



While She Sleeps

Author: *Montana Fyre*

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Description: For over a decade, I've lived a double life.

One with a masked persona who is the king of drug distribution in the America's.

And another as a respected entrepreneur.

For years I've worked myself to the bone to survive.

To make a name for myself.

To build an empire.

Until suddenly none of it means anything without her.

Ember comes into my life like a wildfire.

One moment she's a distant pipe dream, and then she's an all-consuming obsession.

For months I stalk her, keeping her safe from as far as I prepare my kingdom for us to rule side by side.

She's hesitant at first, not knowing how to trust someone after years of being let down.

But if she thinks I'm going to give up without a fight, she has another thing coming.

From the first time I saw her, I knew there was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

I'd burn down the entire world and give her every dollar I've ever made.

I'd walk away from everything I've built and end anyone who has ever made her cry.

But there's one small problem.

She's intent on destroying the man that killed her brother.

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PROLOGUE

ORION

The life of a ghost is lonely, but necessary.

In the beginning, I thrived on the solitude. After so many years of being at the mercy of others, I was finally strong enough to stand on my own, to build the life I never dared hope for.

But there's something missing.

A queen.

Ruling over the drug distribution for the entirety of North America has kept me busy, but all this power has felt empty for a while now.

Every time I've come close to finding a woman strong enough to stand by my side and rule my kingdom, something gets in the way.

But I'm nothing if not a patient man.

There have been times when I've thought she was right in front of me, where I thought I could cheat fate and find the woman that would rule by my side by less than savory methods, but I learned quickly that true love, true infatuation can't be bought. Most things in this world can be, but not that.

And if I'm honest with myself, those women may have been adequate rulers. They may have learned to love me and to accept the things I do to provide for us, but I don't want a meek woman. I don't want a figurehead. I don't want someone who will bow to me because I'm her husband.

I want the fire.

I want the passion.

And I want a woman who will burn the world down for me, the same way I will for her.

So I'll be patient. I'll scour this earth until I find her.

And once I do, she'll never be free of me.

CHAPTER ONE

EMBER

A scream tears from my throat as I jolt straight up in bed, sweat soaking through the sleep shirt I pulled on before I crashed.

You'd think after almost a year of these nightmares, I'd be used to them, but if anything, they're getting worse. More violent. More horrifying. Harder to drag myself out of.

I run my trembling hand over my face and sigh. I need to get it together.

It's been eleven months since the accident. Eleven months since I lost the only person in this world I could rely on, that I've ever been able to trust, but that saying about

time healing all wounds is straight up bullshit. The people who say those kinds of things are just trying to make themselves feel better. If they'd ever felt true loss, they'd know an open wound like that remains a gaping hole, and the pain only intensifies as you forget the little things.

The sound of their voice.

What their hugs felt like.

The way their eyes lit up when they smiled.

Those are the things I've been grappling with these last few months, and I don't think I'll truly feel better until the man responsible for my brother's death meets his own end.

I shove myself off the lumpy mattress and glance at the alarm clock on the bedside table. Three in the morning would be a shitty time to wake up for most people, but when I only crawled into bed a little over an hour ago, I know it's going to be a long as fuck day.

After a quick shower to wash away the nightmare, I step into the living room of my tiny one-bedroom apartment.

Before Travis died, we had a bigger place in a better neighborhood. My big brother promised me when we lived on the streets that one day he'd make enough money to get us a real house, something we hadn't had in a long time, but he died before he could make that happen. He was stolen from me.

Pushing the thoughts down, I move to the kitchen and flick the coffee machine on before dropping down in front of my laptop. I've been neglecting my search for his killer for the last month. Not because I'm not desperate to see him pay for what he

did, but because Lucas has been giving me twice as many jobs to complete now that it's just me paying off our debt.

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It won't be forever,I remind myself. It just feels that way right now.

I flick through a few emails as I wait for my coffee to brew, but none of it sinks in. It's like the day Travis died, so did I. I mean, technically, I did. I was in the car with him when we were run off the road and when it caught fire.

I was right next to him when the man that ran us off the road walked toward the flipped car and crouched down to see if we were alive. And I was right next to him when that same man pointed a gun at my brother's head and pulled the trigger, covering me with his blood as well as my own from the accident.

The thing that has never quite made sense to me is why I didn't meet the same fate.

The car exploded, but I wasn't in it. Someone pulled me out before it could, and that's just another question to add to the never-ending pile, but at the top of it is one I rarely let myself think about.

Why didn't he kill me as well?

I shake the thought away. He's going to wish he had killed me. He's going to wish he didn't leave me alive that night when I come for him. When I destroy him for what he stole from me.

The man they call The Hunter will regret every choice he's ever made once I'm done with him.

Alot of thieves believe the middle of the night is the best time to work, and they're

not entirely wrong. We all have our own ways of going about things. It's just I prefer to do the bulk of my work in broad daylight.

I slip on dark sunglasses as I step out onto the street. It's hot as fuck in sunny LA, and even in my short summer dress and strappy sandals, I have to fight the urge to fan myself. As soon as my debt to Lucas is paid, I'm getting the fuck out of this hellscape. I want to live somewhere cold, the mountains maybe. Somewhere quiet and away from a majority of the human race.

When you grow up the way I did, your views on humanity are pretty fucking skewed. Everyone has their own agenda. No one truly cares about others. If they did, there wouldn't be war or famine. There wouldn't be people with more money than God or governments set on stealing rights out from under our noses. There would be peace.

I roll my eyes at myself. I need to get my head in the game if I want to get the job done before I meet with Lucas in a few hours. He's wanted to see me a lot more recently than he ever did when my brother was alive, and I'm not entirely comfortable with the way he looks at me.

It's probably in my head. He's just keeping a closer eye on me because of my loss. He thinks I'll make mistakes because I'm grieving. But if anything, I'm more focused than I've ever been.

I want out of this life before it kills me too, and the only way that's happening is if I work my ass off to pay off our debt and make enough money to set up a cozy life far away from LA.

The coffee shop is packed when I slip inside and glance around at the patrons.

Perfect.

My mark sits in the corner. His laptop is open in front of him as he scowls at the screen. His briefcase is on the spare seat, in his direct eye line, telling me he brought it with him.

Idiot.

You'd think these assholes would know better than to take their most valuable items with them wherever they go. If he'd left the documents in his safe in his office, I would have had a hell of a time getting to them, but his own stupidity was a gift to me.

I love it when they make my job easy.

I stand in line for ten minutes, taking the time to observe those sitting around James Taylor. He's a city attorney who has a little too much evidence on my boss, but he knows better than to leave that kind of thing on the city's computer system. Which means there's one set of files, and they're in that briefcase.

His gray hair is thinning on top, and his light blue eyes have been locked on his laptop since I walked in, which means he's focused on work and not on what's happening around him.

I place my order and wait at the side for my iced chai latte. There are a few ways I can play this. All of them have their own merits, but if there's one thing I learned from my recon, it's that James is a sucker for a girl the age of his granddaughter. The number of affairs this guy has under his belt even shocked me, and I deal with people like him every day.

Once I have my coffee in my hand, I take a sip and move toward him. I make a show of looking around for a seat, but they're all taken, except for the chair with the briefcase.

Fate is really looking down on me today.

“Excuse me?” I say as I stop at the edge of his table, pushing my chest out to give him a perfect view of my chest.

His eyes slowly move up my body, pausing for too long on the swell of my hips before they flick to my eyes and then settle exactly where I intended. I didn’t bother with contacts or a wig because I knew the only thing he would remember was what my tits looked like, and it’s a little hard to give the cops a description that only includes the chest.

“What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if I could sit with you?” I nod to the briefcase. “There are no other seats, and I just had a fight with my boyfriend. He’s been talking to other women, and I had to get out of the apartment.” I infuse as much distress into my voice as I can manage, because if there’s anything that makes a man uncomfortable, it’s an upset woman.

I used to do everything I could not to appear weak in front of men, but I quickly learned that is exactly what I should look like, even if it’s not the case. Not even close.

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“Oh, sweetheart.” His features soften, and he reaches for the briefcase, setting it down against the wall and vacating the seat for me. “Please, sit for as long as you need.” His words sound genuine, and maybe I’d believe them if his eyes weren’t still locked on my cleavage.

Piece of shit.

“Thank you so much.” I choke on a fake sob as I drop into the chair and rest my elbows on the table. I swipe the put-on tears from my cheeks and take a sip of my drink, pursing my lips around the straw more than necessary to keep James’s attention on me.

Men are predictable creatures, and I’ve made it my sole purpose to use their stupidity for my own gain.

“I’m sorry your boyfriend is such an idiot,” he says, finally plucking his gaze from my chest and meeting my eyes. “A pretty little thing like you should have someone who will treat you right.”

I half laugh, bitterness etched into the sound. “I don’t think men like that exist.” I pause. “No offense.”

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “None taken, sweet thing.”

I swipe at the tears again, drawing attention to them before running my fingers beneath my nose. I only need him to leave the table for thirty seconds. Long enough for me to pick the lock on the case, extract the documents, and settle myself before he

gets back.

“Let me get you some napkins,” he offers. Bingo.

“You don’t have to do that,” I argue weakly.

“It’s the least I can do to apologize for my gender’s stupidity.” He pushes himself up and weaves through the tables toward the counter.

Like I said, men are predictable. You just have to know how to play them.

CHAPTER TWO

ORION

The benefit of no one knowing who I am is that I rarely have to deal with the idiots who work within my organization.

Not directly, anyway.

I’m very aware of every single move that’s made within my business. I know the names and backstories of every runner we have, every dealer on the streets, even the woman who launders some of our cash at the laundromat on the outskirts of Tulsa.

There are hundreds of people who work for me, and I know every single one of them, even if none of them have so much as laid eyes on me.

But today is one of those days I actually have to come face-to-face with one of my people.

Killian, my right-hand man and the only person who I allow to see my face, is

waiting for me when I arrive at the warehouse, rows of our product lined up ready to go to their new homes around the country.

There's not an ounce of narcotics that comes into this country that I don't source, and if there is, it's dealt with swiftly. You don't get to where I am without exercising your dominance a time or two. It's been twelve years since I took over the drug distribution network for the Americas. While the transition from each city sourcing their own drugs to it all coming through me and my organization was a bumpy one, things have long settled into a steady rhythm.

"You look like shit," Killian comments as he falls into step with me. His dark brown hair is pushed back and messy, while his amber eyes survey our stock the same way mine are. I lucked out when I brought him on not long after I started running things. He was a scared teenager, full of anger and bad decisions, but he's turned out to be everything I needed in a number two.

"Don't bother mincing your words." I sigh, but he's right. I haven't been sleeping, and not because my operation has been requiring all my attention.

No. Something else has been plaguing me.

Or someone rather.

But I don't tell him that. I don't tell him about the woman that haunts me day and night, or how many lines I've crossed over the last few months just to get close to her.

And I definitely don't mention the fact we're here today because of her.

He'd have a fucking heart attack if he knew I was mixing business with my search to find my queen, an endeavor he has often criticized because he doesn't feel the same

emptiness I do.

Killian is more than happy fucking girls behind nightclubs and sleeping alone every night, and sometimes I'm jealous as fuck about it.

But then her sapphire eyes staring straight into my soul fill my mind, and I'm back to plotting ways to get her by my side.

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The situation is more delicate than I would like, but I'm not a stranger to complications. My entire life is filled with them, and this is just another one that I'll work out in the long run.

"Wasn't planning on it," he says as he pauses at the end of an aisle, and his brows furrow. "I thought we had more oxy than this."

I follow his gaze and count the containers lining the racks. One. Two. Three. Four. Where are the other two? We had six the last time I did the inventory, which was only a few days ago, and shipments always go out on a Monday. It's Thursday now.

"Check the footage," I tell him and keep moving. There are few people who have access to this particular warehouse. It would be foolish to keep all of our product in one place, but this is where the bulk of it is stored, and I keep the people that pass through it to an absolute minimum. There's a chance some of the crates have been moved to the warehouse in San Diego in preparation to leave the city, but I want to be sure.

I tug my mask from my back pocket and pull it over my face. The cotton slips over my face, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. The skull that covers my face has evolved over the years, but the current version is perhaps my favorite,

When you live so long with your identity a secret to everyone, you feel more at ease with the mask on than off.

Killian falls back in step with me, his fingers moving over his phone rapidly. "He'll be here in five."

“Were you able to gather any more intel about his crew?”

He shakes his head. “He keeps them close to the chest. The only one I could get any information about is his right-hand man, and he doesn’t have much to do with recruitment as far as I can tell.”

I hum in acknowledgment. Lucas Trainer is a pain in my ass, but he’s good at what he does. He and his team have their fingers in all kinds of pies, but primarily they’re thieves, and good ones at that.

They can steal anything from anyone, and that’s what worries me. How long before his head gets too big and he thinks he can steal from me?

Members of his crew have already made that mistake and paid for it with their lives. I would hate for Lucas to meet the same fate.

Okay, that’s a lie. I actually wouldn’t give a fuck. But it would be a dent in sales in LA, and that’s something I would like to avoid.

I step outside and weave through the neighboring warehouses until I reach the meeting point, one of many we use around the city. We never meet the same people in the same place twice. It’s just a precaution, but one we don’t take lightly. There are too many people who would wipe Killian and me off the face of this earth given the chance, just so they could take our positions in this world.

The sun is beginning to set on the horizon, giving day to night and leaving pink tinges mottled with the blue, and I take a few moments to enjoy it. I need to learn to slow down before I bring her home to me. I need to learn to enjoy the little moments instead of thinking five steps ahead the way I have for the last decade.

A black SUV pulls me out of my thoughts, and I stand straighter.

Killian and one of our enforcers are behind a pile of pallets with their guns trained on the situation, even though Lucas would be an idiot to try it.

The car comes to a stop, and the man in question slips out of the driver's seat with one of his men on his heels, his hand poised on the handle of his gun.

Lucas approaches me, his dark eyes surveying the area as he gets closer, before pausing a few feet from where I'm standing. "Aren't we past the mask?"

"We're not friends, Trainer," I remind him. I can't remember having a meeting with this fucker where he didn't try to get me to show him my identity. I've caught a couple of his men tracking me over the years, but none of them have gotten very far. Mostly because I kill them long before they can see my true identity. The problem is, I've never been able to confirm if they were tracking me on his orders or of their own volition.

He rolls his eyes and runs his hand over his bald skull. Tattoos decorate his entire scalp as he takes another look around. "What do you want?"

"I need you to do a job for me."

He scoffs. "What's in it for me?"

I stare at him for long seconds, wondering how quickly I could draw my gun and shoot these two motherfuckers for thinking they have any power here, but I breathe through the instinct.

Lucas is, unfortunately, too valuable to waste like that. But eventually his value will run out, and he'll meet the fate that has been coming his way since the day we met.

He sighs. "Fine. What do you need done?"

His usefulness saves him for another day, but it won't last forever.

No one's ever does.

CHAPTER THREE

EMBER

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I hand over the folder but avoid his gaze.

Ever since the accident, I've had trouble looking him in the eye. I don't know if it's because a part of me, and not a small part, blames him for Travis dying. He did die doing a job for Lucas, after all.

Or it could be how much interest he's been paying me over the last three years since I turned eighteen.

That could definitely be it.

When Travis died, he seemed to take it as a chance to take care of me. He was all over me at the funeral, comforting me in the only way he knew how. By exuding his power to anyone who came close to me.

But when it became clear that I didn't reciprocate those feelings, nor was I thankful for his attention and care during the hardest time of my life, he promptly told me I now owed my debt as well as Travis's. That his death wasn't enough to wipe the slate clean.

I could have killed him that day. Hell, I almost did. But between my three broken ribs, fractured wrist, and cracked hip bone from the accident, I couldn't pull a knife fast enough before Cain, his personal security, could restrain me.

"You got this quick," Lucas comments as he flicks through the manila folder. I took photos of all the documents for my own records, but he doesn't need to know that. Now that I'm on my own, I like to have insurance if shit goes south. I'm not going

down on my own.

I shrug. "It was easy."

I reposition on the uncomfortable couch in Lucas's office at the club.

A strip club, naturally.

I don't know why he insists on having meetings with me here, but I have a feeling it has something to do with rubbing my face in the fact I rejected him because one of the girls always comes in halfway through and perches in his lap behind the desk.

If only he knew I relaxed every time it happens because it means he's not going to make a move on me.

As if I've conjured her, a tall blonde woman with big blue eyes and tits that are way too round to be natural struts in. She's wearing a gold bikini that leaves nothing to the imagination, and heels that make my ankles hurt to look at. She crosses the room, paying me no mind as she sits herself on the edge of the desk in front of Lucas.

I barely catch my eyes before they roll into the back of my head at the weak power move he thinks he's making.

Men are the worst, and you can't convince me otherwise.

"Can I go?" I ask, keeping my tone bored and even.

"I have another job for you," he tells me, and I lean back into the filthy maroon fabric. God, I hate this place so fucking much.

"Okay, what do you need me to do?"

“I need you to work tonight.”

“Sure. What job is it?”

“No, you misunderstand me.” He peers at me around the leggy blonde. “I need you to work here tonight.”

I open my mouth to argue but quickly snap it shut again, not because I’m going to agree to it, but because he’s honestly rendered me speechless with this one.

“That’s not part of the deal.” I finally force the words out.

“I don’t care.” He shrugs. “The deal changed when Travis died. I can’t see why it can’t change again. I’m a girl short for tonight, and you’ll be filling in.”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“It wasn’t a question, darling. It was an order.” Smugness rolls off him in waves as he runs a hand up the blonde’s thigh. “And unless you have a couple hundred grand sitting around to pay off your debt, you’ll do as you’re told.”

I press my eyes closed for a beat, trying desperately to get control of my own emotions. I’m not worried about crying in front of this son of a bitch, but I am worried about killing him in cold blood with more than one witness.

It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve considered it. If Lucas died, I’d be free of my debt. Or at least I would be in theory. It would give me enough time to get out of LA, maybe even the country, if I could swing it. It’s unlikely that I would be one of their first suspects. He’s pissed off half of LA at one point or another, but it wouldn’t take them long to figure it out.

I force my focus back to the moment, pushing down the murderous thoughts. “I can’t tonight. I have something I need to do.”

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“Cancel it.”

“I can’t. It’s a doctor’s appointment I’ve been waiting for, for months.”

He looks at me skeptically, but he knows I’ve had issues with headaches since the accident. Something about long-term effects of my concussion from the accident, and I really do have an appointment, it’s just not for that. “Come here straight from the appointment.”

I sigh and nod. There’s no point arguing with him.

It’s just a strip club, and I’ve done worse things to pay off this debt than dance for some lowlifes half naked.

How bad could one shift possibly be?

CHAPTER FOUR

ORION

It wasn’t nearly as hard as it should have been to plant the idea of Ember working at the club tonight. But I needed her occupied for what I had planned.

Following her has been tricky, much trickier than it should have been given my unique skill set, and I’ve come to the end of my tether where that is concerned.

I glance over my shoulder as I make quick work of picking the lock of her apartment.

I'll need to get my own key cut, but that can wait. As long as I can track her, it'll settle my need to be close to her, even if it's only for a while. Just long enough for me to get control of this obsession I have with her.

I shake off the thought and slip into the apartment, taking a moment to look around the space. It smells distinctly like her, not that I've given myself many opportunities to experience her scent up close. Just a couple of run-ins on the street and once sitting behind her at a restaurant. I've been playing the long game, even when it's felt maddening.

Without pausing, I unpack the small bag I brought with me, my eyes darting over the assortment of trackers and cameras laid out in front of me.

This is fucked up.

I'm not too big a man to admit it.

But that doesn't mean I hesitate before I grab one of the tiny cameras and move into her bedroom. The apartment is so sparsely decorated I'd think she moved in a week ago if I didn't know better.

I glance at the rumpled sheets and can't help but stare at the place Ember sleeps, where she's the most vulnerable. She's a fighter out in the world. A born queen, even if she was born to poverty. But here she's not. Here she can allow the veil of strength to slip away, and I'm desperate to see it. To observe the way my little flame falls apart.

I spot the vent across from the bed and move toward it. There are many times my generous six-foot-four comes in handy, and this is definitely one of them as I carefully place it inside.

Once it's settled, I slip my phone from my pocket and open the app that links to the cameras, checking I have a clear view of the bed. Is this fucked up?

Absolutely.

But I can't spend another night wondering if she's okay. This ensures I can tell, even if it's not time for me to claim her yet.

I move on to the living room and pick the vent again. It's unlikely she'd think to clean them, seeing as they're so high up, which means she probably won't find them. At least not anytime soon.

Once I'm done installing two more cameras throughout the apartment, I move on to the trackers. I need to get hold of her phone because she'll never leave home without it, but for now, I'll have to settle for her shoes and bags.

I drop into a crouch at the edge of her closet and carefully slide the thin trackers into the soles of one of each pair of shoes. Next, I snip a small hole into the lining of each bag and slip the tracker inside.

Once I'm satisfied I'll be able to keep an eye on her even when I can't physically be around, I take another look around at the apartment. It's not a bad place, but the area makes me nervous. Ember can take care of herself, but I'd rather she didn't have to.

There's not much I can do about it, though. Not yet, at least.

Soon though.

Soon, I'll give her the entire world, and in return, she'll become the queen of my empire.

Just a little bit longer.

