’s dad. He took a knife to my leg and dragged it down because my brother refused to fight. I felt my skin split open, slowly, while those bastards laughed. Ezra fought the other guy. He lost because he was too busy worrying about how badly I was bleeding, but he fought to stop them. They stitched me up right there, Blue. With no painkillers or anything. I was forced to walk around the following two weeks like nothing had ever happened.”

Those fucking bastards!

Fury slithers up my spine, for what’s happening to Brinley and what happened to him. It’s like two twin snakes fighting to see which one will reach the top first.

I want to kill whoever put a gun to her head. I want to beat the shit out of Brin’s father. I want to laugh as that piece of shit governor is hauled off to jail, but mostly I want to spit on the graves of the men who’ve caused all of this.

Every last one.

Blood rushes to my face, the heat of it coloring my cheeks. I push up from the ground to capture’s Damon’s angry gaze

with mine and our emotions collide together into a tumultuous storm of combined turmoil, rage and hatred.

He nods at me as if he approves of what he sees.

“That’s right, Blue. Hold on to that anger because it’s the only thing that’s going to get you through this.”

The plane dips suddenly and my stomach feels five miles above my body, turbulence knocking us together so that Damon’s arms tighten around me in something I’ve never felt before.

Protection.

Nope, I think immediately, I’m not buying it. Believing he protects anybody but himself is what got me into this mess in the first place.

I have to force my anxiety back, have to will my breathing to slow despite my rapid heart rate. I have to think of something else besides the entire world crushing in around me.

Fluffy kittens aren’t cutting it.

Neither are Christmas movies or rainbows.

Then the thought of kicking Damon’s ass comes to mind, and a small smile tugs at my lips. But even that thought is fleeting after hearing what was done to him.

But there are other asses to kick.

Slowly, the thoughts stop colliding and bouncing, and they form into a single-minded focus and a linear line.

“Anger, huh?” I swipe away the tears in a piss-poor effort to dry my cheek. “Is it anger that helped you survive all those scars?”

He nods his head and swallows. I follow the way his Adam’s apple dips down, notice the strain of the tendons in his neck. Damon’s body is rock-solid, but his hands tremble. Not that anybody would know it. You’d have to be touching him to know.

“How did you walk? If they cut you from knee to ankle, how—”

“They never cut deep enough to injure the muscle. Just the skin.”

“That man at your house, the night you took me there, you told me he’s your father.”

Another nod, this one slow, more careful. “What about him?”

“He just let his friends do those things to you?”

It takes him a few seconds to answer, anger rolling behind his eyes so hot that the amber almost glows. His pupils dilate and contract, the vein at his temple steadily pulsing.

“He made money off it. They all did.”

Rage pulses in me, too. For what he was put through, for the secrets he’s been forced to keep, and because that those sadistic bastards now have Brinley.

“Please tell me you tossed that fat fuck out of your house. Tell me you tossed him out hard enough that he slid across the concrete and got road rash.”

Damon’s lips pull into a thin line.

“He won’t show up at my house again.”

“Good. Because the next time he shows up and I’m around, I want to be the one to use my fingernails to dig out his bloodshot eyes and feed them to him.”

Silence.

Damon pulls away from me and I stare at him wondering if I said too much.

But what person wouldn’t want to kill his father? I change the subject, trying to keep him with me.

Keep the anger alive.

“How much did they make off you? And how long did this fighting shit go on?”

He sits back and kicks his legs out over the floor. We're still sitting shoulder to shoulder—still have some connection—but I can tell he's pulling away and shutting down again, his walls rebuilding brick by impenetrable brick.

“It started in high school and didn't stop until our last year in college. I have no idea how much they made, but I'm sure it was in the millions. They took us away for it every other weekend.”

It shouldn't be possible, but my heart splits open, one side beating for Damon and the other for Brinley.

“This entire thing is my fault,” I admit.

Since we're sharing and all.

“Brinley wouldn't be in this position if it weren't for me.”

My voice dies off, thoughts bouncing in my head again. “If I had just told you to fuck off with the favor you asked—”

“We still would have found her.” His eyes meet mine. “This isn't your fault. What I said to you to force the favor ... it was—”

“Wrong?”

Sliding my fingertip down his arm, I trace another scar, this one smaller but still raised. “Was this a knife as well?”

I want to keep him talking, even if it's not for the most altruistic reasons. I need something besides the worry and pain I feel for Brinley now.

Please ... Please let her still be alive.

A quick glance at the scar then Damon shakes his head.

“No. That one was from a sharp edge of an old desk.”

There's more to that story, but judging by the look on his face, he's not interested in telling it.

Straightening my body and my legs, I sit in the same position as him, hoping Mr. Snooty Pants pilot doesn't wander

out here wondering why we've chosen to sit on the floor instead of the seats.

"I hate your family ... well ... not your friends. Not yet. Brinley sounded happy when you all let me talk to her before we left."

Laughter bubbles up inside me, breaking apart some of the worry and rage. "I can't believe he spent so much money on clothes for her. I should high-five him for that."

That gets Damon to laugh, even if it's only a soft chuckle.

"Yeah," he says, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I have a feeling Shane's got it bad for her."

That's good, I think.

It means Shane should be angry, too.

People generally say that anger is a negative emotion, one that should be avoided because it never solves anything.

But I think those people are wrong.

Anger, when used properly, is a strength. It gives a person a reason to change the horrible problems in the world and eventually make the world a better place.

"I still hate you," I admit. "Because of your secrets."

He looks over at me and laughs again. This time a real laugh, his mouth pulling into such a brilliant smile that I glimpse the other side of him. Who he might be if not for what was done on those weekends.

"Oh yeah, well I'm not your biggest fan either, Blue."

Blinking my eyes at that, I ask, "Why not? What the hell did I do?"

"You're annoying, and you ask too many questions."

I nod my head. I can accept that.

"Meh, I'll end up growing on you."

Our eyes lock, the green flecks in his eyes dancing with humor.

“Sure you will, like a damn tumor.”

I’ll take it.

Nudging his shoulder with mine, I try to make light of the situation.

“Hey Champ, guess what.”

He eyes me with suspicion. “What?”

A wide grin stretches my lips. “I still have two questions left.”

Groaning, he drops his weight to lie down on the floor.

I lay beside him.

If this is how the snooty folk ride on their super fancy private planes, I need to learn the proper protocol.



Damon

Thankfully, Blue was quiet when we landed in Georgia. After meeting up with Shane, she could tell that it wasn't a time for jokes or her usual sarcastic comments.

All three of us are on the warpath, but there's not much that can be done when we have no idea where Brinley was taken.

Arriving at the hotel, I keep a careful eye on Blue.

Normally, this would be a time for her to comment on what she calls the *snooty* lifestyle, but instead, she walks behind Shane and me without saying a word, her eyes taking in the luxury of the hotel.

It's not until we reach the suite we'll be staying in that Blue can't help but pipe up.

Fortunately, she keeps her comments on point, her worry for Brinley pouring out until I'm drowning in it.

This is my fault...

Her words from the plane repeat in my head when I know it's not her fault ... it's mine.

I'm to blame for returning to Myth over and over.

I'm to blame for making a deal with Blue just so I could keep her.

I'm to blame for thinking I could keep her a secret after taking her to my house.

Once Priest learned about Blue, it was over.

I should have known he'd go running to Shane.

If I hadn't killed my father ... we wouldn't all be standing here right now.

It's not your fault ...

That's what I told her.

I'm the one who should be shouldering the blame.

What I'm starting to learn about Blue is that she's not the type to let one person carry the weight of any problem. Whether it be current or in the past, whatever a person struggles with, she insists on carrying it with them.

As far as admirable traits, she has a few that are more than I've ever known in another person.

Blue has compassion.

She has strength.

Her loyalty is solid.

But for all the good qualities she has, there is a dark spot in her that I'm beginning to understand.

She can't trust.

Not me anyway.

And I know that's my fault just like all the other problems.

When Blue trusts somebody, she loves them. Her heart opens up and takes them in. She would give her life to help them.

Blue doesn't cry when she looks at my scars like Emily did; she makes me face them. She stands in that storm, and she offers to fight the battles with me that I've been too weak to battle on my own.

Maybe that's my irritation with her.

The true reason she annoys me.

By dragging out my nightmares and not moving when my anger erupts, Blue is showing me where I'm weak. There she

stands in that storm, sure-footed and strong. She doesn't run away or let the anger control her—not like it does me.

Blue doesn't tell me she's sorry for what happened to me. She demands I get up, that I keep fighting. But instead of fighting against myself, she demands I fight for what's best for me for once.

That's a hard lesson to learn.

And this woman has been teaching it to me since day one.

We reach the penthouse suite. Blue looks around, her feet hesitant as she moves. I can tell she feels out of place, and I can't stand that about her.

The woman is worth more than she realizes, yet she allows the world to beat her down until she believes she's less than everybody else.

Although I'm not surprised, not after reading the information Taylor was able to find on Blue. She spent a lifetime running from one place to another, never allowed to establish roots. The number of schools she attended made it clear her mother never stayed in one place for long, which meant she never held down a decent job.

How Blue ended up in college is a mystery to me, especially a prestigious one. I'm sure the hours she spends dancing in that damn cage and the games she runs on abusive men is a necessity to pay her expenses.

I wanted to change that with our deal. But then I fucked up and got Priest involved.

Once Brinley is found and we have that problem solved, the next will be fixing what I've done.

Shane shows us which room he's picked for himself then tells us we have our pick of the other three bedrooms in the suite.

Blue and I glance at each other and silently decide to choose separate rooms. We're each going different directions when Blue's voice shatters the tense silence in the suite.

“What about everybody else?”

She knows the rest of my friends are coming to Georgia later tonight when Gabe’s plane returns home to pick them up.

Shane glances at me then back to Blue, answering her question before I have the chance.

“They’ll get another suite of rooms.”

“And Brinley will need a room,” Blue adds her violet eyes dancing between Shane and me. Her voice is so full of hope that it cracks the shell around my heart. “When we get her back.”

Spoken like a statement, but really, it’s another one of her questions.

Shane’s lips pull into a thin line, and I look away to stare out the large picture window into the parking lot.

Neither of us have an answer.

Shane retreats to his room after telling Blue the rest of the Inferno should arrive in about five hours. He leaves Blue and me alone in the main space of the large suite, and I can barely look at her.

I hate the sound of hope.

The look of it.

How it brightens someone’s eyes even when all signs point to the worst possible outcome.

To be hopeful is to be brave. Despite the ever-darkening tunnel, hope is the light that not many people can bear to see. It’s the hopeful who keep fighting their way through that tunnel, believing they’ll find their way out of the darkness, even when that tunnel is collapsing down around them.

Maybe to be hopeful is also to be stupid. To be delusional. To be irrational. The last evil in Pandora’s Box, hope digs into your heart, claws itself into place, and never lets go. It rips away at you, and you’re left with a large gaping hole where your heart used to be.

Blue is braver than me.

But then I've already learned not to hope.

I hoped for too many years that those weekends would end. And by the time they did, my heart was a blackened, festering mess with walls built around it that nobody could access.

I once thought Emily could get past those walls, but looking back, she was always outside of them.

Sympathetic, but never fighting with me.

It's Blue who's been tearing my walls down brick by painful brick with all her damn questions. Regardless of what nightmare I face, she grits her teeth and balls her hands into fists, right there by my side to face whatever threatens me.

Maybe I've been a little hard on her.

After her panic attack on the plane, I finally witnessed the battles she fights on her own.

Two are better than one, I've heard.

If she's willing to fight the nightmares that haunt me, I need her to trust me so I can help her battle her own.

"You sure you want separate rooms? It's not like we've never seen each other naked before."

Attempting to sound light-hearted, I fight the urge to tell her she's sharing with me whether she likes it or not.

Gently, she pushes a stray hair from her face.

"How many more people are coming?"

"I assume Ezra and Emily, so they'll take a room in here. Tanner and Luca will stay together. So will Gabriel and Ivy. Then there's Taylor, Sawyer, Jase." My voice gets softer when I mentally calculate the numbers. "Mason and Ava will share a room, too."

Scratching my head, I think out loud.

"Sounds like we'll need more than two suites—"

“Brinley can bunk with me when we get her back. So I need a room to myself. You know, for when that happens.”

If that happens, I don't say.

And most likely, once Shane gets his hands on Brinley, she'll be staying with him. That man won't risk letting her out of his sight.

“I'll just take this one,” she says, grabbing the bag she packed at her apartment yesterday morning when I broke in. Casting me one last look, she disappears into the room, then the door closes with a soft click.

Meanwhile, I'm left standing in the living room by myself, feeling like a complete dick for how I've treated her.

That woman is in her room, battling her demons all by herself.

That won't happen anymore.

Not when I can be in there to help fight them with her.

Crossing the living room, I knock on her door.

“Leave me alone, Damon.”

There's no way in hell I'm doing that. I try the handle to find that it's locked.

“Blue, open the damn door.”

“I said—“

You know what?

Fuck this shit.

Kicking the door, I bust the frame where the cheap lock held. It swings open. Blue is sitting on the edge of her bed, staring back at me with narrowed eyes.

“Do you have no concept of what it means to respect another person's privacy?”

“Not when it comes to you, I don't.”

Pushing to her feet, she storms in my direction to slam both hands against my chest to shove me out. I stare down at her, and the corner of my mouth quirks up.

I step forward and her feet slide back.

“I think when it comes to who’s physically stronger, I’ve got you beat by a long shot.”

Her voice is strained as she continues trying to shove me back.

“Just get the fuck out, Damon.”

“Not until we’re done.”

Her gaze flicks up to mine. “Done with what?”

“You have more questions. Or have you forgotten?”

“This isn’t the time for this,” she barks.

Gripping her wrists in my hands, I lock them together and hold Blue in place in front of me.

“This is exactly the time for this. You have scars, and so do I. Except, this time, the game changes.”

Giving her a minute to find out she’s not wrestling herself free of my hold, I stifle my laughter when she blows out a breath and her shoulders slump.

“What’s the new game? I probably don’t want to play it.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. A memory for a memory.”

After a few tries, I finally take pity on Blue and allow her to tug her wrists from my hold. She crosses her arms and glares up at me.

“That’s it? I get to keep my clothes on this time?”

I rub at the back of my neck. “I mean, it’s not mandatory, but I won’t object if you feel the need to strip down or anything.”

“Very funny.”

A few seconds pass before she sighs heavily and turns to walk to the bed.

“Three questions?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you think now is a good time to run through the hellscape of both of our pasts?” She turns to look at me. “What about Brinley?”

“We can’t do anything about Brinley until the rest of the group arrives. So you can either spend that time worrying yourself to death about what’s going on in the present, or we can pass the time by talking about what occurred in our pasts.”

At that, she chuckles.

“I guess. What else is there to do?”

I round the bed then drop my weight down on the mattress.

“Damn good choice, since I wasn’t really giving you one to begin with.”

Blue attempts to sit primly on her side of the bed, but I reach over, snatch her by the loop on her jeans then tug her down with me.

“We don’t need to be cuddling, but I’m not playing this hating me bullshit, either. I won’t bite unless you ask, so you might as well lie down and get comfortable.”

She shuffles into her spot, making sure not to touch me.

“Who goes first?” I ask.

Rolling to her side to look at me, she blinks her violet eyes.

“What about the scar caused by the edge of a desk? You never went into detail about that one.”

I close my eyes and try to block out the images but then remember I won’t be the only one fighting them.

It got your brother to fight...

Next time, you won’t be so lucky...

It takes several breaths for me to find the words to explain what I'm seeing. Thankfully, this memory isn't the worst one, but it was the first moment I knew those weekends would only get worse for Ezra and me.

My teeth grind, and I swallow hard, forcing the words out that cling to my throat and tongue. It's as if just saying them will free the darker memories from my locked box.

"Ezra and I were dragged off every other weekend for fights. You know stupid shit. Men wanting to get their rocks off by beating on teenagers or some shit. It was easier to convince me to play along. There was already so much anger inside me—so much hatred for my father—that I always saw it as a way to blow off steam."

A particularly difficult memory assaults me, a vision of Ezra on his knees, two men holding him back while he was screaming.

"Ezra didn't want to play along. It's not that he had an issue with fighting, he just didn't want to make our dad money with our blood, you know?"

Blue's hand inches across the mattress to hold mine when I hesitate to keep going.

Gripping her fingers with mine, she helps me fight against the urge to chase the memories away like the events never happened. To shut up and keep it all bottled inside.

"There was an old office leading off from the warehouse where the fights took place." My words stutter to a stop in my head, but I force them out anyway. "One night when Ezra wouldn't fight, they dragged me into the office and bent me over a desk..."

It got your brother to fight...

Stop crying!

Blue gasps and rolls over to face me. Anger swirls behind her eyes. "Tell me those bastards didn't—"

“Not that night. Not this scar. The threat alone was enough for Ezra to fight. The edge of the old desk was sharp and cut me. That’s where this one is from.”

Scooting closer, Blue lays her head on my chest. I wrap my fingers into her hair, slowly brushing down the length of it. I breathe in the scent of her.

It calms me.

A few minutes pass with us sitting in silence. I think she’s not going to respond when she finally talks.

“I haven’t spoken to my mother in over a year.”

My hands stop moving for a bare second.

Surprised at her words, I continue stroking her hair, even when I can’t make sense of them.

“You love your mom.”

“I do. And I would do anything for her. But I can’t help thinking that her insanity is because of me. Kind of like how Ezra fought to protect you, I think she kept running because of me.”

Interest piqued, I carefully choose a response and fight not to demand more information. It rubs me the wrong way to be careful, but Blue needs to trust me. That won’t happen if I lose my shit every time she opens up.

“Why do you think that?”

She traces a fingertip along the curve of my bicep.

“Kane told me Mom wasn’t as crazy when he was little. They stayed in one place as far as he can remember. It wasn’t until I was born that she quit her job and moved us. I don’t remember anything because I was just a baby, but it kept getting worse as I grew up.” Blue blows out a steady breath. “Maybe that’s how mental illness works. I don’t know.”

That’s still not enough information. “So why do you think it’s about you if it’s just her mental illness?”

Blue's quiet for too long, her voice pained when she admits, "Because when Kane sent me away to college, Mom stopped running. They've lived in the same place for two years."

I need to meet Kane.

Fuck if it's intrusive in Blue's life.

If there's danger circling Blue, I need to know about it.

Her body shakes with quiet sobs, and my shirt feels wet beneath where she's laying her head.

"I fucked Mom's life up, and now I've probably gotten Brinley killed.

My teeth clench and my jaw tics from the effort. "It's not your fault. And Brinley's not dead."

"You don't know that," she argues.

"No, I don't know."

My grip tightens in her hair.

"But what's the likelihood her father would kill her? If he wanted her dead, he could have showed up at her school at any time."

Blue snuffles. "Yeah. Right there in the middle of the library where she always hides."

"He could have invited her for lunch," I say, wincing at realizing what I just suggested.

"You mean like I did?"

"Only because I forced you to."

"Yeah, I remember now why I hate you. Thanks for that."

Soft laughter shakes my chest. "I never claimed to be a good guy, Blue. And I won't start that bullshit now."

"No worries. I knew you were an asshole the first night I saw you."

I know nothing about you. But what I see in you is familiar...

My hand flattens on her back, and I close my eyes as the memory surfaces.

“I take it you’ve met my type before?”

“Sure have,” she answers. “And if you would have listened then, we might not be in this situation.”

I roll my head over the pillow to look down at the top of her head. “The Brinley thing would have happened whether I listened or not. Just because of who her dad is.”

Blue rolls to her back, the low neckline of her shirt struggling to keep her tits in place. My eyes lock on her body, admiring the view.

“That’s not the situation I’m talking about.”

I’m too damn tired to try to figure out what thoughts are rolling through her head this time.

“You’ll have to help me out here, Blue. I’m not following.”

Arching her back in a way that makes my dick jump, she looks up at me.

“We wouldn’t be sharing battle scars because you’re trying to find a way to apologize for being an asshole.”

The corner of my mouth curls into a smirk. “Yeah, well, maybe things would have gone a little easier if you weren’t such a crazy bitch all the time.”

Blue grins. “What can I say? You drag it out of me.”

I smile at that, remembering the bruise she left on my cheek the night she kicked me and the bruise blooming on my jaw now from her impressive right hook.

“So are we sharing a room tonight or what?”

“That depends,” she answers, flattening her body back down on the mattress.

“On what?”

“Whether or not you can keep your hands where they belong.”

My brows tug together. “It’s not like we haven’t fucked already. From what I remember, you liked it.”

“I also like to keep it behind closed doors.”

Glancing across the room at the door listing on its hinges, I groan and my head falls back against the pillow.

“Maybe you should be more patient next time, Champ. You fucked everything up when you first walked in here.”

Fuck that shit.

Nothing is stopping me from stripping her down and having my way with her.

Blue laughs. “Too bad. It could have been fun.”

“It can still be fun,” I answer.

“How?”

Sometimes it pays off to arrive before everyone else.

I push up from the bed to climb to my feet. After grabbing Blue’s bag, I reach down to pull her up, my mouth to her ear before she’s fully balanced.

“We’re switching rooms,” I say on a laugh. “Ezra and Emily can have this one.”

Blue laughs and follows along behind me. “How do we explain the door?”

“We don’t. That sounds like a *them* problem, Blue. And definitely not an *us* problem.”

We cross through the living room, and it hits me that Blue and I have become *us*.

I’m not sure how to feel about that.



Amélie

Damon and I didn't share more stories once we changed rooms. Our hands were on each other, our clothes tugged off. He worshiped my body with everything he had, but I still wouldn't let him have the one thing he wanted.

Can I kiss you, Blue?

He'd practically begged.

I refused, a small voice inside me saying that while Damon might be sharing a few of his nightmares, there are ones that he still keeps to himself—ones that he's not ready to reveal because we both have the same demons.

Trust.

It's a simple word. One syllable. Nothing a third grader or maybe even younger wouldn't be able to comprehend.

But it's meaning runs deep to our core.

When we trust, we hand over everything to the people we deem worthy. Everything. Our lives, our hopes, our dreams, our shames, our victories and our fears. And yet even though trust should be rock solid, there's always a small part that remains fragile. One bad decision. One wrong word. And it falls apart.