CHAPTER FIVE

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EMBER

My appointment runs over by forty-five minutes, but I don't bother texting Lucas to let him know. I don't want him to know anything more about this than he needs to.

If he finds out just how much my brother's death has fucked me up, he might decide I'm too much of a liability to keep around, and I've seen firsthand what Lucas does to those he no longer needs.

I press my eyes closed to blink back the memory, but it hits me so hard it takes my breath away.

The parking lot is deserted and cold.

It's the middle of the night, a rare time that the City of Angels isn't warm, and I'm standing beside my brother, trembling from something other than the cold.

Fear.

At sixteen, I should be out with friends, or studying, or doing something fun and innocent.

What I should absolutely not be doing is preparing to kill a man.

Travis said it was necessary. That we couldn't be initiated if we didn't do it. I've tried reasoning with him over the last few weeks, but he keeps telling me we owe Lucas. For what, I'm not sure, but he never elaborates.

It's been three years since we ran from our last group home, and my brother has protected me every day. He says he failed me once when he allowed our foster father to sneak in one night when Lucas was fast asleep down the hall.

When he found out what happened, he packed us both a backpack, and we ran. And we've never stopped running.

We've lived on the street, in halfway houses, and we even squatted for a few months in a derelict house ready for demolition, but he's never let anyone touch me.

I owe Travis everything.

Which is why I'm here.

I can't let him down, not when it's my fault we ever had to start living this life.

An old, beat-up sedan drives into the parking lot. Travis takes my hand and grips it tightly, silently giving me the support I need to go through with this.

Trembles rack through my body, but I force myself to stand still as the car parks a few yards away from us, and two men clamber out.

The stench of alcohol and weed is thick the moment the door swings open, and I swallow the bile that rises up my throat.

So maybe these two aren't the most upstanding citizens, but I don't think they deserve to die. Or maybe they do, but I don't know that I should be the one who ends either of them. I just don't have a choice.

One of Lucas's men steps up behind the guys and kicks the backs of their knees, forcing them to the ground with a crunch that makes my stomach roll.

Travis drops my hand when Lucas turns to face us.

It's time.

He looks between us, his eyes moving over our faces before his hand reaches toward me, and I drop my gaze to see what he's holding out to me.

A gun.

I open my mouth to insist that Travis go first, that I've never held a gun, let alone shot one, but I snap it shut again. Will watching my brother kill someone really make it easier for me to do the same?

Or will the sight of a dead body turn my stomach before I can go through with my own initiation?

I wrap my fingers around the handle and test the weight. It's heavier than I thought it would be, but it settles in my hand with an unsettling amount of ease.

"What the fuck?" The guy on the left demands, his frantic eyes suddenly holding more lucidity than when they climbed out of the car.

"Did you think you could steal from me?" Lucas asks, his face devoid of emotion. "Did you think I wouldn't find out that you were pulling jobs behind my back? Stealing money from our operation?"

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My eyes flick between the two men kneeling and Lucas. Surely they weren't dumb enough to think they could pull the wool over the eyes of a man who deceives for a living?

"We didn't," the one on the left insists. His long, dark hair flicks over his scared eyes as he shakes his head. "We would never do that."

"And yet you did." Lucas chuckles, but there's no humor in the sound as he turns to me. "Do it."

I stare at him for a beat longer than I should before I drop my gaze to the man in front of me. He stares up at me, his head shaking violently from side to side. There's a flash of something in his eyes that makes me think he doesn't believe I'll pull this trigger, and I'm beginning to doubt myself as much as he is.

"You can do it, Em," Travis whispers. "Once you do this, we're in. We can pay off our debt. We can have the life I've always wanted for us."

Tears drip down my cheeks, but I don't respond. I just stare down at the man I'm about to kill, my finger poised on the trigger, preparing myself to go through with something I know I'll never be able to take back.

Once I pull this trigger, I'll be changed irrevocably. There's no going back once I cross this line.

I tuck my bottom lip between my teeth and release a steady breath.

It's now or never.

I shake the memory off as a violent shiver racks through my body.

This is the last place I want to fall apart, the last place I want to show how broken I truly am.

But PTSD is a bitch.

It's slowly peeling pieces of me away, and soon I'm afraid there'll be nothing left of me. Just a broken girl who has no one left to love her. No one left to protect her. No one left to give a fuck if she lives or dies.

It's busier than I expect when I step through the front door of the club, my gym bag thrown over my shoulder, and I swallow the sigh that threatens to escape.

This is the last place I feel like being after my appointment with my psychiatrist. I feel too vulnerable, too wounded, too naked to be gawked at by all these assholes.

Some I recognize, others I've never seen in my life, but they all have one thing in common. They see women as entertainment. Hell, I'd wager that at least seventy percent of these assholes believe a woman's role is in the kitchen.

Hurrying over the sticky carpet that should have been replaced long before I met Lucas, I head for the changing room. The last time I was in here, I was tasked to find which one of his girls was skimming tips from the club. It turned out it was actually the manager, and that he had been doing it for years, not just the months that Lucas thought.

"Hey, Ember!" Jules, a brunette with big brown eyes, beams at me when I step through the door and shut it behind me. "What are you doing here?"

“Working...apparently.” I scoff as I take in her jeweled booty shorts and sheer crop top that hides exactly nothing. Her confidence has always made me jealous, and how she doesn’t give a fuck what anyone thinks about her career choice. She told me once about how her parents cut her off when they found out how she makes money, but she’s also put herself through college with this job without a single cent from them or any student loans.

She’s a fucking queen, if you ask me.

Her brows tug together. “Here?”

I nod and drop my bag at a free mirror, but try to avoid my own reflection. Not for the first time, I’m relieved I decided to cut my hair to shoulder length after the accident, because at the very least, I’ll be able to style it quickly. But there’s nothing I can do about the dejection tugging at every muscle, giving me a permanently sad look. “Yep.”

“Just when I thought Lucas couldn’t be more of an asshole,” she mutters, checking her reflection one last time before she pushes to her feet. She doesn’t so much as wobble on the six-inch platform heels that I would almost definitely fall on my face if I even thought about wearing. “Let me know if anyone gives you any trouble.”

“I will.” I smile at her kindness. “Thank you.”

The door snicks shut behind her, and I release a breath. This is too much after tearing my heart out for an hour and telling a perfect stranger how much I’m struggling.

Before I can reach for my bag, the door swings open again, and I meet Lucas’s eyes through the mirror. As a rule, he’s not supposed to be in here, or at least that’s what the girls told me the first time I stepped foot in this room, but he doesn’t seem to care.

He steps inside, and the door clicks shut behind him ominously. If there's one thing I've always tried to do, it's to not be alone in a room with this man.

There's something about him that has always made me uncomfortable, and the way he's staring at me right now makes my stomach churn.

“Why aren't you getting ready?”

“I just got here,” I tell him. “My appointment ran over.”

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“That’s not my problem. You have a job to do.”

I turn in my seat and glare at him. “Not my job,” I remind him. “I don’t work at the club. I’m a thief, not a dancer. I don’t know what the fuck good you think me working here tonight is going to do.” I’ve never spoken to him like this, but it seems my sense of self-preservation is waning nowadays.

Anger fills his dark orbs, and I swallow heavily when he steps toward me. I slip out of the chair and put it between us, hoping it will do something to protect me from his advance, but I should know it won’t help from how red his face has turned.

Lucas shoves the chair out of the way, and I’m so startled by the sound it makes when it hits the ground that I forget to dodge him. His fingers wrap around my forearm a moment before he tugs me into his body. The scent of whiskey and cigars lingers on his breath, and I force myself not to wretch.

I try and fail to tug myself free, but his grip on me is so tight I’m sure it’ll leave marks. His free hand grasps my chin and forces my eyes up to meet his. “Listen here, Ember. You work for me. You do as I tell you, when I tell you, and you don’t fucking argue. You don’t have big brother around to protect you anymore, and you’d do well to remember who was there when you needed them.”

I swallow heavily, holding his eyes. I should bow to him. I owe him for saving us, and for allowing me time to heal and grieve after the accident. But I also can’t allow him to think he can walk all over me. It’s a dangerous precedent to set. “You’re hurting me,” I force out. “Wouldn’t want me bruised up for your clients on the floor.”

He stares down at me for another beat before releasing me so quickly that I stumble backward. “You owe me a debt, and I’ll request it be paid any fucking way I please. If I want you working here every night, you’ll do it. If I tell you to get down on your knees and open your pretty mouth for my clients, that’s exactly what you’re going to do. And if I tell you to bend over my desk and hold on, you’re going to do that too. Don’t think just because you’re a good thief that you’re not dispensable. Everyone in this life is, including a pretty little thing like you.”

Lucas doesn’t give me another glance before he storms out and slams the door behind him. It’s not until I’m certain he’s halfway to his office that I allow my knees to collapse beneath me and sobs to tear through my body.

How much longer can I do this?

How much longer can I pretend living is a better option than succumbing to the darkness in my own mind?

CHAPTER SIX

EMBER

It doesn’t take nearly as long to pull myself together as it would have a few months ago.

Once I’ve carefully applied enough makeup to cover the evidence of my meltdown and I’ve dressed in the shortest dress I own, I make my way out onto the floor. I’m still not sure what the hell Lucas expects me to do tonight because I have two left feet, and if he thinks I’m dancing, I’m pretty sure I’ll fall off the stage.

But it doesn’t take long before he finds me, the calm mask of a man who runs an empire snapped back into place.

“You’re working the VIP tables,” he tells me.

I nod. “What do I do?”

“Sit on their lap, play on their ego, allow them to touch whatever they want. I’m sure a girl like you knows how to use her looks to her advantage.”

I swallow heavily. I’ve been lucky in a lot of ways. The only sexual encounters I’ve had since we ran from the group home have been consensual and wanted, but he’s basically asking me to allow these men to do whatever they want to me.

“You’ll be fine. These guys pay a lot to be here, so make sure they get their money’s worth.”

Before I can ask exactly what he means by that, he turns on his heel and makes his way toward his office.

Perfect. Just fucking perfect.

I step toward the VIP area, testing the stilettos I found in the back of my closet. I don’t remember ever buying them, and I know for a fact I’ve never worn them because I would remember this pain, but they’ve finally come in handy.

It was probably something Sally, Travis’s ex, bought me, thinking she could make me girly like her. She didn’t stick around long, but the time she was around was painful, if for no other reason than the fact that she wanted to be my best friend, and I’ve always kind of been a lone wolf.

Apart from Travis.

I shake the thought of my brother before I can spiral and steel my spine as I approach

the roped off area. The Velvet Room is one of the most premium strip clubs in Los Angeles, and the guest list on any given night would surprise most people.

Senators, celebrities, influencers, they all frequent this place, and I've never understood why that is. It's nothing special, and it's kind of filthy. But then again, I think you'd be hard pressed to find a strip club most people would consider clean.

The bouncer stationed at the edge of the VIP section takes his time looking me up and down, and I force myself not to snap at him despite the way my stomach churns at his perusal.

"Fresh blood," he murmurs so quietly I wouldn't have heard him if it weren't for my ability to read lips.

A smile tips up the corners of my lips as I step past him. If there's anything I've learned from being a thief, it's that it doesn't matter what's going on inside, I can always perpetuate a mask that most people will struggle to see through.

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The music is muted in here, playing quietly in the background as tables of men keep their gazes locked on the women dancing in front of them.

I recognize most of the dancers, but none of them so much as lift their eyes to meet mine, not when there are sizable tips at stake. But I doubt I'll get to keep any that I earn.

Lucas pays me a wage for the work I do for him, which is barely enough to make ends meet, and everything else goes straight to him. It's hard to believe I still have so much to pay off from our debt, but every time I've mentioned it to him, he's flipped his switch so quickly it's like I'm speaking to another person altogether.

I glance around and find a table of men in the corner that don't have a dancer with them and head their way. I'm not in the business of getting in anyone's way, especially when I shouldn't be here in the first place.

"Hey, pretty lady." A short man eyes me as I approach. His beady eyes are filled with lust that makes my stomach churn, and the sweat stains at his armpits make it hard not to wretch at the idea of allowing this man to touch me. "I've never seen you in here before. You new?"

The man beside him, as tall as he is lean, makes a sound in the back of his throat that doesn't help my case, but I pause at the edge of their table, nonetheless.

"Kind of." I flick a piece of hair over my shoulder. "I've worked for the boss for a long time, but I don't normally work here." It's as truthful as I plan on being with these complete strangers. The fewer people who think I'll ever be in this room again,

the better.

“Why don’t you come sit between us, sweet thing?” The skinny guy asks as he readjusts himself. Stupidly, I allow my eyes to drop to the bulge in his pants, and I quickly avert my gaze, looking for any opportunity to not take a step closer to these two.

“Can I get you a drink?” I ask, reaching for the bottle of vodka sitting in the middle of the table. I know better than to drink anything that wasn’t sealed when it was handed to me, but I’m happy to liquor these two up until they’re too drunk to put their hands on me.

I don’t give them a chance to respond before I refill their empty glasses, but it doesn’t waste anywhere near as much time as I would like.

A loud cheer catches my attention, and I look over my shoulder to see Kelsey lying on a table with one of the more attractive patrons here tonight pouring tequila over her bare stomach while the rest of his group watches.

“You up for that, sweetheart?” The bigger man asks, his eyes still glued to the scene playing out in front of us.

“I’m not dressed for that, unfortunately.” I giggle, the sound grating on my own nerves.

“I’m sure there’s something pretty under that dress you could show us,” he replies, and I swallow heavily. Lucas is a real fucking asshole for putting me in this position.

I’m so distracted by trying to think of a reason to not strip out of this dress that I miss the drunk asshole stumbling toward me until it’s too late, and given the sky-high heels, I can’t catch myself before I fall.

The filthy carpet rushes toward me, and I hold my breath, preparing my body to hit the ground, but I never do. Instead, a set of strong arms wrap around me, and I find myself against their chest.

“Animals,” he mutters against the shell of my ear. “Are you okay?”

I nod, attempting to look over my shoulder at whoever is holding me, but he doesn’t give me enough room to see him. “I’m okay. Thank you for catching me.”

He rights me, holding onto my hips until he’s sure I’ve got my balance before he lets go. “Have a good night,” he says quietly, and slips away into the shadows before I can turn around.

If it weren’t for the way the two men in the booth were staring behind me, I’d wonder if I imagined the entire interaction. But then I notice the drunk guy who bumped into me on the floor beside me and know I definitely didn’t dream up the way those arms wrapped around me, or how his hands squeezed my waist.

“Come have a seat, sweetheart.” The skinny guy wraps his hand around my wrist and tugs me toward them before I can say no.

I stumble again, cursing these stupid heels, and I don’t get a chance to right myself before they have me trapped between them, each placing a hand on my exposed thigh.

“There. Isn’t that better?” The sweaty one leans closer and breathes me in. Could I have picked a creepier pair to walk toward? Suddenly it’s making a butt load of sense why none of the other girls were over here.

I want to tell him that, if anything, this is much worse, but I snap my mouth shut. These assholes manhandling me is not how I saw tonight playing out, but I don’t have

a lot of choices other than to grin and bear it.

Almost at the same time, their hands move higher, and my breath stutters in my chest as panic knocks the air from my lungs. After my session a few hours ago, I was already feeling vulnerable. But now, trapped between these two men with no choice but to allow this to play out, I'm struggling to see past the dark spots filling my vision.

"I bet you'd take our cocks so fucking well," the skinny one murmurs against the shell of my ear as his fingers reach the edge of my panties. "Whores like you always do."

I swallow heavily, my stomach rolling to the point I'm sure I'm about to lose the only thing in my stomach, the iced coffee I had this morning.

"Ember," Lucas snaps from the other side of the table. When did he get here? I didn't see him walk up, but then again, I've been too focused on not having a panic attack to see much of anything happening around me. "You're needed in one of the private rooms."

I open my mouth to ask what he means, but he's already gone.

Being trapped between these two assholes in the middle of the VIP section is one thing, but being locked in a room with no one to save me?

That's a whole other form of torture.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ORION

The feel of her body against mine lingers in my mind for long moments as I try to gather any semblance of control.

But it's useless.

There's a reason I've kept myself away from her, and it's not the least of which because my life isn't ready for her yet.

No. It's because I knew as soon as I felt her in my arms, there would be no going back. My obsession would be too far gone to allow her out of my sight.

I look over my shoulder from the edge of the VIP section, and a rough growl escapes my throat at what I see.

The fat, balding man has his hands on her while his friend watches with disgusting interest. I can't allow this to play out.

I storm toward one of the bouncers and watch as his eyes widen. I'm not masked tonight, but that's because I'm not here as the Hunter. A perk of having two identities is the ability to watch your target from two points of view, and tonight it is as the businessman rather than the crime boss.

“I want her in a private room,” I rumble, pointing straight at Ember but keeping my eyes trained on the bouncer. If I look back the way I just came, I’ll pull the gun from the back of my pants and put two bullets in each of the men that currently have their hands on what doesn’t belong to them.

He looks me up and down before turning to where I’m pointing. “She’s busy, man. Pick someone else.”

I glare at him as my hands clench into fists. Maybe I can spare a bullet for this asshole too. “I don’t care. I want her.”

He huffs and says something into his earpiece that sounds a lot like an insult, but I ignore him. If it gets me closer to having Ember all to myself, I don’t care what means come to that end.

“What’s your name?” He huffs out the question.

“Orion Henderson.”

His eyes widen, and I can’t help but smirk. Most people who live double lives are lucky for one of their personas to be feared. But both of mine are. Both of mine are the things that go bump in the night, and I know before the bouncer even repeats the name that I’m getting exactly what I want.

I’m known for being ruthless in all walks of my life, and even someone as low level as this bouncer knows better than to fuck with me.

He nods. “Lucas is coming down now if you’d like to wait in private room B for the girl.”

I swallow down the anger that simmers at the way he describes Ember, but I can’t

expect him to know she'll soon be queen of my empire.

Without a word, I turn on my heel and move toward the private suites they keep for their most influential clients. Lucky for me, I fall into that category.

I slip into the room and look around, my brows pulling together as I try to work out how I can make this work without her seeing my face.

Eyeing the leather couch in the corner and the small stage in the center of the room, a plan starts to fall into place in my mind.

I flick the lights off, leaving only the dimmed-down lights on over the stage before moving to the couch and pushing it farther into the corner until I'm sure the shadows will conceal my identity.

Any minute now, my pretty little flame will walk through that door, and I'll be face-to-face with her for the first time since the night we met.

Since the night that both our lives changed irrevocably.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EMBER

Am I relieved to be away from creep one and creep two?

Absolutely.

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Am I terrified of whatever awaits me on the other side of the door I've been standing in front of for the last five minutes?

Also yes.

I was so relieved when Lucas told me someone had requested me in the private room that I didn't stop to think about how this could be a worse situation than the one I was just in.

For instance, I could have taken sweaty and stinky down without too much hassle, even if it would have cost me my job and maybe added to my debt, but I have no idea how many people are in this room, nor do I know if someone will come running if I scream.

Somehow, I doubt it.

This place may be aboveboard legally, but that doesn't mean there aren't illegal things happening within these walls.

When I'm sure I can't get away with standing here a moment longer, I reach for the door handle and push it open, slipping inside before I can change my mind.

I hover as I close the door behind me, dragging in unsteady breaths as I try to get a handle on my emotions. I've always prided myself on my ability to keep my shit together in challenging situations, but tonight is testing the hell out of me.

When I turn around, confusion fills me as I take in the room. The very empty room.

Or at least I think it's empty. The lights are dimmed so low I can barely see a few feet in front of me, and I'm beginning to think that may be by design.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice shaking slightly.

When no response comes, I reach for the light switch to make sure I'm not in the wrong room, which is very possible, considering I don't really know my way around this place.

"Stop," a deep voice rumbles before my fingers can flip the switch, and something about the tone has me screeching to a halt, my heart stuttering in my chest.

I swallow heavily and drop my hand, hoping he doesn't notice how much it shakes. What is it about being locked in a dark room with a mystery man that is as terrifying as it is exciting?

"Good girl."

The praise hits me in the chest, and I swallow heavily. I can't think of a time anyone has ever praised me for something so menial. Hell, I can't think of a time someone has for anything.

I shake off the surprise and move further into the room, watching every step I take as I make my way to the stage. I hope this guy isn't paying for the pleasure of having me in a private room, because I can't dance, and if he doesn't want the light on, I doubt he wants me near the corner where I might be able to make out his face.

"I'm not sure I'm in the right room," I admit, reaching for the handle. I should check with Lucas because he'll lose his mind if he finds out I wasn't where he told me to be, and that's the last thing I need right now.

“You are,” he says.

“Oh.” The sound escapes my throat before I can catch it, and I roll my eyes at myself. So eloquent, Ember. “You should know I can’t dance.”

He chuckles. “I don’t need you to dance. I just didn’t like those two men manhandling you.”

His admission does something strange to my heart, and my mouth drops open of its own accord. Why would he care about those two assholes?

“If you don’t want me to dance, what exactly do you want me to do?” I ask cautiously. I’m not moving away from this door until I’m positive I haven’t thrown myself from the flame to the fire by walking in here.

Silence greets me, but I don’t ask again. He heard me. And if he doesn’t have a good response in the next ten seconds, I’m hightailing it out of here, and Lucas can deal with the fallout. This isn’t my fucking job, and after all I’ve lost for his business, I’m not risking my safety so he can cash in on whoever the fuck this guy is.