I sure as hell don't trust Damon, and he doesn't trust me. But for a moment I thought that we were trying.

At least until a knock at my door wakes me up, the bed empty beside me.

My eyes open, still hazy from sleep, and I glance at the window to see that the sun hasn't yet lifted over the horizon. The sky is an ombré mix of colors, dark on top, to twilight

purple, to a rich gold that spread its wings out from a center of pure light.

“Ames, are you up?”

Another knock.

“Can we come in?”

A female voice, but I don't quite recognize it. Keeping all of his friends straight in my head hasn't been easy.

Tugging the blanket up to cover my chest, I'm thankful for refusing to fall asleep naked. Just in case Brinley came back ... or we learned where she was and had to rush to save her.

“Ames?”

“Yes,” I answer, attempting to finger brush my hair into some semblance of control.

The door pops open, then a face peers in.

“I'm Luca, Tanner's girlfriend.”

Thank god she introduced herself. I've already forgotten all their names.

Stepping in, she opens the door wider so that another woman can walk in. Emily. Ezra's girlfriend. We've met a few times now, so I recognize her, at least.

“Mind if we come in and talk?”

I take it they aren't waiting for an answer to that question since they're already halfway into the room. Both take seats at the end of my bed.

Once the sleepy haze dissipates, panic rushes in.

“Is Brinley okay? Have they found her? Where's Damon?”

The questions rush out before I can stop them.

Sympathy is written in Luca's eyes and careful expression. She's a decent person, quiet but observant. I noticed that much about her at the meeting we had when the rest of Damon's friends arrived. Emily is just as sympathetic, but something

about her rubs me the wrong way. She watches me a little too closely.

“They found Brinley.”

My heart pounds at the good news, and I want my arms around my best friend, holding her so that I know she’s safe.

“Where is she?”

Why didn’t Damon bring her to me immediately?

“Where’s Damon?”

Luca places her hand on my shoulder. “They’re on their way back home. We’ll take Gabe’s plane later today when it returns.”

I hate to feel anguish over this.

I should be relieved that Brinley’s alive, that she’s okay and we have her back.

But Damon promised to let me know if they found her.

Maybe...

Leaning over the bed, I grab my phone. No notifications pop up on the screen. Hoping there was a glitch, I log in to my phone, checking the texts and calls ... Nothing.

Glancing over at Luca, my shoulders slump and the disappointment must be clear in my expression.

“They had to leave,” Emily explains, her words rushed because they’re trying to excuse what Damon has done.

My eyes snap to Luca. “But you got a call, right?”

“Well, it was Tanner’s phone. Shane called.”

Eyes over to Emily. “And you got a call?”

She looks away, unable to face what I’m implying. “Yes, well, kind of,” she says, her fingers twisting and tugging at an errant string on the bedspread. “Ezra texted.”

As if that makes it better.

Damon told me he had to stay in the living room and babysit Shane. He told me he'd wake me up if they found her. We exchanged phone numbers just in case he had to leave in a hurry.

Damon said he'd get in touch with me.

He has his phone.

Yet he didn't.

Finding Brinley was important to me. My heart was breaking apart more and more as the hours wore on, knowing she was with some guy who held a gun to her head. He knew what this meant to me. I told him about my fears.

Yet ... nothing.

Trust is such a fickle thing.

So delicate and easily broken.

It's agony when trust is shattered and the pieces of your heart with it.

I knew better than to hope.

To trust.

Damon shattered what little trust I had in him.

Shaking off those thoughts, I attempt to hide my disappointment behind a weak smile. I don't know these women well, so I'll play along that everything is okay.

"Great. When do you think we'll be leaving? What time is it?"

Another glance at the window tells me it must be some ridiculous hour in the morning.

Luca and Emily share a look before their eyes are back on me.

"Well," Luca answers, "it's around six now, but they called a few hours earlier. We just wanted to let you sleep some before bothering you."

Is she fucking joking?

For hours I've worried that my only friend in life may be dead somewhere with a bullet in her head, and they didn't want to bother me?

Emily fidgets with that damn string and murmurs, "Damon, huh? How are things, you know ... how is it dating him?"

My brow furrows. Is she serious with this question?

"We're not dating."

They share a look again. It's difficult to read what they're thinking. Both of these women are clearly practiced in hiding their emotions.

"So it was just the deal with him?" Luca asks.

Oh, I get it. They're one big happy family of friends, gossip spreads quickly, and I'm the newbie they're attempting to figure out.

"Sorry, I'm sure you both are really nice people, but if you're attempting to find out if I'll be around for family vacations and holidays, the answer is no. Damon and I had a complicated ... thing ... but it's not permanent."

In fact, it's over already.

All he had to do was pick up a phone.

But he didn't.

Luca's eyes widen a touch. "That's not what we're doing. We're checking in on you."

Okay. Now I'm confused.

"Why would you need to check on me?"

For the third time, they look at each other before their attention is on me. This is getting aggravating.

"Listen, can you two just spit out whatever it is you want to ask? It's really early. I'm still half-asleep, and I need to think through everything that's happened in the last few days."

Luca's lips pull into a funny twist, but she blows out a breath in surrender.

“Okay, we just want to know why Damon has a new bruise on his jaw and if you're the one who put it there.”

I nod my head.

“I'll take credit for that bruise and the one he had a few weeks ago. He's got the wrong one if he thinks he can insult me or order me around. He decided to break into my apartment, and I punched him for it.”

Again, they look at each other. What is with these two? Do they share a brain?

Both sets of eyes are back on me. “Yep. You're one of us. Consider yourself officially part of the Inferno.”

What?

No.

I'm not a joiner, and once all this bullshit is figured out, I'm not planning on sticking around.

Damon is too much of a loose cannon.

On top of that, he has a habit of saying one thing and doing another. I'm not sure why I even got involved with him in the first place. I recognized he was damaged from day one.

Damn my bleeding heart.

I don't usually have a habit of picking up strays, but my curiosity lowered my usual defenses, and Damon slipped right in.

“I'm not part of anything. I'm not sure what you have been told, but once this stuff with the governor is figured out—“

“So you're telling us you have no feelings for Damon?”

Emily stares at me with expectant eyes. Unfortunately for her, I have nothing interesting to tell her. Not that I'm one to kiss and tell in the first place.

“You care because?”

“Because Damon has been through,” Emily pauses, carefully choosing her words. “A lot.”

She’s right about that, but I won’t nod in agreement. What Damon told me is in a locked vault. He confided in me, and those stories are his to tell. I’ll never betray that.

“Okay.”

Eyeing me like she’s attempting to figure me out, Emily eventually nods her head and speaks with a gentle voice.

“I just thought you should know that. He’s a great guy. One of the best. He just has some issues and we worry about him —“

“Let me stop you there. I’m here because of Brinley and all this governor stuff. Once that’s resolved, I’m out. You don’t have anything to worry about between Damon and me.”

It hurts to admit.

A hell of a lot more than it should.

“That’s a shame,” Luca answers. “Like Emily said, he’s a great guy. You simply need to see past the walls he puts up.”

Walls?

I want to laugh.

What Damon has built around his mind and heart is an impenetrable fortress, with one narrow passageway used to shoot arrows at any person who dares attempt to walk through.

I believe he’s a great person. I’ve seen that side of him in rare moments. But trusting him is too difficult for me. Especially if he can’t keep his word.

“Okay, well...”

Both of their expressions shatter as if they’re upset about my response.

“We should get going,” Luca says as she pushes to her feet with Emily following along with her. “The plane should be here in a few hours to pick us up.”

“Great. Then I can grab Brinley, and we can go home.”

They stop in their tracks and turn back to me. Luca must be the spokesperson because she does most of the talking.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Not until we work out the problem with the governor. He’s probably looking for both of you right now. And if he finds you—“

“He’ll what? Torture us for information?”

She shakes her head. “You’re not understanding. How much has Damon told you about us?”

Unsure if Damon was allowed to tell me anything, I play dumb. All the events over the past couple of days has set me on edge.

Missing servers.

The flash drive.

Cars blowing up and a corrupt governor.

Oh! Eight shitty fathers who enjoyed torturing their kids.

It’s all very James Bond movies, and my brain is on overdrive. I have no idea who knows what, who’s lying or telling the truth, or whose pen is actually a teeny tiny gun used for discreet assassinations.

To keep myself out of this shit, I know nothing.

It’s as simple as that.

I shrug and purse my lips. “He hasn’t told me much of anything.”

My mattress shifts from their weight dropping down onto the end of the bed again. Luca takes up her usual spokesperson role.

“We’re planning lunch by the pool tomorrow at my place. If Brinley and you would like to join, it’ll just be us girls. That way we can explain everything to both of you without the guys around.”

Lunch by the pool.

I mean, I've seen it in movies and magazines and stuff, but I've never actually attended one.

"Sounds good," I say with a too-wide smile. Playing along with all this is becoming one hell of a chore.

"Great." Luca and Emily both give me too-wide smiles, and I feel a little better about myself for not being the only one pretending.

They finally leave, then I catch a few more hours of sleep before the plane shows up.

The flight home is uncomfortable with small little groupings here and there, behind the hand comments and whispered conversations.

They all acknowledged me and said hello, so it's not that I'm being ignored, it's just that I ended up in a seat in the back that has an empty one next to it.

With all these people, the plane is packed, and I didn't have any better options.

Not that I mind.

The less people talk to me, the less they can ask me questions.

The flight takes two hours, and as soon as I step off the stairs and onto the tarmac, an arm wraps through mine, and a mischievous voice whispers against my ear.

"When are you planning on telling the truth about what's happening between you and Damon?"

Glancing up, a pair of sparkling green eyes stare down at me, a smile gracing the guy's lips that should make any person call bullshit. It takes a liar to know one, and this guy's smile tells me there's more going on inside his head that I probably don't want to know about.

Still, he's gorgeous, and I'm sure he uses that to his advantage. All of them are. But none of them call to me like

Damon, my expression falling at the mention of his name. None of them are as ... damaged.

Damn it.

After realizing that hard truth, I need to take a better look at myself and my shitty taste in men.

My fake smile fails me at the mention of Damon's name.

I'd hoped to wake up to a text before we left the hotel and drove to the plane. There was nothing. Then I let a little hope sneak in again during the flight thinking he might text me before we landed. Nothing.

While walking arm-in-arm with a guy whose name I can't remember, I shrug my shoulders at the thought that I'm not as important to Damon as I'd started to believe.

Green eyes study me curiously as we approach two limousines. Luca beckons for me to ride in her car, but he waves her on and looks down at me.

"You'll be riding with the boys back to Tanner's place. I hope that doesn't bother you."

I'm not liking this idea.

From what I've already seen of the boys at the meeting they held at the hotel, all nine of them are insanely intelligent, and they play off each other perfectly, like a coordinated orchestra.

"Why can't I just go with the girls?" I force my usual smile and he smiles again in response.

"Forgive me, love, but I've been sent to abduct you for the ride. The boys and I, let's just say we have ... questions."

Fuck...

I'm led to the limousine while he talks pleasantly about the weather. My nerves are too on edge to pay much attention to what he's saying or to care. I'm more worried about the questions.

I feel like I'm being led to an interrogation room where they'll strap me up to a lie detector machine and pull a bright light out of nowhere to shine on me before asking where I've been and if I have any alibis.

Tucked into the car next to a guy with blond hair to his shoulders, a true smile and bloodshot eyes with heavy lids, I breathe a little easier, knowing the guy is stoned.

He shouldn't be too much of a problem. But when Green Eyes takes the seat on my other side, I realize I'm trapped between them with no access to a door should I decide it's a better option to toss myself out of a moving car than to continue answering their ... questions.

Looking forward, my stomach twists in knots to see two faces staring back at me, especially the one directly in front of me with black hair and dark green eyes that are locked on me. He doesn't smile.

I'm at a disadvantage, so I attempt to ease the awkward tension in the car by figuring out who they are.

"You all will have to forgive me, but I forget your names."

The one straight across from me finally grins.

"I'm Tanner." He gestures to the guy sitting next to him. "This is Jase, and the two beside you are Sawyer and Gabriel."

"Weren't there more of you?"

Gabriel leans over until his shoulder is pressed to mine. "Shane, Taylor, Ezra and Damon are already at Tanner's house, and Mason is driving Shane's car back from Georgia with Ava."

Okay. Well, that's all the small talk I have to delay the inevitable.

The car lurches forward, and Tanner continues staring at me. "What's going on with you and Damon?"

Damn.

Why are they so interested in this? Can't two people fuck without being questioned about it?

“We're ... friends.” When he keeps staring, I add, “With benefits.”

There. I've covered everything.

Tanner leans back in his seat, his eyes narrowing a touch like there's more I'm not telling him.

Gabriel nudges my shoulder again and says, “It's not that we have a problem with you. So, don't take it that way—”

“Why did Damon give you ten grand for a deal?” Tanner asks, interrupting Gabriel, who I would much rather talk to. Tanner makes my asshole pucker. Something about him is off.

This part I can answer because it's not one of the secrets Damon confided in me.

“I was having a hard time getting my manager at work off my back. Damon offered me the money to help me out. Or at least I thought that's what he was doing.”

With a softer voice, Gabriel asks, “And now what do you think he was doing?”

I turn to look at him, mesmerized by the clear green color of his eyes. “Using me to get to Brinley.”

They all share glances, some unspoken thoughts and ideas being passed along that drives me mad.

“Just say what you all are thinking instead of the staring contest.”

All eyes are back on me, and I instantly regret the outburst.

Tanner relaxes more against his seat.

“Damon didn't want a favor for the deal. We found out about the deal, and we demanded it. That's what has us so confused. Normally, deals are made with a specific favor in mind. But Damon gave you that money for no reason.”

Surprised, by that, my heart stutters funnily. “So the favor he asked—“

“He didn’t want,” Gabriel finishes for me.

Sighing, Tanner stabs a hand through his hair. “We want to know what’s going on between you two because Damon has ... issues.”

Of course, he does. He’s damaged. I already knew that. But I won’t tell his friends that. I won’t betray Damon.

I’m suddenly on the defensive.

“Does it really matter what’s going on between us?”

Gabriel settles back against his seat.

“It’s taken a while for Damon to be balanced. We’re concerned that if he has feelings for you and they’re not reciprocated, it’ll cause problems.”

“For me?” I ask.

“For him,” Gabriel answers.

Recalling how he couldn’t even bother to text me after finding Brinley, I brush their worries off.

“He doesn’t have feelings for me, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Except for the fact that he won’t let any of us near you. When I offered for somebody else to pick you up, he lost his shit. I have a feeling Damon’s attachment to you is more than you think.”

More surprise bursts inside me, confusion rolling along with it.

“He also hid you from us. Initially, at least. That’s not like him.”

The confusion wins out. “What are you trying to say?”

They all share looks again, and I swear, I’m about to throat punch each and every one of them. Can’t anybody just spit it out?

“He cares about you,” Gabriel finally answers. “And we’re worried that if you’re just playing games, that it will throw him off balance again.”

Are they serious with this shit?

Damon may have his issues, but he’s not weak.

Far from it.

Thinking back on the questions Luca and Emily were asking, and now these guys, I’m offended for Damon and a hell of a lot protective.

“Damon’s a lot stronger than any of you all think. I may not have known him as long as you all, but given what it’s obvious he’s gone through, the fact that he’s still functioning proves he’s not weak.”

“You don’t know that,” Tanner argues.

“Actually, I do. I was raised by a woman who ran from her demons. Ones that nobody could see but her.”

You know what?

Fuck it. I’m sure the information given to Damon about my mom is known by all of them. Admitting it wouldn’t be a betrayal of Damon’s secrets.

“You all know about my childhood since this group seems to be the information network of gossip. So knowing that, and knowing what was done to my mom, it makes sense that she runs. But unlike her, Damon doesn’t run away from problems, he charges straight at them. So if you all could stop acting like he’s fragile and needs coddling, maybe you would learn something about him you’ve never seen before.”

Their eyes widen at what I said. Well, all except Sawyer. He just laughs and nudges my shoulder. “I like her. I think we should keep her.”

Tanner turns to Sawyer, his expression twisting with annoyance. “Shut up, Sawyer. You’re not helping.”

Sawyer has the kind of laugh that's infectious. Biting the inside of my cheek, I keep from smiling. This isn't a funny subject, but it's hard to stay serious around Sawyer.

Tanner's eyes are back on me, his expression incredulous. "You can't possibly think you know Damon better than us. We grew up with him."

I stare right back at him, refusing to be intimidated. I won't betray Damon's secrets, but I'll still make my point.

"What caused the tiny scar beneath Damon's right eye?"

Tanner's head flinches back, his shoulders going rigid.

Beside him, Jase's brows shoot up before he turns to look out the window.

Next to me, Gabriel attempts to stifle a laugh, while Sawyer loses the battle against laughing, earning him a stern glare from Tanner.

Those dark green eyes are back on me.

"Weekends away," he answers.

Either he's hiding secrets like me or he doesn't know the details. I'm assuming the latter.

"But what specifically caused it while he was away for the weekend?"

We stare at each other, absolute silence in the car.

Eventually, Gabriel breaks it.

"I don't think she's bluffing, Tanner. And since none of us seem to know the answer, we can only assume Damon's been talking to her about events in his past he's never told us."

All four of them study me like I'm a rat running a maze.

The limo comes to a stop, and I glance out the window to see we're stopped at the entrance of a gated community. And not just any community, judging by the immense size of the mansions running in a row beyond the gates, but *the* community.

It's the capital of Snootyville, and I'm being driven inside it.

I turn my attention back to Damon's friends to see they're still studying me, Tanner rubbing at his chin while Gabriel is wearing his blinding smile.

"I like her, too," Gabriel says. "She passes."

I narrow my eyes on him. "I didn't simply pass. You have to admit I just ran circles around all of you."

Gabriel's eyes widen, and his smile somehow stretches wider to reveal a dimple in his cheek that is quite charming.

This is his real smile.

Not the fake one.

I file that information away for a day I may need it.

"You pass," Tanner admits in agreement with his friend. "We'll see about those circles."

Rolling my eyes, I turn my head to see an enormous mansion coming into view. Built to resemble a castle, I'm not surprised when the limo turns to follow the ridiculously long drive that circles the front of the house.

"Which one of you thinks so highly of himself that he needs to live in a castle?"

Returning my attention to them, I assume it's Tanner, since the rest of them are trying and failing to disguise their smiles.

Only Tanner stares at me with his eyes narrowed slightly and his lips a tight line.

"Should have figured," I remark. "You have that air about you."

Flashing him an unapologetic grin, I wait for the limo to come to a stop and follow Gabriel out.

We walk up large half circle stairs to the front doors. Gabriel lets us in, but while he was allowed to freely walk inside, I'm snatched up by my shirt, my feet scrambling for

purchase as I'm dragged through the foyer to a living room on the right. From there, I'm dragged through an impressive kitchen, out another door until I'm back outside again.

My eyes round at the sight. "Holy shit. Is this where cars come to die?"

Surveying the scene, I can't believe just how many burned shells exist of what I assume was an impressive collection of expensive cars.

"I told you the governor vandalized our shit, but that's not what's pissing me off right now."

My eyes tangle with Damon's, the amber color molten with anger.

"I thought you cared about your friend." The snap to Damon's voice confuses me at first, but then puts me on the defensive.

"Is she here? Was she harmed?"

"Yes, she's here, and she's fine."

He steps up to me then rolls his shoulders back like he's preparing to fight.

I remain in place because fuck him and the horse he rode in on. If anybody should be angry, it's me.

"Would have been nice to know," I counter, my hands curling into fists so hard my nails are digging into my palms. "Too bad you couldn't keep your word and call me or text to let me know. So glad I trusted you, like you asked."

It's not like I haven't been confronted with Damon's anger before. Hell, at this point, it's his usual. But something about his expression changes in a way I've never seen before. His eyes soften as his lips pull into a weird grin.

He holds up his phone for me to see then slides his thumb over the screen to scroll through a dozen texts.

All of them are to a number two digits off from mine. The first few are information about how Brinley's doing, but each

successive text transitions from information about Brinley to questions about why I'm not responding.

My brow arches as Damon flips to show his call history. Another dozen, all going to the wrong number, the last two digits transposed. None of the calls were answered.

"You have the wrong number," I explain, my hands relaxing as my posture shifts. "It should be three one at the end, but you have one three."

The heated anger I had toward him is doused with the cold, cutting truth that he had tried to contact me. He never broke my trust like I thought, and that realization stitches my heart back together.

Damon's expression softens as well. "You're the one who typed it in to my contacts."

I grab his phone, surprised that he handed it over without protest, then search through his contacts. Hitting my name, I shake my head at the error. "I must have typed it in wrong."

Handing the phone back, I apologize. "That was my fault. I thought you didn't bother reaching out—"

He places a finger over my lips to silence me, his thumb gently rubbing under my chin. A shiver runs down my spine at the small contact, my body craving more of this man.

It's my heart that's insane, though, the beat so fast that I feel lightheaded. Thoughts collide and bounce again, one I can't fathom coming into focus... I may be able to trust Damon after all.

I'm not sure what to do with that.

Amber eyes holding mine, mischief tugs at the corner of Damon's mouth. "I know how you can make it up to me."

Heat blooms between my legs, my breath stuttering for just a second to remember what he does to me in bed.

"I want to see Brinley first. But after that, whatever you have in mind is good with me."

His grin widens into a breathtaking smile, and my heart beats a staccato rhythm in anticipation for whatever he has planned.



Damon

“This isn’t what I meant by whatever you have in mind.”

Grinning at the annoyance in Blue’s voice, I shake my head at her complaint.

“Listen, you’re the one who wants us to hurry this problem along so that Brinley and you can return to your regular lives. The information I hope to get tonight may just hurry this along. You should be happy, not annoyed.”

“Happy? I should be happy? My best friend took off with a damn murderer. Your friends are all psychotic. And now you’re taking me to the last place I want to go. I could have made a phone call, Damon. The four-hour drive is unnecessary.”

Rolling my eyes, I argue, “Shane isn’t a murderer.”

Her jaw drops. Closes. Drops again.

“He just admitted he murdered Luca’s dad. Did you not hear that conversation? You people have some seriously fucked-up lives and fucked-up family meetings. I mean ... damn. I may have known some shitty people in my life, but they weren’t murdering my parents and then hanging out like everything was fine.”

Opening my mouth to answer, I can’t utter a word before she continues.

“I should have known from that party. In fact, I *did* know from that party. People fucking out in the open. A group of shady-ass old fuckers hanging out in the corner garden ogling young women. Emily getting cornered on the stairs by...”

Blue's brows pull together at that memory, and I quickly change the subject. The last topic I want to discuss is Emily.

I glance away from the road ahead of us to peek at her.

"What did you think I had in mind?"

Thankfully, the topic change works. Heat colors Blue's cheeks a shade of red, and I return my attention to the road.

"Nothing," she lies.

Nothing, my ass.

This woman's mind is a lot like mine: dirty and wild, angry and unpredictable. Not only that but Blue likes to play dominant, at least until my mouth is between her legs and she's moaning so loud I can feel the vibration of it roll through her body to my tongue.

While there are plenty of benefits to the way she thinks, there are a ton of problems that come with it as well. Especially, the issue with dominance.

Only one can rule in my world ... me.

She just has yet to submit to that.

To say it's frustrating as fuck is an understatement.

And to say it also turns me the fuck on is just skimming the surface.

When she finally arrived at Tanner's, after being interrogated by four guys she'd barely met, Blue wasn't frazzled and shaking like most people would be. No. The woman was electric by the time I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the back of his place where I planned on tearing into her for not answering a phone call.

But for her to tear back into me? Over a phone call? Something so stupid, after everything I've done...

That was when I remembered why Blue's perfect for me.

She's not afraid to fight.

Not for herself.

Not for her friends.

And as she beginning to prove, not for me.

Only one other person has fought for me before. And that same person was also forced to fight against me.

In a way, Ezra and I have been fighting each other ever since, and the loneliness it has caused is difficult to explain. I certainly didn't understand it. Not until Emily's return.

But then Blue came along and filled those empty spaces with the lash of her quick wit, and her stubborn refusal to back down.

She knew me from the day she first laid eyes on me. At least that's what she always claimed.

It's a pity that I know who she is, too.

I'm beginning to see that we're one in the same.

"You wouldn't happen to be thinking about my fingertips tracing down the sides of your body?"

Pausing for a second, I add, "Or the way they dig in to your hips when I take control?"

"Not that," she answers a little too quickly.

The corner of my mouth quirks. She shuffles her position in the seat to look out the side window.

"Okay," I say slowly, keeping my voice as casual as possible, "how about when my hands grip your legs, forcing them so far apart, your tendons burn from the stretch? You let out a small gasp from the feel of it, and I want to bite your lip because of that sound, but you won't let me near your mouth."

Blue's voice is slightly strained. "Nope."

She still refuses to look at me.

Nodding my head, my fingers tighten over the wheel, the engine revving harder when I give it more gas around a curve.

"I got you. Then you must have been thinking about the tip of my tongue toying with your clit and my fingers slowly

pushing inside your wet pussy, the inner muscles gripping down so fast that it's tough to pull my hand away, so I curl my fingertips to find that spot you like so much..."

Another quick peek and I catch the slightest wiggle of her hips, her legs held tight together.

"You squeal."

"Getting colder," she snaps. Yet the squeak in her voice gives away that she's lying. Her hips shift more, and she rubs her hands over her thighs as if to chase the memory away.

Allowing a few minutes of silence except for the vibration of the tires over the road, I can feel the pressure building.

"Well, if it's not any of that, it must be when I strip you down to nothing but your wings, sit back and pull you on my lap. You lift your body up just enough to find the head of my cock then slide down, inch by inch, your pussy stretching as you let me inside you, balls deep—"

"Definitely not that." Her body turns, her face swinging my direction until a pair of big, violet eyes are planted firmly on me. "It's none of that."

Glancing over at her, I meet her heated stare and grin.

"If it's none of that, then it must be one last thing."

Blue rolls her eyes. "What could that possibly be?"

I glance at the road then back to her.

"Can I kiss you, Blue?"

Cheeks flaring red in a beautiful blush I imagine runs down her entire body, she turns away from me again.

It takes everything I have not to laugh.

"You're an ass, you know that?"

"You've told me."

"Good. Glad we're caught up."

Losing the battle, I laugh, the sound of it almost foreign to me because it's the first time I've really laughed in what feels like forever. Blue laughs, too, both of us peeking over at each other before laughing harder. We wipe tears from our eyes, the sound settling down until I can catch my breath to speak again.

“In all seriousness, though, why can't I kiss you?”

Blue settles into her seat then pulls her bent legs up against her chest, wrapping her arms around her shins. She rests the side of her face against her knees, her eyes staring over at me.

“I don't trust you.”

My brows pull together, puzzle pieces falling together to reveal a clearer picture of the woman sitting beside me. “You said you've never let anybody kiss you.”

Her silence is the only answer I need.

I let the thought sink in. Not that I can blame her. I don't trust people either. At least not with the parts of myself I'd rather keep buried.

“What would you make you trust me?” I ask, not just because I want to know what it would take for her but also wondering what it would take for me?

If she can open up, is there a chance in hell for me?

“You'd have to be worthy, which means you'd have to trust me, too. And where we stand right now, I know you don't. So we're not kissing.”

She's not wrong, and the silent seconds I allow to pass after her statement confirms the truth to her words.

Still, she continues staring at my profile as I drive.

Every quarter mile or so, a streetlight illuminates the road, shadows running across the car and our faces.

Neither of us move, but I can sense that her mind is racing just as fast as mine with all those questions she always has.

Eventually, Blue lifts her head from her knees and sits back against her seat, her gaze now fixed on the road.

“So to answer your questions from earlier: No, I did not think what you *had in mind* for tonight was a four-hour drive to see my mother and brother. Of all the fucked-up things you could have had in mind, this takes the cake. I mean, hell, not just the cake but the entire fucking bakery for how insane this is. I could have just called Kane —“

“I want to meet your brother,” I admit. And her mom, which I don’t admit.

“Why?”

“Because he’s the person decrypting the drive. And I’d like to get that handled as soon as possible so this bullshit with the governor becomes a *them* problem and again and stops being a *me* problem.”

“A *you* problem? Shouldn’t it be a *me* problem? He’s my brother.”

“Yeah, and I stick my dick in you, so now that makes it a *me* problem according to the powers that be.”

Her brow cocks in question. “And just who the hell thinks they’re the powers that be? I’ll have a conversation with them and settle this shit—“

“You already had a conversation with them. In a limousine. On the way back from the plane. Or don’t you remember?”

She chuckles.

Fucking chuckles.

Blue went up against Tanner and Gabe then stepped out of the car with her chin up like a damn champ. I was too angry to wonder why when I dragged her from the front door to the back parking area, but thinking about it later, I had fucking questions.

Tanner wouldn’t answer them.

Gabe’s lips were zipped.

Sawyer was no help, and I didn't bother with Jase because he'd start bitching about Everly, and I'd have to knock him the fuck out to shut him up.

Which leaves one.

“What did you say to them?”

Her little shoulders bounce more with barely restrained laughter. “I ran circles around them.”

“And what exactly does that mean?”

A single shake of her head. “Nope. You can have that conversation with them.”

“Why?”

“Because you'll be mad.”

“I'm always mad.”

Blue goes silent, then, “Good point. I mentioned something that shut their bullshit down and somehow got accepted into your fucked-up family. Not that I want to be in your family. People get murdered and shit.”

Accepted?

I glance her way.

“What point?”

“You'll be mad.”

“So you've told me.”

Blue sighs and looks over at me. “I asked them what caused the scar beneath your right eye.”

My body stills except for the tightening of my grip over the steering wheel. The leather squeaks beneath my hold, the vibration of the tires over the road a loud hum that rises to replace our voices.

“And their answer?”

“They said it was from a weekend away.”

Rolling my neck over my shoulders, I attempt to relieve the tension in my muscles. “And your answer?”

“My answer was the point that I knew the answer better than they did. But that’s all I would say. Your secrets are your own. I won’t betray them. Not even to your friends.”

Surprise rushes in to replace the tension, the relief of it so startling that my breath catches in my lungs momentarily, my heart stuttering for a beat to learn Blue kept my secrets to herself.

Against Tanner and Gabe of all people.

She deserves a fucking trophy for that alone.

My voice is a bare whisper because that’s all I can manage. “Thank you.”

Blue’s hair slides over her shoulder when she peeks my direction. “For what?”

It takes another minute or two for me to find the words I want to say to her. They’re all up in my head, swirling around, anxiety pouring through me because this is another time in my life when I’m afraid to say the wrong thing.

After swallowing hard, I go with the easiest words—the honest answer.

“For showing me I can trust you.”

Silence again, replaced by the vibration of the tires. Blue turns her head to stare out over the road, her fingers tapping against her legs where she still holds them against her chest, the tips of her sneakers hanging over the front edge of her seat.

Fuck, it feels like hours and my mind whispers that I’ve said something wrong again. That I’ll never be more than a fuckup when it comes to how I think.

“You’re welcome,” Blue answers, her voice soft and careful.

We don’t say another word for the rest of the drive, but in both of our laps is the weight of the truth that of all the things

we need from each other, trust is the heaviest to carry.

Where both of us have been left jagged and raw by all the people who have fucked us up in life, trust is the balm that soothes our wounds, and may just be what stitches us back together ... one whispered secret at a time.

...

It's two in the morning when we pull up to Blue's family's house.

Not much to look at, the place is average for the area, a single story, two-bedroom at most that could use some new paint and resurfacing of the broken driveway. But the landscaping is well-kept, the trees trimmed back and the roof free of debris. It's obvious somebody takes care of the property, unlike most of the neighboring houses that look like they may as well be abandoned.

I stop the car and turn off the headlights as Blue stares at the house. Tension runs through the line of her shoulders, her jaw working like she's gnawing at the inside of her cheek.

"You nervous?"

She drums her fingers on the armrest of the door. "Not really."

Watching her jaw working harder, I mention, "You sure? Because if you chew at your cheek much longer, you might not have enough left to stitch back together."

She rolls her eyes and looks my direction.

"At least let me call Kane before we go inside."

Lifting my eyes over her shoulder, I cock a brow. "Not sure how that'll help."

"It will alert him," she explains.

"To what?"

“Our presence.”

I nudge my chin at the house, and to the tall son of a bitch stalking to our car without any noticeable concern for who is sitting inside it.

“I think he already knows.”

“What—“

Blue’s door is opened, and she’s yanked out by her arm before she can get another word out.

Fuck...

I’m not the type to get in between siblings when they’re arguing or throwing hands, just because I’m usually that sibling when it comes to Ezra, but Blue looks like she could use some help.

By the time I get out of the car, and come around the front, Kane has Blue in a playful headlock, practically lifting her off the ground while her little feet are slamming backwards attempting to take out his shins.

“Who the hell shows up unannounced at two in the fucking morning?” Kane asks, his voice steady as a teasing smile spreads his lips and he spins Blue around to pull her into a hug.

I laugh at how her feet are still dangling above the ground, but the sound dies off when his gaze lifts to me.

“And who is this jackass?”

Setting Blue down, he runs that dark gaze down the line of the restored ‘72 Ford Mustang Priest loaned me and scratches at his jaw. “I mean, judging by what he’s driving, he can’t be half as bad as the other punks you’ve brought home.”

My brows rise at that, and now I’m hella curious as to just who these punks were.

“I never brought anybody home. The fuck are you talking about?”

Kane smiles at his sister and winks. “Just playing.” His eyes are back on me. “But seriously. Who are you?”

I like him.

“This is Damon. He’s a pain in my ass and thought driving down here to talk about that flash drive I gave you was a better idea than just letting me call you, like a normal person.”

His eyes are pinned on me now, his hand gently directing Blue to stand behind him. I know that look, and I know the protective stance.

Given that it’s Blue’s brother, I’m going to refrain from breaking his jaw and taking her back, but only if he drops his bullshit in the next five seconds.

“What about the drive? And a name would be super helpful.”

Blue might as well be talking to herself at this point. Kane wants the answers, and by the way he’s staring me down, he doesn’t want them from her.

I step up and actively work to keep from rolling my shoulders back in preparation for a fight. Extending my hand instead, I offer, “My name’s Damon. And a friend of mine has been working on decrypting the drive.”

Kane eyes me up and down, then accepts the handshake. We both tighten down. He’s got a hell of a grip, but so do I.

“He decrypt it?”

“Not sure,” I answer. “You?”

“Not sure,” he answers back.

“Oh, this is fucking ridiculous.”

Shoving past her brother, Blue sets herself between us like she will somehow be able to stop a fight. Knowing what an impressive right hook Blue has, I’m not entirely convinced that she couldn’t stop it.

At least, with me, she could. I would never do anything to harm her. I'm hoping her brother feels the same.

After a few tense seconds where he looks between Blue and me, I relax to see Kane's posture shift, both of our eyes still squarely locked on each other.

"Kane," she says, finally peeling her adorable as fuck warning stare off me to turn to her brother. "We need the drive. Well, he needs the drive. Or at least what's on it. Have you worked on it at all?"

With effort, Kane finally looks from me to Blue and shakes his head. "I haven't been able to decrypt it. Whoever did the encryption was a fucking genius, so I sent it out to a friend."

Fuck...

The less people involved in this the better, and that damn drive is getting spread around faster than the common cold.

"Who did you give it to?" I ask.

But before he can answer, a third voice breaks into the late night, one that stills Blue in place, her shoulders going rigid.

"Kane? Who's out there?"

Female, and judging by the wariness in her tone, I assume it's a woman who has spent her life running from some unseen danger.

Kane stares at Blue—hard—but then his expression softens and he turns to the house. "It's Ames, Mom. She's decided to come for a visit."

Blue's shoulders deflate, and she stands frozen in place, her mind spinning so fast over what to do that I can almost see the myriad of decisions running through that head of hers.

Slowly, I move to block her access to the car, and Kane moves to block her from running down the road. We look at each other in approval when Blue sneers at both of us then begrudgingly turns to the house.

"Amélie? Is that really you?"

The hope I hear in her mother's voice is enough to strangle my heart, but it's the relief I hear as well that fully shatters it.

Blue never told me why she hasn't spoken to her mom. She mentioned her fear that she was the cause of her mom's problems but never quite got to why she refuses to just talk.

"Hi, Mom," she answers, sounding completely dejected and defeated when she realizes she has no choice but to walk up to the house.

Kane and I step in behind her then follow her to the house, our shoulders brushing as if we're the prison guards leading a man to the death chamber.

Except it shouldn't be this bad, and I wonder what scares Blue so much that just making this walk feels like torture.



Amélie

My mother.

The bastard brought me to my mother.

Of all the crap Damon has put me through in the few months I've known him, this beats it all.

Demanding I lie to my best friend and help them abduct her was shitty. And as I've learned since, that wasn't entirely Damon's fault.

Stealing me from my apartment was also shitty. But with all this governor stuff going on, I can forgive him for it.

Keeping me in the dark about Brinley was insanely bad, but I learned that was a mistake on my part.

But this?

Forcing me to see my mom?

No. Nothing about this is forgivable, and when I get Damon alone again, it'll be time to finally let go of all my pent-up frustration and kick his ass for his bullshit.

I'd like to think he could have at least asked first, but I also know myself well enough that I know my response would have involved me hightailing it one direction while he eventually chased me down and dragged me along anyway.

Okay, so maybe not telling me was the best move. But that doesn't mean I have to like him for it.

Trust.

Yeah, he thanked me for showing him I've got his back, but where the hell is he when I need someone watching mine?

“How have you been Amélie? I hear school is going well. Are you close to graduating?”

Mom leads me into a tiny kitchen area while making small talk, her hands shaking like she’s afraid to touch me, even though she reaches out every so often like she’s fighting the urge to take me into a full hug.

Within the kitchen is a round breakfast table, the dark wood surface scarred by years of use. I take a seat and stare at those scars, wondering about what caused them.

In a way, they remind me of Damon, of myself and of Mom.

It takes effort to look up at Mom, to see the fear and nervousness floating around behind her careful expression. Kane said she was normal again.

Is this as normal as it gets?

“I’m good,” I finally answer, my voice low and my eyes tracking Kane and Damon walking into the kitchen behind where Mom is sitting. They don’t approach, and I’m not entirely sure why. If I had to guess, those two are afraid to interrupt this reunion I wasn’t planning and am definitely not prepared for.

My eyes lock with Damon’s amber stare and I take a breath as if it may calm down my heart.

Mom shifts in her seat, fidgets with a napkin on the table, and keeps her eyes on me. “And school?”

One thing about Mom that has always left me breathless is her beauty. Even aged, she’s timeless. Even crazy, there’s just something about her that sets her apart. I notice it again as I stare at her now, the worry lines on her forehead and the dark smudges under her eyes somehow adding character to a face that is practically perfect.

Every feature of her face is damn near symmetrical, the oval shape lending to a youthful appearance despite all she’s

been through, the almond shape of her eyes are the perfect complement to high cheekbones and pale skin.

She looks so much healthier since I saw her last, and while it makes me happy to think Kane has been helping her, it hurts more to know it wasn't until I left that she's regained this much.

Staring at her, I remember what Damon told me about what happened to Mom and my heart breaks more.

Why would somebody take a woman so beautiful and steal her away to rip her apart?

Clearing my throat, I force a lie out that I hate telling her.

“School's good. I should be graduating soon.”

A smile lifts the corner of her lips and I dread the pride I see in her expression.

“You've always been smarter than me,” she muses, her voice so soft it's practically floating between us.

Reaching across the table, she barely touches my hand with her fingertips. Almost fearful, it's like Mom thinks if she gets too close, something awful will happen to me, and it will be her fault.

Unable to stand it, I grasp onto her hand with mine, my fingers tightening down when she attempts to pull away.

“I miss you,” I admit, my eyes capturing hers like prisoners. I refuse to look away. “I love you.”

It's all I can say—all I know to say—and yet it doesn't feel like enough.

Mom tugs her hand free of mine, her head turning to find Kane. He steps forward immediately, a gentle smile gracing his strong features.

I have no idea who our father was, but he must have been handsome in some way. While I take after my mother, Kane has a darker complexion and black hair. His face is cut in such

a way that his cheeks are shadowed beneath his eyes, his jaw a strong line that leads to a proud chin.

He's always been my rock. Someone I know is as dangerous as Damon. But when it comes to Mom, Kane is the softest person I've ever met.

"Shouldn't we offer them something?" Mom asks, her head turning more to notice Damon.

With her face turned away from me, I can't see her expression, but Damon's posture changes immediately, his relaxed shoulders drawing tense, his eyes flicking between my mother and across the small table at me.

He doesn't need to say anything.

Questions float behind his eyes.

But more than that, the truth of what he knows was done to her.

It occurs to me we have yet to mention to Kane what we know—the answers he's been searching for since he learned how to use a computer.

Not looking forward to that conversation, I call out to my brother.

"Actually, it's getting late. I'd rather get some sleep and we can..."

Mom stands from her seat then walks over to Damon. She doesn't say a word as she stands in front of him, a few seconds passing before she pushes up to her tiptoes and wraps her arms around him for a hug.

My eyes fly wide and so do Damon's, his amber stare holding mine as he gently hugs my mother in return.

"I'm Emma," she says to him. "It's nice to meet you."

Okay. What in the actual fuck is going on?

Even Kane stills in place, his dark stare bouncing between Mom hugging Damon then over to me.

She pulls away to hold Damon by his shoulders. He looks dazed initially but shakes away the reaction and answers, “I’m Damon.”

Kane steps up to touch Mom’s arm and draw her attention. She turns to look at him, and my breath catches in my lungs to see the broad smile on her face.

I’m not sure I’ve seen Mom so happy.

Not once.

Not ever.

“Maybe Ames is right, and we should all go to bed and talk in the morning.”

I silently thank my brother for following my lead, the legs of my chair squeaking over the floor as I push to my feet and cross the room to stand next to Damon.

“So I can take the couch, and Damon can sleep on the floor —“

“You two take my room. I’ll take the couch,” Kane says, interrupting me.

Surprise shoots my eyebrows to my hairline, but rather than arguing, I thank him and grab Damon’s hand to lead him away.

This night hasn’t gotten far too weird for my taste, and I’m even more exhausted after the last ten minutes.

Without bothering to ask which room is Kane’s, I lead Damon out of the kitchen while Kane speaks at our retreating backs.

“Second door on the left. The bathroom is across the hall, if you need it.”

Lifting a hand to thank him, my feet don’t stop until the door to Kane’s bedroom closes behind my back, and I lean against the wood to stare at Damon.

“What the fuck just happened?”

He laughs. Not a funny laugh, or a mocking one. More of a shocked laugh, still ... Damon laughs.

My cheeks flare red, tension racing down my shoulders into my arms where I cross them over my chest.

“I fail to see what’s funny about any of this.”

Damon creeps closer to me, raising his hands slowly as if I might attack him if he moves too quickly. I feel like a damn lion being approached by the gazelle.

His warm hands wrap around my biceps, then he inches even closer until our chests come together and I can feel the steady beat of his breath against my hair.

“What’s wrong? Your mom seemed—“

“Crazy?”

Craning my neck, I peer up into a set of amber eyes that are flecked with green. They’re like that when Damon’s calm. Absolutely gorgeous. Not as dark as when his anger grabs hold of him.

“She’s not crazy, Ames. I don’t understand why you’re so damn scared.”

I try to duck away from him, but he cages me against the door, preventing my escape.

“We’re having this conversation,” he says. “What clothes do I have to lose to get you to answer my questions?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake, I’m seriously beginning to hate this game.

“I’m not playing with you, Damon.”

Tears are welling at my eyes, and I don’t have time to blink them away. Damon is too fast; his fingers capture my chin and force my face to his. His eyes search mine, and I hold my breath as if that will keep all the emotions at bay.

He sees through me regardless. And with a thumb, he wipes away a tear that slipped down my cheek.

Why am I so scared? I don't fucking know. I've never known. I just keep wanting to run in another direction. To keep from witnessing my Mom. To hide...

"Tell me what's wrong."

There's no give in the way Damon stares at me. It's the same damn look I know I've given him. Except for instead of having a white line to follow that runs along my skin, he's reaching deeper inside to find the scars I keep buried.