“Take a seat.” It’s not a question or even a request. It’s an order. An order I find myself complying with without hesitation.

I lower myself into the single leather seat by the stage and cross one leg over the other. This is not how I expected my night to play out, but if this is all he wants from me, I’d be an idiot to leave.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Ember,” I tell him honestly.

“A pretty name for a pretty girl.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head. Why do men insist on keeping that saying alive?
It's so outdated and dishonest that it almost makes me angry.

Another chuckle greets me from the other side of the room, and not for the first time,
I'm tempted to ask why we're sitting here in the dark.

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Is he ugly? Or maybe he has scars he doesn't like to show off? I'm not vain enough that I would care about something like that, especially because this is the most respect I've been shown since I walked through the doors an hour ago, but I guess there's no way for him to know that.

"Your name suits you."

"How so?"

"There's a fire burning in you."

I almost scoff and tell him that may have been the case once upon a time, but it's sure as hell not anymore. Instead, I just shake my head and plaster a placating smile on my lips.

"At the risk of sounding even more cliché than I already have, what's a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this? You look out of place."

"Gee, thanks." I half laugh at the backhanded compliment.

"That's not what I meant." I imagine him shaking his head. "I meant that you've looked uncomfortable since I first saw you, and a girl who does this on the regular wouldn't seem so out of her comfort zone."

"Maybe it's my first day."

"Your boss wouldn't put a new girl in the VIP area, no matter how pretty she is."

A surprised laugh escapes my throat. He's half right, I suppose. It may be my first time working here, but it's not my first day with him. Lucas trusts me. Or at least he trusts me about as much as he trusts anyone in his organization.

"You seem to know a lot about my boss."

"I know a lot about a lot of people."

There's something about the stranger in the dark that puts me at ease, and I find myself relaxing into the soft leather. The couches in here are less worn than anywhere else in the club, and after the day I've had, it's nice to relax.

"What's your name?" I ask.

I'm met with silence, and part of me is sad he doesn't want to tell me about himself, which is stupid, right? Why would I care if I know a single thing about this guy?

I'm just going to sit in here until he tells me I can leave, and then I'm going home.

Lucas can go fuck himself if he thinks I'm dealing with anymore of his clients tonight.

CHAPTER NINE

ORION

The light hits her perfectly, illuminating her soft, dark hair and high cheekbones.

But it also highlights something else. Her sadness.

I don't know how I missed it before, but she seems sadder than usual, like just

breathing is hard for her tonight.

“Orion,” I tell her honestly. It’s rare I have to tell someone my name, because most people know it, regardless of which persona I’m wearing.

Her eyes snap up and stare right at me, and my breath stutters in my chest as our eyes clash. She has no idea she’s staring right into my goddamn soul right now when she thinks she’s just looking into the darkness.

She shifts in her seat, tucking one of her legs beneath her to get more comfortable. I’ve been close to Ember a handful of times, but this is the most time we’ve ever spent together while she’s conscious, and I find myself entranced by every soft sound she makes, every shift of her body, every breath she takes.

“Why are we sitting in the dark?” she asks. “If you’re not going to ask me to do anything, and we’re just going to sit here talking, surely we could have more than a few dim lights on.”

I chuckle and brush my fingers over the stubble on my chin. I’ve been growing it longer recently, and I’ve often wondered if Ember will like it. “Don’t you find it calming?”

“No.” She shakes her head, and her short hair falls against her shoulders. The dress she’s wearing is something straight out of my dreams, showing off her creamy flesh in a way her clothes don’t normally. “It’s a bit unsettling, if I’m honest.”

“You don’t like the dark?”

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She's silent for a beat, as if considering how honest she wants to be with a perfect stranger. "There's too much unknown in the dark. You never know what, or who, is lurking just around the corner."

"You say that like you have experience."

"I do," she whispers. "Too much."

Silence falls over us, but it's not as uncomfortable as it probably should be. Two strangers sitting in a dark room together in the middle of a strip club. Yeah, this should probably be way more awkward.

Ember's eyes fall closed, and she takes a deep breath, settling further into the chair she's curled up in. How long can I keep her in here before Lucas comes looking for her?

I asked him to have everyone on his payroll here tonight so I could plant the cameras and trackers in her apartment, but it never occurred to me he would put her to work like this. But I can't show my hand too early, which means I can't say shit about him putting her in this position.

"If you're not a dancer and you don't normally work here, why did your boss have you in the VIP area tonight?"

She shrugs, her eyes snapping open to search the darkness once more. "Your guess is as good as mine. Lucas is...he's kind of a moron, but he never does anything without a reason. I'm sure I'll find out soon enough what angle he's working having me

here.”

“What do you normally do for work?”

A smirk tips up her lips, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s forgotten that while she can’t see me, I have a perfect view of her. “I acquire things.”

I chuckle softly, too quiet for her to hear from the other side of the room. That’s the most eloquent way I’ve ever heard someone admit they’re a thief. “What kinds of things? I might be able to use your services.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so.” But she doesn’t bother answering my question. I suppose a good thief knows when to keep their mouth shut, especially when locked in a room with someone they don’t know.

“What do you do for work, Orion?”

My name on her lips steals a groan from my throat, and I reach down, palming my aching cock. He’s been patient these past months, watching from afar, having nothing but my hand to keep him company. But he’s getting impatient, the same way I am, and having her this close is making it hard to keep my distance.

“I’m an entrepreneur,” I tell her. Technically, not a lie, or at least not any more than her description of what she does for a living.

She sits up straighter, her shoulders pulling back. “What kind of businesses do you work with?”

“A little bit of this, a little bit of that,” I reply vaguely.

A laugh escapes her throat, but she doesn’t question me further, and for that I’m

grateful. Giving her my name was risky enough, but my patience is beginning to falter.

I need to move up the timeline.

I need to make her mine because I don't know how much longer I can remain a ghost in her life.

CHAPTER TEN

EMBER

It doesn't make any sense, but somehow sitting in a dark room with a perfect stranger for an hour is the most at ease I've felt since my brother died.

There's something almost soothing about Orion's presence, which I know is batshit crazy seeing as there's obviously a reason he stayed in the darkest corner of the room and only gave me his name and a very vague profession to go off.

And yet, when Lucas bangs on the door to tell me to go home, I'm disappointed.

If I weren't already in therapy, I'd think I needed my head read.

"It was nice to meet you, Ember." The way my name rolls off his tongue makes my stomach clench, and a wave of goose bumps races across my skin.

I open my mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. Instead, I step into the hallway and move toward the VIP section, where I assume I'm supposed to be, but stop when one of the bouncers steps into my path.

"Boss wants to see you," he grunts, and my stomach bottoms out. I don't know if I

can handle dealing with Lucas again tonight. Sure, the hour in a dark room with a faceless stranger was a nice reprieve, but I still feel entirely too raw.

I press my eyes closed, breathing in a steady breath, before I turn on my heel and move down the hallway. I quickly step into the bathroom and check my makeup before dragging cool water up my bare arms to calm myself.

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I've been alone with Lucas a million times before, and unless I can find a way to pay off my debt to him, I probably will be a million more.

Once I've settled the anxiety building in my chest, I push off from the basin and step back into the hallway.

The music from the main floor filters through the tight space as I walk to the end of the hall and knock on the door. There's no way I'm stepping into this room without knocking, knowing how many of the girls he's fucking.

"Come in," he calls, and I don't hesitate to shove the door open even as my stomach recoils at the thought.

Lucas sits on the other side of the desk, his eyes glued to the computer screen in front of him, with his brows furrowed.

I step into the room and close the door behind me, slipping into one of the chairs in front of the desk, folding my hands in my lap as I wait for Lucas to finish whatever it is he's doing.

It didn't take very long for me to learn he isn't someone who likes being interrupted, and I don't think I can handle his anger right now.

He finally looks up at me as he leans back in his chair, staring over the cheap wooden desk at me. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" I ask, my brows tugging together in confusion as I try to rack my brain

about everything I've done recently that he could possibly be talking about.

"How did you catch the attention of the most ruthless businessman to ever call LA home?"

I open my mouth, but it immediately snaps shut again because I'm still not quite following this conversation. "I don't know what you mean," I tell him honestly.

"Orion Henderson specifically requested time with you in the private room. He paid through the fucking nose to spend an hour with a girl that can't dance for shit, so I gotta assume you were using your body considering the fucking tip he left you."

He thinks he's clearing up what I'm confused about, but if anything, I'm more confused now than I was when he first opened his mouth. He paid to sit in the dark room and talk? Why the hell would he do that?

I shake my head. "We didn't do anything. We just...talked."

Lucas's booming laugh startles me, but I force myself to remain in my seat. "You're telling me, the most eligible bachelor in this city walks into my club, picks my least experienced girl from the crowd, and then sat there and talked?"

Okay, so he doesn't believe me. I get that. I probably wouldn't believe me if I were him either, especially when he puts it like that. It does seem kind of farfetched.

I fold my arms across my chest defensively, but don't bother to argue. I know what happened in that room, and I really couldn't give a fuck what Lucas thinks of me, so long as he doesn't think this is going to be a regular thing.

"He wants to see you again. Tomorrow night."

My eyes widen, and my stomach flips in a way that's unfamiliar. "This was supposed to be a one-off, Lucas. This isn't what I do, and I'm never going to pay back mine and Travis's debts with some measly tips from the club. I need real jobs. The jobs you hired me to do in the first place."

He huffs out a sigh and drops his elbows to the desk. He considers me for a beat before pushing an envelope across the desk and nodding to it. "Open it."

I reach for the unsuspecting white envelope, knowing it could hold just about anything. When you work with criminals, you learn to expect the unexpected.

But when I lift the flap, it's not a job or anything sinister, for that matter. It's cash. A lot of fucking cash.

I flick my eyes up to meet his smug gaze before looking back down at the wad of hundreds staring back at me.

"That's your cut. I've already taken mine, plus your loan payment."

My mouth drops open in surprise. There's at least fifteen hundred dollars here, which means Orion paid an obscene amount of money to sit in a dark room and chat.

The question is, why?

Why would anyone pay to talk to a stranger?

I almost laugh at myself because I literally did that a few hours ago as I laid myself bare to a psychiatrist, begging them to save me from drowning in the pools of my own grief.

"You'll be here at the same time tomorrow night. You won't have to work VIP."

You'll only be seeing Orion."

I finally find my voice, dropping the envelope into my lap. "This is feeling vaguely like prostitution, Lucas."

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He laughs. “Didn’t you say nothing happened in that room?” He raises a brow at me.

“Fucking isn’t the definition of the word.” I roll my eyes. “What about my usual work?”

“I have a special assignment for you, seeing as you’ll be more preoccupied than usual.” He reaches into his desk and pulls out a manila folder, pushing it across the desk to me. This time, I don’t hesitate to pick it up and flick through the few sheets of paper inside.

The Hunter.

Distributor of all illegal drugs into the Americas.

My brows shoot up as I lock eyes with Lucas. “What is this?”

“I want information on him.”

“On the nameless, faceless man that has a trail of dead bodies of people who have tried to unearth his identity? This is a fucking suicide mission.”

I snap the folder closed and shove myself to my feet. I can’t do this tonight, not when I’m already grappling with my ability to live my life alone, missing the only person who ever loved me.

“The Hunter is the one who killed your brother, Ember. He was driving the car that ran the two of you off the road that night.”

My entire body stills as panic slams into me so hard I barely catch myself before I land on my ass. Not only does he want me to track a man that clearly doesn't want to be found, but he's also the reason my entire life has fallen apart.

I take a deep breath and slip back into my chair, not trusting my shaky legs to hold me up. "What do you want me to do?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ORION

Asking to see Ember again is a risk for a lot of reasons.

The first being that by showing an obvious interest in the girl, that asshole Lucas is going to know she means something to me.

The second is that I'm not ready to drag her into my orbit yet. There are things outside of my control that I must get in order before I can bring her into the fold and claim her as mine.

And the third is that I don't know how long I'll be able to sit in the corner without needing my hands on her. I'm a man known for patience. I've had to have a lot of it to get to where I am. But there's something about my little flame that makes it hard to remember why I need to be patient. She makes me reckless, and that's not something I can afford to be right now.

But I can't stay away anymore.

The months of patience I've had to this point have been hard fought, but I need to have her in any capacity I can manage.

I slide my car into an empty parking spot behind our main warehouse, where I conduct most of my business, before double-checking the cameras. At this time of night, there shouldn't be anyone here, which means I can forgo the mask. But I'm not willing to risk it. I've gone too many years without anyone knowing my identity. I'm not about to fuck it up now.

Once I'm sure the only person in the building is Killian, I slip out of the car and use the side door to enter the warehouse. There are pallets in the center of the huge space and a forklift parked beside them. It's a new shipment of fentanyl that's just arrived from the Middle East, but I want to check the quality before we start distribution. I haven't gotten to where I am today without knowing to be wary of new suppliers.

I find Killian in the small control room that overlooks all of our warehouses across the city, his eyes locked on one screen in particular. "Hey."

He doesn't bother looking up from the screen, sparing me but a grunt in acknowledgment. "Where have you been?"

I chuckle and fold myself into the spare chair by the door. Only he can get away with talking to me like that, and he knows it. I answer to no one, but Killian is as close to a friend as I have, making me much more likely to answer his question honestly.

"I was at The Velvet Room," I tell him honestly, which finally tears his attention from the screen.

"You were at a strip club?" he asks incredulously. "What the fuck were you doing there?"

I consider my answer for a beat before deciding I've already come this far. Why not go the whole nine yards? Killian may not have an interest in getting a woman of his own, but he knows I've longed for a queen for years and has helped me anytime I

needed it to make that happen.

There's a chance Lucas will become suspicious by how often I demand to see her, and that means she'll soon need another layer of protection that I can't offer by myself.

"I saw Ember."

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His eyes widen, and he turns the chair to face me, seemingly forgetting about whatever he was watching before I walked in. “I thought you were going to wait a while longer before claiming her.”

“I am. But after I was done at her apartment, something told me I needed to go check on her to make sure Lucas did as he was told, which he didn’t, mind you. He had her working the VIP section with two assholes pawing her.”

Killian bristles, and if I weren’t so mad at the memory, I’d smirk. Lucas may not be directly attached to the skin trade, but he walks a line neither of us is comfortable with, especially when his sister was taken by the Lounder Cartel a few years back, an organization we helped to dismantle without anyone ever knowing we were involved.

That reminds me, I should check in on Ayvah and make sure that asshole, Storm Saint James, is treating her right.

Although I believe Ayvah would have made a good queen, and I was thoroughly fascinated with her, I think things worked out how they were supposed to. Because there isn’t a single doubt in my mind that Ember is my future. She just doesn’t know it yet.

“I requested time with her in a private room so I could get her out of there.”

“You did what?” he snaps. “Orion, it’s too dangerous for her to see you right now.”

“She didn’t,” I placate him. “I had all the lights off, and we just...talked.”

He stares at me for a beat before a startling laugh escapes his throat. “You talked?”

“We did.” I nod. “It likely wasn’t the worst idea I’ve ever had. At least I had the chance to make sure we’re not totally incompatible before I make her mine.”

Killian shakes his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. “You’ve got it bad, man.”

I don’t bother denying it, not when we both know my obsession with this woman has been getting progressively more unhinged as the months have worn on.

“Are you seeing her again?”

I nod. “Tomorrow night.”

“Lucas is going to know something’s up.”

“That’s why I’m telling you. I need you to keep her safe when I can’t.”

If it were anyone else, I would expect an argument, but Killian nods his understanding.

He knows how much she means to me, and he doesn’t want me to suffer the way he has, even if he’ll never say that to my face.

Our peculiar little family will soon grow by one. We just have to get Ember on board with it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EMBER

The envelope of cash sits on the table in front of me, beside the manila envelope that makes my stomach flip to look at, let alone open.

The Hunter killed my brother.

The nameless, faceless, lethal man who rules the drug trade is the man who ran us off the road and into that ravine.

He's the reason my brother is dead.

He's the reason I can't get into a car without a panic attack.

He's the reason my entire life came crumpling down.

Before the accident, I had hoped that one day I would get out from under Lucas's thumb. That maybe I'd be able to build a life for myself, far away from the sins of my past.

But that was torn away from me when I realized I would have to pay both our debts. There's no chance of freedom now. At least not for the foreseeable future, depending on how long my usefulness lasts. I'm not so dumb as to think Lucas will allow a valuable member of his team to walk away from him without a fight.

But you don't get to where I am without knowing how to get the hell out of dodge without a trace. When the time comes, I'll make myself disappear, and not even Lucas will be able to find me.

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My chest aches for my freedom, but it's so far away. So unreachable.

I reach for the manila envelope and flick through the pages of information inside. There is basically nothing to go off. Just a few notes about warehouses and the times the Hunter has been at meetings Lucas has attended.

What the fuck does he want me to do with this?

It's nothing.

It's less than nothing.

I could get more from a fucking Google search than what Lucas has provided me with.

Sighing, I flick the folder shut and drop my head to the edge of the table, taking in a few deep breaths to settle the anxiety running rampant through my chest.

Lucas is sending me on a suicide mission.

But that gets me thinking, why would the Hunter kill my brother?

Travis was mid-level in Lucas's organization, and in most cases, I'd even say he ranked below me. He wasn't as talented a thief as I am, nor was he able to get in and out of places undetected like I can. He was just like every other guy who works for Lucas.

So that begs the question, what did Travis do to piss off the most feared man in the country?

Without thinking too much on it, I cross the room to the closet I keep my brother's belongings in and tug out the box I remember throwing his phone in.

I plug it in to charge before returning to the closet and opening a few boxes until I find some files that I never bothered to go through. When I went through all of this, my mental state was fragile, and my body was broken from the accident. The last thing on my mind was whether our birth certificates were safe or if Travis was up to date with paying his taxes.

Returning to the table with a handful of paperwork, I retake my seat and start flicking through the piles of unpaid bills and notes jotted down on napkins.

Clearly, the man needed help with his admin skills if this is what he was working with.

I sigh and start making piles, splitting things into categories so I can toss out whatever I don't need, which is pretty much all of it. It takes me longer than I care to admit to sift through all the paperwork, and in the end, there's nothing that sticks out to me as a clue.

Not until Travis's phone lights up. I pluck it off the charger, quickly unlocking it with my birthday. My brother may have been a criminal, but he was a softy at heart and cared about me more than anyone ever has, and likely ever will.

I flick through his texts, finding nothing of note aside from a bunch of booty calls that make my stomach roll. Was he always this much of a player? Or did I just ignore it all those years?

I click into his texts with Lucas and scroll back a couple of months before his death. Toward the end, Travis got secretive about the jobs our boss had him doing, and I don't know why it never occurred to me before to check his phone.

Maybe because you were so bogged down in grief that you were fighting just to live, I remind myself. But the joke is on me because I'm still struggling to want to live.

Something catches my eye, and I quickly swipe back, my brows tugging together as I read through the thread.

Lucas: Got a job for you.

Travis: You got it. Send me the details.

Lucas: I'll send Cain to meet you with the information. This one is off the books. No one can know you're working on this. Not even Ember.

Travis: I'll meet him in 10.

Well, there's the confirmation I didn't need that my brother was lying to me.

I drop the phone on the table and consider my options. I might be able to track his movements through the GPS in the phone, and while I know my way around a computer, hacking isn't my strong suit.

The manila envelope catches my eye, and I drop my head into my hands. This is connected. I can feel it. Did Lucas order Travis to look into the Hunter? That's the only way I can see that he would end up on his radar.

I nibble at my bottom lip, considering what my next move should be.

Lucas will kill me if I don't deliver on this job. That was the first thing he ever drilled into us when we came on board. Failure equals death.

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But on the flip side, the Hunter will kill me if I get too close to discovering his identity.

There's not much I can do about any of it tonight, so I may as well crawl into bed for a few hours so I can look at this with fresh eyes.

If only I thought that would help.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ORION

The dark corner of the room has become a safe haven for me.

This is the fourth time I'm seeing my sweet Ember, and the fourth time I've hidden away in the shadows like a coward.

If she were so inclined, she could Google me. There are thousands of articles all over the web about me and my legitimate businesses, so why bother hiding in the corner of the room I keep insisting we meet in?

I'm not sure.

Perhaps it's because the anonymity it offers me feels safe right now. If I can't see her in full light, locked in a room with me, maybe I can keep my hands to myself for a little while longer.

I scoff at the thought.

I'm barely holding on.

Even the dim light that illuminates my girl is enough to make my resolve weaken with each visit.

So why do I keep coming back?

Now there's a question.

I should have stopped after the first time. It's unlikely Lucas would have insisted Ember come back here, and then I could have gone back to watching her from afar without any issues.

But I can't stay away.

I'm like an addict desperate for my next fix.

I check my watch for the third time since I walked in here. She's late, and my stomach flips with unease.

Ever since I started these little meetings last week, I've become even more protective of her, watching her on the cameras whenever I'm not in meetings, and going so far as to follow her when I have the time.

It's getting worse with every day that passes, and it's only a matter of time before I'll need to make her mine.

I tug my phone out of my pocket and pull up her tracker app. It takes a few seconds to load, and when it does, my body relaxes slightly. She's here. She's in the building.

Yeah, I've officially lost it.