"I don't know," I answer, the words pleading. "I just want to leave. We can get the information about the drive over the phone. We can—"

He places his thumb against my lips and holds my stare with his.

"Blue, stop. Calm down. I'm right here with you. Trust me ... please."

Trust.

There's that damn word again.

The one thing we need from each other but find so hard to give.

Damon leans in and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. It's a lover's touch. Not physical or sexual or demanding. Just something intended to help drive away the fear and chaos that's crashing inside me.

Damon's comforting me.

And I'm not sure I've felt this in life.

"She gave you a hug," I say, unable to figure out any other words. My voice is breaking apart as more emotions assault me, the tears now falling because I'm not strong enough to hold them back in this place.

He nods, his forehead against the side of mine. "She did."

My legs are getting weak as the truth sinks in a little deeper. "She's never hugged me like that before."

I'm sobbing, my hands gripping into his shirt to hold myself in place.

"She's never..."

The words can't escape the lump in my throat, all except for one keening question.

"Why?"

Damon curses under his breath then lifts me up to carry me to Kane's bed. After setting me down, he lays next to me and shelters me in a sense.

My body is shaking from my tears as I attempt to curl into a ball to get away from Damon. I don't want him to see me like this, but he holds me in place.

"Blue, just talk to me."

I can't. These scars run far too deep. I'm not sure I've ever admitted them to myself, so how the hell will I tell him?

It's just a bunch of questions, but they grip into my heart, tearing at the muscle every time just the thought of them runs through my head. I'm afraid to say them out loud because I'm not sure I'll survive the pain.

What if the answers are everything I've feared in life? Everything I've run from?

What if...

"They made us fight each other," Damon says, his deep voice a whisper against my ear.

His arm wraps over my chest tighter, one of his legs moving to trap both of mine beneath. Damon isn't on top of me, but he might as well be. I'm practically pinned to the bed.

Normally I would fight being held down like this, but his confession stills me in place, my mind scrambling to dig free of the emotions and questions choking it to make sense of what he's telling me.

"What do you mean? They did what?"

He rests his head against mine, his breath soft heat against my cheek.

“My dad ... well ... all of them eventually. Those were some of their favorite fights. The ones where they made Ezra and me fight each other. I don’t think they would have cared if it was to the death, but Ezra and I always stopped in the end. It was enough to please the assholes making money, but we knew when to stop so neither of us died.”

Rage.

Pure and unadulterated..

It washes through me like a tidal wave, the heat of it chasing off my anxiety.

“Those sons of bitches.” My hands grip down into the blankets at my sides. “I’ll fucking kill them. I’ll—“

He laughs softly, the sound of it so sad. “That’s not why I’m telling you about this.”

My heart is a damn war drum beneath my chest, my mind spinning faster over everything he said. How dare any grown men do that to children? How dare any person at all do that to someone else?

What is so wrong with this world that it seems like evil always wins?

“I’m telling you this, Blue, because I know there are some secrets that are buried too deep to let go. You have to rip at them to free them. And you have to trust the person you’re giving them to. I’ll give you mine, Blue. But you have to give me some of yours in return.”

“I can’t,” I breath out on a choked sob, “And not because I don’t trust you with the truth, but because I don’t know if I trust myself with the answers.”

We’re whispering at this point. But isn’t that how secrets are spoken? As silently as possible. As if the wind can snatch them away from you and blow them clear across the world.

“Try. You help me fight my demons. Let me do the same for you.”

I can feel the questions digging out of that deep place in myself. Like a festering sore opening up as the words escape it, one by one. There’s this black spot inside me that has existed for so long that it’s an infection I’m not sure will ever be cured.

“Come on, Blue.” His hand grips my hip. “Tell me.”

Quieting for a moment, he breathes out slowly. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Remember?”

A bark of sad laughter escapes me. This bastard is using my own weapons against me, as if he disarmed me during our first battle and has turned the tides of this war.

It takes several attempts, but the first question escapes that festering hole in my chest and manages to crawl up my throat.

“She never hugs me. Never. And I think that means I’ve been the one who hurts her.” I choke on the lump in my throat, the question too painful to ask.

“What if I’m the reason she’s always been so crazy? What if I’m what happened that made her run so much?”

Still there, still crawling up, I can barely speak when I ask, “What if she doesn’t love me because of something I don’t know that I’ve done?”

Damon stills at my side, then regains himself and pulls my body tighter to his.

“Ah, Blue. I doubt that’s what’s happening. You can tell your mother loves you. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

My body shakes with more sobs, the pillow at my cheek soaked from the tears that won’t stop falling.

There’s another question I’m afraid to ask, one that’s bigger, that’s hurts so much more, and the answer might be enough to destroy me.

Forcing it out of that festering place, I grit my teeth to find the strength to finally ask it.

My voice is meek, so quiet, I'm not sure Damon can hear me.

“What if I end up crazy just like her, Champ? What if whatever chases through her head will eventually find me?”

The relief of finally saying it is so intense that my muscles give out.

I lay limp at Damon's side.

He never let's go.

Never stopped protecting me.

Silence falls and it feels like it lasts forever. I finally decide he's not going to answer me when his deep voice whispers back.

“I won't let it chase you, Blue. You have me to fight beside you now. I won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise you that.”

“But what can you do if my mother's insanity one day becomes my own?”

Another soft kiss on my cheek. “Then I'll fight to find you wherever you go. I won't let you run forever.”



Damon

I never thought I'd see the day when Blue broke down completely. From the moment we first met, that woman kept me on my toes. My anger didn't intimidate her, neither did my threats. She'd just glared at me with those violet eyes, daring me to challenge her.

And it wasn't just those days at the club when we barely knew each other, but in every moment we've shared since.

I laugh to think that she kicked dirt onto Ezra's shoes after cussing us out. That she swung on me when I took her from her apartment. She panicked a little when it came to Brinley that day on the plane, but it was nothing like what I saw last night.

Blue cried herself to sleep, the questions she'd asked having stolen all the strength she had. Now I know why she doesn't talk to her mother and why she didn't want to come to this house.

Blue has hated herself for some terrible thing she fears she did to her mother. And on top of that, she's lived a life terrified of the nightmares that always kept her family running.

I'm not okay with that.

I want answers.

And I'm damn sure going to get them.

"You're up early."

Kane walks into the kitchen then rounds the table to go to the fridge. Dressed in a pair of jeans and nothing else, he scratches his head and yawns as he pulls the fridge door open.

Grabbing a half gallon of orange juice, he sets it on the table then moves to the cupboards to grab two small glasses.

Only when he sits down at the opposite end of the small, round table facing me does he meet my stare.

Relaxing back in my seat, I answer him. “Couldn’t sleep much. I didn’t expect to stay.”

A dark brow cocks above his eye, his black hair a mess around his head as he pours two glasses of juice then slides one my direction. I catch it with one hand.

“Then I guess we’re both at a loss because I didn’t expect my sister to show up at the house with some strange guy at two in the morning.”

I smirk at that before glancing out the window to see the sun has barely risen over the horizon.

“She wanted to call.”

“I bet she did. Ames isn’t exactly the best at visiting home.”

Home.

After everything she’s told me about how her family ended up here, I wonder if she even considers this house her home.

“She’s busy with school and work,” I explain, although I’m not sure I’m being honest. Still, that girl protected my secrets when up against Tanner and Gabe, and I’ll be damn sure to do the same for her.

“So she says,” Kane responds as he lifts the glass of juice to his lips to take a sip.

He swallows it down, and we stare at each other. He’s the first to break the awkward silence.

“Why are you here?”

Guessing small talk is over, I’m happy to get to the reason for our visit.

“I need what’s on the flash drive Blue gave you.”

He nods. “What’s so important about it?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “But it was supposed to go to a friend of mine from her father before he died, and she needs whatever is on it in order to know what her father was sending her.”

Brows pulling together in confusion, Kane leans forward, his forearms resting on the table.

“Is your friend Governor Callahan?”

His posture is a challenge. One I’m happy to meet.

Leaning forward just the same, I smile.

“Not quite. Governor Callahan is the problem.”

Our stares lock for several moments, but then Kane nods his head and sits back in his seat again.

“In that case, I’ll help you.”

Now I’m confused. “Why?”

Kane pours another glass of juice then drinks it like a damn shot. The bottom of the glass smacks the table as he sets it down.

“Because after Ames and her friend mailed the copy to me, I did a little digging into Governor Callahan. It seemed odd that my sister would have anything to do with someone so high in the government.”

He eyes me. “Unless it has something to do with that waitressing job of hers? I looked in to Myth, and the place doesn’t exist except for the one-percenters.”

Waitressing?

We stare at each other again, and I make the decision to go with whatever he’s saying. It could be another of Blue’s secrets, and I’m not about to bust her with her brother.

I purse my lips and slowly turn the glass he gave me over the table. “It’s not exactly the governor’s type of place.”

“She meet you there?”

I nod my head.

He scoffs. “Explains what you’re driving.”

Not really, but I let him go with that thought. Before they were torched, my collection of trucks and motorcycles were worth a hell of a lot more than what Priest loaned me.

“What’s your last name, Damon?”

I want to reach across and bang Kane’s head on the fucking table for his tone of voice, but given his relationship to Blue, I choose to respect him instead. Yeah, he’s pulling the typical shit of seeing whose dick is bigger, but he cares about his sister, so I can understand what he’s doing.

“Cross.”

Another nod. “Happen to know a guy named Tanner Caine?”

I still in place. Kane simply grins.

“Or maybe you know a guy named Gabriel Dane?”

My brows tug together. How the fuck has he already made that connection? Slowly, I answer him, my hackles rising.

“I grew up with them. Why?”

“I know who you are. For someone who takes issue with Governor Callahan, your families are awfully tight with him. Wasn’t your friend Mason’s engagement party held at the governor’s mansion just a month or so ago.”

Well ... fuck.

I should have brought Taylor with me. This guy has done his fucking research.

Blue told me he was into computers, which is why he has the drive to begin with. Maybe if I’d brought Taylor, these two could finish this interrogation, geek to geek.

A sigh bleeds out of me. “It’s a forced relationship due to our families. But we’re not exactly happy about it.”

“Right. Then why are you dragging my sister into it?”

Before I can answer, Kane leans forward again and says, “I’ve researched Governor Callahan, and from what I can see, he’s got his hands in everything dirty he can possibly touch in the city, and your families also just happen to be playing in the mud pit with him. So it makes me wonder just what your intentions are with my sister, because if they were anything good, you wouldn’t be dragging her into that bullshit. So let me ask this one last question—“

“Kane.”

His mother’s soft voice drags both of our attention to the living room.

Standing in a red, plaid robe, she pulls the two sides together then cinches the small fabric belt that ties it shut.

“That’s Amélie’s guest, and I don’t like your tone of voice with him. You’re being rude.”

Given Kane’s current state of mind, I expect him to argue with his mother. Instead, he settles back in his seat, his expression softening to see her.

“Sorry, Mom. We were just talking about stupid shit.”

She nods and pushes her light brown hair away from her face.

I can see why Blue worries about her so much. In every feature, her mother appears frail.

Still, there’s something that glimmers in her eyes when she looks at me. The same something that shocked me last night just before she wrapped her arms around me in a warm hug.

I know Blue cried because her mother has never hugged her like she did me, and it only brought to mind that I can say the same.

My mother never hugged me either.

Maybe that’s why it made the contact so profound for me. And maybe that’s why I now look at Blue’s mother like I would protect her with my life.

Whether this woman knows it or not, she's now my mother, too.

She looks back at Kane.

“Why don't you make yourself useful somewhere else for a bit? I'd like to talk to Amélie's friend alone, if that's all right?”

Kane hesitates, but eventually nods his head and stands from the table.

Leaving the orange juice carton, he takes his dirty glass to the sink, grabs a clean one from the cupboard, then sets it in front of his mom.

Filling her glass, he gently reminds her, “You need to drink that for me, okay? Don't forget. And I'll be back in a little while to cook some breakfast.”

With a wave of her hand, she dismisses him from the room then turns a set of sapphire-blue eyes my direction.

Blue's mom may seem frail in mind and stature—I can see why both her children worry as much as they do—but behind this woman's eyes is something I recognize every time I look at myself in the mirror.

How Blue and Kane have missed it, I have no idea. But this woman isn't simply running from the monsters who got to her early in life. She's still fighting them tooth and nail.

And from what I can see, those bastards have no chance of winning.

“Amélie must really like you,” she says, her voice so soft that it's difficult to judge what she's thinking. The frail tone is so at odds with what I see behind her eyes that I have to wonder if I'm about to be welcomed into the family ... or if I'm about to have my ass handed to me.

“She must like you to have brought you to the house. She's never done this before.”

I mean, technically I dragged Blue here kicking and screaming, but I keep that little tidbit to myself.

“Damon, right?”

I nod my head, and she reaches both hands across the table as if asking for mine.

Not knowing what else to do, I take her hands, holding completely still as her warm fingers tighten over mine.

“I’m Emma, in case you forgot from last night. It was pretty late, and we all were tired.”

This is unfamiliar territory to me. Unsure what to do with myself, I remain as still as possible, refusing to look away as she holds my stare.

A curious expression shifts her facial features. “I see the bastards got you, too.”

It made your brother fight...

Be a MAN...

Stop crying...

My brows tug together, tension inching across my shoulders. She must feel it in my hands because her fingers tighten down some more.

“You don’t have to tell me, but I know. I can see the scars. The ones on your skin but also what’s behind your eyes. I’m sorry about what was done to you.”

Thinking this must be where Blue gets it from, I try to think of a response, but my words fail me again. Not that Emma is expecting a response. She never gives me time for one.

“You know, I used to think that holding it in was the strong thing to do. That’s what I’ve done. All these years...” Her voice trails off like she’s lost to a memory from a lifetime ago.

Shaking her head free of it, she adds, “I’m sure Amélie told you we moved around a lot. And she’s not wrong. I felt I

had to hide her from the world. Make sure the people that got to me never found her. I'm not sure exactly what she thinks about what I did. We've never talked about it. But while it may seem like all I did was run, I promise you, I fought for my daughter. Our lives were never easy, but I watched over my children. Kept them safe. I got them to the point where they can take care of themselves now without their mom having to hide them away."

She laughs, the sound barely there.

"Kane is a strong man now, and Amélie is so strong, too. Much stronger than I was at her age. But I still worry for her. That's a mother's job—to worry. That's our strength. Imagine living the majority of your life watching over the two people you love most in the world. Protecting them from everything. How different my life would have been if I'd only had myself to worry about once I escaped—"

Abruptly cutting off that thought, she switches to another. "Anyway, I'm saying too much."

Emma still refuses to release my hands, but I can't help my curiosity.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

Isn't this something she should be telling Blue? It would ease her worry about mental illness and answer so many questions that have been terrifying her for too damn long.

"I'm telling my daughter... Through you. You'll do what's right and pass my message along."

"Why me? Why not just tell—"

"Amélie will ask too many questions. The monsters never got to her and there are just some things I never want her to know. But you're not asking those questions, are you?"

Get up...

You're as worthless as your gold digger of a mother...

Earn your keep, boys...

My heart stutters in my chest, that keen blue gaze of hers holding me prisoner.

“You don’t have to ask. Because you already know. The same monsters got to you, too. That’s where the scars are from. Am I wrong?”

I shake my head and swallow hard.

My words are lost again.

Emma nods.

“That’s what I thought. The details aren’t important to you, but they will be to Amélie because she’s never been through it. If I told her the truth, she’d fight right along beside me, and I don’t want my daughter to have to fight my battles. Those are mine. I’m her mother, and my job is to protect her. Not the other way around.”

It’s my job to protect her not, too. Emma isn’t wrong about Blue. When she cares about someone, she’ll run into any battle right alongside them. It’s why I haven’t told her the worst of my secrets.

Emma tilts her head and smiles.

“It’s different for a husband and wife, though. Or two people who love each other. If you let Amélie fight with you, she’ll let you fight with her. I know that much about my daughter. It’s not easy for her to trust, but when a person proves that they’re worthy, she’ll give them everything she has in this world.”

I swear this woman is reading my mind. The conversation is surreal. Every question I have being answered without me having to ask. Is this what it’s like to have a mother who loves you?

Is this what I missed out on my entire life?

It makes me think of Ezra and the other guys. All of us came from screwed up families, and we cling to each other because of it. There isn’t a battle fought where all of us aren’t

willing to jump into the fray and do whatever it takes to protect each other.

Emma sighs, her shoulders deflating a touch. “Just tell me you’ll protect her from now on. That my job is done, and I can rest knowing she’s safe.”

For once in my life, the words I need aren’t difficult to find.

“I promise you that you have nothing to worry about when it comes to her. I’ll never let anyone hurt her.”

Emma smiles. “That’s good. You’re a good man.”

One question does come to mind, though, so when she attempts to pull her hands away, I cling on, hopeful that the contact will keep her talking just a moment longer.

“Why have you never hugged Amélie?”

I don’t mean it as an insult or a condemnation. I’m genuinely curious how a mother who loves her daughter so much has denied her something as simple as a hug.

A sad look washes across Emma’s face.

Glancing out the window before she answers, she attempts a weak smile before saying, “It’s not that I’ve never tried. Amélie pulls away when I get too close to her. And I’ve never taken offense to it. Like I said, I know her. I think with her, it’s just that she has to trust someone fully before she’ll allow something as simple as a kiss or a hug. I frighten Amélie, but maybe someday, she’ll stop being so scared when she looks at me.”

Emma is just finishing the sentence when Kane walks into the room. He opens a bottom cabinet, then pots and pans cling together as he starts cooking breakfast.

A thought rolls through my head while digesting what Emma said, one voice so clear against all the others.

Can I kiss you, Blue...?

It hangs inside my mind whispering with the answer I've always wondered, the voice still there when I follow Emma's stare to watch Blue walk into the kitchen.



Amélie

“Can you help me bring some of the platters out to the pool deck for lunch? I think I made way too much food if it’s just us girls.”

Luca looks across the kitchen island at me, her brown hair falling over one shoulder as she chews at a fingernail while surveying the feast she’s prepared.

As far as I know, it’s only supposed to be five of us girls eating, but by the amount of fruit, cheese, lunch meats and other finger foods that Luca’s prepared, one would think she’s catering a large party meant for fifty people.

Damon and I arrived at Tanner’s house a few hours early. We’d driven straight here from my mom’s. During the drive, I was still exhausted from the emotional breakdown I had, and Damon was oddly quiet, but I brushed that off as him being tired from the late-night drive.

It’s not like we spent a lot of time recovering this morning. By the time I woke up, Damon was in the kitchen talking to Mom while Kane was starting breakfast.

I looked at Mom and couldn’t manage what I was feeling. All the questions from last night resurfaced, my body stilling in place as anxiety crept up my spine, threatening to take me down with an early morning panic attack or worse.

Mom took one look at me and smiled, the expression sad as if she were disappointed to see me.

Releasing Damon’s hands, she’d stood from the table and approached me, stood in front of me like she was going to give me a hug, but I flinched back at the contact, too upset at that

moment to stay strong and finally face her for the first time in two years.

“I love you, Amélie,” was all she said before making an excuse to head back to her bedroom for a nap, and I knew it for the excuse it was.

After that, there was no convincing me to stay for breakfast. I wanted to go, get the hell on the road and back to the city to escape everything seeing her had brought back.

Before we left, Damon and Kane made plans to meet up regarding the flash drive, but I was already in the car, my eyes locked on the road that would take me away from a situation I was not ready to handle.

On the drive back, I didn't let Damon bring it up, couldn't listen when he tried telling me his secrets as if that would work again.

I was incapable of facing either of our pasts.

Anger at my life had completely devoured me. That storm around Damon was now around me, and I couldn't allow him to stand beside me within it.

By the time we reached Tanner's, Damon and I weren't talking, but thankfully Luca snatched me up as soon as we walked through the door, her calm demeanor washing over me enough that I could snap out of my bullshit to help her with lunch.

We both grab one of the many platters then I follow her through the house toward the back pool area. The silence between us is awkward, so I paste on my fake persona—the happy, smiling woman who has no problems, no family issues, no mom who has torn me up completely.

“Sorry about what happened last night,” I say, attempting conversation.

Luca turns just enough to glance at me, her knee helping balance the platter so she can free a hand to open the back door.

“What do you mean?”

“The thing with Shane and your dad. That must have been rough.”

Her cheeks blush a shade of pink. “It was a misunderstanding, and I’m embarrassed you had to witness all of that. Shane didn’t kill my dad. We worked it out late last night after you left with Damon.”

Ah ... well. There went the only topic I really had to talk about that didn’t make this awkward.

Luca places her platter down on a long table near an immaculate pool, the water glimmering beneath sunlight.

“Did you two have any luck with your brother and the flash drive?”

I place my platter down on the table a little too carefully.

“You’ll have to ask Damon about that. He talked to Kane more than I did.”

She gives me a curious look like she wants to ask more about our trip to my brother’s house, but she’s interrupted before she has the chance.

“There you are,” an upbeat voice calls from behind us. “I looked in the kitchen and noticed all the damn food, then I walked around the house looking for you.”

Turning to see who else had arrived, I admire the white-blond hair of Gabe’s girlfriend, Ivy. She flashes me a sassy smile, her aqua eyes sparkling beneath the sun almost as much as the pool.

“I thought it was just the girls for lunch,” Ivy teases, casting a quick glance at Luca. You made enough to feed the guys and the next three houses down the block.”

Luca laughs, but Ivy’s eyes return to me when Luca explains, “Yes, I made too much. Hope you’re hungry.”

“Bitch, I’m always hungry. And you,” she says, her attention now fully on me. “It’s about time we get you alone. I

bet you have all the gossip to give us. Damon, huh? That was unexpected.”

“At least help me move these platters from the kitchen before interrogating Ames.”

Ivy waves her off. “I can interrogate and move food. I’m multi-talented like that.”

Wrapping her arm through mine, she leads me back to the kitchen. “Seriously, though. Damon? That must be intense. I bet you and Emily will have a lot to talk about when she finally drags her ass here.”

Emily.

Two thoughts surface in my mind at the mention of her name: The first night I saw her on the stairs, trapped between Damon and Ezra, and last night when Damon said he didn’t want to talk about her before quickly changing the subject.

My curiosity piques. “What about Emily?”

We’re walking into the large kitchen to grab more platters when Ivy finally releases my arm and directs me to take a seat on a stool at the island.

Both she and Luca walk around to the opposite side to face me.

Luca rolls her eyes and warns, “Maybe this isn’t the best time to—“

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ivy asks, laughter in her voice. “This is Dick History 101, and I think the new people should be caught up.”

Laughing, Luca has an incredulous expression. “Dick History 101?”

Flashing me a game smile, Ivy explains, “Yeah. That’s what I’m calling it now whenever a new woman joins the family. I may eventually just write a book to make it easier. But the newbies need to know the history of the Inferno and everything these dickheads have done to us.”

My eyes round with curiosity. “What they’ve done?”

Leaning back against the fridge, Luca’s gaze bounces between Ivy and me. “The deals. We know Damon talked you into one. Almost every woman here was caught in that bullshit.”

“Well,” Ivy adds, “I definitely was caught.” She looks at Luca. “You, not so much. Tanner just stalked your ass. And Emily wasn’t really a deal either. She just got between twin dicks when she fooled around with them in high school.”

It hits me then.

Emily.

The stairs...

Almost as if summoned, the redhead in question walks into the kitchen. “What about high school?”

I turn and stare at her, the image of her on the stairs at the governor’s mansion flashing back, and Damon’s quick subject change because he didn’t want to talk about her.

“I was just telling Ames about how all of us ended up involved with the Inferno boys.”

Emily stills in place before she glances at me then turns to stare down Ivy. “Do we really need to get into this?”

Yes, I don’t say.

Of all the secrets Damon has been willing to give me, Emily is one he’s dodged. I should have known there was something. Especially with the way she acted in Georgia when questioning me about him.

“So wait,” I ask because this is need to know information. “You slept with both Damon and Ezra?”

Her cheeks are red now, damn near the same color as her hair. “It’s a long story—“

“And speaking of stories,” Ivy interrupts, her attention back on me. “What’s the deal with Brinley and Shane? You’re

her bestie. I bet you have all the gossip.”

Luca busts into the conversation before I can answer. “Can we save this for lunch? It’s almost time to eat, and we need to get these platters to the table. Brinley should be here soon, and we can ask her.”

I slouch on my stool, all the stories swirling around my head. I knew these people were nuts, but apparently it runs deeper than I thought.

Grabbing a platter, I paste on the usual fake smile because I don’t want anybody to know what’s going through my head right now. “Yeah, let’s get these outside. I’m starving.”

They buy the lie, thankfully, and after Brinley arrives, we’re given the full story of the Inferno.

The good, bad, and the ugly.

It only leaves me with more questions about a man I’m wondering if I was wrong to trust.

...

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

Damon and I are sitting outside my apartment, the strap of my bag held firmly in my hand, my hair hanging down the side of my face as a curtain to block my expression.

After lunch, everybody went their own way, and when I asked to pick up more clothes from my place, I’d intended for Damon to drop me off.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight. Not until this thing with the governor—”

“He didn’t blow up your cars! Isn’t that what you told me after the meeting with the guys? It was someone else.”

After lunch, all the boys came down to steal the food from the girls’ lunch table. Luca didn’t mind; she’d made enough.

While eating, they shared what they had figured out about the cars and vandalism of their houses, the entire thing done by the guys Damon and Shane had fought at Myth.

It was good information to learn because it gave me a reason to end this bullshit charade where I'm supposedly a target of Governor Callahan.

It told me I can get back to my life. And my anger at all the damn secrets and chain of events of these past few days is enough to send me running.

I just want to be a dancer in a cage again. One without worries about flash drives, the governor, fucked-up families, my mother and most of all, the secrets that continue to swirl behind Damon's eyes.

Refusing to bring up what I learned from the girls about Damon's relationship with Emily and all the other things these guys have done to so many people, I agreed to let Damon drive me home to get more clothes, but now I'm done being part of this.

Too much has happened, and my mind is spinning more than it ever has. I need to escape to my music so I can pretend that everything in my life is normal.

Damon's amber stare locks me in place. "We still have to figure out what to do about—"

"A bunch of shit that has nothing to do with me," I argue.

He grins. "Except your brother still has the flash drive—"

"Then go babysit him."

I can't take anymore, and the anger that was devouring me earlier is controlling me now. I know that, but I can't get my head straight enough to deal with any more of this.

I need time to think.

To process.

To figure out if it's healthy for me to continue in whatever this is with Damon.

Confusion tugs Damon's brows together at my behavior. "What is this about, Blue? Why the fuck are you so angry?"

Of course, he recognizes it. This man has been shrouded in the same rage since the first night I spoke to him. And after the events of the past few days and all the game playing going on with his friends, I completely understand why he holds so many secrets inside.

But that still doesn't make it okay.

Not after he asked me to trust him.

Trust.

It's always so damn fickle.

There one minute and gone the next, especially when you learn you haven't been given the full story.

"I have work tonight. That's where I'll be. Nobody is after me, and I don't need a bodyguard watching over me."

Damon's hand grips tight over the steering wheel, his eyes lifting to my apartment before that gorgeous stare returns to me.

"Just tell me why you are so upset. If this has something to do with your mom—"

That does it. I can't handle any more questions on that particular subject. Stealing a page out of Damon's previous playbook, I bring up something different.

"Let's talk about Emily, Champ. You want to exchange secrets? Why don't we discuss that one?"

Darkness rolls behind his eyes, and I can see the moment he shuts down, all those damn walls of his slamming closed while a storm rolls across the horizon.

He's silent for several minutes, his gaze wandering over the parking lot, the apartment building then back to me.

"Have fun at work tonight," he finally answers, the subject I brought up shut down with his refusal to talk about it.

“That’s what I thought.”

I open the door and get out of his car. Pulling the strap of my bag up higher on my shoulder, I slam the door then walk to the apartment building.

Tears well at my eyes again, but I refuse to give in to them.

I refuse to look back at Damon’s car, even though I can feel him watching me.

After climbing the stairs, I walk down the hallway en route to my place, and it isn’t until I’ve entered my apartment and shut the door that I hear Damon’s car roar to life, the engine revving as he speeds away.

So much for sharing secrets. It seems like he forced his way into the worst part of my life by taking me to see Kane, but when it comes to his friends and family, I’m still being shut out.

Dropping my bag on my couch, I walk into my bedroom then sit down on the edge of the bed.

I’m acting like a brat about all of this, and I know it.

Damon and I haven’t had enough time to discuss everything.

If I don’t slow this down so that I can take a moment to breathe, I’ll eventually suffocate in a relationship with Damon that I can’t even name.

I think that’s what bothered me so much at lunch today.

Not the shit with Emily—Damon is allowed to have a past.

But while every girl sitting at that table could answer the question of what their relationship was to the men they were with, I had no answers to give.

What are Damon and me now that the deal is over and there’s nothing left?

Friends with benefits?

Two people who’ve fallen in love?

Or two damaged souls shoved together by circumstance?

He's just some guy I'm supposed to trust...

What is there to trust when you don't even know where you stand?

This needs to slow down.

I can't handle the questions that are bouncing and colliding in my head.

Maybe I am like my mother.

When the circumstances become too much in the place where I find myself, all I can think to do is run the fuck away.



Damon

“Well if it isn’t the princess. Please tell me what we have done to be honored with your presence.”

Scowling at Priest as I walk in the shop, I ignore his laughter. What’s worse is Ezra’s stare, eyes that are almost identical to mine watching me walk through the shop and into Priest’s office.

I’m surprised to find Gabe and Taylor already taking up room on Priest’s dirty couch, their eyes meeting mine when I pull a soda from the fridge and pop the top.

“Why are you two here?”

It’s strange to find Taylor without his trusty computer. He leans back against the couch and taps his fingers against the armrest like he’s typing.

It’s even stranger to see Gabe in such a dirty environment with his pristine clothes.

“We came to talk to Ezra, but we’re happy to see you, too,” Gabe jokes, his head tilting in question.

I’ve just come from dropping Blue off at her apartment, and anger is leaking out of me that I can barely contain.

“Everything all right?”

By the time Gabe gets the question out, Ezra has walked into the cramped office, Priest following behind him with a rag in his hands that he uses to wipe grease from his fingers.

I toy with the tab on the soda can, not in a mood to be questioned by the guys. “Everything is—“

“Don’t lie,” Gabe warns. “I already know the answer. It’s written clearly on your face.”

I’d taken the long way to Priest’s shop after leaving Blue’s place. Needing the extra time, I tried and failed to make sense of everything that’s occurred since I first approached her at Myth.

The entire situation has become a clusterfuck I never intended. Yet here I am, facing down my brother and friends, wondering how the hell I’m going to talk my way out of this conversation.

It doesn’t help that Ezra takes a long look at me, smiles, then shakes his head. “Hate to tell you this, Little Brother, but you’ve fallen for your chick.”

I glare at the asshole. “And how would you know that?”

A collective sigh rolls through the office, every single one of them glancing at each other before all eyes are back on me.

Gabe speaks for all of them.

“I think it has everything to do with the fact that you’re so frustrated at the moment it reminds most of us of a place we’ve unfortunately been. You can’t decide between claiming her as your own and refusing to let her out of your sight or killing her just to make your life easier.”

He’s not wrong.

Life would be a hell of a lot easier if I hadn’t created this situation in the first place.

She was only supposed to be an escape.

And now she’s a woman that I want to make my home.

Just like everything else in my life, I’ve screwed this up, and I’m not sure what I can do to fix it.

Ezra continues staring at me, so I turn my face because when it comes to all of them, he’s the one who can read me the best.

But then, that's the problem when it comes to being twins.

"Let me guess," Ezra says, his eyes trapping mine when I look over at him. "Ames found out about Emily and lost her shit."

Shrugging at that, I nod my head, but I know Blue was upset about more than that.

"Emily told me about the conversation the girls had at lunch," Ezra explains.

"Maybe Tanner is right," Gabe offers. "We really need to keep them all apart. Letting them talk to each other is seriously becoming a problem."

"It's better you all than me," Taylor says, his fingers still tapping at the armrest.

Priest laughs and leans down to knock knuckles with Taylor.

"That's what I've been telling these assholes since the first chick they abducted. Speaking of which," Priest looks at me. "What crimes did you commit against your lady? Or did you actually do the normal thing for once?"

Ezra answers for me. "He forced her to take part in Shane snatching Brinley from the side of the road."

"For fuck's sake." Tossing the greasy rag down on the desk, Priest eyes me again. "And how the fuck did you manage that?"

"I gave her ten grand as part of a deal, then demanded she fuck over her best friend so Shane could grab her."

Shaking his head, Priest leans against a metal file cabinet that is so old, it can barely take his weight.

"You all have some interesting ideas of how to get women to like you. Haven't you all considered the normal approach of asking them out on a date? Might save you some headaches down the road."

We all grow quiet.

Gabe crosses his ankle over his knee and relaxes back against the couch.

“If you ask me, Damon, it sounds like you need to do what all of us did when we found ourselves in your situation.”

I cock a brow in question. “Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

Ezra snorts. “You need to grovel.”

Gabe’s laughter fills the room, but he nods his head in agreement. “That’s the honest truth of it. You need to crawl over to wherever she is, and apologize for being such a jackass.”

I get what they’re saying, but with Blue, it’s different. She’s forgiven me for what I demanded as a favor. And the anger I saw in her today started long before the girls’ conversation at lunch. If anything, Blue pointing out my past with Emily was an excuse to cover up something else entirely.

It all started when she walked into her mother’s kitchen then flinched when her mother tried to hug her.

Scratching at my jaw, I think I finally understand why Blue wanted me to leave her alone. And it has nothing to do with my past and everything to do with her own.

Ezra taps my shoulder with his fingers and then nudges his chin at the office door. “Come out into the shop where I can talk to you for a second.”

I’d rather stay in here with the rest of the guys. Facing them is easier than facing the one person in the world who knows everything about me. The one person who is part of the secrets I’ve always tried to hide.

It makes me think for a second that I’m just as bad as Blue. Instead of facing my problems, I’ve been running just as fast as her.

Conceding to what Ezra wants, I follow him out into the shop.

Loud music fills the space, only a few mechanics scattered about in the different bays, their tools clanging onto the concrete beneath them or a slew of cuss words murmuring beneath the music while fighting a seized bolt or something else.

Ezra and I could practically yell at each other for this private conversation, and nobody would hear us.

Leading me over to the back of the shop, he grabs me by the arms then pulls me close enough that our foreheads are touching.

His eyes meet mine, much like he's done to me over the years when he's being the *older brother*.

“Tanner and Gabe told me that your girl ran circles around them yesterday on the ride back from Gabe's plane.” He holds my stare, this conversation important to him. “And she did so without revealing a damn word you've said to her about our weekends away.”

I try to pull away from him, the subject not one I'm comfortable facing. It doesn't matter that he went through those weekends, too. The fights have never been a subject we've openly talked about.

Yes, we acknowledge they happened. And yes, we're there for each other when the nightmares hit and we lose our shit. We drag each other back from the edge when it's necessary, our emotional states not always perfectly balanced.

But we still fight, too.

Sometimes I think we're trying to destroy the reminder of those weekends by destroying each other.

His hands grip down on my arms, his forehead pressing to mine harder. I want to close my eyes and escape what he's trying to say, but I can't escape his voice no matter what I do. There's no point looking away.

“My point is you're finally talking. And while the memories you have are both our secrets, I'm giving you

permission to speak your truth. My parts and yours. I think you finally found a woman you can admit everything to. And if she can go up against Tanner and Gabe and not break your trust, she's got my approval for knowing what both of us were put through."

I get what he's saying.

More than protecting ourselves by keeping those secrets, we're protecting each other, too.

"Did you ever tell Emily all of it?"

Ezra shakes his head. "No. You never told me I could."

It's like I told Blue when she was crying about her mom: some secrets are buried so deep that you have to rip them out in order to make yourself whole.

Ezra blinks, but locks his eyes with mine again. "I found my peace in my own way, Little Brother. Emily doesn't need to know everything. But maybe your peace exists in finally admitting to someone what was done."

And he's giving me permission.

In all the years since the fights stopped, this is something neither of us have done.

Ezra releases me then takes a step back. "I hope that makes things easier."

It had never occurred to me that my reluctance to talk was to protect my brother's secrets, but now that he mentions it, maybe that's part of the reason I've kept the memories to myself for so long.

I don't have to answer Ezra for him to know I get what he's saying. So rather than speaking another word, he bumps his fist against my shoulder then wanders back to the office, leaving me in the back of the shop.

Thinking about everything, I lose myself to all the events over the last few days, but two moments stick out to me the most.

Blue's mom didn't have that conversation with me to tell me she understood what I was going through. She'd taken me aside to tell me about her daughter and what it would take for Blue to trust.

More important than that, I made a promise that I'm damn well going to keep.

I don't give a shit how hard Blue shoves me away. The last thing I'm going to do is let her get all twisted up in her head so that she drops everything and runs.

But first, I need a favor from Taylor. He better have his computer nearby because I'm about to turn the world on its head and create the home that neither Blue or I have ever had.



Amélie

After spending a day soaking in a tub surrounded by scented candles, and pampering myself more than I probably deserved, I managed to clear my head and come to a conclusion.

It's all over at this point.

Period.

The end.

I have nothing to worry about anymore.

I can finally pause and take a full breath because the panic has subsided.

Looking at the situation for what it is, and after distancing myself from the mental chaos, I came up with a list in my head of just exactly where my life has ended up.

Number one: I earned my ten grand. There are no favors due. No sexual requirements. No pretending I like somebody or play the role of a narcissist's pet to pay my bills for the next couple of months.

Number two: Brinley seems happy with her new man. And I'm happy for her. Just as long as he turns out to care about her as much as he appears to from what I've seen of them together. Shane is not a murderer. At least as far as I know from what Luca told me.

Number three: Granger can't boss me around anymore. I don't owe the man a damn thing, so he can't harass me. He's finally gone, and I didn't find myself in a tight spot where I would have to worry about crawling back to him.

And number four: My mother is happy in the place she's found with Kane. For that, I can be happy for her without worry of her returning to the life she led when I was a child.

All the problems that haunted me for the past two years have come to a head. The festering wound gave up its poison. And I'm still standing strong, despite the nightmare I went through to get here.

It's weird how life works.

I don't agree that our fates are always written in the stars. I think sometimes the hustle is a necessary evil that rolls the dice across the cosmic board, and we end up standing in a place we neither expected nor wanted, but its exactly where we belong for that moment.

Who knows what the next roll of the dice will bring? But as far as I'm concerned, I've closed this chapter, and I'll worry about that day when it comes.

As for now, I'm taking my life back. Without worry of my past, of Damon, or of all the secrets he keeps trapped in his head.

Those are no longer my problem.

They can't be my problem.

I have to take control of my life, and that man's presence has driven me to a point of absolute insanity.

My focus now is fixing the mess I've made of school during the day, and dancing at night.

That's it.

I'm keeping it simple, because complicated is just too damn messy.

Before opening the door of the Uber I took to work, I pay the driver and thank him for the ride. An old guy, he stares curiously at the feed store facade and can't help his question.

"Honey, do you realize this place hasn't been open for years now? Hell, by the looks of it, the building is falling

apart.”

Smiling kindly at him, I shake my head and zip my lips about the truth of what’s inside.

“Thanks again for the ride,” I say, letting myself out then walking to where Patrick sits on his stool, guarding the front door.

Patrick looks at his watch then at me, pushing two fingers to his throat as if checking for a pulse.

“Everything okay?”

Patrick looks healthy, but he’s acting as if his heart might come out of his chest at any second.

He pinches his arm hard enough to bruise before glancing at me curiously.

“I think so,” he answers on a laugh. “But I thought I’d never see the day you show up on time, much less early. So I’m either dead and don’t know it or dreaming.”

Laughter rolls over my lips. “I know, right? Maybe I’m turning over a new leaf. Got some shit straight in my life and now I’m not going to be a problem any longer.”

His expression warms. “Ames, I’ve never thought of you as a problem. You have some shitty taste in men, that much I’ll give you. But I think as a person, you’re just fine.”

I still in place at the compliment. “That’s really sweet of you to say. I think you’re pretty decent yourself.”

He huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, well, speaking of shitty men, Granger is in one hell of a mood tonight, so you may want to get your ass in there.”

Granger’s always in a mood. And although that’s not my problem anymore, I can’t help being nosy.

“What’s his deal tonight?”

Patrick shrugs. “Got me. But he’s storming around here like someone kicked him in the balls and then didn’t bother

sticking around for the fight.”

“What else is new? Anybody get fired?”

With a shake of his head, he grins. “Nope. Which I find funny as hell. That bastard’s strings are being held for some reason, and I’d like to know who’s suddenly the new puppet master.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I say as I turn to walk inside.

The music hits me immediately as I cross the first floor en route to the stairs to the second. At this hour, the club isn’t insanely busy, and thankfully, I don’t have to push through a crowd.

Granger is nowhere in sight as I reach the second floor and turn right to go down the hall to the dressing room. What’s even more intriguing is that he’s nowhere to be seen when I finish getting dressed and head up to my cage.

Unsure about the *puppet master* Patrick mentioned, I remember Granger is not my problem and climb in my cage without worry of his sorry ass or anything else for that matter.

Tonight is about losing myself to the music. It’s about dancing and becoming the beat. It’s about enjoying a single moment where the world isn’t crashing down around me for once.

I’m bound to no person and no thing.

I’m going to transform myself.

I’m going to do what’s right for myself for a change.

And the calm I find inside my cage lasts for about an hour, at most.

How is it possible that I can feel him when he enters a room? How can his amber gaze be inescapable? How do I know that Damon is walking up the stairs to my cage before I even open my eyes?

I don’t think I’ll ever understand our connection, but there he stands, watching me with a knowing smirk on his

handsome face.

Damon's damaged soul has fractures and cracks that seem to fit perfectly with mine.

We're like puzzle pieces that way, our story written into the jagged edges that match up and lock us together.

No matter how hard my pulse races when he looks at me, and no matter how chaotic my mind becomes at the sound of his deep voice, I have to remain strong to resist this man, if for no other reason than to save myself the heartache.

Gripping the bar above the cage door, Damon leans forward so that he is all that I see.

To say this man owns his space is an understatement.

He's much larger than that, and I feel like a moon orbiting a planet that's orbiting a star that's orbiting a black hole at the center of the galaxy. All those ridiculous things. And Damon is the event horizon, pulling me in until time and space no longer exist so that I lose myself within him.

I can't help it, though. When he occupies the same space as me, I'm stuck in place.

"You just going to dance there all night, or are you going to come talk with me?"

My feet stop moving, the music lost, the club around us disappearing into the background.

His question is so similar to the one I asked him the first night we spoke, and the memory of that night hits me like a speeding train.

Damon had been so lost that night.

So angry.

But mostly vulnerable.

And he didn't even know it.

"I can't do this with you again," I manage to say, even though all I want to do is leave this cage and drag Damon to a

back room. “Not again. I need to keep myself in a good place and you are nothing but trouble.”

His eyes search mine, and despite my protests, he refuses to leave. “And is that the decision you’ve come to in only a handful of hours?”

Nodding my head, I swallow hard, as if that will hold my resolve in place so I can continue to deny him.

A few seconds pass before another question rolls over his full lips.

“How much for a private dance, Blue? That’s all that I’m asking.”

“I don’t need the money.”

Damon nods his head and twists his posture to look out across the club before looking back at me.

“What if I tell you we’re not done yet?”

I huff out a breath. He’ll stand there all night if I don’t end the game we’ve been playing, but still, I refuse.

“I’m done.”

He’s nothing if not persistent.

“Five minutes, Blue. That’s all I’m asking. And if you want me to leave, they have a button in each wall you can hit to have me dragged out of this place. I’m sure Patrick is looking forward to taking me down again. You’ll be doing him a favor.”

I begin to shake my head, but his voice stops me. “Come on, Blue. What can possibly happen in five minutes?”

A lot.

Stifling a laugh, I want to argue that, with him, there’s no guessing. Within the last four days, he’s managed to force me to abduct my friend, steal me from my apartment, fly me to Georgia, leave me in Georgia, and then drive me to my mother’s and back. And that’s just the basic events.

It's what Damon was able to do to my heart and my head in that same amount of time that is the true story of his path of destruction.