I lean back into my armchair and force my body to relax. It's rare that I allow my emotions to overwhelm me. I turned them off so many years ago, forced myself to be the cold, ruthless villain I needed to be to get to where I am today. But Ember tears them from the box I shoved them into all those years ago. She makes me feel too much.

The door swings open, and her soft footsteps cross to the chair by the stage, where she drops into it with a sigh.

In the dim light, I watch as she wipes tears from her cheeks, and the sight makes my chest ache, makes me desperate to cross the room and pull her into my arms.

"Ember?" My voice is rough, emotion that doesn't belong forcing its way out.

I've watched hundreds, if not thousands, of people cry, but none of them have hit me like the sight of tears falling against my woman's cheeks.

I swallow heavily as I grasp the arms of the chairs, forcing myself to remain seated. Every single muscle screams at me to cross the room and hold her, but I remain seated. "Ember?" I say again, but this time my voice cracks.

Fuck.

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I knew I was a goner for this girl, but the way she has me ready to throw everything I've worked my entire life for out the window just so I can hold her startles me.

Her bloodshot eyes flick up to the dark corner, but the move only makes a rough sob crack from her chest.

I press my eyes closed, desperately trying and failing to grasp hold of any control left in my body, but somehow, without even trying, she's torn through it all.

"Little Flame." The words I've kept just for myself slip from my lips, and her body stills. As if the idea that I've given her a pet name is so shocking. "Come here."

She hesitates for long seconds that feel like hours. She has no reason to follow my instructions, no reason to trust me with her tears, but there's a flicker of interest beside the utter despair filling her blue eyes.

Slowly, she pushes herself out of her chair and takes cautious steps into the darkness I call home. As soon as she's within arm's reach, I pull her onto my lap and wrap my arms around her. Something deep inside me clicks into place at having her where she's always belonged, but I force down the voice that demands I claim her right this second, even though it's screaming at me.

I brush my fingers down her arm while my other hand slides into the hair at the nape of her neck, pulling her head gently into my chest.

She feels light in my lap, almost too light, but I force the thought to the back of my mind. We're not at a point where I can insist she eat more, nor is that going to help

how devastated she looks right now.

A rough sob tears from her chest as she burrows into my chest, seeking out the warmth and comfort she likely hasn't felt since her brother died, and maybe even then.

The thought of the man has anger bubbling in my gut, but I shove it down. She idolized him the way any little sister does her big brother, but Travis Roberts never deserved an ounce of it.

"What's going on, Ember?" I murmur against her hair, shamelessly breathing in her wild berry scent. It's fucking intoxicating.

She sucks in a desperate breath, her tears soaking through my button down. I've imagined a hundred different ways I would make her cry in the bedroom, but this is different. This is true despair, and I can't handle it.

"It's my brother's birthday." She chokes out the words, and everything clicks into place. She's suffering because she misses the only person she's ever allowed herself to lean on. "He died almost a year ago, so it's my first without him, and I asked Lucas to change nights to see you, but he forced me to come in."

I press my eyes closed and force a calming breath into my lungs. She doesn't need my anger right now, even if Lucas is going to feel every bit of my wrath once I can settle my girl. "I'm sorry for your loss, Little Flame."

Her body melts into mine at the sound of her nickname, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips. I did that. The man who has always struggled to bring comfort to others. The ruthless criminal who built his empire with a trail of blood and bodies a mile long. The man who hasn't allowed himself to feel a single thing for decades.

“I miss him so much, you know?” She sobs. “He’s all I had. All I’ve ever had, and now he’s just gone. I keep telling myself it’s going to get better, but it never does. It only seems to get worse.”

I tighten my arms around her and swallow past the lump in my throat. It’s not lost on me I’m the reason for this pain, even if she doesn’t realize it yet, and something I’m not familiar with settles in my gut.

Guilt.

I’ve never felt guilty about a single thing I’ve done to get myself where I am now.

Not killing people.

Not tearing families apart.

Not even when the drugs I bring into the country inevitably kill people.

I’m not a good person.

I’m not a good man.

But the woman in my arms makes me desperate to be good for her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EMBER

I can’t remember the last time someone held me like this.

Has anyone?

Although I loved my brother with every beat of my heart, we were never affectionate siblings. Sure, we hugged if we weren't going to see each other for a while, and when I was little, he would comfort me when I was upset. But I never felt as safe as I do right now.

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Which is wild, seeing as Orion is a stranger, by all accounts. I know his name. I know he's an entrepreneur and is considered LA's most eligible bachelor by almost every magazine and tabloid. And I know he comes here twice a week with no other plans but to sit in a dark room with me.

But that's it.

That's everything I know about the man.

And yet I feel so safe that I allow myself to cry in front of him, praying I won't be met with any judgment.

His arms are firm around my body, holding me steady against his warmth as I sob. Occasionally, he'll whisper soft words to me, giving me gentle praise for letting out the emotions that feel like they're drowning me.

It feels like hours before my tears run dry, but even as I settle, Orion makes no move to leave, even though I'm certain our time was up a while ago. His soft touches are more comforting than they should be for someone I don't know, but I don't question it.

"Are you feeling better?" he murmurs against the top of my head, a moment before I feel him press a kiss to my hair. The gesture is almost too intimate, but I can't bring myself to care.

"Yes," I whisper. "Thank you. I'm sorry you had to see me like this."

He shakes his head, his rough stubble brushing over my forehead and making me desperate to know what he looks like. I could have Googled him at any point, but for some reason, I haven't. Something inside me keeps telling me to wait until he's ready to show me himself, and the fucked-up part of me enjoys the fact I come here twice a week to sit in a room with a man I can't see, even if I've imagined what he looks like over and over again.

"There's nothing to apologize for, Ember. It was my privilege to be your safe place, even if it was only for a short time." His voice is as pained as my chest as the words fall between us.

The reality is, once I walk out of this room, I'll be alone again. I'll go back to my apartment with no family, no real friends, and no one that would give a fuck if I died tomorrow.

There's a loud knock at the door, followed by one of the guards yelling about needing the room, and my stomach plummets. I'm not ready for this to be over yet. I'm not ready for him to let me go.

"Let me take you home. I don't think you should be driving in this state," Orion says gently, but it's not a question or even a suggestion. It's an order.

I shake my head. "It's okay. I don't live far. I'll just walk." I leave out the part where I haven't been able to get in a car since I left the hospital. He doesn't need to know that not only am I emotionally unstable, I'm also irrevocably broken. My therapist says it's not uncommon for people who have been in serious car accidents to feel an aversion to any kind of motor vehicle, but it doesn't seem to be getting better.

The last time I called an Uber, I had a panic attack in the back seat, and the driver freaked out. He left me on the side of the road with my head between my knees as I grappled for every breath I pulled into my lungs.

I've already embarrassed myself once tonight with Orion. I don't plan on a repeat performance.

His body stiffens beneath mine, and his arms tighten. "I would prefer you don't walk, Little Flame. This city isn't safe at night."

I almost laugh. I know better than most how dangerous this city can be, a product of living on the streets with my brother as a kid. But I choose to keep that little tidbit to myself. I already look pathetic to a man more powerful than I've ever met before. I don't think I can handle any more shame for tonight.

"I'm fine. Really." I catch him off guard when I slip from his lap and put some distance between us. "I don't think we should do this anymore."

I'm met with silence that makes my stomach flip uncomfortably. It's been nice to have a little extra money and more time to devote to the task Lucas has set for me, but I can't keep doing this. Not now that I know what it feels like to be held by the man in the darkness.

"And why is that, Ember?" he asks on a growl. The sound is so primal I can barely breathe, but I force myself to take another step toward the door.

"It's just not a good idea. Have a nice life, Orion."

And before he can stop me, I slip into the hallway and sprint toward the back door, my heart beating a million miles as I step into the alley behind the club, fresh air washing over me.

I press my back to the wall beside the door and drag an unsteady breath into my lungs. Why does it feel like I'm losing everything by walking away from a perfect stranger? I don't even know him. I don't even know what he looks like, for god's

sake.

My eyes are raw from all the tears I've cried tonight, but suddenly the urge to sob is back, and I barely manage to swallow it down.

I need to get home before I allow myself to break down again.

The walk is longer than normal. Usually, I'm not afraid to take the back alleys to make my trip shorter, but tonight it feels like a bad idea, and I always listen to my gut above all else. It's kept me alive for this long, so it deserves my trust.

But the whole way to my apartment, I can't get the feeling that I'm being followed out of my head. Every time I look over my shoulder, the street around me is empty, but I can't shake the feeling, no matter how ridiculous I think it is.

By the time I shove through the front door of my apartment building, I can barely breathe with the anxiety swirling around in my chest.

What if it's the Hunter?

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What if he knows I'm looking into him?

What if I'm going to be his next victim?

I take the steps two at a time until I reach my floor and fly through unlocking it. Once I'm inside, I slam the door behind me and secure the three locks I had installed when I moved in before finally allowing myself to breathe.

If the Hunter is the one who killed my brother, the worst thing I could do is follow in his footsteps, but then, maybe dying wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Maybe then I'd finally know peace.

I swallow down the sob that rises in my throat as I move toward the bathroom. I strip out of my dress and shoes, only allowing myself a second to breathe in Orion's scent all over my clothes before throwing them into the hamper.

Not seeing him again is for the best.

I turn the shower on as hot as it will go and watch as the small room fills with steam before something catches my eye, causing me to drag in an unsteady breath.

Even as I reach for it, I know I shouldn't, and when my fingers wrap around the small razor blade I can't bring myself to throw out, my stomach clenches with guilt and urgency to make the pain go away.

I close my eyes and swallow heavily before resting the blade against the top of my

thigh beside the littering of other scars that came from the same blade.

Slowly, I press it into my soft flesh and hiss out a breath when it breaks through. But the pain is good.

For once, it's not because my brother is dead, and I have no one in the world. Or the fact that I have no free will because of a debt I owe a man who took advantage of two kids that had no one. It's because I chose it.

I chose the pain, and I revel in it as blood trickles down my thigh slowly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ORION

Sitting outside Ember's apartment forty minutes after she disappeared inside is a new low I didn't think I would sink to. But I can't get her out of my head. Her distress, her pain, her devastation. I refuse to leave her when she's like this, even if that just means watching her through the cameras from my car.

The problem is she's been in the bathroom, the only room I didn't put cameras in, since she first walked into her apartment. Which means I'm actually just staring at empty rooms, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman who has me by the balls and doesn't even realize it.

I brush a hand down my face and lean my head back against the headrest, trying desperately to hold on to the sliver of composure that still lives in my body when it comes to this woman.

I knew from the first time I saw her that she would be mine. There wasn't a single doubt in my mind that I would do whatever it took to claim her. But up until now, I

didn't realize just how much she was going to destroy me, and how much I was going to fucking love it.

Movement in the camera catches my eye, and I click into the frame to see how she looks, but the black-and-white footage dulls her emotions.

Fuck.

I wonder if I can scale the fire escape and peek through the window to get a better idea of how she's feeling.

Jesus. I haven't done something like that since I was a teenager trying to survive in the world on my own. Long before I built my empire, I was a scared kid with nothing to my name. But soon I'll have everything, because soon, Ember will be mine.

A phone call cuts the cameras from view, and I growl out an irritated breath. Who the fuck is calling me at this time of night?

I almost laugh at myself. I'm a fucking crime boss who controls every drug that crosses the borders into the Americas. There's no time of day I'm without someone calling me.

"What?" I bark into the phone.

"Boss, we have a problem," Killian says.

"What kind of problem?"

"The Lucas Trainer kind."

I rub a hand down my face and sigh. That motherfucker is the bane of my goddamn

existence, and seeing how he treats my girl has only made me loathe him more. If it were as easy as killing him and moving on, he would have been dead years ago. But alas, I can't take out one of the most useful organizations I work with, no matter how much I may despise their leader. "What's he done now?"

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“He has someone working on finding the Hunter...again.”

“Of course he does,” I muse. He’s been trying to unmask me for almost as long as he’s been on the scene, but he comes up short every time. “Who does he have working on it this time?”

“Ember.”

A startled laugh escapes my throat, and I rest my head against the headrest as the irony of this whole situation washes over me.

“What do you want me to do about it?” he asks.

“Nothing. Leave her be.”

“Are you sure?” His worried voice filters through the phone. “If Lucas figures out who you are, it could?—”

“He won’t,” I assure him. “Ember will be mine long before she can tell him what she knows about the Hunter.”

Silence meets me on the other end of the line. I know from previous conversations that he’s not as confident in the plan as I am, but he doesn’t know my little flame like I do. He hasn’t spent months obsessing over her.

Or at least I hope he hasn’t. I like Killian, and searching for another number two would be a real pain after killing him.

“There’s something else.” He pauses, and the sound of his expensive Italian shoes hitting the concrete in the warehouse fills the line. “You know how we thought the oxy shelves looked a little bare? They are. They’re a lot bare.”

I freeze. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? “Someone’s stealing from us?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“It would appear so. I’ve been through all the tapes multiple times, and I can’t pinpoint the moment the stock disappeared. The tapes have been doctored. Well. Like, really fucking well.”

I swallow heavily to force the anger down as I desperately try to regain my composure. Who the fuck is brave enough to steal from me? And moreover, who’s well-connected enough to pull it off?

“Thank you for letting me know. I’ll see you at the warehouse in the morning.”

“You’re not coming in now?” he asks, surprise filling his tone.

“No. I have something else I need to do first.”

I end the call and shove myself out of the car. I need to calm the vibrating rage before I get to her, but the only thing that will settle me is having her close.

Without pausing, I cross the street and key in the code to access the building. The code wasn’t hard to get, or even a slight challenge, if I’m honest. I just followed one of the other residents in and watched her key it in, paying no mind to the well-dressed businessman she vaguely recognized but couldn’t place.

I bypass the elevator that looks as if it’ll break down at any second, and move to the stairs, taking them two at a time to get to her sooner.

Once I reach her door, I reach into my pocket for my keys. I make quick work of using the key I cut for myself when I was here the other week, and slip into her space.

The scent of her immediately calms me, and I take long seconds to just breathe her in. No one has ever had this kind of power over me, but I don't let that concern me. Not when my woman is so close.

I keep my footsteps light as I move through the small apartment and pause in her bedroom doorway. She's spread across the middle of the bed, her brows furrowed in her sleep, and I can't help but step toward her.

It's risky being here.

So fucking risky it's out of character for me.

But Ember makes me throw caution to the wind.

As I grow closer, I see the dried tears against her cheeks and the wet spot where her pillow has absorbed her sobs, and I'm desperate to hold her. To feel her against me and for her to know she can always lean on me.

Soon, I remind myself.

I reach the edge of the bed and drop into a crouch. If she wakes, it will be significantly more terrifying to find a man looming over her bed. Not that this is much of a concession, but the other option is for me to not be here at all, which isn't an option at all.

Slowly, I reach out and brush a few stray hairs from her cheeks. They're soft beneath my fingers, and it only makes me want to touch her more.

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Tonight was the beginning of the end of my tether.

Now I know what it feels like to hold her, I don't know how I can possibly go back to watching her from afar.

I move to the chair in the corner, putting some much-needed space between us so I don't do something stupid, like climb into bed beside her, and pick up the file from the bedside table.

It's full of perceived information about the Hunter, but so much of it is fabricated. Lies Killian and I have fed anyone who has tried to find my alter ego over the years. There are a few things that hold some merit, but certainly not enough for me to worry.

And if I'm honest, maybe I want Ember to find me.

If she figures out who I am on her own, maybe it won't come as such a shock, and she won't try to run from me when I make her mine.

Ember shifts in her sleep, and I watch as she drags the covers up under her chin and snuggles in.

A smile tips up my lips at how sweet she looks.

It won't be long before I can watch her sleep every night from the comfort of my home.

Just a few more pieces to lock into place, and then she'll be mine.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EMBER

I'm officially losing the plot.

It doesn't come as a complete surprise, especially as I pop my antidepressant to swallow it down with my black cup of coffee, but at least I know when my mind is fucking with me.

Personal growth or whatever.

I take another look around and frown.

There's nothing out of place. Everything is exactly as I left it last night, including the razor blade on my basin and the messy file on my bedside table from where I threw it so I could fall into bed.

But I know someone has been here.

While I slept.

A shiver moves through my body, and I sigh, taking another healthy drink from my mug. Maybe it was just a dream. That would make sense. I've always had vivid dreams that I've struggled to distinguish from reality, so maybe that's what this is.

But even as I think it, I shake off the thought.

Someone was here.

I fucking know it.

I eye the file in front of me, and my stomach clenches. What if it was him? What if he knows I'm looking into him? What if I'm next on his hit list?

But that doesn't make much sense. If he were here in the middle of the night, surely he would just kill me and get it over with. Or at the very least, leave some indication that he was here at all to scare me into dropping my investigation. But there's nothing. Not a single trace that anyone but me has been in this apartment in months.

My phone vibrates across the table, and I drop my head into my hands. The last person I feel like dealing with right now is Lucas. He's a fucking asshole at the best of times, but when he finds out I ended things with Orion last night, he's going to lose his ever-loving mind.

That was a nice injection of cash for both of us, but it wasn't worth the risk. Not when I was coming to look forward to our time together.

I can't afford to allow anyone close to me.

Because everyone who ever gets close either hurts me or leaves, and I've officially reached my quota for this lifetime, and maybe the next.

I let the call ring out and take another drink from my mug. The brand I use is rubbish, but it's cheap and gives me the illusion of energy, meaning it's good enough for me.

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When the phone starts vibrating again, I sigh and reach for it. I guess there's no avoiding him forever. If I keep dodging his calls, he'll just send one of his guys here to collect me. A memory of the last guy that showed up here sends ice through my veins, and I quickly accept the call.

"Hey, sorry. You caught me getting out of the shower," I lie.

"Ember," he growls, and my stomach drops. I knew he would be pissed about the whole Orion situation, but I can feel his rage down the phone line, and it's putting me on edge. "How could you cost us our biggest fucking client?" he snaps. "Do you know how much we could have made off Orion Henderson? Do you know the connections we could have made if you kept him on the fucking hook?"

I press my eyes closed and blink back the tears that threaten to rise to the surface. I've never been the kind of girl who cries all the time, but this last year has been a test to that. Since Travis died, all I can fucking do is cry. "Lucas, I asked you to cancel last night. Begged, in fact, because I was not in a good place. The fact that you insisted on my coming in when you knew how distraught I was is all the explanation you need for how we ended up here."

It's a bad idea to talk back to him like this. But I don't really have a choice. It's either I grow a backbone where this man is involved, or I spend the next decade allowing him to walk all over me.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" he roars, and I pull the phone away from my face. Yep. Definitely a bad idea.

“You heard me, Lucas. This is on you. The next time one of your employees calls you distraught, begging you to change something—not cancel, just swap nights—maybe you’ll do it.”

I end the call and throw the phone back onto the table like it’s going to burn me if I keep it close. Hell, it might, considering how mad Lucas was.

I’m going to pay for that, but I can’t bring myself to care right now.

I flick through the file for what feels like the hundredth time since Lucas handed it to me, but nothing jumps out at me, which is a first. I’ve been conning people and stealing for most of my life, and every time I’ve ever been handed a file like this, there’s at least one thing that stands out to me, that cracks the case, so to speak. But this one doesn’t have that.

I tap my fingers on the table and nibble at my lower lip. If I can just find a lead, I’ll be able to stop sitting here day in and day out staring at this shit, and I can actually get to the part I’m good at.

“What aren’t I seeing?” I whisper to myself as I flick to the next page, reading over every line twice to make sure I’m not missing something.

“Oh my god,” I murmur.

There’s a really fucking good reason I can’t put these pieces together.

It’s because most of it is untrue. There are sprinklings of the truth in here, but until I can differentiate the true from the false, I’m going to be left chasing my tail.

I don’t know who the hell the Hunter is, but even I have to respect how well connected he is to have pulled this off.

Shoving myself to my feet, I move into the bedroom to get dressed for the day before slipping out into the hallway.

The only way I'll find the truth from the false is by starting all over again.

LA is warm all year round, but summer is the pits. It's hot and sticky, and everyone you meet is even more prickly than usual, and that's saying something considering it's a city full of divas and wannabes.

To make matters worse, I'm forced to walk everywhere because of my irrational fear of vehicles. By the time I reach the warehouse district, I feel like my skin is on fire, and I've sweat through the active shorts and T-shirt I tugged on as I left the apartment.

My therapist seems to think I'll be ready for exposure therapy in a few months, but just the thought of getting in a car has me breaking out in a cold sweat.

I check the address again and consider my options.

This isn't the safest place for a woman on her own, even one who learned to fight when she was eight years old and can take down a man three times her size, but this is one of the only leads that I think might be legitimate.

Whoever this Hunter guy is, he's a master at keeping off the radar. I'll give him that.

I nibble at my bottom lip and take a few steps forward, keeping my eyes locked on my surroundings, but there doesn't seem to be anyone around.

The closer I get to the building, the more certain I am that I'm alone. If there was security on the warehouse, they would have been out here three minutes ago when I started lurking around, but so far, I can't see, nor can I hear, anyone.

My fingers wrap around the cool metal doorknob, and I take a steadying breath as I turn it, surprised as hell when it turns and the door unlatches.

I swallow heavily, forcing down my nerves as I pull open the door and stare into the warehouse.

The very fucking empty warehouse.