Perhaps it's that storm of his that makes everything so chaotic, and just like every storm that blows wildly out of control, there's no telling what devastation can occur in as little as five minutes.

Still ... my pulse picks up to look at him, and an invisible tether that ties us together pulls me to him all the same.

I start to shake my head again, but he surprises me when he leans in closer and asks, "Why are you running?"

My resolve collapses to hear the question.

All the lies I've been telling myself for the past few hours.

There is no way that he can know I've been asking myself the same question all day.

He can't know.

Can he?

Maybe he does.

He smiles like he does.

"Five minutes," I relent, knowing that, even in so short a period of time, saying goodbye to him at the end of it will be damn near impossible.

But I made a choice today.

Simple.

I need simple.

My heart and mind can't handle complicated.

I'm made a choice to let Damon go because I realized that when two damaged people fall in love, it's not always about healing.

Many times, damaged people only cause more scars when they fight to stay together.

Damon opens my cage door, and I step out with a hesitant foot. Despite how I feel, I allow him to take my hand to lead me down my stairs and back to the private rooms.

Unsure which to pick, he opens the first available then allows me to walk in ahead of him. Thankfully, the room isn't too bad—a simple stage set in the center for a private dance with one overstuffed chair to the side for one person to watch.

The door closes at my back, then I feel Damon step up behind me, the heat of his body brushing across my skin. He traces one fingertip along my shoulder before planting the softest of kisses there.

It all comes rushing back.

Every discussion we've had in these rooms.

Every question I've asked that he refused to answer.

The game we eventually played so he would open up about the scars he has.

He inches closer until his chest is against my back, the stupid black angel wings I wear crushed between us.

Damon presses his lips to my ear, and I tremble at the contact.

“You were right,” he says, his voice so soft, I barely hear it over the thump of music outside the room. “The first time I came here was because of a woman.”

My heart sinks into my stomach. I want to tell him to stop, that I don't need any more of his damn secrets, but I can't speak around the lump in my throat. It's difficult to breathe with him so close.

“My brother and I fell in love with Emily in high school. At the time, I thought she was my home, the one person in the world I could run to who would understand me. Accept me. Who would know the nightmare of my life and love me despite it.”

Anger flares inside me.

I don't understand it.

Every person is allowed their past.

I have no right to care.

But I do care.

Too much.

“Damon—“

I move to step away, but he grabs my arm and holds me in place. It's not much of a fight. I give in. I want to know.

“She came back into town for her engagement party to Mason. That's what was happening that night at the governor's mansion when we first saw each other.”

Engagement to Mason?

“But I thought she's with your brother.”

His soft laughter causes his chest to shake against my back. “She is. Long story. But she's the scar that first sent me here. To you.”

I knew it. I'd asked him about the woman. I knew he was showing up at Myth and taking his shit out on me because of one. I just didn't know her name.

“You were supposed to be an escape,” he admits. “Somewhere I could run. Something that was only mine.”

“You loved her,” I repeat, the pain of those words dripping down my spine, flaring in my chest like a storm that steals my breath.

“I thought I did. But she wasn't what I thought she was. My brother loved her, and she loved him. She wasn't the home I was looking for.”

He sighs, his fingers gently stroking up and down my arm. Everywhere he touches tingles. My head falls back against his shoulder.

“Emily used to kiss away my bruises after those weekends Ezra and I were forced to fight. And for a long time, I thought

I needed that touch. For someone to heal me. But then I met you.”

Just the mention of those weekends sets my teeth on edge, my anger burning away the pain of Damon’s love for someone else.

“I still want to kill all your fathers,” I whisper. “Slowly. And with a dull instrument so it hurts more.”

Another soft laugh shakes his chest. “And that’s what I fell in love with about you...”

My heart constricts.

Love?

He *loves* me?

“Blue, no matter what I’m feeling, you’ve never backed down. No matter what I said, you knew me from the beginning. You told me that, and I refused to believe you. You chose to learn about my past and stood there to fight with me. You are the only woman who chose to face my anger head on, and I didn’t know how to handle that. But here we are.”

Damon turns me around to face him, notching two fingers beneath my chin so that I can look up into those enigmatic amber eyes.

A tiny grin curls the edge of his mouth. “So we might as well work through this.”

Bastard.

Using my own words against me.

“We’re too scarred,” I tell him. “Too damaged.”

He nods, his stare never letting me go. “But tell me I’m wrong when I say we’re both looking for homes. We’ve been searching for a place to call home our entire lives. And in the moments we told each other our secrets, that’s exactly what we found.”

Home.

I've never really had one.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Emily and you found out from someone else. I'll grovel about that."

I blink at the admission.

"But I'm ready to tell you about the rest of the scars, if you still want to hear about them."

"Damon—"

"You showed me yours, so I'll show you mine. But more importantly, I promised you that no matter where you ran, I'd find you. So here I am."

Chuckling at that, I mention, "It's not like I ran far. I'm exactly where you first found me."

Damon releases my chin to tap the side of my head. "This is where you run. That's what I finally understand."

Bastard.

It's not fair that he knows that.

Nobody knows that.

Not even my best friend.

Silence passes between us, the five minutes long gone as we stare at each other in a battle of our hearts.

"Can I kiss you, Blue?"

Questions resurface, bouncing and colliding. The one that sent me running this morning rising to the surface.

"What are we, Damon?"

"We're home."

Honesty rolls behind his eyes.

All I have to do is trust him.

He gently grasps my chin again and lowers his face to mine.

"Can I kiss you, Blue?"

What he's really asking me is to trust him. To tell him he means something. That he is worthy of me.

I'm not sure.

I can't answer this question.

I just need —

Our mouths meet and I part my lips for his tongue to sweep in and tangle with mine.

That's all it takes. That first contact. Then Damon wraps an arm around me to pull me impossibly closer as his mouth takes control, and he kisses me like it's what's necessary for us to breathe. My eyes close, and I melt into him, my arms reaching up to grasp onto him when he tightens his hold around my body.

I thought stars only happened with a good orgasm, but I see them now with something as simple as his kiss.

I love this man, and he loves me.

Home.

We're home.

I can plant my roots in him, and no matter where we find ourselves, as long as the other is there, we're home.

Heat erupts between us, a simple kiss that has him stripping off my stupid wings and tugging at my clothes. I tug at his just the same, unbuttoning his jeans so they fall down his legs.

Turning me around, he pushes me against a wall, then his hands grab my ass to lift me up.

Our bodies come together, his cock pushing inside me until we have to break the kiss so a rush of breath can pour out of me.

Damon's eyes find mine again, and we make love to each other with such intensity that my first release comes fast and hard.

Then another.

And another.

He's making love to me for the first time, our mouths back together because now that I've kissed this man, I know I'll never be able to stop.

What can possibly happen in five minutes?

It's such a silly question.

In that small amount of time, two damaged people can fall in love, and when the puzzle pieces of their scars lock together, they find the home they never had but always wanted.



Damon

“Do we have to do it like this? Kane is going to lose his shit when he walks in here.”

I glance over at Blue then run my gaze along the large conference room table we’re sitting at in the office.

The entire Inferno is here. Each member dressed in suits as if this meeting is an official interrogation of Kane Hart.

It’s not, but Tanner insisted it be done this way so that Blue’s brother understands who he’s dealing with.

Not that he doesn’t already know. My conversation with him at Blue’s house made it clear he knew more about us than we do about him. But I never told the guys what he said to me. I’m looking forward to this meeting more than anybody knows.

I nudge Blue’s shoulder with mine. “I think Kane can handle it.”

“Oh, sure he can handle it. I’m just worried about everyone else.”

The past week has been a round of wins for me and the guys. We took down the governor and Paul Rollings at the opening event of the governor’s new charity.

In the past few days since settling those problems, we’ve set our sights on finally dealing with the servers, and thankfully, Kane agreed to meet us at the office to go over the problem with decrypting the flash drive.

In that time, Blue and I have been sharing our secrets. All the visible ones and those that are hidden.

It feels like I'm free for the first time in my life. Like I belong somewhere for the first time. I found a woman who will stand beside me through every horrible nightmare and not only love me despite my past but also fight the nightmares beside me.

She's perfect, even though she still has scars of her own. I plan to deal with those now that all the bullshit with the governor is over. There's just this one last detail we need to address, and Blue's brother is set to arrive at any time.

"He already knows what you guys are up to. This won't intimidate him."

I laugh at that because she isn't wrong. Leaning over, I whisper to her so the entire table doesn't hear what I'm saying.

"I'm looking forward to it. Tanner and Gabe especially need their egos knocked down a few pegs."

I'm the only guy in the group who's met Kane, and I've managed to keep from explaining that meeting despite how many times they've asked.

Yes, I'm still keeping secrets. A few from the guys and a few I still haven't told Blue. But after this meeting, I plan to stand beside her for another battle she doesn't yet know she needs to fight.

Kane walks into the room and every member of the Inferno glances over at him. But it's Taylor who jumps up from his seat to walk over and offer a handshake in greeting.

The meeting of geeks is almost heartwarming. Taylor is finally in his zone.

"Kane Hart," Taylor says, admiration in his eyes. "I've heard about you for a long time, so it's exciting to finally meet you."

Don't get me wrong, Taylor isn't the normal geek who got pushed around in high school. Despite his love of computers, he's still a member of the Inferno and just as dangerous. He

just has his own set of skills in that brain of his that none of us could ever match.

Kane and Taylor stand at the same height, but where Kane has black hair and dark features, Taylor has light brown hair and bright blue eyes. They're an even match in muscle tone and size, but when it comes to a battle of the brains, this meeting will declare a champion.

The Inferno is betting on Taylor.

Until the flash drive, there wasn't anything he couldn't accomplish with a few taps of his fingers over the keyboard.

But I'm not so sure after meeting Kane at Blue's house. So, I settle back in my chair to see what happens.

Kane accepts the handshake, eyeing Taylor before turning his attention to the rest of the room. Eyes back to Taylor, Kane smiles. "I've heard about you, too."

Taylor smirks at that. Many people in his circuit have heard of him.

"When I first met Ames, I didn't make the connection that you're her brother. It wasn't until recently that I put two and two together. You're a legend."

A pen click follows Taylor's words and we all turn to Tanner.

"Although we're touched by the geek love the two of you are sharing, we're here to talk about the—"

"Flash drive," Kane finishes for him. "But before we get into that... I have questions."

Well, fuck.

Here we go.

Kane takes a seat next to Taylor. He leans back, his dark eyes touching on all of us before his stare lands on Blue.

"You keep some interesting friends, Ames."

Blue responds with a sly smile. “I didn’t mean to end up in this group. They abducted me.”

Kane cocks a brow and then locks eyes with me. “Damon,” he says in greeting.

I nod then turn my attention to Taylor, who is supposed to be leading the conversation today.

After opening his laptop on the table, Taylor pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Ames told me you weren’t able to decrypt the drive. What problems did you have with it? I’m thinking if we compare notes, we may be able to crack this thing together.”

Kane glances at Taylor, smirks, then locks his stare on Tanner.

“I’m more interested in finding out why my sister is involved with a group of guys who have a reputation for destroying people’s lives.”

Tanner cocks a brow at Kane’s statement, clicks his pen, then leans back in his seat, the springs screeching as he lifts his feet to set them on the table.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Tanner lies. “Why don’t you tell me what you think you know, and we can go from there.”

Kane grins. “That’s the way we’re playing this game?”

Tanner returns the expression. “It’s hard to play a game when nobody knows they’re playing.”

Ah hell, here we go.

I can’t help my shit-eating grin.

This is exactly what I was hoping would happen.

I like Kane.

I want to adopt him.

Glancing over at Ezra, I notice the same interest on my brother’s face.

The two of us never care much about the game playing with our fathers, the deals the group makes and these damn servers, but we are here for it when someone steps up to Tanner and Gabe to throw their bullshit back at them.

Judging by Kane's relaxed posture, he's neither intimidated nor backing down. In that way, he's just like his sister.

"Oh, this is about to become a shit show."

I reach over and squeeze Blue's hand in response to her whisper.

Kane nods.

"Fine. Tanner Caine, you are the lead partner of this law firm with Gabriel Dane and Mason Strom. Three men known in their circle as Treachery, Fraud and Limbo."

Turning his attention to Mason, Kane adds, "I'd love to know how you got stuck with such a shitty moniker. Although, after checking things out, I think I already have a good idea."

Mason rolls his eyes, his lips a thin line that tells everybody at the table that he's not getting into this.

We all know why he's Limbo, but I'll have to hand the trophy to Kane about his intel if he's managed to figure it out.

After that exchange and without saying a word, Gabe stands from the table and walks to the back wall. He presses a small, concealed button, and a panel pops open that reveals a tiny bar.

We all turn to watch as Gabe grabs a crystal tumbler, drops in some ice with a pair of tiny tongs, and fills the tumbler with his favorite scotch.

After taking a sip and pouring some more to fill the glass again, he turns back to the table, his professional smile firmly in place.

"I didn't realize we were being called out today, but now I'm ready to hear what you have to say. This should be fun."

Sawyer pushes his seat back and reaches into an interior pocket of his jacket, pulling out a joint and a lighter.

“Sawyer,” Tanner snaps, the pen in his hand clicking furiously. “What the fuck? We’re in the office.”

Lighting the joint, Sawyer takes a long drag, holds it, then blows out a cloud of smoke.

“This meeting just went from formal and boring to hella entertaining. I need to be in the right frame of mind for it.”

Tanner stares Sawyer down but then hits a button on a console on the table that turns the windows opaque so the staff can’t see into the conference room.

Furious tapping of keys grabs my attention next. I watch Taylor still in place, look at Kane then back to his computer.

“You broke into ...” Flustered, he taps a few more keys, his expression tightening in concern. “How?”

Kane laughs. “We’ll get to that.” His eyes are back on Tanner. “All of you have your hands in something dirty around this city, but what I’m most interested in are the games you play on the women in your life. Tell me, Tanner, how is Luca now that you destroyed her marriage to Clayton Hughes? He’s the son of a congressman, if I’m not mistaken.”

Tanner’s expression remains bored, but the clicking of his pen gives away his frustration. “Luca’s great. Thanks for asking. And my relationship with her has nothing to do with —“

“Good to know,” Kane turns to Gabe.

“And Gabriel Dane. You chased Ivy Callahan clear across the country to where she was vacationing in Florida and then made the media believe the two of you were engaged. She’s Governor Callahan’s daughter, right? How interesting that this flash drive was in his possession.”

Gabriel takes a sip of his scotch and almost chokes.

“Ivy’s connection to the governor wasn’t the reason for my interest in her. I’ve known her—“

Kane turns his attention back to Tanner.

“What I also find interesting about Luca is that her father was the man who encrypted this drive. John Bailey, who owned a security firm down in Georgia. Sadly, the man is now dead. Car accidents are such convenient explanations.”

Tension straightens my shoulders on that comment, but nobody knows what happened to my father. There’s no way Kane could have discovered that information.

It’s a secret I’ve withheld from Blue, and keeping it from her is killing me.

“What is the point of this?” Gabe asks, his voice practiced and restrained.

“All of the woman you are corralling into your little club have family connections to high government officials and the man who created this flash drive. Why is that?”

Tanner’s dark stare locks on Kane. “I’m not sure that’s any of your business. You were given the drive to decrypt—“

“It is my business when it comes to my sister and her best friend.”

Kane shifts to face Shane.

“How are things with Brinley? Her father happens to have owned the business with John. And now, from what I can tell, he’s missing. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you? Especially after your recent trip to Georgia.”

Shane scratches his jaw and shakes his head. “Listen, I think you have all of this wrong—”

“Do I?” Kane asks, suspicion dripping from his voice as his dark eyes land on me.

Fuck...

There's no way he knows anything about me. I haven't done anything.

“So then maybe you'd like to explain to me why you are now a co-owner of Myth with every person who currently sits at this table besides my sister and me.”

Except that.

We did that.

Blue stills beside me, and I glance her way to see violet eyes narrowing on me. It's the other secret I've kept from her. But I have my reasons.

Kane's voice interrupts Blue's stare down.

“Damon, would you like to tell me why you decided to buy the club where my sister works? Or is this just another way your group is manipulating the situation to control the women who are part of it?”

His eyes shift to Blue, satisfaction written in the curve of his lips.

“I'm guessing you didn't know that part, did you?”

She shakes her head, anger flaring behind her eyes.

This meeting is no longer as entertaining as it used to be.

The room is silent except for Taylor's furious tapping.

“I don't understand how you got past my firewalls. Nobody has been able to—“

Kane turns to Taylor.

“First, I can't take credit for getting past anything. I had a friend do it for me. The same friend who's now working on decrypting the flash drive.”

A sheen of red across his cheeks is the only clue that Tanner is beyond rage at this point. Ever the professional, he maintains his composure.

Gabe's voice filters through the tension in the room.

“Okay, Kane. You know some things about us. Would you like to tell the class what any of this has to do with why you’re here today?”

Kane swivels in his seat to face Gabriel.

“Besides my sister, none of the women you’ve been manipulating are sitting in this room today. Is there a reason for that?”

Tanner rolls his eyes.

“They’re at lunch, but we can invite them here for this conversation if it will stop this bullshit interrogation you’re conducting without knowing the first fucking thing about what you’re attempting to insinuate.”

“I’m not attempting anything,” Kane retorts. “I think I’ve done a decent job of making the insinuation crystal clear.”

“Why did you have your friend hack my computer?” Taylor asks, his fingers still furiously dancing over his keyboard. Shock is evident in the tight line of his jaw, his teeth grinding so much that the muscle tics.

Meanwhile, Kane is cool, calm and collected.

“Because when I last spoke with my sister, she informed me that your group has information on my mother. She wouldn’t tell me exactly what that information is over the phone, so I decided to find out for myself.”

The smile Kane flashes Tanner is pure antagonism.

“Sorry to take away what you believed you could hold over my head.”

Tanner clicks his pen, pulls his feet from the conference table then sits up in his seat.

“We weren’t planning on holding anything over your head. We thought you’d be willing to work with us because your sister has asked for the help.”

“I was willing to help. Except after learning you bought the club she works in, I can’t trust that her job isn’t being held

over her head. Or that any of the women you have involved in this aren't being manipulated.”

“Oh for fuck's sake.”

Gabe pulls his phone from his pocket, hits a button then holds it to his ear.

“Hi, Love. By any chance are you in the area? We have a slight issue that I need your gorgeous ass to resolve.”

Silence fills the room before Gabe continues his conversation.

“Excellent. Please meet us at the office. Bring the rest of the girls with you.”

He ends the call then returns his attention to Kane.

“The manipulated women in question will be here in five minutes. Ivy is currently releasing them from their cages where we hold them prisoner until they become useful again.”

Kane's eyes round, but then Blue slaps her hands on the table and pushes to her feet.

“This is ridiculous, Kane. Just drop whatever it is you're doing because I can promise you none of the women I've met are being manipulated for anything. They want the information on that drive as much as everyone here.”

“You want the information?”

Blue nods her head.

“Why?” he asks. “How does anything on that drive have anything to do with you?”

Despite the secret Blue just discovered about Myth, she looks at me, grabs my hand and turns back to her brother. “Because I want their dads dead as much as they do.”

Kane cocks a brow at Blue's statement. “Why? What have they done to you?”

“They've...”

Blue squeezes my hand, the answer on the tip of her tongue, but she refuses to betray me by repeating the secrets I've told her.

"Because they're shitty people," she finally answers.

"Let's just say our fathers are the ones with their hands in dirty places and we're tired of the games they like to play," Gabe explains. "The information on that drive can help us find a way to stop their manipulation of an entire city."

Kane keeps his stare locked to Blue, a silent question being asked between them.

"Damon hasn't manipulated me," Blue tells him.

"Don't lie to me, Ames."

"Okay, well, he did at first, but then we worked it out, and now I'm in love with him." Scrambling over the explanation, she clarifies. "He's my home, Kane. Can't you just trust me to know who I'm with? I trust Damon. And although these guys have done some screwed up shit, I understand their intentions. They didn't want to hold the info about Mom over your head. Taylor found that information because I asked him to. And you have to give him credit for discovering something you've been unable to find in all the years you've been searching. He's a computer genius just like you."

Taylor looks up from his computer. "Thanks, Ames."

Kane sighs. "My sister is pretty good about giving credit where it's due."

He looks over at Taylor. "Thank you for finding that, by the way. You pulled off something even I couldn't do."

Taylor's face lights up. "Coming from you, that's a hell of a compliment."

"Okay," Tanner interrupts. "Now that we got the geek lovefest out of the way, what are we going to do about the flash drive? You already admitted you couldn't decrypt it. Why are we even bothering with this useless conversation?"

Kane flashes him a dismissive look.

“I never said I can’t get the information off the flash drive. And I don’t exactly like you yet. Not until I speak to Luca. If anybody has a right to ask about the drive, it’s her. Until then, kindly shut the fuck up.”

My jaw drops.

So does Ezra’s and Sawyer’s.

Shane and Mason both disguise a laugh with a cough.

Jase’s eyes round with shock, his hand moving to hide a grin.

Taylor looks down at his computer, his lips twitching as he fights to control his reaction.

Gabriel turns to pour another drink, his expression hidden from view.

And Tanner stares down Kane like he’s about to go across the table at him.

Hell yeah.

We’re back to this being entertaining.

The conference room door pops open while we’re all gaining control of ourselves, Ivy stepping into the room followed by Luca, Emily, Ava and Brinley.

“Okay. We’re here. What problem have you men gotten yourselves into that only us women can solve?”

Ezra speaks up, finally losing his fight against his laughter.

“Kane just told Tanner to shut the fuck up until he gets the chance to talk to Luca.”

Ivy’s eyes grow wide. “Who is Kane because I think I just fell in love with him.”

Gabriel crosses the room to stand at Ivy’s side.

“While I may agree with you, Love, the problem is I’m not into threesomes. It’s too many dicks in one space, and I’ve

never been a fan of sword fighting.”

Laughter shakes her shoulders. “I’ll settle for a high five. But seriously,” her eyes land on Kane. “You must be the man in question. Can we keep you around? Because I think everyone here has wanted to tell Tanner to shut the fuck up at least two or three times in their lives.”

“Try two or three times a week,” Jase says under his breath.