Looks like this intel was just another piece of false information that all those who came before me have found.

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This is going to be even harder than I thought.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ORION

“Your girl is definitely investigating you.” Killian’s amused voice comes down the line, and I rub my face. I’m in my office in the heart of the city today doing some of my legitimate work, but I was tracking Ember all morning until I was pulled into an investors’ meeting.

“What’s she doing?”

“She was at the old warehouse, the one we moved out of six months ago because we thought someone had found the location.”

I chuckle and shake my head. It’s kind of cute that she’s trying to find the Hunter when he’s been in front of her for weeks. “Well, I guess that confirms they had.”

“Lucas is becoming a problem, Orion. He’s getting cockier, and you know what that means.”

I do. He’s not the first person who has gotten too big for their boots and thought they could take me out. Hell, the Lounder Cartel is the most recent organization that thought they could take my enterprise from my cold, dead hands. But they paid for that misconception with their lives. Just as Lucas inevitably will.

“We’ll take care of it when the time comes.”

He groans and the sound of his car turning on fills the line. “Your girl is on the move again. I wish she’d drive somewhere so I can stop being a creeper following her at a snail’s pace.”

I chuckle. “You could walk,” I suggest.

“Fuck off.”

I lean my head back against the chair and scan my remaining meetings for the day. I try not to come into the office every day, but that just means the days that I am here are full of bullshit I have no interest in.

What I want to be doing is exactly what Killian is complaining about.

There’s a part of me that feels unsettled when Ember is out of my sight, and although I’m quite aware of how insane that sounds, I don’t bother fighting it.

Why would I?

I knew this is how it would be when I found my woman.

There were traces of it with the women I’ve pursued in the past, but that was nothing compared to how it is now. How wild and unhinged my chest feels when I think about her. How much emotion she has dragged out of my cold, dead soul without her even realizing.

Honestly, I’m more worried about how I’m going to be when I can finally make her mine. When I can tie her to me in every single way possible to make sure she can never escape me. And when I can finally see her growing my babies.

I bite back a groan at the thought of seeing her swollen with my kids. It's way too soon to be thinking about such a thing, seeing as we've never had a face-to-face conversation, but I don't give a fuck. She's mine, and I'm planning our lives to reflect that.

"Stay on her and let me know where she goes next."

"Do you want me to organize for her to find some fake leads?"

"No." I shake my head as a smirk tugs at the corners of my lips. "Let's see how far she gets."

"Are you sure? She could tell Lucas what she finds."

"He won't be alive long enough for it to matter."

Ember snores softly, spread across her sheets rather than under them.

This is the third night this week I've found myself here, watching her dream from the safety of a dark corner, but I can't drag myself away.

She looks so peaceful, even as her brows furrow and her head twists to the side, but I can't help but wonder what it is that fills her unconscious thoughts.

I tug my phone from my pocket and scroll through a few emails. I've tried to sleep while I've been here the last couple of nights, but it never comes. I'd like to think it's because my subconscious knows how risky it would be for me to fall asleep in an apartment I broke into in order to watch the woman I'm obsessed with sleep. But it has more to do with the distance between us. I'm desperate to lie next to her, to pull her into my arms and breathe in her scent as I slip into a peaceful slumber.

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Not yet, I remind myself.

Killian is no closer to figuring out who was bold enough to steal from us, and soon I'm going to have to start questioning those who work for me, something I loathe the idea of. I'm a good boss, despite the line of work we're in, and I help my employees in every way possible.

If one of my delivery drivers needs a day off with their sick kid, I make it work.

If one of my dealers has a death in the family, I pay them to have time off with their loved ones, as well as pay for the funeral.

When Larry, one of the warehouse workers, found out he had cancer last year, I paid for his treatment and all his expenses so he could get himself better.

I may be a shady criminal, but I'm a good boss, and I'm going to be especially fucking pissed if one of them thinks they can steal from me. I run the business the way I do to ensure loyalty, because that's the only way you build mutual trust.

The number of people who know that warehouse exists is lower than some of the others, so the suspect pool is much smaller than most of the others, giving me hope it's none of my guys.

A small whimper fills the room, and I shoot my eyes up to see Ember roll onto her side, her entire body trembling.

A nightmare.

I've watched her have a few on the cameras, but this is the first one I've seen in person. I was beginning to delude myself into thinking my presence alone was enough to keep them away, but clearly, that's not the case.

"No," she cries, and the sound of her distress has me out of my seat before I can think it through. If she wakes up to me looming over her, it's going to take a whole lot more work to make her mine. She'll run from me. She'll try to deny me. Though the end result will remain the same.

But I would rather our relationship not begin that way.

Another cry fills the room, and before I know it, I'm kneeling beside the bed.

I'm not a man that kneels for anyone, but for Ember I'll get on my knees every damn day if that's what it takes to keep her.

I brush my fingers down her cheek, noticing the cold sweat that's broken out across her brow.

There's nothing I want more than to pull her into my arms and hold her close. To tell her she has nothing to fear because I'll never allow her to feel another moment of pain, but I manage to restrain myself...just.

The small section of sheet that covered her hips falls away, and my chest tightens at the sight that greets me.

Cuts.

So many that I can barely count them in the dim moonlight.

They litter the tops of her thighs where her clothes would cover them, and my

stomach sinks.

I knew she was hurting, but I didn't realize just how badly.

An ache settles in my chest as I brush the tips of my fingers over the aging scars.

I need to move the timeline up.

I can't allow my woman to suffer alone.

I won't.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EMBER

The faint scent of whiskey and vanilla lingers in my apartment as I drag myself out of bed, further proving my theory that I'm losing my mind. That's the only explanation for thinking I smell Orion every time I wake up.

Maybe it's my subconscious telling me I made a mistake by ending our sessions.

As weird as it sounds, I miss him. I really fucking miss him. More than I should, seeing as I still haven't Googled the man.

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I glance down at the cuts at the top of my thigh and press my eyes closed with shame. I should be stronger than this. I need to be stronger.

My phone breaks me out of my thoughts, and I quickly cross to it. Lucas is still being an asshole about me losing him money, but every day I give him an update about where I am on the Hunter case, and he seems placated.

He's more desperate for answers on the nameless, faceless drug distributor than he is to make money, which is very out of character for him.

Lucas: I need you at the club tonight.

Ember: Why?

Lucas: Orion wants to see you. He's an important client, and he's offering double what he did before.

Ember: Double?! Why the fuck would he do that?

Lucas: He's taken a liking to you, clearly. Whatever you're doing, keep it up and you'll repay your debt in no time.

My thumbs dance over the screen as I consider my options. I've told him multiple times that we hadn't so much as touched before the night I had my breakdown, but he doesn't believe me.

He doesn't believe that anyone, let alone Orion Henderson, mysterious entrepreneur

and serial bachelor, would pay so much to sit in a dark room and talk.

Ember: What time?

Lucas: Eight. Wear something slutty.

I roll my eyes. It's likely not even for Orion's benefit that I wear something revealing, but rather for him. Lucas looks at me with a little too much heat for my own liking.

Lucas: I want an update about your project asap.

Ember: Sure thing. Following up on another lead today.

I don't bother waiting for his response, instead dropping my phone on the table and moving to the coffee machine.

If I'm going to make it through today, I really need some caffeine.

Dead end after dead end has left me drained and exhausted, but I don't have time to rest. I barely have enough time to stop by my apartment and get changed.

By the time I reach The Velvet Room, kitted out in a tiny faux leather miniskirt and a black halter crop top, I'm pretty much dead on my boot-clad feet. At least I can walk in these, unlike the heels I wore the first night I met Orion.

I stop by the break room and shove my bag into an empty locker before checking my choppy brown bob. I've always had long hair, but after Travis died, I couldn't deal with it. It took too much effort to wash it, to brush it, to just care for it in general, and when I told the hairdresser to cut it all off, she looked more than a little uncertain.

My dark hair was almost at the top of my ass, but cutting it off was freeing, and I have to admit, I've felt more myself ever since.

The makeup I haphazardly applied on my way out the door is darker than usual, but I don't mind it with this outfit. I look edgy and kind of badass.

"You've got this," I murmur to myself, but anxiety eats away at me. It doesn't make sense that Orion would pay so much to see me, and if he thinks he's getting laid, he's going to be sorely fucking mistaken.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I make my way down the hall, my shoulders back and head held high as I pause at the door to the private room.

I push the door open, and I'm met with familiar darkness, causing my heart to beat harder in my chest as I remember the last time we were in here. How he held me. The soft words of reassurance. How his fingers brushed through my hair in a way that was foreign but oh so comforting.

Travis and I never really had parents. Well, none that cared about us.

Our mother surrendered us to the state after our father left her high and dry for another woman, and neither of them ever looked back. I was only five at the time, but I don't think either of them was particularly warm, and while Travis always did his best, he wasn't what I would call comforting either.

The door clicks shut softly, and I take a step toward the chair I usually sit in during the sessions when his deep voice fills the space.

"No," he rumbles, forcing me to pause in place. "Come sit with me."

My breath stutters in my chest, but I don't allow myself to hesitate. There's no point

delaying the inevitable when we both know I'm going to do exactly as he says.

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Before my eyes can adjust and pinpoint Orion's form in the corner of the room, his hands grip my hips and tug me onto his lap, leaving little room for arguments.

He buries his face into my neck, and if I'm not mistaken, he sucks in a deep breath of me.

"I missed you, Little Flame," he murmurs against my skin, and I melt into his warm embrace.

Perhaps I should be weirded out by this entire interaction, especially because I don't even know what he looks like, but I'm not. There's something so safe about being in his arms, and if I'm honest with myself, I missed him a little too.

Okay, maybe it was more than a little.

Those nights in the dark, where I could just relax and allow some of my strength to waver, have given me the ability to get through some of the darker times over the last month.

"We're not supposed to be doing this anymore," I remind him.

He chuckles. "Certainly not by my choice." He tugs me harder against him, and I allow him to position me however he chooses. There's something inherently comforting about giving someone else control, especially when you've been making the decisions alone for so long. "I was worried about you," he admits.

"About me?" I ask incredulously.

He nods, and his stubble moves across my cheek. “The way you ran out of here last week after being so distraught.” He pauses as his body tenses beneath me. “If I thought you wouldn’t call the cops on me, I probably would have followed you home. Or at the very least, hired you some security.”

It’s my turn to laugh, because the idea of this rich, powerful man doing either of those things is preposterous, but then I realize he’s not laughing, nor was there any hint of a joke in his tone.

“That would have been unnecessary,” I murmur.

“I find nothing is unnecessary when it comes to keeping the things I care about safe.”

My heart stutters in my chest, but I can’t allow myself to believe his words. I can’t allow myself to feel anything for anyone right now, and maybe ever.

Not now that I know how much it hurts to lose everything.

His hands are firm around me, but instead of feeling trapped or panicked, I feel safe. Safer than I’ve ever felt in my life, if I’m really honest with myself.

“Are you feeling better? After last week?” His words cut through the otherwise quiet room. Faint music drifts beneath the door from the rest of the club, but it feels like a world away. Orion and I are in our own little bubble in the darkness, and it’s the most at home I’ve felt since my brother died.

I nibble at my lower lip, considering my answer. I could lie. Hell, I should lie. But there’s something about this man that makes me want to tell him the truth.

“Not really,” I whisper. “This year has been...hard. My brother and I were alone all our lives. Our parents surrendered us to foster care when I was so young I don’t even

remember them, and then we bounced around in foster care. We got lucky in some ways, never being split up, but that's pretty much where our luck began and ended. When Travis was old enough to protect me on the streets, we ran from our last home, and he did just that. He protected me. He did everything he could to keep me safe." I pause as I desperately try to keep hold of myself. The last thing I need is to fall apart in the man's arms...again. "When our car went off the edge of the road, I lost consciousness. Or at least that's what the doctors think, because I have no memory of being pulled from the wreckage. Travis was always saving me, and the one time I could have repaid him, the one time I maybe could have returned the favor, I was so out of it I can't remember it almost a year later."

"Ember, you have to know that's not your fault. If you hit your head in the accident, you're not to blame for not being able to save him." Orion's words are so full of confidence that I almost believe them. If only I hadn't spent months convincing myself of the opposite.

I sigh and press my face against his warm chest. My mind is screaming at me not to get too comfortable, not to get used to having someone to comfort me, but my heart longs for it. For the safety. For the warmth. For the care that he's showing me. For the emotion that bursts to life every time he touches me. "Logically, I know that. But it's not as simple as just accepting it. Or at least that's what my therapist says." I half laugh, but there's no humor in the sound.

"Sounds to me like you need someone to remind you a little more regularly."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ORION

Of course I knew she was in therapy. I've watched her tracker go there once a week since I installed it.

And yet the idea of her leaning on anyone other than me has anger bubbling to the surface. I need to get a fucking grip.

“Can I ask you something?” she murmurs.

“Of course.”

“Why do you keep paying so much to sit in a dark room with me? From what I understand from Lucas, you’re a pretty sought after bachelor. I’m sure you don’t need to pay for company.” There’s a vulnerability in her voice that makes me hold her against me a little tighter as I consider my answer.

It was inevitable she would ask, eventually. I may have gained the reputation of being a bit of a hermit, only attending events for a short time before I slip out, but it’s also given me the title of mysterious bachelor, when really, I just have better shit to do than watch LA’s socialites fall over themselves to get to me. Unfortunately, the legitimate side of my business is necessary. When you deal in the quantities I do, there’s a whole lot of cash to launder, and to do that, you need your finger in a lot of pies.

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But I can't tell her the truth. I can't tell her that the first time I laid eyes on her, I knew she was mine. I can't tell her how many lines I've crossed since that day to keep her safe and to prepare for when I finally make her mine. If I told her any of that, she'd run. And if she ran, I'd have to chase her.

"The first night, it was to get you away from those creeps. I could tell you were uncomfortable, and it didn't sit right with me, so I spoke to Lucas and made the arrangements. After that, I couldn't accept that I wouldn't see you again."

She nods her understanding against my chest. "And the darkness?"

I chuckle because this is a question I can answer without lying. It's one of the few truths I can give her without sending her running in the opposite direction. "Initially, it was because people tend to act differently around me once they meet me face-to-face. But after the first time, it was because you seemed so relaxed in the dark. Every time you walk into this room, and you're met with it, the tension visibly rolls off you."

When she doesn't reply immediately, I carefully shift her in my lap and lift her face up until our lips are just a breath apart.

"I'd like to kiss you now," I murmur and smile when her breath hitches.

"Okay," she whispers.

Not giving her a chance to change her mind, I close the space between us and taste her for the first time. The softness of her lips is like nothing I've ever felt, but it's the

little moan that accompanies the first swipe of my tongue that does me in.

Every ounce of control I've held onto since the day I first saw her disappears, and the monster I hide beneath my well-tailored suits forces his way to the surface.

I'm a man possessed as I ravage her lips, desperately trying to get my fill, even though it's pointless.

I'll never get enough of my little flame.

A ragged growl escapes my throat as my fingers slide up the nape of her neck and grasp her hair in my fist, giving me full control as I move her exactly how I need her.

Ember shifts in my lap, and a small gasp tears from her when her ass grazes my too hard cock. The poor guy is seconds from tearing through my zipper, and her grinding on me is definitely not going to help matters.

I wrench her lips from mine and trail kisses down her throat, nipping and sucking as I go, ensuring my marks will mar her perfect skin, even if it is only temporary.

"Orion," she moans, her fingers tugging at my hair and spurring me on. It seems my little flame is just as desperate for me as I am for her.

"You have no fucking clue what you do to me, Ember," I rumble against the column of her throat. "You have no idea how badly I want to bend you over and fuck you so hard you'll be feeling me inside you for the rest of your goddamn life."

Another moan escapes, and I can't help but chuckle. She likes the sound of that.

But not tonight. Things have already spiraled, and if I allow myself too much more rope, I'm going to make good on my promise.

She needs to know she's not just a fuck for me.

She's my everything.

UNTITLED

And soon she'll be my queen.

“The first time I take you, Little Flame, it won't be in this club.”

Her breath hitches. “You're sounding very sure that it's an eventuality.”

I chuckle. “That's because I am, Ember. When I want something, I take it. And you have quickly become exactly what I want.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

EMBER

This is fucking insane.

There's no other word for it.

And yet instead of running out the door and putting as much distance between myself and danger, I'm sitting in its lap, burying my face in its neck.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

Yeah, I think my therapist is going to have a thing or two to say about this one.

Orion's hand runs up my bare thigh and leaves a trail of goose bumps in his wake. I've never allowed a man this close before. Not because I wanted it at least, and certainly not because it felt as natural as breathing to have his hands on me.

That alone should be enough to have me walking out the door. I know better than to ever rely on someone, and more than that, I know better than to allow myself to get close to someone when losing them could kill me.

I can't take that kind of pain again.

The soul-crushing agony that lurks in your chest for months after losing someone. The blinding reality every morning that you'll never see them again, or hear their voice, or be able to call them when you need them. The realization that you're completely alone in the world, and that's never going to change.

No. I'll never allow myself to be that vulnerable again.

I can't.

I'm so lost in my own mind that I don't notice how high his hand has climbed until his fingers brush the edge of my panties, sending a jolt of awareness through me.

"When you're with me, Little Flame, I need your mind here too," Orion murmurs against my hair.

“We shouldn’t,” I whisper, not trusting my voice not to give away how much I want this. How badly I want him to touch me, even when I shouldn’t.

Fuck. My mind is so messed up at the best of times, but right now it’s like a war raging inside me, and I don’t know which side will win.

The lonely girl who wants nothing more than for someone to love her.

Or the badass thief who knows better than to allow herself to care for someone, because losing them hurts so fucking badly.

His fingers brush over my panty clad pussy, and my protests die on my lips. The only person who has ever gotten me off is myself, and apparently it’s a whole lot different when it’s someone else.

He chuckles, his breath brushing over my shoulder as he massages his fingers over my clit. “You’re already so wet, Ember. Your panties are soaking. Remind me again why we shouldn’t be doing this?”

I swallow heavily around a moan, but it’s useless. He’s playing my body like he’s been doing it for years, and they escape despite my efforts. “We don’t know each other.” I force out on a shaky breath.

“This is just one of the many ways I want to get to know you,” he tells me as his fingers toy with the edge of my panties, almost as if he’s giving me a chance to actually say no. “Next.”

“We’re in a strip club.”

“Mmm. That’s true.” He brings his touch back to my throbbing clit. “That doesn’t mean I can’t help you relax a little, though. What else you got?”

“I...I’m...” I’m so lost to the pleasure that part of me is ready to just throw in the towel and let him have his way with me, but that wouldn’t be fair to either of us. Not if I’m not honest with him. “I’m a virgin.” I force out the confession on a rough whisper. Fuck, it’s embarrassing admitting that as an almost twenty-two-year-old woman. It shouldn’t be. Not in the slightest. But it is. Women are seen as frigid or cold if they save themselves past their teens. If they don’t fuck some two-pump chump in the back of their prom date’s pickup truck.

But for me it wasn’t a matter of not wanting to get it over with, more so a lack of opportunity and decent options. I’ve never had time to date. I finished high school online because Travis didn’t like me being out of his sight after we left the foster home. The only friends I’ve ever really had were the ones that worked for Lucas, and I know better than to ever truly trust any of them. People who work in my line of work are in it for themselves. They’ll do anything to survive, even if that means backstabbing people they’re supposed to care about.

And although I never thought losing my virginity was going to be some incredibly special thing that would change my life forever, I didn’t want to give it to a one-night stand or someone that didn’t know what they were doing.

Call me crazy, but I actually planned on coming the first time someone shoved their dick inside me.

I’m so deep in thought that I don’t realize he’s stopped moving, and his body has stiffened beneath me. If it weren’t for how tightly he’s holding onto me, I’d think he was getting ready to bolt. Something I’ve learned is that some men fetishize virginity, while others want nothing to do with the inexperience.

“What did you just say?” Orion growls, the sound so inhuman that my breath stutters in my chest.

“I’m a virgin,” I whisper.

“Fuck,” he breathes. “You don’t know what you’ve done, Little Flame. I was already fucking obsessed with you, but now...” He trails off, and I’m equally terrified and intrigued by whatever his next words are going to be.

There’s a thinly veiled promise of what’s to come, because I have a feeling no matter how far I try to run from Orion, he’s not going to let me go.

“Has anyone ever made you come, sweet Ember?”

“No,” I tell him honestly.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

“What about you? Do you rub your pretty little pussy to relieve the ache?” The words are so filthy coming from his mouth, and I can’t help but shift in his lap, desperate for some kind of relief. His hands clamp around me to hold me in position, forcing me to remain still. “Little Flame, I’m already holding on by a thread. Do you think it’s wise to tempt me further?”

“No.”

“Then stay still,” he rumbles. “I asked you a question.”

“Yes,” I tell him honestly. “But not...not often.”

“And why is that? No one to get you hot and bothered, or do you not enjoy your own touch?”

“I...I’m not sure. I guess it doesn’t occur to me.”

“Hmm.” Orion trails kisses along my shoulder. “I can’t wait to show you the world, Ember.”

Before I can ask what he means by that, there’s a loud knock at the door that causes me to jolt, and the only thing that stops me from tumbling off his lap is his firm hold.

“I guess our time is up,” I whisper, desperately trying to hold back the disappointment from my tone.

“Doesn’t have to be,” he murmurs. “Let me take you home.”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t want me knowing where you live?”

“No. I mean, I can’t let you take me home. I...I don’t really do cars, or vehicles of any type for that matter, since my brother died.”

I hold my breath, waiting for him to realize I’m too much work and that he’s better off without me, but if anything, he holds me tighter.

“I’ll walk with you then? I don’t like the idea of you unprotected.”

This feels like a big step. Because not only will Orion know where I live, we’ll also finally see one another outside of this dark room.

“Okay,” I murmur.

I climb out of his lap, trying my best to do so gracefully, but I stumble on the edge of the chair. A yelp escapes my throat as I attempt to right myself. But then strong arms wrap around me, tugging me against his body with both hands on my hips.

“Careful, Little Flame,” he murmurs.

My cheeks heat at the endearment. I can’t think of a single nickname I’ve ever been called aside from Em, but I’m really growing to like this one. Probably something else I’m going to regret, but I find myself caring less and less with each minute that passes.

Once he’s sure I’m steady, he releases my hips and immediately grasps my hand in his much larger one, before tugging me toward the door.

“Do you have a bag you need to pick up?” he asks as we slip into the empty hallway.

I nod and tug him toward the locker room. “I’ll be right back,” I tell him, quickly chancing a glance up at him. I just about swallow my tongue when I catch sight of his perfectly styled dark hair and sinfully intense brown eyes. There’s a generous stubble across his jaw that I felt brush over my forehead when he was holding me, and his suit is impeccably fitted, to the point I’m wondering if he had it tailored to his body this morning.

Well, fuck.

Orion wasn’t hideous, or deformed, or any of the things I had thought he might be when he refused to let me turn the lights on.

No. He’s fucking beautiful. Or maybe that’s not the right word. Handsome. Rugged in a refined kind of way. And hot as fuck.

He gives me an amused smirk and nods to the door, clearly getting a kick out of how thoroughly I’ve just checked him out.

A deep heat washes over me as I slip into the staff room and press my back to the door.

Fuck. I’m so in over my head right now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ORION

I can't say I'm not a little smug about how Ember reacted to seeing me for the first time.

When we stepped out of the private room we've been meeting in these past few weeks, I expected her to look straight up at me. But she didn't. Almost as if she were too nervous to finally know what I look like.

But the look of lust and need that greeted me when she finally looked up was worth the wait. Truthfully, I've had women falling at my feet all my life. It's never been a problem for me, and it's one of the only reasons I survived when I was young. But seeing it in Ember's eyes is different. I want her to obsess over me because I'm fucking obsessed with her. I want her desperate for me, because I can barely breathe with my need for her. And I want her to fall for me, because I'm never going to let her go.

I lean against the wall opposite the door she disappeared into and try to settle my need for her. As much as I would love to take advantage of her obvious attraction to me, I'm more than aware of the fact I'm playing the long game, and the long game is never won in a single night.

The complication of her virginity also adds another layer of complexity, but only because somehow it makes me more ravenous for her. The fact that no other man has ever touched her, that her tight little cunt will only ever have my cock slide into it, makes it difficult for me to think straight.

I've always prided myself on my control over all aspects of my life, because there was a time I had no control. No control of my body. No control of my mind. And no control of my circumstances. It was important to me I build a life where I would never feel that out of control again.

And yet here we are.

A figure catches my attention from the corner of my eye, and I realize Lucas has been watching me with intrigue. His shoulder rests against the wall beside his office as he appraises me in a way I don't think he's ever dared to before.

There's a certain risk living a double life, especially engaging with those who want your alter ego dead. Lucas has wanted me out of the picture for years, and recently he's become desperate. There's no telling what he'll do to make it happen.

"It's extra to take the girls home," he finally says.

"I'm just walking her to her apartment. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how unsafe these streets are." The dig at his section of the city is clear, but he keeps his poker face in place. A testament to how many years he's been playing this game.

He's done little to ensure the safety of the people that live in the perimeters of his turf, and it's always pissed me off. There are innocent people who live within the borders, and he should do more to make sure they're not caught in the crossfire of his battles.

"Indeed." He nods. "The cost of these little meetings the two of you are having is going up."

"Okay."

“By a lot. Ember is much more valuable than just a whore for the club.”

I barely manage to swallow down the growl that threatens to give me away, but I realize what he’s doing. He’s trying to get a rise out of me by calling Ember a whore, but he won’t get one. “No problem.” I force the words out despite the anger thrumming through my body.

The door in front of me opens. Ember appears with a soft smile before following where my eye line was, and it immediately drops. “I’m heading home, Lucas.”

He nods. “Don’t forget your special project, Em. I want an update tomorrow.”

She frowns but doesn’t respond despite her clear annoyance at the situation. He’s talking about her investigation into the Hunter, a project he only gave her a few weeks ago. Every man he’s given the task to has been given months to investigate and report back, but I’m not surprised that he holds her to a different standard. I’d love to think it’s because she’s so talented at what she does, but I know it’s more about her gender than anything else. “Sure.”

She turns her attention to me and nods toward the exit, leading the way up the hallway and away from Lucas.

I chance one last look at the motherfucker and don’t miss the smirk etched across his lips.

I may be a master of disguise, but he’s just seen my one weakness, and I have no doubt that he’s planning to exploit it.

“Which way?” I ask even as my feet threaten to turn us in the direction of her apartment building, and I’ve placed myself so that I’ll be closest to the road. Not that I expect her to pick up on the last part. Ember hasn’t had anyone care for her the way

I do, and therefore, she probably doesn't know that any real man will always put himself between his woman and any danger that could come to her.

Ember tugs me to the right, and I fall into step beside her. "What did Lucas have to say?" she asks quietly, flicking a look over her shoulder to make sure we're not being followed, and I don't bother telling her that we are.

Killian is in a car down the street looking out for her at all times, a job my number two doesn't quite appreciate. He's used to dealing with buyers and managing shipments, not stalking the woman his boss is obsessed with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EMBER

Orion waits until we reach the curb before he takes my hand.

It's not something I would ordinarily notice, but for some reason, the move screams at my self-doubt and anxiety. Does he not want to be seen with me?

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

I'm sure most of the club knows about our meetings in the private room. The gossip mill in that place would rival a school full of teenage girls.

"That he wants to increase the price of our meetings," he tells me, and my stomach clenches. Orion is already paying an absurd amount of money to see me. There's no way he's going to keep this up.

Not when the man can obviously get any woman he pleases.

I was not prepared for him to look like a fucking god. Sure, I figured he had to be attractive given the moniker the Los Angeles tabloids have given him, but fuck me, I didn't know he'd look like this.

"Oh." The sound escapes me without thought, and I immediately regret how full of disappointment it sounds. Despite my best efforts, I've grown to crave Orion's company. Even the time after I broke things off, I couldn't get that mysterious man out of my mind. And now it's all going to be over.

He squeezes my hand, and I look up at him, meeting his dark eyes that seem like they stare right into my soul. "That doesn't mean I'm not going to see you anymore, Ember. But I do think perhaps our dark meetings at the club should progress to the light."

A smile that I absolutely should not allow slips onto my lips. This is a bad idea. A really fucking bad idea. But I can't find it in myself to shut it down before it can go too far.

“To the light, it is.” I drag my bottom lip between my teeth and nibble at the soft pillow.

It only takes ten minutes to reach my building, and I don’t miss the way Orion looks up at the apartment complex with a furrowed brow. “This is where you live?” he asks quietly.

“Uh, yeah.” I look up and down the street on instinct to make sure we weren’t followed before turning my attention back to him. “The area looks worse than it is, and the apartments are pretty well contained, considering when this building was built.”

He nods, his mask of indifference slipping into place. “When can I see you again, Little Flame?”

“I...uh...” I stumble over my words. Fuck, it’s so obvious I have no experience with men. Why did I have to choose this one to be the first I ever wanted things to progress with? “Did you want to come upstairs?” I rush out. “For a drink,” I add quickly.

A smirk tugs at his lips as he looks up at the building one more time. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Ember.”

“Oh.” My face falls. I quickly look away so he doesn’t see the disappointment that whips through me.

Strong fingers wrap around my chin and force me to look up into his dark gaze. “Don’t hide from me, Little Flame. Never hide from me,” he murmurs, dropping his face until his lips are just a breath from mine. “It’s not that I don’t want to come upstairs. It’s that I shouldn’t. I don’t have a very good handle on my control at the best of times when I’m with you, and I’m trying my best to keep a tight hold on that

control so you don't run for the hills."

"Why would I do that?" I ask, my brows tugging together in confusion.

His hold on my chin drops slightly, bracketing my throat and sending a shiver of need straight to my core. "Because I want to do this right. You're not a one-night stand to me or a casual fling. You're so much more, and I can't prove that to you if I lose control and fuck you against your front door an hour after telling me you're a virgin."

My mouth drops open. "Oh," I whisper.

"Yeah, oh." He chuckles and flexes his fingers slightly before dropping his hold on me. "Dinner tomorrow night. I'll pick you up here, and we'll walk."

"I can just meet you wherever you're thinking." I offer.

"From now on, you're not walking the streets of Los Angeles by yourself at night. Ever. If that means I walk you everywhere, that's what I'm going to do, so I suggest you get used to it."

I open my mouth to respond, but I'm cut off by his lips crashing down on mine, stealing the breath right from my lungs.

He devours me for long seconds that feel like an eternity, and yet when he pulls back, it's all too soon. His pupils are blown, and his hands are fisted at his sides like he's desperately trying to keep himself from touching me. "Tomorrow night. I'll be here at seven."

"Seven," I repeat as my fingers brush over my swollen lips of their own accord.

Orion tracks the move, and I barely catch the gasp that tries to escape at the fire

staring back at me. “Give me your phone.” He holds his hand out expectantly.

I consider him for a moment before fishing my phone from my purse and handing it to him.

He navigates it with ease, quickly adding his phone number before calling himself so he’ll have mine, and for some reason, the move has butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Almost as if his wanting my phone number proves this isn’t a fling for him.

I may not understand what a man like Orion could possibly want with a girl like me, but I can’t help but allow hope to surface, an emotion I’ve never allowed myself to feel.

He extends the phone to me, and I take it, slipping it back into my bag.

“Thank you for walking me home,” I say softly.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

“You’re welcome, Little Flame.” He dips his head and presses a chaste kiss to my lips without allowing either of us to deepen it. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turns on his heel and stuffs his hands into his pockets as he starts back the way we came, and I can’t help but watch him as he walks away.

Orion Henderson just asked me on a date.

Well, it was less of a question and more of an order, but it’s more than any other guy has ever bothered with. Sure, sleazebags have asked me out for a drink, but we both knew it was just about sex, and I always turned them down.

I mean, it’s possible Orion is playing me, but he seemed so genuine when he said this was more than just a one-night stand or sex, and my entire body hopes that’s true.

For the first time in almost a year, I fall asleep with a smile on my face and hope in my heart.

If it is too good to be true, it’s going to hurt like hell. But if it’s not? It might be everything I’ve never dared to hope for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ORION

Islip into the passenger seat of Killian’s Range Rover and ignore the look he gives me.

No one else would dare to question me the way he does, but that's the reason he's my second. I need someone to challenge me, and he sure as hell does that.

"Orion, you know this is dangerous," he finally says.

"I know."

"Lucas knows you care for the girl. Don't you realize what kind of danger that puts her in?"

A growl rises up the back of my throat, but I quickly swallow it, because he's right. He's so fucking right that I'm desperate to slam my fist into his face just so he'll stop reminding me how bad an idea this is. "He doesn't know I'm the Hunter," I force through gritted teeth.

"No, you don't think he knows you're the Hunter. But he might. Even if he suspects it, it puts Ember in danger, and she doesn't even realize it."

"She's a survivor. She'll know if something is wrong," I say quietly, but he's right. I'm taking a risk by stepping out of the darkness, and I just have to hope that it doesn't blow up in my face and get my girl hurt.

"I've been tailing her for a week, Orion, and she hasn't noticed. Not once."

I press my eyes closed and force a deep breath into my lungs. "You're not a danger, though."

"She doesn't know that."

I rub a hand down my face and turn to face him. "What do you suggest?"

His eyes flare with surprise. It's not that I never ask his opinion. It's that I only ever ask about it when it's about the business, and while Ember will rule by my side once she's ready, this is the first time I've ever asked for his opinion about my personal life. "You either need to cut her loose or move fast. Lucas has something on her. That's the only way she would be working for him. I'll work on figuring out what exactly it is that got her caught in his web while you work on getting her into your penthouse permanently."

I smirk. "I like that you know the first option wasn't one at all."

He rolls his eyes. "I know your crazy ass better than anyone else. Of course I know you're not going to let the girl go."

"Let me know what you find." I reach for the handle and shove the door open.

"You don't want a ride back to your car?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm going to watch over her for a bit."

He chuckles. "You're being a creep. You know that, right?"

I cut him a glare. "You'll understand one day. Men like us don't fall softly."

Without missing a beat, I make my way back up the street and head into Ember's apartment building.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

I pause at her door and check the cameras to make sure she's already in bed and find her exactly where I expected. She's curled around one of her pillows, her eyes closed, and a soft snore fills the speaker.

I unlock the door and slip inside before shutting it softly behind me.

Moving quietly across the apartment, I pause in her bedroom doorway and take in the sight before me.

Sleep seems to be the only time my girl gets any peace, and even then, it's usually short-lived. Nightmares plague her dreams, her subconscious tearing her apart as she rests.

Usually, I relegate myself to the chair in the corner. The dim streetlight misses that part of the room, so if she were to wake up, she's not as likely to see me. But tonight I can't force myself to the corner. Tonight I'm desperate to be close to her.

I shuck my jacket and shoes, keeping them near the door in case I have to make a quick exit before rounding the side of the bed she's curled up on.

Dropping into a crouch, I brush the short brown locks from her face, and a foreign feeling settles in my chest. I spent so many years avoiding genuine human connection that I'm not quite sure what to do with the feeling of contentment that my little flame brings out in me.

A soft moan slips from between her perfect lips, and I smirk.

“What are you dreaming about, my sweet Ember?” I murmur so softly I barely hear my own words.

Another moan comes seconds after the first, and I have little doubt about what’s plaguing her dreams tonight. For once, it’s not nightmares, but instead, pleasure.

I consider my options for long seconds. I should sit in the chair in the corner and watch as this plays out, or better yet, I should leave.

But I can’t drag myself away from her.

Carefully, I pull the thin sheet from her body and suck in a breath at what she’s wearing beneath. A satin night dress clings to her body, accentuating each of her perfect curves until my cock twitches in protest at being locked away.

I swallow the rumble that tries to escape my throat and continue my exploration of her soft body. Usually, she sleeps in an old T-shirt or a ratty pair of pajamas, and I can’t help but wonder why she chose the thin black material tonight.

Once the sheet no longer covers her, I start working on the pillow she’s clutching to her chest. The thing has seen better days, but she holds onto it like it’s the most precious thing in the world. Ever so slowly, I tug one arm, and then the other until her grip releases, and I can slip it from her hold.

I deposit it on the other side of the bed and stop to take her in as she rolls to her back.

Fuck. How did I get so lucky to find this woman?

Out of the millions of people in Los Angeles and billions around the world, I found my queen just a few miles from my own home.

Ember's head rolls to the side, baring her neck to me, and I lean in, pressing my lips to the soft column. I breathe in her intoxicating scent and press my eyes closed, reveling in her perfection.

“You have no idea how much power you hold, Little Flame.” I press gentle kisses along her jaw as my hand skims along the silky fabric covering her. As desperate as I am to tear the flimsy material off her and soak her in, I want her awake the first time I see her naked.

I want her to see how utterly obsessed I am with every single inch of her body, even the parts she wants to hide from the world.

Forcing my lips from her delectable skin, I keep a close eye on her face as my fingers descend toward the place between her legs where I'm aching to bury my face.

Not tonight. But soon.

I push the fabric up her thighs, uncovering her scars, and a part of me settles when I realize there are no new cuts. It's not that I don't understand her need to control her own pain, because I do. It's that I can't stand the idea of my queen being in any pain at all, physical or emotional.

Her panty clad pussy calls to me, and I shuffle across the floor quietly until I'm level with her hips. I push them to the side and immediately give in to the need to run my fingers through her sex.

I barely catch the growl that tries to escape when I find her wet and wanting.

Fuck.

Even in her sleep, she's ready for me.

I press my eyes closed to allow myself a moment to get a hold of my resolve before gently exploring her softness.

The scent of her arousal surrounds us as I press softly on her clit.

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A gentle moan falls from between her lips, and I flick my gaze up to her face to make sure she's still sleeping soundly.

I add a little more pressure and circle the sensitive bundle of nerves, needing to hear another of her moans, and I'm quickly rewarded with just that.

"Orion," she breathes softly.

A smug smile tugs at my lips as I continue my assault on her clit while making quick work of freeing my cock.

It's wrong. It's depraved. But I'm so desperate for her I can barely see straight. The need to mark her, to cover her in my cum so no man will ever come near her again overwhelms me as I increase the speed of my ministrations and pump my cock roughly.

I don't think I've ever been as close to losing control as I am right now, watching as my woman writhes beneath my hand as I bring her pleasure, my own release just out of a breath.

"Please," she whimpers, and I up the pressure just enough to send her spiraling over the edge into oblivion.

I stand, never allowing my movements to pause as I draw out her release. I press one knee onto the mattress beside her as I pump my cock, all rational thought long gone as I chase my pleasure, needing it more than I've ever needed it before.

My orgasm slams into me so hard I barely catch myself as stars blur my vision and hot ropes of cum cover the tops of Ember's silky thighs, marking her in the only way I can right now.

Soon she'll be mine.

Soon she'll be in my bed.

Soon I'll never have to allow her out of my sight.

But for right now, this is enough.

For right now, seeing my cum spread across her body is enough to stop me from stealing her away in the dead of the night and throwing caution to the wind.

Once I trust myself not to stumble, I push myself to my feet and shove my still hard cock back into my pants. The release may have taken the edge off, but it's nowhere near enough to satiate my need for the woman sprawled out before me.

I drag the sheet back over her body and bring the pillow she was wrapped around closer before ducking my head to press a kiss to her cheek.

"Sleep well, Little Flame."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

EMBER

Incessant buzzing drags me from the most peaceful sleep I can remember having since Travis died, and I curse as I shove myself from the bed.

The thin nightgown I fell asleep in is bunched up around my waist when I throw the sheet off me and reach for my phone, vibrating around my bedside table.

The clock beside it tells me it's not even seven in the morning, far too early for anyone to be calling if you ask me, but if I ignore it, they're just going to call back.

"What?" I snap down the line.

"Is that any way to greet your boss, Ember?" Lucas snarls down the line.

"It is when they call at six fifty-two in the morning," I snap back. "Now, what do you want?"

"You're a bitch in the mornings."

"Yeah, and you're an asshole all the time. Tell me what you want, or I'm hanging up."

"I want to know what you have on the Hunter."

"Nothing," I reply honestly. "But neither did any of the other people you sent to look into him. Every single lead you gave me was bullshit. The Hunter has been running rings around you from the beginning."

"That can't be."

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“Well, it is.” I sigh and shove myself up the bed, resting my back against the headboard. “Once I realized the first couple were fake, I went back over every single piece of information in that file, and out of everything, I think there were three things I couldn’t completely rule out, but given how incorrect everything else was, I’m pretty happy assuming those are bullshit as well.”

Silence greets me on the other end of the phone, and I pull it away from my ear to make sure Lucas didn’t hang up on me. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s been distracted by something while talking to me, and he’s ended the call without saying anything.

“How did you figure out it was all bullshit?”

“I looked into it. I followed every lead, checked every source. It was pretty easy to disprove most of it.”

“Have you started working on your own leads then?”

“I have, but it’s slow going. Lucas, this guy is a ghost. He has the nickname he has for a reason. I don’t think I’m going to be any more successful in figuring out who the fuck this guy is than anyone else has been.”

“He killed your brother, Ember. I thought you’d want revenge.”

“I do,” I snap. “Believe me, I do. But I’m trying to be practical here. I don’t want to tell you I’m going to be able to find something that others haven’t. I’m good at a lot, but I think this might surpass even my talents.”

“You’ll find the Hunter, or I’ll be adding another hundred grand to your debt.”

“What?” I ask incredulously. “You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will, Ember. Don’t fucking push me.”

The call ends before I can argue any further, and I drop my head into my hands. He wants me to accomplish something that I’m pretty sure is impossible.

As it is, he’ll have me for another five to seven years, depending on how many jobs I can do. But that also depends on how long he keeps me on this wild goose chase. Adding another hundred grand to the total is just going to blow it out for longer, and I don’t know how much longer I can do this.

I’m a good thief. One of the best. But I’m tired of this life. Most thieves get a thrill from stealing, but that’s never been the case for me. It’s necessity that put me in this position, and I don’t want this to be the rest of my life.

I drop the phone on the mattress and shove myself out of bed. There’s no point wallowing when I can get in some research before my date tonight.

Just the thought of Orion brings a smile to my face, softening some of the anxiety beating through my veins.

I strip out of my nightgown and panties as I reach the bathroom and turn the shower on, but it’s only when I move to step into the shower that I realize there’s something dried across my thighs, and my cheeks heat.

The dream I had clearly had a happy ending somewhere other than in my subconscious. Maybe if I play my cards right, I’ll get a live reply from the man himself tonight.