Sawyer blows out another large cloud of smoke. “I think it’s two or three times a day.”

“Will you all shut the fuck up?” Tanner snaps.

Luca walks over to Tanner and leans over to kiss him on the cheek.

“Let it go, Babe. I tell you to shut up all the time, and you don’t complain about it.”

“That’s a lie. I complain all the time.”

“That’s because you want me to listen and obey without question. It’s never going to happen.”

“Which is a damn shame,” Tanner answers, a smile on his face now that Luca is in the room.

Kane scratches his nose and manages to keep his expression blank despite the insanity of the group.

I clear my throat.

“Is all of this enough to convince you that none of these women are weak and manipulated?”

Luca looks across the table at me. “Manipulated? Us?”

Every single one of the women start laughing.

Kane continues his quiet perusal of the group.

When the room goes quiet again, he plants his stare on Luca. “You must be the actual owner of the flash drive.”

Luca nods and keeps a hand on Tanner's shoulder. It's a silent comfort between them, and the tension in Tanner's body quickly relaxes at the contact.

"I am. My father died trying to get that information to me, so if you've been able to decrypt it, I'll be forever in your debt."

Kane watches her carefully, but then acceptance drips into his sharp features, his concern thwarted by Luca's calm and mindful presence.

He drums his fingers on the table, much like Taylor does whenever there's not a computer nearby for him to run his fingers over its keyboard.

"I haven't been able to decrypt it," he admits. "But I gave it to a friend who should be able to."

Taylor sits back in his chair. "Ames mentioned a week or so ago that you sent a copy to Hannibal. Is that true? Do you really know her?"

Kane nods his head. "If anybody can decrypt it, it'll be her."

Taylor's face lights up again like Kane just acknowledged a mythological creature ... or maybe a superhero.

"Great, so when do we meet up with her?" Taylor asks.

"We don't. I'll give you her information, and if you can convince her to do the job, she'll take care of it. But she won't do it until she's in touch with one of you."

"So this entire charade was a waste of our time?" Tanner asks.

Kane glares at him, still unimpressed.

"Let's just call this meeting step one. I needed to lay eyes on my sister and the rest of the women involved in this, and I also needed to hear from Luca that she wants the drive decrypted."

"Then what the fuck is step two?"

“I give the word to Hannibal that I got Luca’s permission, and then Taylor can get in touch with her to act as liaison for the rest of the group. It’s between them at that point as to what happens.”

“So this meeting is over?”

Kane shrugs. “As far as I’m concerned.”

“Fucking great. You had nothing to give us, and instead wasted our fucking time with absurd allegations. Thanks for your time,” Tanner barks as he slams his pen onto the table, pushes to his feet then leaves the room.

One by one, the rest of the group follows Tanner out of the conference room, a few people patting Kane on the shoulder for a job well done.

Kane, Blue and me are left sitting at the table when Kane eyes me before meeting Blue’s gaze across the room.

“Was that really necessary?” Blue asks. “You could have just asked me if things were all right. I would have told you.”

He nods in response.

“Just making sure my little sister isn’t getting wrapped up in something that’s not good for her. And in order to do that, I felt the need to meet all your new friends.”

She scoffs. “I think I’m capable of making my own decisions.”

“Plus, she’s also got a hell of a right hook,” I add, rubbing my jaw where the bruise had been after I broke into her apartment.

“I taught her that,” Kane says, grinning at his sister.

We grow quiet for a second, but then Kane breaks the silence. “When are you planning on coming home again to see Mom?”

Blue attempts to toss out an excuse, but I speak over her.

“Tomorrow,” I answer, intentionally ignoring Blue’s stare that is burning holes in the side of my face.

It’s just one last secret I haven’t told her.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Kane says.

It’s not that I want to torture Blue by forcing her to do something she doesn’t want, but in the past week that we’ve been telling secrets, I came to a conclusion that is difficult to ignore.

Much like I had to talk about my past in order to heal from it, I decided that the only way to finally stop Blue from running is to help her stand still long enough to face, understand, and accept her past.



Amélie

“Why does the Inferno own Myth?”

Bright sunlight pours into the car from outside the windshield, the light causing Damon’s amber eyes to shimmer like gold.

I’ve spent countless nights gazing into Damon’s eyes as I’ve listened to his whispered confessions of what was done to him and his brother.

Somehow, looking at him makes it easier to hear the horrors of what was done. Touching him and knowing he’s healed and whole drives away the panic and fear.

The twins were used as unwilling participants in a scheme to make money— not only for their father but for the rest of the Inferno fathers as well.

When he told me the secrets that were locked away in the darkest confines of his mind, I cried for him but then told him all the ways I planned on killing each and every one of their dads with dull instruments — slowly and as painfully as possible.

It’s too bad Damon’s father died in a car accident.

That bastard deserved so much worse.

“Granger hasn’t been bothering you, has he? Buying Myth was the way we made that happen. His first meeting with Tanner, Gabe and me made it quite clear what would happen if he bothered another dancer. We’re not actually done with the reckoning owed to Granger, but that’s for another night. That son of a bitch laid a hand on my girl, and for that, I plan to lay hands on him.”

I smile at that but turn my head to hide my reaction.

Besides Kane, I've never had anybody else in my life who defended me, much less bought an entire ass club to protect me. Life was always my problem to solve, regardless of the stupid ways I chose to deal with it.

My hustling days are over.

Well...kind of.

Minor hustles are fine when I'm trying to convince Damon to go along with what I want.

“So you all bought the club? Just for that? Why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to hear it from Kane? It's just another damn secret—“

“One I apologize for. I should have told you. I was just trying to find the right time. There was a lot going on.”

“And it slipped your mind? That's kind of a big deal, Damon.”

“I started the process of buying the club the night I showed up, and we agreed to be each other's home.”

Glancing away from the road, he captures my eyes. “The night we agreed to be each other's escape when we need it.”

“But how?”

Shrugging a shoulder, he admits, “It was easy. There was so much dirt on both Granger and his business partner that they happily sold the club just to keep that information from leaking out.”

I fidget in my seat, not happy about where we're driving. “I assume Taylor got that information.”

A grin pulls at his lips. “Who else? The only thing Taylor hasn't been able to do with his trusty laptop is decrypt that damn flash drive.”

I wonder if I can hustle Damon into turning the car around.

“Has he gotten in touch with Hannibal yet? Kane said she’d be able to decrypt it.”

Damon chuckles. “I have no idea, Blue. That sounds like a *him* problem and not a *me* problem.”

My voice is saccharine sweet. “We could always turn around and go back home to help him.”

Reaching over, I run my hand up his thigh. Damon glances at me, a knowing smile tilting his lips. My hand inches higher and he shakes his head.

“You think we’ll somehow help Taylor by fucking?”

“Well, no,” I say, finding that his dick is already somewhat hard. I run my finger up the length of it over his pants. “But when we’re done helping him, we could—“

“You’re going to see your Mom, Blue. I already promised Kane, and I don’t feel like getting my ass handed to me for not following through. Your brother is a mean son of a bitch.”

I laugh at that.

When Kane wants something, he’ll get it.

Just like what he did to the Inferno boys. That meeting wasn’t just Kane’s way of seeing that Luca, Brinley, me and the rest of the women are okay. Mostly, it was a warning to the group that he knew of their games and could play them just as well, if not better.

Tanner bitched about it for hours following the meeting, but everyone else couldn’t stop laughing.

Everyone except Taylor.

I’m sure he spent the entire night working on his computer and locking down whatever ways Kane’s friend had used to hack it.

“I don’t need to see my mom. I made peace with it.”

I’m still annoyed with Damon for not telling me about Myth, but this trip he’s forcing me on is making me angry.

My relationship with Mom is complicated. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to face what she did.

Still, it's pathetic of me to fear seeing her again.

In that, Damon is right.

I'm still running from a past I've never emotionally dealt with. Mom is a trigger, and just the thought of her has me racing damn marathons in my mind trying to escape the fear my childhood had created.

I'm not like Damon.

Not as strong.

His nightmares are a hell of a lot worse than mine—what his father and those other men did to him and his brother.

They tortured them physically, mentally and sexually.

They made one brother hold the other in place so some guy could beat the hell out of him.

They placed bets on which twin would win when they were forced to fight each other.

And if one of them refused, the other was dragged into that small, dark office where they were violated and abused until the other brother gave in and fought.

Those were the worst secrets. The violations.

Damon doesn't have any scars on his skin from the few times he experienced sexual violence, yet those are the scars that cut the deepest.

His voice shook when he told me the full story, tears streaming from his eyes when he described the horror of two brothers unable to help each other before being forced to almost kill each other in a fight.

Both tried to refuse.

And both had to give in because what was done to them if they didn't beat each other was far worse than the bruises and broken bones that occurred when they fought.

They fought for their lives on those weekends.

Brother against brother.

And they gave in to hurting each other because they loved their brother so much they couldn't bear the laughter of the men and the screams that occurred when one was dragged to that office.

I'll never tell anybody what he confessed to me.

Not even if they held me down and tortured me just the same.

I took Damon's nightmares and made them mine.

They are whispered secrets that will only be spoken when Damon and I are together ... when we're safe ... and when we're home.

Knowing that about him, who am I to refuse to face my past by finally accepting what happened to my mother, and what happened to Kane and me as a result?

“Stop lying, Blue. You haven't made peace with anything. That's why I'm driving you back.”

Sinking lower in my seat, I place my feet on the dash.

“You told me what she said to you. Isn't that enough?”

“I told you because she wanted me to tell you. And because she wanted you to know that her job protecting you is done now that I'm in your life. I made her a promise that I would watch over you—“

“So that's why you bought Myth?”

The corner of his lips curl.

“Mostly.”

My brow furrows when I turn to look at Damon. “Why not just fire Granger and get it over with?”

He laughs. “That's too easy.”

I shake my head and continue staring at him as he drives. I've spent the past couple months looking at Damon and I don't think I'll ever get enough.

The scars somehow add to the beauty of his face and body—those white lines that are the truth of his past.

I trace my gaze along the strong line of his jaw, curling my fingers into my palms to keep from stroking my hands through his soft, dark-brown hair that hangs down in a disheveled mess to his cheekbone.

And, God, the hours I've spent worshiping a body that is cut in all the right places. My mouth waters at what it feels like to grip my hands down onto his broad shoulders when he lifts me up, his chest wide and his torso narrowing into a tight waist.

I've licked every dip and shadow in the muscles of his abs and struggled to wrap my hands over his strong thighs when I ride him and lean back.

He's perfection, especially with the scars, but he doesn't seem to know it.

Damon doesn't act like it anyway, except for in moments when he corners me, that smirk of his coming out to play when he knows I'll submit.

When he kisses me, I lose it every time and melt within the feeling of knowing he's the only man I trust.

Glancing over at me, he grins. "What are you thinking about, Blue?"

I clear my throat and return my attention to the road. "Nothing."

"Uh-huh. So we're playing this game again, are we?"

My thighs squeeze tight. I already know what game he's playing.

"You wouldn't be thinking about last night, would you?"

Holy shit.

Last night.

The orgasms were endless, and he wouldn't stop until I was begging.

“Maybe you're thinking about when I pressed you against the wall, and slowly kissed a path down your spine.”

My head falls back against the seat. Those kisses had sent electricity through every inch of me, a slow path of anticipation from my neck to my ass.

“That's not what I'm thinking about.”

“Ah, okay. Well maybe you're thinking about when I dropped to my knees, ripped your jeans and your panties down then slowly ran my hands up your thighs to spread your legs and press my mouth to your—“

“Nope,” I say a little too quickly, a tiny, embarrassing squeak in my voice.

He grins. “Okay. Then maybe—“

“Not that either,” I lie, because now I'm thinking about all of it.

“I didn't even say anything,” he laughs.

Closing my eyes, I shake my head and run my hands up my thighs. “Just drive, Damon. I need to concentrate on where we're going.”

He snorts at knowing I'm not concentrating on a damn thing except for him.

But then he's always had that power over me since the moment I laid eyes on him.

...

Pulling up to Kane and Mom's house, I sigh heavily and try to ignore the way my heart is attempting to escape my chest.

Unlike the first time we showed up here, Kane is already outside waiting for us, his large body leaned against his car.

Damon pulls to a full stop, and Kane doesn't even wait for him to kill the engine before opening my door and pulling me out. Picking me up, he crushes me in a warm hug, and I struggle to break free.

“Hey, Sis. It's good to see you again. It's such a big surprise.”

Bastard.

He already knew I was coming.

Damon and Kane have become the best of buddies, which I have to admit is annoying the hell out of me. They must have coordinated Damon driving me here today.

Damon rounds the front of the car then claps hands with Kane in greeting.

“Mom's inside,” Kane says, not bothering to turn and move like he's coming inside with me.

I look back at both Kane and Damon, expecting for them to follow me in the house, but neither budge from where they stand talking.

“Hello? Aren't you two coming?”

Kane looks over and shakes his head.

“This is all you, Sis. Mom isn't waiting to talk to us.”

Pricks.

While they're outside enjoying their bromance, I'm heading inside to face a woman I've never understood.

Knowing I have no choice but to pull up my big girl panties, I make my way inside, my steps slow as I weave past the furniture in the tiny living room to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table.

She stands up as soon as she sees me, her blue eyes meeting mine as she smooths her dress down with her hands.

It's obvious she's nervous, but what surprises me is that I clearly see pure love and happiness in her expression.

Mom never looks happy to see me.

I feel like I'm walking up to a stranger.

"Amélie, I'm so happy you've come to see me."

I reach the table, and we both stand awkwardly.

This is the moment a mother should pull their child into a hug, but she doesn't lift her arms to do so. Not that I expected she would.

"Have a seat," she says. "Can I get you something to drink? We have juice, water, some soda—"

"I'm good, Mom. Don't bother yourself with all of that."

Mom nods, the movement sharp like she's battling a jumble of nerves.

Taking a seat opposite me, she moves as if to reach across the table for my hand but stops and pulls her arm back to her lap.

Silence is heavy in the room, pregnant with all the questions I want to ask, and all the answers I know she'll never give me.

Unable to stand it, I break the silence with a soft voice.

"Damon told me what you said to him."

She smiles, the expression barely there. "He's a good man. I'm glad you met him. He's someone you can trust."

Her smile brightens. "He's handsome, too. I think you both are lucky to have found each other."

More silence.

My Mom fidgets like she wants to say something, but for whatever reason she can't find the words.

If anybody is going to start this conversation, it's me.

“Mom, why did you tell Damon about what happened to you? About why we were running all the time when I was a kid? Kane and I have been trying to figure that out our entire lives, and it would have made things easier for us if we’d known. But then you tell a stranger you just met?”

Tears well in my eyes to think about my past—to think about how I believed my mother was simply crazy without knowing what mental issue she had.

My biggest fear was that someday I would end up just like her. As if the years would eventually twist my brain in the same way no matter how fast I run.

“I was trying to protect you,” she admits, her eyes holding mine. Tears shimmer at the lower brims, and I swallow hard to keep from breaking down in sobs.

She shakes her head, her long brown hair slipping over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Amélie. I never wanted you or Kane to have to know the truth and bear the weight of what happened to me. My abduction,” she chokes on the word. “My rape,” she adds so softly I can barely hear it.

Her voice stronger, she explains, “It’s a parent’s job to protect their children and carry the load on themselves. I was trying to give you a childhood, I just got so scared all the time that I didn’t know how.”

Breathing out, I roll my shoulders and ask the one question that doesn’t make sense in all of this.

“How do Kane and I have the same father? If he’s the man who raped you, did he find you again when Kane was young and do it again? Is that why you always ran? To keep him from finding you?”

It would make so much sense.

It would explain my entire childhood.

Pure sorrow fills her expression, her previous strength gone.

“No. I loved your father. And he loved me. He never raped me. Not once. He was trapped in the same place that I was. And while we wanted to be together, we knew that we never could. He was just as damaged as me.”

The truth hits me like a hammer to the head.

The similarity.

It's like I believed with Damon...That two damaged people can't come together without ripping each other apart.

But being with Damon has proved me wrong in that. The sorrow in my mother flows through me to realize that she may have loved someone as much as I do Damon. But they couldn't find a way for the jagged edges of their puzzle to lock them together and help them heal.

It makes me want to find him for her, to see if it's possible for them to make it work.

Maybe I'll mention it to Kane.

Another question comes to mind, and it takes everything I have to ask it.

“Did I do something to hurt you? Kane told me you didn't start running until I was born. What was so bad about me?”

Mom reaches across the table with both arms, and I grab her hands without hesitation. Her skin is soft and warm, but the bones feel frail beneath it.

“Don't ever think that. You and Kane both are the best parts of my life. Raising the two of you was the purpose of my life and my biggest success. You're both so strong and smart and compassionate. Everything I wanted you to be. Don't you ever think that, Amélie.

Her fingers grip mine harder. It's like now that she has a hold of me, she'll never let me go.

“I ran because you were the most beautiful little girl I'd ever seen, and I feared the monsters would find me again and take you away. That's why I ran. My own fear. Don't you ever

dare believe that you did something wrong. You've done everything right, and I'm so damn proud of you."

Tears are steaming down my face. They drip from my jaw to the table.

The same for Mom.

I never hurt her like I thought. I didn't cause her to fear the world so that she always felt she needed to run.

Mom ran from her past as much as I've tried to since leaving for school, and now I hate myself for treating her so poorly.

"Mom," I say, my voice stricken with tears. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Amélie."

She releases our hands and stands from the table. By the time she comes around to my side, I'm already on my feet and my mother pulls me into the first real hug I've ever received from her.

It's exactly like a mother's hug should be. Warm and strong. Pure and unassuming. Her love pours into me, and I soak it up, finally realizing that this is exactly what I've always wanted.

"I love you, Amélie. You're my beautiful little girl who grew into a strong woman."

"I love you, Mom." My arms pull her in tighter.

For my entire life, I blamed my mother for being damaged. But in this moment, now that I know the truth and can recognize she's not broken, I begin to see just how strong my mother needed to be to raise two children after everything that happened.

In a different way than Damon, her fractured pieces match up to mine perfectly, and we heal each other in this first long hug, our jagged lines finally locking together.



Damon

“Just put on the blindfold, Blue. We have a surprise for you.”

Blue eyes me warily, her stare jumping between me and the guys as we stand outside a white van parked in Tanner’s driveway.

“Let me get this straight. You have a plain white van sitting here with eight of your buddies, and you want me to not only blindfold myself but also put a hood over my head while all nine of you drive me away to some random place you won’t tell me.”

I nod my head.

She scowls.

It takes everything not to laugh.

“Seems a little suspicious, Damon. I’ve seen this horror movie and I’m not really interested in being part of it.”

A few of the guys snicker, but I wave the blindfold at her again. She’s going to love this.

“Just put it on. You trust me, don’t you?”

“I did,” she answers, “but now I’m starting to wonder just how far that trust goes.”

“Blue.”

“Champ,” she answers.

I sigh heavily and step up to her. “I’ll put the blindfold on you and make the promise that if we do anything to harm you, we’ll all sign over the ownership papers of Myth. You’ll own it fully.”

Her eyes round. “I’m more worried about if the cops will be able to find my body after this.”

The guys snicker more, and I turn to eye them.

They shut up immediately.

Pointing in their direction, Blue says, “That doesn’t make me feel any better. Why just me? Where are the rest of the girls? Why am I the special guest on your super secret field trip?”

She has a point. But too damn bad.

“Your brother knows you’re with me, right?”

Blue nods.

“And you know he will hunt me and every guy here down, one by one, if something happens to you, right?”

“Fucking asshole probably would,” Tanner curses under his breath.

Blue smirks and looks Tanner’s direction. “That’s what I’ve always liked about Kane.”

Tanner scowls.

Gently touching Blue’s face, I drag her attention back to me.

“You know I’m right. So just put on the blindfold for now. In a little bit, we’ll have to put a hood over your head, but it will only be temporary. Once you see the surprise, you’ll understand.”

She hesitates, but finally blows out a steady breath and turns around to let me tie the blindfold around her head.

“This better be good,” she says.

“It’ll be awesome,” I promise her.

And it will be.

The day of reckoning has come.

After blindfolding Blue, the guys and I move to take our places in the van. I keep Blue next to me the entire time as they shuffle places and check to make sure we have everything we need.

Gabriel's driving and Tanner takes the passenger seat next to him.

Once we're in our places, Shane goes over the plans to ensure our coordination is perfect.

"Okay, our target should be leaving his place at roughly six. We'll follow him for twenty minutes, which is the amount of time it should take for his car battery to die."

"You sure you didn't fuck this up?" Tanner asks.

Shane rolls his eyes. "I never fuck shit up."

Gabe laughs. "I wouldn't go that far. Brinley escaped you a few times from what I remember."

"Just shut up and drive. If we don't get moving, we'll miss the target."

The van takes off down Tanner's driveway, and Blue leans back against my chest. There's barely any room to move with all of us packed in here.

"What the hell is going on?" she asks. "And what target are they talking about?"

I wrap my arms around her.

"That's the surprise. Just trust me when I put the hood on."

Thankfully, the sun is already starting to set, and by the time we grab Granger and get him to the woods, it'll be completely dark outside without much light due to the overcast sky blocking the moon and stars.

Anticipation is like a fine wine on my tongue, my heart beating a chaotic rhythm thinking about the gauntlet we're about to run.

I wanted to take care of Granger myself, but rather than beating the shit out of him, which would land me in jail, I convinced the guys that Granger deserved a taste of what the Inferno is known for.

It takes an hour to drive out to Granger's place.

The jackass lives far outside the city in an upper-class, suburban neighborhood. Thankfully, it's not gated, and Gabriel is able to park the van out of sight, while we wait for his Black BMW to drive past.

We've been watching him for several days to learn the exact route he takes to work. It's a rural road for several miles, making our lives easier when grabbing him.

Unfortunately for him, he won't arrive at Myth tonight. And if his battery dies when it should, we'll be on a stretch of road where nobody will hear the fight I know it'll be to grab him and stuff him in the van.

"There he is. I'll keep my distance," Gabe says.

This is the same trick we used on Clayton back when he'd tried to kill Luca, and if it worked once, we might as well use it again.

We drive three or four miles before Tanner pipes up.

"He's slowing down. Looks like his lights are fading in and out."

"The car should be dead any minute now," Shane answers.