I should be so lucky.

After a long, hot shower and a coffee, I sit down at my laptop and go over the notes I've left for myself over the last few days.

A hacker would probably be better at tracking this stuff than I am, but I don't know any who would be willing to help for free, and I don't have the cash to hire anyone.

I nibble on my bottom lip as I consider my options. I've already scoured the web for all mentions of the Hunter in Los Angeles and beyond. I've spoken to some of the dealers I know from my time on the street, and while they could confirm the product they were selling was his, they weren't able to give me any information about who he is.

Because no one fucking knows.

But how is that possible?

In this day and age, with the internet and security cameras on every corner, how can someone so infamous remain anonymous? They can't. Surely it's not possible.

I sigh and start tapping away, checking on some of the sources I found yesterday to make sure they're solid before moving on to finding new information.

If I can figure out where he's been, I might be able to hack into an ATM or a private camera. I've done it a couple of times in the past, but it's been a while, and I'm out of practice.

Otherwise, I could go the old-fashioned route and see if I can charm my way into someone giving me the tapes.

That's probably safer.

Having decided my plan of attack, I look through some of the information I was able to get from the dealers and cross-check it with what Lucas gave me.

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It seems safe to say he'd be active within the warehouse district. He has to be holding the drugs he imports somewhere, even if it's for a short time. But there are too many warehouses for me to go through by myself, and I would definitely draw attention to myself, something I most certainly do not want to do.

If the Hunter killed Travis for investigating him, I don't doubt that I would meet the same fate if I'm caught, something that seems kind of inevitable.

I'm about to stand to get ready to head out when my phone vibrates.

I reach for it, fully expecting it to be Lucas with another unreasonable demand, but instead I find Orion's name staring back at me.

Orion: Don't forget about our date tonight.

Ember: Who is this?

I giggle to myself, shaking my head as I move into my bedroom and pull out a light summer dress. It's too fucking hot to spend all day walking around the city, but I don't have any other options. God, I miss how simple it was before I was too scared to set foot in any kind of vehicle. If I ever manage it again, I'll never take it for granted.

Orion: Careful, brat. I'll be there at 7.

Ember: Are you sure you don't want me to meet you there?

Orion: I don't like repeating myself, Little Flame. I don't want you walking around by yourself at night.

A smile tugs at my lips of its own accord, and I press my hands to the heated cheeks. This man is going to be the end of me.

Ember: Okay, I understand.

Orion: What number is your apartment?

Ember: Why?

Orion: Because I asked.

Ember: Are you planning on stalking me or something?

Orion: Don't tempt me. Now answer the question.

Ember: 307

Orion: Good girl. I'll see you tonight.

Ember: See you tonight x

For the first time in my life, I feel like a giddy teenager about to go on her first date, and it's impossible to wipe the smile off my face as I go about getting ready for my day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ORION

Islip my phone into my pocket and tug my mask over my face. I wanted to message Ember as soon as I woke up this morning, but I'm not ready for her to know just how obsessed I am with her.

If all the pieces were where they should be on the board, I wouldn't hesitate to claim her. She'd already be moved into my penthouse, where I know she's safe, and she'd be far, far away from her asshole boss.

But I still have some moves to make before I can claim my queen.

Killian steps up beside me and gives me a knowing look. "Couldn't make it through the day?" he asks.

"No. I needed to know she was okay. Especially because you're not tailing her today."

He grunts his acknowledgment as we move to the back of the warehouse, where the truck is waiting for us. We've kept a close eye on the oxy since we realized it's been going missing, but we've yet to figure out who's behind it, just adding to the reasons it's not safe to bring Ember into my orbit just yet.

There are four people waiting for us on the other side of the door. Two of the leaders of the Huntley family in San Francisco, one of their guards, and Callum, one of our staff members who loads and unloads trucks.

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“Beckham,” I acknowledge, as I step toward the man closest to me. He’s known as a bit of a lone wolf as well, only keeping his cousin close enough that he has a plan if someone takes him out. His messy dark hair is the same as when I saw him a few months ago, and as always, his violet eyes catch my attention. The color seems so unnatural, but I’m sure it gets him laid plenty.

“Hunter.” He holds a hand out to me, and I quickly shake it. “You remember Oliver? My second in charge?”

“I do.” I turn to the other man, who has a good two inches on me and Beckham. His dark hair is similar to his cousin’s, but rather than violet, his eyes are piercing blue. The black Henley he’s wearing is stretched tight around his brawn, and I can’t say I blame Beckham for bringing him along for extra security. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” he grunts.

“You said you wanted to talk?” I ask.

Beckham nods and gestures toward the truck. “We need some more product in the next run. The demand in the city is becoming difficult for us to meet with our current supply.”

I watch him for long seconds, appraising him. I’ve been working with the Huntley family for as long as I’ve been in this role, and they’ve never tried to fuck me over. Their payments are always made on time, and any time I’ve required them for anything other than selling my product, they’ve assisted without question.

But it's always a red flag when someone wants more product due to demand.

I've always been of the opinion that you only sell as much as someone can handle, because what good is a dead junkie? So either the city of San Francisco is going through a drug epidemic—certainly not out of the question—or Beckham and his men are overselling the product.

“Everything?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “The cocaine is flying out the door, as well as the oxy and the ecstasy. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say it's people trying to work too many hours to make ends meet and need a pick me up, as well as not wanting to see a doctor for pain.”

I flick my eyes to Killian, and he's considering Beckham the same way I am. He's not the first to come to us with this information, which means it's a trend we need to account for in our future orders. “Consider it done. Let Killian know how much of each you want to add to your usual supply, and we'll make it happen.”

He gives me a curt nod and heads toward the truck with Oliver hot on his heels.

“What do you think?” I ask as soon as they're out of earshot.

“I think this country is going to get itself into some real fucking trouble if they keep taking our products at this rate.”

I smirk beneath the mask. “A drug importer that cares about his buyers,” I muse.

“A dead customer is a useless customer, and you know it,” he snaps and starts toward the warehouse doors, leaving Callum to load the last few things onto the truck.

I follow him and fall into step beside him. “What’s your solution?” I ask.

“I don’t have one. None of our distributors are going to say no to selling to willing customers. That would be stupid on their part. But it’s a concern.”

“What about lowering the doses in the products?”

He flicks an annoyed glare to me before turning his attention to the shelves of product that line the wall. “That would be stupid on our part. We’d lose the confidence of everyone, and someone else would swoop in with superior product.”

I nod. “I’ve taught you well.”

“Shut up, asshole. I started in this business a year after you. You didn’t teach me shit.”

I chuckle. “I’m going to head out for the day. Let me know if there are any issues.”

“Going to see Ember?” he asks.

“Sadly, no. I have a meeting across town with a potential investor for the West Street project.”

“Ah, poor sucker.”

The project has been on hold for the last few months because, although I could fund it all myself, I’m choosing not to in order to take any suspicion off myself should the Feds figure out we’re funneling drug money through it. Randy Alcott is just an old man with too much money and too many opinions that the government will never suspect of laundering money, and that’s exactly why he’s the perfect investor.

“Indeed.” I don’t bother taking my mask off, given that there are still people around the building who I don’t want to know my true identity, instead strolling toward the other side of the building. “You should take the night off.”

Killian rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Some of us have to keep this ship sailing, Orion.”

“Isn’t that what I’m off to do now?”

“Now, you are. Later, you’re seeing the iceberg that could sink the entire ship.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

EMBER

I’m hot. I’m sweaty. And I fucking hate the Hunter. Or Lucas. Or both.

I’m not really sure.

All I know is I need a cold shower and a glass of wine before trying to make myself look any kind of presentable.

The last eleven months have been hard as hell not being able use public transportation or get in a car, but today I fucking felt it. Summer reared its ugly head a month ago, and I thought I was doing all right, but it turns out I was lying to myself.

The combination of the blaring sun and the hot wind that whipped past me at every street corner, I had to duck into a coffee shop every twenty minutes so I didn’t overheat.

And then on top of that, by the time I reached the general store where I was hoping to charm myself into getting access to their rear entrance camera, I was so sweaty and disgusting that there was no chance anyone would find me attractive or innocent enough to break company policy, making the entire outing pointless.

I stomp up the steps to my apartment, ignoring everyone I pass as I go.

Maybe I should cancel with Orion. I can't see me being in a very good mood by the time he gets here, and he doesn't deserve my shitty attitude just because I'm too broken to get in a fucking Uber.

Just the thought has hot tears leaking from the corners of my eyes.

Fuck me, my therapist has his work cut out for him.

Reaching the top of the steps, I start down the hallway, but pause when I notice a box sitting on my doorstep.

In my line of work, you learn pretty fucking quickly that suspicious packages are just that. Suspicious.

After a quick list of everyone I've pissed off recently flicks through my mind, I decide I haven't warranted a bomb or anything equally as sinister and approach the box slowly.

I shove my key into the lock and push the door open before bending to carefully pick it up. Again, probably not a bomb, but I haven't made it to twenty-two without learning to be cautious about anything I don't absolutely know is safe.

It's not until I place the box down in the middle of the dining table that I notice the note taped to the top.

Ember,

I'm looking forward to our date tonight.

I saw this dress and thought of you. Please wear it for dinner.

Yours, Orion

I stare at the note for longer than necessary before turning my attention back to the box.

He bought me a dress?

A man went shopping for a dress? For me?

What kind of parallel universe have I slipped and fallen into?

With a steady breath, I use my keys to cut through the tape, and my stomach drops out when I fish the dress from the mountain of tissue paper it's wrapped in.

Holy fuck.

Holy fucking fuck.

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This isn't just a dress.

This is designer.

I'm holding more money than I'll make this month between my fingers.

The soft red fabric is unlike anything I've ever touched, and I swallow down the giddy excitement that threatens to pull me under. No one has ever done something like this for me before. No one has ever bought me a gift at all, now I think about it.

Travis did his best after we escaped the group home, but he struggled to keep us fed most days. There was no spare money for frivolous things like gifts. And then by the time we did have some spare money, so long had passed that I don't think he even thought about things like that.

Orion has no way of knowing he's just given me more with the simple gesture than anyone else ever has.

I press my eyes closed to ward away unwelcome tears before pulling the dress from the tissue paper.

It's a fit and flare style that I would have picked myself, with a cinched waist and a low neckline that will make my tits look great if I choose the right bra.

How did he know this is something I would wear?

Another parcel catches my eye beneath the tissue paper, and I carefully place the

dress over the back of a chair before reaching for it, only to realize there's more than one.

This is too much. Rationally, I know that the contents of this box are way too much for a first date. But there's a part of me, a part that I've kept buried all my life, that's desperate to have someone care enough to spoil me. It's not really about the items themselves, but the gesture of it.

I nibble at my bottom lip before picking up the shoe-sized box. The branding has another cold sweat washing over me because I know for a fact this brand is not cheap, and yet I don't hesitate to pop the lid off.

The black ankle boots staring back at me are low enough that I'm sure I'll be able to walk in them with ease, but with the flare of the company's logo as the heel. Holy fuck. They're so pretty I can barely take my eyes off them.

The fact that he knew I favored boots over heels is enough to have my heart beating harder in my chest. All these little observations he's made that I would never expect a member of the opposite sex to pick up are weakening my resolve even further.

Getting close to someone means risking losing them, but how am I supposed to ignore a man that has taken such an interest in me?

Once I manage to pry the shoe box from my own hands, I inspect the rest of the parcels. There's a small box of jewelry that probably cost an arm and a leg, and a small bundle of tissue paper that contains lingerie from a store I've walked past a million times but could never afford to step inside.

The black bra and panty set is lacy and again, something I would have chosen for myself. Honestly, if he'd sent me off to buy an expensive outfit for our first date, I think I probably would have returned with the contents of this box, and my stomach

does another flip.

There's a knock at the door, and I carefully place the jewelry and lingerie back into the box before moving to the door.

I check the peephole and find the biggest bouquet of flowers I've ever seen in my life staring back at me.

There's no way he bought me flowers on top of all the other stuff...right?

I unlock the door and tug it open in time to see a man pop his head around the side of the vase he's holding. "Ember Roberts?"

"That's me." I smile.

"These are for you. If you can just grab the clipboard under my arm and sign for them." He nods in the direction of the paperwork, and I quickly do as he's asked because that vase must be heavy as hell, and he just lugged it up the steps.

"Thank you so much. Hold on two seconds, and I'll grab my purse." I'm pretty sure I have a five-dollar bill in there, but I think I should probably tip more, considering the size of it.

"The tip has been covered, miss."

"Oh." My brows tug together as he thrusts the bouquet toward me. The weight of the flowers is even more than I anticipated, but I manage to get a decent grip on the vase without dropping it. What a travesty that would be!

"Have a nice day," the delivery guy calls over his shoulder before disappearing down the hallway.

I kick the door closed and carefully lower the flowers to my kitchen bench, given my dining table isn't big enough for them as well as the other gifts Orion has had delivered.

There's a small envelope sticking out of the side of the arrangement, and I pluck it from the prongs. I pull the card out and look over the words with a stupid smile tugging at my lips.

Little Flame,

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No backing out now.

Orion

A laugh tumbles from my mouth, and it takes me a moment to realize how easily it came, considering all the others have been forced for as long as I can remember.

I drop the card beside the flowers and reach for my phone.

Ember: This is way too much to buy for a first date...you know that, right?

Orion: I wasn't aware. I'll make sure I buy you more for date two.

I scoff and shake my head. I think he's joking, but I actually can't be sure, given the state of my apartment right now.

Ember: Thank you for all the gifts, but you didn't have to.

Orion: I wanted to. What's the point of having all this money if you have no one to spend it on? Now go get ready for our date. I have a feeling seeing you in that dress is going to make it hard to leave your apartment...

I have that same feeling, but I refrain from telling him that.

Tonight might be the night I finally lose my virginity, and that thought doesn't scare me nearly half as much as I thought it would.

Who wouldn't want to lose their v-card to the most eligible bachelor in LA?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ORION

I'm an hour early to pick up Ember, and there's a voice in the back of my head telling me you're not supposed to seem quite so keen on a first date. But the rational voice in the back of my head is fighting a losing battle against the unhinged version of myself that comes out to play every time my little flame is involved.

I work on my phone. I pace up and down the sidewalk. I count down the fucking seconds until I can head up to her apartment and see her in the dress I purchased.

There's a whole wardrobe at my apartment waiting for her, but this was the one I chose for tonight, wanting to show her I see her. Not the mask she shows the world. Not the fighter she has had to be since the day she was born. No. I see the Ember she is deep down, but has never had the chance to truly be, and I'm desperate to prove that to her.

When quarter to seven rolls around, I've had enough of waiting and basically bound up the stairs to her apartment.

If the cameras inside her apartment are anything to go by, she's still getting ready, but I couldn't give a fuck about whether she thinks she's perfect for our date, because the reality is, I'll think that enough for the both of us.

I rap my knuckles on the door and take a step back, fixing my tie before I shove my hands in my pockets just to give them something to do. If Killian could see me now, he'd be laughing his fucking ass off.

The day he finds his own Ember is a day I'm going to relish forever, because he has no idea how hard he's going to fall.

That's just the reality for men like us.

We don't have the time to fall slowly. Dating and courting and long, drawn-out engagements are useless to us, and more than that, they're dangerous as hell. If our enemies catch wind of a woman we care for that doesn't share our last name, they're fair game, and that's something I won't allow Ember to be.

The sooner she's in my penthouse with twenty-four-seven security, the better.

It takes a minute for her to answer the door, looking flustered and fucking perfect. Her makeup is just a light layer with a smoky eye to bring the outfit together. The dress I chose fits her like a glove, and I hope she doesn't ask any questions about how exactly I knew what size she wears in both clothes and shoes. I look down and find the ankle boots I knew she'd love already on her feet.

She looks like a fucking dream, even with the roller on the top of her head that I assume is holding the front pieces of her hair while the rest frames her face in wavy strands.

"You're breathtaking," I breathe, stepping forward before I can catch myself and realize she hasn't invited me in.

"You're early," she huffs, looking over her shoulder at the clock above the television.

I chuckle and brush my fingers along her cheek, needing to touch her before I lose my fucking mind. "I couldn't wait anymore," I admit. "Forgive me."

Some of the annoyance bleeds from her features as a small smile tips up the corners

of her lips. “You’re forgiven. But only because you have impeccable taste in shoes.”

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A laugh bubbles in my chest, and the grin she rewards me with makes my heart clench in a way it never has before. “I’ll keep that in mind.” I smirk and carefully step us back until I can close the door. During my pacing up and down the street, I made sure there was no one watching her building, but you can never be too careful, and risking Ember’s safety isn’t something I’m ever going to be okay with. “Finish getting ready. I can wait.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be fifteen minutes early,” she sasses as she steps away from me and heads back toward the bathroom.

If only she knew.

It takes Ember another ten minutes to emerge from the bathroom with the roller out of her hair and the waves refreshed, but she looks every bit as stunning as she did when she answered the door.

“See, this is how I was supposed to greet you.” She waves at herself, and I can’t help but smile. This woman seems to have such a hard exterior when the rest of the world is involved, but this playful side seems almost exclusive to me, and I’m fucking honored that she’s allowing herself to be her true self.

“You’re still breathtaking,” I confirm, reaching out a hand to coax her closer.

Her couch is uncomfortable as hell, explaining why she never sits here to watch television and chooses to watch it on her laptop in bed instead. There’s a spring I can’t seem to escape, no matter how much I shuffle around, but now that she’s back in the room, I can’t remember why it was bothering me in the first place.

Ember takes my hand and allows me to tug her onto my lap, settling the part of me that can't handle when she's out of sight.

Things will be much easier once I've got her in my apartment, where I can watch day in and day out, but for now, the small cameras I installed here will have to be enough.

"That's better," I murmur against her throat. "I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but you need a new couch."

She laughs. "Oh, I'm more than aware. This thing is uncomfortable as hell. I should have told you to sit at the table to save your ass from the springs."

"Are you ready for dinner?"

She nods against my shoulder, dragging her bottom lip between her teeth.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." She shakes her head.

"Ember," I warn.

She sighs. "It's just that if this dress and your suit are anything to go by, we're going somewhere stupidly expensive to eat, and I can't really afford that right now."

I press a kiss to her shoulder. "It's a good thing you're not paying then, isn't it?"

"Orion..."

"No, Ember. This isn't up for debate or argument. I asked you out on a date, and as such, I'm going to pay for the meal."

“But you already bought me all of this.” She gestures down at the clothes she’s wearing.

“Because I wanted to,” I say.

“But—”

Before she can track the movement, my hand brackets either side of her throat, gently forcing her eyes to meet mine. I don’t miss the flare of lust that stares back at me.

Interesting. It seems my little virgin isn’t as innocent as I expected her to be. Likely for the best, considering my tastes are hardly vanilla.

“No buts, Ember,” I growl. “Now, I suggest we leave now to make sure we make our reservation, because if I have you in my lap for much longer, I don’t think we’ll be leaving at all.”

A smirk tugs at her lips, and I drag her face down to mine for a chaste kiss that ends far too soon.

This woman is wrecking me in every single way, and as much as I likely should be, I’m not mad about it. If anything, I’m excited.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EMBER

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

It's safe to say I'm not exactly familiar with fine dining, and even if I were, I think I'd opt for a cheeseburger at a greasy diner than this overpriced piece of ravioli sitting in front of me.

Yep. One solitary piece in the center of a huge plate.

What a waste of dishes.

Orion watches from beside me as I survey the food in front of me, the same way I have the last three courses.

Who the hell classifies this as a course, anyway?

"Something wrong with your pasta, Little Flame?" he asks with a smirk.

The sound of the nickname on his lips sends a shiver over my flushed skin. That's the other thing about this meal, the man hasn't taken his hands off me. Between courses, he has his hand so far up my thigh it's bordering on inappropriate each time the server takes our plates away. And while we eat, his hand will occasionally disappear to cut something, only to come back with soothing strokes to my bare skin that send me wild.

Fuck. I'm so in over my head right now.

"It's just..." I try to figure out how to put this nicely. I appreciate him taking me out for a nice meal. Really, I do. But I also don't want this to become a habit, if by some miracle, this makes it past a single date. "There's not much of it."

His laugh catches me off guard, the sound deep, and the way the corners of his eyes crinkle just slightly shouldn't take my breath away, but it does. I finally got up the nerve to Google him and found out he's nine years my senior, not that it bothers me at all. I was never interested in men my own age, anyway. "You're not wrong about that."

"It's lovely though," I tell him, taking a small bite of the pasta, not wanting to have it all at once, an issue I shouldn't have when this is considered a course. Fuck me. These rich fuckers are weird as hell.

Orion reaches for his glass of wine and brings it to his lips, and I can't help but track every movement. The way his lip rests on the edge of the rim. How the red liquid disappears into his mouth, giving me all kinds of dirty thoughts. I'm like one big raging hormone tonight, and it's all his fault.

"I'll admit, these courses are especially small. Most of these kinds of places at least give you two or three pieces of ravioli."

I stare at him for a long moment, trying to figure out if he's fucking with me, but something tells me he's not. Three pieces maximum? Pasta is my favorite food, and I could eat at least thirty of these tasty pillows of goodness.

"How about for our next date, you choose the place?"

"The next date?" I raise a brow. "Getting a little ahead of yourself there, Orion."