"Seriously," Blue whispers. "Are we abducting someone again? Why do you keep including me in this shit?"

I shush her as Granger's car dies, and we speed up to approach him. "I have to put the hood on you now."

"Why do I need a hood?"

"So he doesn't recognize you."

Meanwhile, we all start pulling on our devil masks.

"So who doesn't recognize me?"

“You’ll see.”

The van stops and Shane, Ezra and Jase jump out to wrestle Granger away from his car, tie his hands and feet then slip a hood over his head.

“What the fuck is going on?” he screams as he’s carried in, and Blue flinches against me in recognition of his voice.

“Is that?”

“Shhhh,” I whisper, bringing my masked face against her hood so she can hear me. “No talking for now.”

“Who the fuck are you people? Get the fuck off me!”

It takes a few minutes for the guys to pin Granger down.

Ezra pulls Granger’s hood off, and his eyes grow wide at the sight of our masks.

“The fuck?”

“Here’s the deal,” Jase tells him while Shane grabs the laced absinthe. “You either drink it on your own like a good little boy, or we hold your nose and dump it down your throat. Either way, this is going to happen.”

“I’m not drinking shit—“

Poor bastard chose the hard way. Jase grabs his face, pinches his nose then forces his mouth open while Shane pours the absinthe down his throat.

Granger chokes and sputters but swallows enough of it that we know it’ll take effect. They replace his hood then hold him down as we drive to the woods we’ve staged for the gauntlet.

Granger continues raging and fighting most of the way there, but he tires himself out as the absinthe takes hold, his movements sluggish when we pull onto the dirt road leading to the woods.

Thankfully, Blue remains silent the entire time. Granger can’t know she’s a part of this. I’d lose my shit if he called the cops and she went to jail.

Once we reach the woods, Gabriel stops the van, and they drag Granger out. The rest of us pour out of the van, and grab the horn we use to announce the time.

I walk Blue in front of me, ensuring she doesn't trip on tree roots or rocks that are along the dirt path.

After lighting the torches, we drop Granger at the front of the trail leading into the woods so that Tanner can explain how the gauntlet works.

Kneeling beside Granger—who by this time is delusional and hallucinating—Tanner explains, “When we untie you, you'll need to run as fast as you can because when you hear the first horn, three men are coming after you. After that, you'll hear the horn again, then three more will be running you down. And by the third horn, the last three will be hunting you, and you don't want any of us to catch up. Do you understand?”

Granger is slurring his words but manages to nod his head while cussing us the fuck out.

Tanner grins. “Good. Do you know why this is being done to you?”

Granger grows quiet, his body still.

“I'll take that as a no. Let me put it this way... If you lay another hand on a woman, if you harass another woman or if you attempt to use another woman by promising them money, we'll find you to teach you this lesson all over again. Except next time, we won't be as nice about it.”

“Oh, fuck,” Blue whispers.

They pick Granger up and untie him.

Sawyer grabs the horn then blows it at the same time Tanner yanks the hood off Granger's head.

Granger flinches back to see our masks illuminated by the torches we've lit around this portion of the path.

“Run,” Tanner reminds him, and that’s all it takes for Granger to run into the woods, his balance a touch off as he stumbles into the overgrowth.

Once he’s out of sight, I pull the hood from Blue’s head and remove the blindfold. She rubs at her eyes before taking us all in.

“Holy shit, you all look like demons. Why are you all doing this?”

I nudge her shoulder with mine.

“Remember when you asked me what happens if we make a deal with someone and they don’t do the favor we ask in return?”

She nods.

“This is what happens. But in Granger’s case, there was no deal. He’s just a dickhead that deserves it.”

She stares at me in astonishment.

“Well, then, I’m glad I helped you all with Brinley. I’m not sure I would have survived this shit.”

“Granger will live,” I explain. “He’ll just wake up with some twisted memories after pissing his pants.”

The rest of the guys laugh.

Tanner, Gabe and Ezra pull off their shirts then wait for Sawyer to blow the horn. The three of them run off to start the gauntlet. You can hear their voices and Granger’s in the distance as they toy with him while running him in circles.

“How often do you guys do this?”

“Only when someone doesn’t do us the favor we ask.”

“And you never get caught?”

“Not when we have enough information on the person so that if they tell, we’ll be dragging their ass down with us.”

Blue stares at me like she’s never seen me before. “Do you all have any more secrets you haven’t mentioned?”

I think of my father's death but shake it off. That's one secret that will go to the grave with me so that nobody else is implicated.

"No."

Blue gets quiet and stares out into the woods.

"You did this for me, didn't you? Because he hit me?"

I nod as the horn is blown again, then Jase, Shane, and Taylor take off into the woods.

"Nobody lays a hand on my woman and gets away with it."

She smiles. "You could have just beat the shit out of him."

Stepping up to her, I lift my mask and whisper against her ear. "And risk going to jail? Hell no. I can't be locked away from you. And you'd probably kick my ass when they finally let me out."

Blue's shoulders shake with soft laughter, and she turns so that the corners of our mouths touch.

I can't help but ask my new favorite question.

"Can I kiss you, Blue?"

She doesn't bother to respond. Instead, she turns more and opens her lips, pressing her mouth to mine so that my tongue can sweep in to tangle with hers, our bodies getting closer as we deepen the kiss.

"Break it up, love birds. It's time to go."

I fight to let go of her then pull my mask in place.

"Wait here. We'll fuck him up some and then drag him back."

Blue arches a brow and looks around at the woods surrounding us.

"Yeah. No worries that I'll be wandering off."

Sawyer blows the last horn, then Mason, Sawyer and I run into the woods to find Granger.

We run off in three different directions, then I follow the sound of the guy's voices for a few minutes before spotting Granger. He's stumbling down a path when I run past and clip him with my shoulder to knock him down.

Waiting for him to climb to his feet, I run at him again and bust his nose with my fist to knock him down again.

That one was for Blue.

That punch was for the woman who has become my *home*.

The guys catch up with me and they all take turns knocking Granger around, but eventually Granger gets to a point where he can barely get up anymore.

Game over. If we continue any longer, we'll cause permanent damage.

We tie his wrists and ankles then carry him out of the woods, dropping him at Blue's feet when we return to her.

Blue doesn't say a word.

She just shakes her head and looks over at me with violet eyes filled with appreciation.

I'll do anything for her now that I've found her.

A woman with blue hair and a temper that matches mine, who somehow stood within my storm when she first met me then taught me what it really means to love.

For that, I owe her my life, and she's become my world.

Blue walks up to me, lifts my mask then pushes up on her toes to plant a soft kiss on my lips.

Her eyes run down my body, and heat rolls behind her stare.

"You look damn good all dirty and sweaty."

I smile at that. "Well, then let me take you home so you can show me just how good I look."

Waving at the guys, I grab Blue's hand and walk her out to the parking area.

"We're not taking the van?"

"Hell no. I left my car out here earlier so we can drive home separately. The guys will deal with Granger and all that.

The ride home takes about an hour, Blue smiling the entire way for what we did.

She's part of the family now, and when it comes to the Inferno, nobody fucks with family.

Blue just needs to learn that.

"Thank you for tonight. For what you did."

"You don't have to thank me. I love you. Nobody will ever mess with you again."

Blue turns to stare at me, her expression one I can't quite figure out.

"I love you, too. And I'll never be able to make this up to you. Not just this but everything."

"There's nothing for you to make up. You'd do the same for me."

She gets quiet, so I tease her to lighten the mood.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, hell no. We're not doing this again."

The fuck we aren't. We're about two minutes from my house, and I'm getting this woman in the mood.

"Let me guess... You're thinking about that one time I dragged you into a back room and dropped my pants, directed you to your knees then you wrapped your mouth around my cock."

Red blushes over her cheeks and I want to chase that color down her body.

"I'm not thinking of that."

I turn the car into my neighborhood then rev the engine down the street.

“Oh, not that. Okay, well, I bet you’re thinking about when I bend you over the bed and kick your legs apart, my fingers sliding down to find you wet and warm, my fingers sliding into your—“

“Not that,” she answers, but her tone of voice isn’t right. “Damon? What’s going on at your house?”

My smile drops when I look to see that the driveway is full of unmarked police cars, the walls of my house painted blue by their lights.

“Oh, God. Did they figure out what you all did to Granger?”

My heart drops into my stomach, a war drum beat pushing blood so fast that it’s a rushing sound in my ears.

“I doubt it.”

Panic tightens every muscle in my body when I pull up onto the driveway to see three men walk to the front of the car.

“Damon? What’s going on? Why are the cops here?”

I stare out at the scene and fight the urge to throw the car in reverse and back the fuck out.

It’s too late, so I need to face whatever the fuck this is.

It could be anything. I’m trying not to panic. After what we did to the governor at his charity gala, he might have made something up to get back at us.

“Damon?” Blue asks again.

A million questions roll through my head as I pull my phone from my pocket and toss it in Blue’s lap.

“All of the guy’s numbers are in there.”

“What—“

“Just in case you need them. I don’t know what this is about, but if something happens, call them immediately.”

“What could possibly happen?”

Of all the different possibilities, one sticks out to me the most.

It got your brother to fight...

Be a MAN...!

You two are as worthless as your mother...

Fucking secrets.

It doesn't matter how deep you bury them, they always find a way to dig free.

I step out of the car then walk up to where the three men stand waiting for me.

A cop in plain clothes looks me up and down before asking, “Are you Damon Cross?”

I nod my head, and his two buddies move to get behind me.

They're locking cuffs over my wrists, my arms tugged behind my back while the first guy tells me what's happening.

“Damon Cross. You're under arrest for the murder of William Cross. We'll be taking you to jail tonight for questioning and booking. You have the right to—“

“Save it. I know my rights.”

Fuck them.

I'm not saying a damn word.

I'm smarter than that.

Blue runs up in a panic. “Damon? What are they talking about? Why are they arresting you?”

I look over at Blue and force a smile. “It's nothing. Just call Tanner and Gabe. Tell them what's happening. They'll know what to do.”

“Damon?” she asks, but I'm already being led to a police car, my head shoved down as they plant me on the backseat.

As soon as the door shuts, I lean my head back and close my eyes.

My father spent years abusing Ezra and me.

And it looks like I'll be the one going to prison for it.



Taylor

“No. Absolutely not. This is not fucking happening!”

Another family meeting was called immediately following the gauntlet. We barely had time to grab Granger’s car and have Shane drive it behind us to Granger’s house so we could dump him in his bed.

Tanner took the call while we were still in the van, his expression transitioning from laughing at the events of the gauntlet to his professional mask, then to anger and fear.

We couldn’t hear what Damon was telling him, but when he hung up the call, he demanded Gabriel drive to the office instead of the house, regardless of the fact that we were all covered in dirt and sweat.

On the drive to the office, he explained that it was Ames calling from Damon’s phone because Damon has been arrested and hauled off to jail.

Emily picked up Ames from Damon’s house, and the rest of the girls arrived at the office, their expressions panicked and morose after hearing the news of what happened.

Now Tanner is on the phone with the police, his face a deep shade of red as he paces the office. The rest of us are waiting for our marching orders when he finally ends the call.

“I don’t give a flying fuck if the judge has gone home for the night. I want the initial appearance to happen in the next ten minutes so bail is set and we can pick him up.”

Silence... Then, “Are you not hearing me? Don’t bother booking him for these trumped-up charges. We’ll have him out of there before the ink can fucking dry for the fingerprints.”

He grabs a pen, clicks it once, then flings it across the room.

“Questioning? Hell no. Damon requests a fucking attorney.” He pauses. “You’re damn right I’m requesting it for him. You know what? Fuck this. He’s got a team of us on our way. You can’t hold him without evidence.”

Tanner ends the call and paces a few more rotations before finally sighing and leaning against his desk. His hands curl over the edge of the wood surface, his knuckles turning white from the lack of blood flow, and he tilts his head back to stare at the ceiling as he thinks.

My fingers are already flying over the keyboard, digging for all the information I can find on the arrest.

“How bad is it?” Gabriel asks.

I keep glancing up to look around the room.

My main concern is Ezra. He’s leaning against a wall, his head down like he’s studying his shoes, but I can almost feel the cold violence that shrouds him.

“They arrested Damon for murdering William. Detective Nichols wouldn’t give me more information than that.”

Pulling up the arrest warrant, I read over the charges, but all that tells me is they have Damon for first degree murder. Fortunately, there’s also an indictment, and although it’s under seal, I have my ways around that.

“I need a Notice of Appearance filed immediately. Mason go take care of that, then you can come with Gabriel and me to represent our client. I’m sure this shit is retribution having to do with the governor. Damon was home when William got in that car accident.”

“Except William stopped at the house,” Ezra adds, his voice low and lethal.

“Your point?” Tanner asks.

Ezra's jaw tics furiously. "Damon was cleaning up blood when I got home that night."

Silence bathes the room, everyone turning to stare at Ezra.

His voice careful, Gabe asks, "Why are you just now telling us this?"

Ezra doesn't look up, his body rigid and still.

"Because Damon asked me not to. They got in a fight. Then William left and crashed his car."

Tanner rolls his neck over his shoulders to relieve tension. "That still doesn't constitute murder. Even if William crashed due to the injuries, that's not murder."

I break into the sealed indictment then read through the evidence that was presented. My heart sinks into my stomach.

"The indictment claims the injuries to William's body don't match the accident scene. His skull was crushed in. He was missing most of his teeth, and his sternum was crushed in as well. Every rib was broken in multiple places. His hips were shattered into pieces..."

The list of injuries goes on, but I don't bother reading the rest of it out loud.

Tanner stabs a hand through his hair, the rest of us falling silent.

"That doesn't prove anything. William's blood alcohol was through the fucking roof and he crashed head-on into a fucking forest. His car went up in flames. All of that can be attributed to the accident."

Tanner, Gabe and the rest of the guys continue discussing the topic while I do what I can to break into the police records. If I can just find—

A message pops up on my screen.

P1C@SS0M0L3: I hear you have some problems...

My eyes flick to the message, and I read it over several times. It's from a handle I don't recognize.

Glancing up at the guys, I consider telling them about the message before I respond but choose against it. They're already too amped up and this may have nothing to do with Damon.

Instead, I read the message two or three more times before I respond.

L364CYWH1Z: We all have problems. You can hear that shit anywhere. Too bad I don't know who I am or who you are.

"We need to calm down," Gabriel argues as the room begins to get loud with multiple voices. "Panicking over this won't get us anywhere. After Mason gets the Notice of Appearance done, we will run home to get showers, then meet up at the jail."

P1C@SS0M0L3: Interesting. And here I thought I was reaching out to a member of the Inferno. Pity I got that wrong.

"Okay, but how much blood are we talking?" Jase asks. "Enough to kill someone, or just regular fight shit where someone's nose got busted?"

They got the Inferno right, but this can still be anybody who knows the group.

L364CYWH1Z: What kind of problem?

I nudge my glasses up the bridge of my nose and glance up at the room. Ames is sitting with Emily and Brinley, a blank look on her face while Brinley attempts to quietly console her.

P1C@SS0M0L3: That's a tough deal with the murder charge. Thought you all were supposed to be different from your fathers.

My brows tug together, and I glance up again to see that nobody is paying attention to me.

“This is such bullshit,” Mason says as he sits with his own laptop, filing the necessary document. “How'd they get the indictment without any of us knowing?”

“My dad probably had something to do with it,” Ivy guesses from where she leans against Gabriel, his arm around her waist. “I knew the jackass wouldn't just walk away and let the charity shit go.”

L364CYWH1Z: Word spreads fast.

Given this is just one of many handles I use, I'm not surprised this person found me. It's not a secret that I'm part of the Inferno. What's interesting is that this particular handle is one I only use occasionally. It's more for research than anything and shouldn't have traced back to me.

P1C@SS0M0L3: That tends to happen when I can read your search history as it happens.

My eyes widen, then narrow. Although I'd closed all the back doors left open to hack my computer, I can think of only one person intelligent enough to find the one I left open on purpose.

“Taylor.”

My head pops up when Tanner says my name.

He stares at me from across the office, his hair a mess from running his hands through it. Then again, we all still look like shit after running the gauntlet. Small twigs and shit are still stuck in my hair, mud splatter caking the bottom of my legs.

“Can you break into the police records, and find whatever evidence they used for the indictment? I need everything before we walk in to whatever interrogation they’re putting him through.”

“Give me five minutes and I’ll print it out. I’m already a step ahead of you.”

The guys go back to their discussion, and I switch screens to grab the records.

P1C@SS0M0L3: Tsk, tsk. Such a naughty boy for breaking into police records.

I hit print on everything I could find before responding. And my new friend just gave herself away simply by watching my computer.

L364CYWH1Z: Hello, Hannibal. It’s lovely to meet you.

“Shane, pull those records off the printer for me,” Tanner says. “Mason, is the notice filed?”

P1C@SS0M0L3: My reputation precedes me.

My heart pounds a touch harder to be talking to Hannibal.

Besides Kane, nobody I know has ever laid eyes on her. Through the different networks and circles, she’s still a ghost. Just a name and the admission that she’s female. Beyond that, she’s never been tripped up, discovered or caught.

“Okay, we need to get home and get in our suits. Taylor, I need you to keep digging. Tear the fucking Internet apart. Try to find anything that shows the governor’s involvement in this, as well as our fathers. If you find anything, call me immediately.”

I nod at Tanner’s request, choosing to remain seated while everyone leaves the office.

L364CYWH1Z: You hear we have problems, and I hear you’re willing to assist us with those problems.

Changing screens, I begin hacking into our father’s different businesses, looking for anything that may point to the reason for Damon’s arrest.

P1C@SS0M0L3: I was. That was until I found out your friend killed his daddy.

There’s nothing in the business files, so I begin searching their personal computers.

L364CYWH1Z: Those are two separate issues. I didn’t take you as someone who gives much of a shit about crime and rules.

Daddy Dearest’s files are all useless, so I dig into Daddy Warbucks’s files next.

P1C@SS0M0L3: I don’t. But if you all are a bunch of dumbasses who are getting into the habit of being caught, I’m not sure I want to be involved with you.

Nothing in those files either. I move on to Governor Callahan.

Reading the message again, I realize she's being cute. That's unlike her from what I know. Hannibal isn't the chatty type.

L364CYWH1Z: Are we flirting now? And here I thought you're the type to get what you want then go.

A message dings back immediately.

P1C@SS0M0L3: Maybe I am getting what I want, but I'm so good at what I do, you just don't know what I'm after.

A smile curls the side of my lips. She's definitely being cute. I'm sure Kane set her up to do this.

L364CYWH1Z: Why don't you show me just how good you are by decrypting the flash drive?

Governor Callahan's files are as worthless as Tanner and Gabe's fathers' files. Not that any of these assholes would leave something as handy as a transcript of secret conversations lying around.

But there would be phone calls.

With a flourish of my fingers over the keys, I begin checking phone records to see who Governor Callahan has been busy chatting up since his failed charity event.

P1C@SS0M0L3: It has to sting, admitting that you can't decrypt the drive. I know my ego would be bruised if I had to admit such a failure.

What stings is that she keeps hacking into my computer, but I'm not about to tell her that and invite her to keep doing it. After dealing with this Damon problem, I'll spend the next week locking everything down tight again.

L364CYWH1Z: We can't all be legends like you.

I hit a button to start running phone numbers to see if any of them link back to our fathers. The screen scrolls so fast, it's impossible to follow it with my eyes.

P1C@SS0M0L3: Flattery will get you everywhere, Taylor.

My brow arches at that. Just how far will it get me exactly?

L364CYWH1Z: You have me at a disadvantage. I don't know your real name.

P1C@SS0M0L3: What can I say? I rather enjoy taking advantage. I know a lot about you, but you can't say the same about me.

There's nothing more attractive than an intelligent woman, and for the first time I think I've found one who may beat me at my own game.

It's too bad for her I left a little surprise on my computer that will lead me back in her direction. Hack me once, shame on you, but hack me twice and we'll both be playing the same game.

The phone records keep scrolling, but nothing is popping up that's useful. It's possible the police decided to pursue

Damon for William's death all on their own, but something tells me there's more to this than the medical examiner's findings not matching up to the crash scene.

P1C@SS0M0L3: Are you done scrolling through pointless phone records yet? I want you to pay attention to me.

A sigh blows over my lips, and I take my glasses off to rub away exhaustion from my eyes. Putting them back on, I hover my fingers over the keys, not quite certain how to respond.

L364CYWH1Z: This is a bad time. Maybe we can pay attention to each other tomorrow or the next day?

Damon has to come first.

Then I'll worry about the flash drive and pay attention to a woman who is playing a game for some reason I don't yet know.

A document comes through, but not from the program I'm using to scroll the records.

P1C@SS0M0L3: I think you missed something. You should really try to be more careful.

Brows pulling together, I open the document, my eyes rounding with surprise.

Through all the phone records, I'd been looking for a connection between the governor and our fathers. But what Hannibal just sent me is a clue that leads in another direction entirely.

My pulse picks up so much that I can feel it in my temple. Given what she found, Hannibal knows a hell of a lot more

than what was given to her on the flash drive.

**L364CYWH1Z: How did you know to look for this?
Who are you?**

**P1C@SS0M0L3: I'm just a girl who knows a boy but
wonders if he'll ever be able to find me.**

She leaves a rose emoji with her next message.

**P1C@SS0M0L3: I prefer them in red, just so you
know. Catch you later, Taylor.**

Relaxing against the couch, I stare at my screen and the names listed on the document she sent me.

I pull my glasses from my face, set them down on the couch next to me, then pick up the phone to call Tanner.

“What did you find?” he asks, his voice tense.

“Have you made it to Damon yet?”

“We're about to walk in now. Why?”

I shake my head and smile while still staring at a document I cannot believe Hannibal found.

“Be careful what you say in there.”

“Okay. Why is that?”

She's a fucking genius.

I think I'm already in love with her.

“Because I have a phone record here that shows a list of calls over the past few months between Detective Nichols and Jerry Thornton.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tanner snaps as he hangs up the call.

Goodbye to you too, I think.

Staring at the screen for a few moments longer, I close the laptop then lean my head against the wall behind me.

Fuck just catching this woman later.

This game with Hannibal is just beginning, and I plan on cornering her when she least expects it.

To Be Continued...

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