His cocky smirk only seems to make my core clench harder with need for him. I've never met a man that could seem so confident without being a cocky asshole about it. "I don't think I am, Ember. I think I'm going to make you feel so fucking good tonight that you'll be begging for another date."

My cheeks heat, but I force myself to hold his gaze. He needs to learn that I'm not going to back down, even if the idea of him showing me just how good things can be has my panties becoming uncomfortably wet.

As if to punctuate his point, his hand slips up the skirt of my dress. His fingers brush over my scars, but he doesn't pause to investigate the slightly raised skin, almost as if he already knew it was there. But that's impossible, right? I don't get a chance to think too much about it as he uses his free hand to drag my chair closer.

He wraps that same arm around my shoulders and drops his head until his lips are at my ear. "How about I give you a little taste right now?" he murmurs softly. His fingers brush along my panty clad sex, and I gasp when they find my pulsing clit. "Mmm, you're already wet, Little Flame. Is this for me?"

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth to stop myself from moaning but manage to give him a nod that has his smirk growing. Cocky son of a bitch knows what he's doing.

"I thought so." He chuckles as he pushes my panties to the side and runs his fingers through my folds. A soft groan escapes his throat, and I flick my eyes up to see his burning with need. "All I want to do right now is eat your pretty little cunt until you've come so many times you've forgotten your own name. And my serving would be much bigger than the ones they serve here."

Oh my god.

If it were possible to dissolve into a puddle at words alone, that's what I would be right now. Orion Henderson has a dirty as fuck mouth, and if my body heats much more, I'm pretty sure I'm going to combust.

"You like the sound of that, don't you, sweet Ember?" he murmurs as he trails kisses

down my throat. “I do too. Believe me, if it wouldn’t mean killing every motherfucker in this restaurant, I’d already have you bent over the table with my face buried between your perfect thighs.” He presses a thick finger into my pussy, and my hips lift of their own accord. Somehow, his threat of mass murder is only getting me hotter, and that right there is what’s fundamentally wrong with me as a human. “But alas, even a man as well connected as me can’t get away with such a thing.”

I pull back and stare at him for a moment, assessing how much of what he’s said is a joke, but there’s not a hint of humor staring back at me.

His thumb circles my clit, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop from crying out as he drags pleasure I wasn’t even sure my body was capable of from me.

Sure, I’ve gotten myself off from time to time, but it’s never been like this. It’s never felt this...life altering.

“Mmm, my Little Flame doesn’t mind I’m a little blood thirsty when it comes to her, does she?” He quirks a brow up at me at the same time he slips a second finger into my pussy.

The stretch borders on painful but quickly morphs into white hot pleasure that takes my breath away. Fuck, does this man know what he’s doing. Every move, every ministrations, makes me think he’s been playing my body for as long as I have.

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“Orion,” I breathe, barely swallowing a string of moans that rise to the surface.

“You’re getting close, aren’t you, baby?”

I nod, unable to force a single word to my lips without a moan following close behind.

“Should I let you come in front of all these people?” He leans in and presses his lips to the shell of my ear, eliciting a shiver of pure desire. “Or should I get you right to the edge and then stop? Hmm? Make you so fucking desperate for me that you’ll be begging for me to fuck you before we can even get back to your apartment?”

“Oh god,” I moan softly, unable to hold it at bay.

He chuckles. “Not even close, Ember.”

I drop my forehead to his shoulder as my body chases its pleasure, uncaring about the foundation that will inevitably be left behind as evidence of what we’ve done in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

“I’m feeling generous, sweet Ember. I think you deserve to come after being such a good girl and accepting my gifts, even though your instincts demand you not.” He nips my earlobe, and my back bows desperately. “But in the future, you’ll have to earn your orgasms. I’ll hold you on the edge of oblivion until you’re a sobbing, begging mess, but your body obeys me out of instinct alone. You’ll get so fucking good at balancing on the edge that when I finally do allow you to come, you’ll miss how good the denial felt.”

“Fuck,” I breathe, because for some reason every single word out of his mouth only seems to drag me closer to the edge.

“I knew you were perfect, Ember, but fuck, you’re blowing my mind. I’m so fucking hard for you that my cock is about to break through the zipper of my pants to get to you.” He hooks his fingers slightly, dragging them over the place inside me I actually thought might be a myth until this moment, and doubles down on my throbbing clit. “Come for me, Ember. Come all over my fingers and show me how good you can be for me.”

He barely gets the words out before my body follows his directions, shattering into a million pieces. My vision blurs and the restaurant noise quiets for long seconds, and I try and fail to keep the evidence of my pleasure to myself as I bite down on Orion’s shoulder.

“That’s it, Little Flame,” he murmurs. “Such a good girl for me.”

God, why does it feel so good when he calls me that? If any other man called me a good girl, I’d probably throat punch them for being so condescending. But from Orion’s mouth, I’m putty in his hands.

He drags the final dregs of my orgasm from my body before carefully righting my underwear and helping me lean back in my seat.

His eyes catch mine as he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks my release from the digits. A deep groan rumbles from his chest. “Just as delicious as I expected.”

My lips drop open in shock, and another wave of heat washes over me.

Holy fuck.

I don't know if I'll survive a night with Orion Henderson, but fuck, what a way to go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ORION

I barely make it through dinner without bending Ember over the closest surface and slamming my cock so deep in her cunt she'll be feeling me for a week.

Barely.

My phone vibrates in my pocket during dessert, the smallest lava cake I think I've ever seen in my life, and I pull it from my jacket pocket while Ember is distracted, trying to figure out how to not eat it in a single bite.

It's safe to say I won't be bringing her to another restaurant like this. Honestly, I'm not even sure why I chose this place for our first date.

Killian's name flashes on the screen, and I note an array of messages that I've missed from him.

Killian: You were followed to the restaurant.

Killian: Whoever it is has a team that has secured the front and back exit.

Killian: Check your phone, fucker.

Killian: ANSWER YOUR FUCKING PHONE ASSHOLE.

Oh fuck.

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I flick my eyes up at Ember as I force down the panic that comes with having something to lose. This is why I wasn't supposed to move on her until she could take her rightful place, until I had everything prepared and her safety under lock and key.

Why did my girl have to be so tempting?

"I'm going to the restroom," I say, careful to keep my tone even and my face neutral. It's a damned good thing I'm a master with masks.

She nods as she takes a bite of the decadent dessert, and her eyes roll back in her head. Whoever the fuck has decided tonight is the night to make a move on me is going to regret that decision for making me miss my girl enjoying her food like this.

"I won't be long," I promise, and as soon as I'm out of her earshot, I answer Killian's call. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Finally," he sighs. "You need to get your head in the game and out of that girl's cunt, Orion."

I growl. "The next time you talk about Ember's pussy, I'll tear your fucking tongue out. Now tell me what the fuck is going on."

"It's just the one team, but they've got the perimeter secured. I've managed to hack into the comms and have confirmed they're here for the girl, but I haven't been able to work out who they're working for yet."

"Fuck."

“Yeah, fuck,” he growls. “Given her issues with vehicles, how do you suggest we get her out of there?”

“I’m on my way out. Meet me at the front doors.”

“Orion,” he warns, but I hang up the phone before he can argue with me. I don’t really give a fuck about his opinion right now. Not when Ember’s life is in danger.

The restaurant is on a quiet street, which makes it obvious when I find a black van sitting directly across from the entrance. Without missing a beat, I walk straight to the driver’s side and knock on the window.

Muffled voices greet me before the window descends, leaving me staring at a bulky man in a black beanie.

“Can I help you?”

“Who hired you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” I snap. “Tell me who hired you, and I’ll consider allowing you to walk away while still breathing.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“I think I’m someone who is more than willing to kill for my woman. So again, I’ll ask, who hired you?”

His face pales slightly, but that’s the only sign he gives that he’s uncomfortable with the exchange, his face remaining perfectly bored. “I don’t know what you’re talking

about. I'm just here for a delivery."

I glare at him but force a calming breath into my lungs.

You can't kill him in the busy street, I remind myself.

Well, I could. And my lawyers are so well paid they could probably get me off on all charges, but that's a shit storm I don't need right now, especially as I try to convince Ember to trust me.

"How much is your boss paying you?" I ask, looking past the bulky guy to his much thinner partner in the passenger seat. It's clear why he hasn't done any of the talking. Sweat drips from his hairline as he looks anywhere but directly at me. "I'll triple it if you fuck off."

The bulky asshole's eyes widen in surprise, but he doesn't reply immediately, his eyes flicking to the time on the dashboard and then back at me.

"We don't want your money," he says calmly, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "We just needed to distract you for long enough to get her out of the building."

My stomach drops at his words, my chest constricting with unfamiliar panic that takes my breath away, and without thought, I'm running.

Unluckily for those two assholes, I never forget a face, and even in a city the size of Los Angeles, I'll find them and end them for the role they've played in ruining my first date with my queen.

The doorman's eyes widen as I shove the doors open so hard the glass wobbles in the frame, but I don't know what his issue is. It's not like it smashed.

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The restaurant is busy, too fucking busy for me to see past everyone to the table in the corner where I left Ember unprotected.

What a fucking idiot.

I never make mistakes.

But when it mattered the most, I left my queen on the board without protection.

CHAPTER THIRTY

EMBER

Ieye Orion's lava cake with keen interest.

He just left it there, untouched. I wonder if he would notice if I had a bite.

As it is, despite my best efforts to savor my own, it was gone in four tiny bites, and my notorious sweet tooth is unsatisfied.

But alas, stealing his dessert on our first date probably isn't a great start to whatever the fuck we're doing here.

To distract myself from the tempting morsel, I glance around the busy restaurant.

Our table is situated in the back corner with a perfect view of the whole room, making it a table I would have chosen for myself. When you make enemies at the rate

I do, it's best to always have your guard up to avoid any incidents when I'm off the job.

I guess Orion probably gravitates toward these kinds of seats for similar reasons. With his status as the city's most eligible bachelor, it probably gives him the chance to escape the paparazzi if they slip past the restaurant's security.

This place is busy as hell considering the food is so tiny, but then again, it's not really about the food.

Dining in a place like this is about status.

You could have all the money in the world, but if you're eating at the local diner instead of a place like this, you're probably going to be looked down upon by your peers.

Personally, I've never given a fuck about that kind of thing. I'd take a greasy cheeseburger and some fries over this every single day of the week, but that's not to say I don't understand eating here, even with the price tag and tiny food.

I cast another longing glance at Orion's plate and sigh. He'd definitely notice if I had a bite.

Movement catches my eye, and I notice a man in a black suit standing a few tables over, his back leaning against the wall and his gaze locked on the restaurant. When did he get there?

Is he security?

I nibble at my lower lip and fiddle with the bracelet Orion bought me. I think I'm safe here, but I've thought that before and have been proven wrong.

But this place is crawling with people. No one would make a move in a busy restaurant, right?

Forcing a calming breath, I take another look around, cataloging all the people who could be here for anything other than an overpriced meal.

To the left there are a couple of men lurking at the edge of a table, but they're speaking to the couple sitting down, meaning they're more than likely just catching up with old friends.

Satisfied they're not a threat, I move on to the outskirts of the room where there's a woman laughing, her hand pressed to the chest of a man who looks less than interested in her touch. His hard eyes survey the space around him, all but ignoring the blonde as she juts her ample chest out until it brushes his.

I cringe internally. She needs to move on from the dangerous-looking man before he moves her on.

I suck in another breath and settle back into my seat. I'm being ridiculous. But when you've lived your life looking over your shoulder, it's a hard habit to break.

I brush my hands over my dress, wiping away the moisture I didn't realize had gathered. Something else for my therapist to psychoanalyze.

Where the hell is Orion?

It feels like he's been gone for ages.

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I swallow past the doubt that tries to climb my throat.

What if he's skipped out on the bill?

What if this is his idea of fun? Leading on women who can't afford to eat in a place like this and then forcing them to pick up the check.

But then I notice his jacket is still resting over the back of his chair.

Your imagination is really running rampant tonight, I scold myself.

"Miss?" A voice on my right startles me, and I just about come out of my skin when I realize it's the man who was stuck talking to blondie a few moments ago.

"Uh, hi?" I stutter.

I'm usually way more confident than this, but there's something about tonight that has me off kilter. I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

"I'm Killian." He smiles. "I'm part of Orion's security team."

"Oh." My shoulders relax slightly. "Is he okay?"

Killian nods, his face remaining perfectly passive. "He had to take a quick call. He'll be back in a few minutes, and he didn't want you to worry while you wait."

I nod my understanding as I take him in. I can't say I blame the blonde who was

trying to climb the man like a tree, because he's awfully pretty. His dark hair is pushed back in that messy style you know took at least a few minutes in front of the mirror, and his eyes are captivating in a way I've found few to be in the past.

Orion is definitely more my type, but I can see the appeal of Killian for sure.

"Thank you for letting me know." I smile. "Did you want to sit? Your one-woman fan club is still lurking over there."

He looks over his shoulder and sighs, annoyance appearing in his amber eyes. "That woman doesn't know the meaning of the word no."

"Sit." I motion to Orion's abandoned chair.

He hesitates for a second before pulling the chair out, unbuttoning his jacket, and lowering himself into the seat with a grace I wouldn't expect from a man his size. His six-foot-four frame is entirely too large for the chair, but he doesn't seem to notice. "Boss man is not going to like me sitting here with you."

"Why not?"

"Because he's...possessive when it comes to you."

My brows tug together, my stomach fluttering with misplaced butterflies. Surely I shouldn't find that attractive. Isn't that some kind of red flag for most women?

But I guess I've never been like most girls. Maybe I like my men with a bit of darkness in their souls.

I shake my head to clear the thought, because getting attached to Orion isn't an option. Not in the long run, at least. This is just about having a little fun with a man I

have no doubt will blow my mind and ruin me for everyone that comes after him. But it'll be worth it.

"I doubt that."

He chuckles, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. The slight tip of his lips transforms his whole face, and I'm sure as hell he's glad blondie can't see him now because she might start humping his leg if she finds out.

"Killian," Orion snaps from beside him, his eyes flaring with annoyance. My stomach flips because I think his security guard just may have been correct. Has anyone ever been possessive of me? I highly fucking doubt it. "I told you to watch her, not take my place at the table."

"I was saving him from a woman who looked like she was ready to walk down the aisle to marry him." I laugh, and Killian's eyes roll. "I'm sure you've been faced with similar scenarios a time or two."

Orion flicks his eyes to me, and they soften immediately, setting a fresh wave of butterflies off. Jesus. This man's effect on my body is dangerous. "Killian has that effect on women a lot."

The man in question shakes his head, but there's a slight smirk playing on his lips, telling me these two men are closer than just security and employer.

Which, I guess, makes sense, considering Killian didn't hesitate to approach me, even knowing Orion wouldn't be okay with it.

"Everything okay with your call?" Killian asks.

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Orion stares at him for a beat before nodding, which is odd.

Was that explanation just a cover?

And if it was, what was Orion doing while he was missing from the table?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ORION

Fucking Killian.

The man is the bane of my existence at the best of times, but right now, I could strangle him in the middle of the bustling restaurant.

Which I can't do for a multitude of reasons.

One, because it's busy as hell, and that's how you end up in a prison cell.

Two, because he's the only person other than me who can run our business, which I need when I finally make Ember mine.

And three, the woman across from us likely wouldn't be a fan of watching me murder someone.

She looks up at me with brows pulled together. She knows Killian's excuse was a lie. Of course she does. She reads people for a living. She's the best fucking thief in the

city, which means she can see through a lie without so much as blinking.

I kick the leg of the chair Killian is sitting in, the same one I vacated to chase off the threat to Ember. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

He nods and gives Ember a smile, which doesn’t help his cause for ending up in a shallow grave. If I could stop all men from looking at my woman, I sure as hell would.

But I can’t, and I need Killian to be able to look after her when I’m not around to keep her safe.

We take a few steps from the table, but I make sure I have a clear view of Ember as she toys with the bracelet on her wrist.

“What happened?” Killian asks. “I noticed a few guys skulking around, which is why I approached the table.”

“Not to talk shit about me?” I snap.

He chuckles. “You’re so gone for this girl, it’s fucking crazy.” He shakes his head. “Now answer my question.”

I suck in an irritated breath. “There were two guys parked out front. Said they were just supposed to distract me so they could get Ember out.”

He rubs a hand down his face. “Any information about who ordered the extraction?”

“No,” I growl. “I came back inside as soon as they told me that.”

“Effectively confirming that you’re attached to Ember,” Killian provides very

unhelpfully.

“Yes.” Perhaps before I sprinted back into the building like my ass was on fire, I could have claimed Ember was nothing more than a passing interest, or a piece of ass I wanted to get a piece of. But I showed my hand, and I have no doubt the assholes from the van are going to report back to their boss, if they haven’t already.

“You need to move her into your penthouse. Like, tonight.”

“And how exactly do you propose I do that?”

“I don’t know. But make it fucking happen, because as soon as you showed an interest in her, you put a target on her back.”

Killian stalks off without another word, but he does give Ember a quick wave as he heads toward the exit. The asshole is right, and as always, I hate it.

But alas, there’s a reason I made him my number two, and why I’ve kept him around all these years.

I step back to the table and slip into my chair, while Ember keeps her eyes trained on the empty plate in front of her.

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“Little Flame?” I say softly, so as not to startle her.

She lifts her eyes until they meet mine, and my stomach rolls at what stares back at me. Dejection. Sadness. The wall I worked to knock down is being rebuilt right before my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

She nods. “Of course.” A fake smile appears on her lips, but she clearly doesn’t realize how well I know her and how closely I’ve studied her. Every expression. Every move she makes. I know what it means without exception.

“Don’t lie to me, Ember. It won’t end well for you.”

Her brow lifts in challenge. “You planning on killing me or something?”

I chuckle. “I was more so thinking of denying your orgasms until you’re a boneless mess before tying you to the bed and leaving you unsatisfied. But if you’re more into murder...”

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head. “You and Killian lied to me. Why?”

I brush my fingers over the stubble on my chin as I consider my options. I may know her every move, know what she’s feeling at all times, and can read her better than I can myself some days, but Ember is a professional lie detector. She has to be. Which means there’s not much I’ll be able to get past her.

Once she rules my kingdom by my side, it won't be a problem, because she'll know everything. But for right now, I have to keep some things close to the chest if I want to protect her.

"There was a security problem, and I imagine Killian didn't want to alarm you," I tell her. It's enough of the truth that it should placate her, but not enough to scare her.

She stares at me for long moments. "What kind of security issue?"

"A threat. On you."

"On me?" Her brows tug together. "What could they possibly gain from threatening me? I'm no one."

"You're not no one," I growl. "You're fucking everything."

She opens her mouth to reply, but I shake my head, effectively cutting her off.

"It seems to be clear as day to everyone except you how enamored I am by you, sweet Ember. And unfortunately, that means you will become a target."

"I can handle myself."

"I have no doubt." And I've seen it, not that she knows that, nor will I be divulging that information tonight. "But I want you to know that there's nothing I won't do to keep you safe, even when that means you're unhappy with me."

Ember rolls her lips together as she holds my eyes, trying to read me and my intentions. If it were anyone else, I have little doubt that she would be able to see straight through them. She'd see the monster lurking behind the pretty face. She'd see how unhinged my obsession with her has become. And she'd see the man who

murdered her brother in cold blood. Who should have killed her, but couldn't.

If she was looking into the eye of any other man, she'd see right down to their soul. But that's the thing. I don't have a soul. At least not one that lives inside my body.

Because my little flame has quickly become my heart and my soul. Two things I didn't think I had until I pulled her out of the burning wreckage that killed her brother.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

EMBER

He's not lying.

That much I'm absolutely sure of.

And that should probably scare the hell out of me.

"There's nothing I won't do to keep you safe, even when that means you're unhappy with me."

The words filter through my mind as I stare into his dark eyes, wading through demons that rival even my own. But we're not at a point where I can question him about them, and we likely won't ever be.

Because falling for Orion Henderson will be my downfall, and I have no intention of going down like that.

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But I may not have a choice.

Without taking his eyes off mine, he waves for the closest waiter. “We’ll take the check.”

I swallow thickly and nibble at my bottom lip. I should be running for the hills, so why does it feel like I’m just going to wind up running straight into his arms?

Vibrations in my lap drag my attention from the man that makes the rest of the world disappear, and I only hesitate for a second before pulling my phone from my bag.

Lucas’s name lights up the screen, and I send the call straight to voicemail. There’s no way I’m dealing with his shit tonight, not when he’s been nothing but a pain in the ass ever since he gave me my assignment to find the Hunter.

If he wants it done on his timeline, maybe he should do it himself.

A few seconds pass before a text comes in, and I sigh. Of course the man couldn’t just accept that I don’t want to speak to him right now.

Lucas: Don’t forget to get payment from your little boyfriend for this little date you’re on.

Ember: What the fuck are you talking about?

Lucas: Moving your dates from the club elsewhere isn’t going to save moneybags any cash. I expect payment in full before the end of the evening.

Ember: You're certifiable. I'm not a prostitute, and I'd appreciate you stop treating me like one.

Lucas: If I tell you to fuck him, that's exactly what you'll do, right up until the last dollar of your debt is paid.

I throw my phone back in my purse as hot tears threaten to fall against my cheeks. He's always been a fucking asshole, but recently he's taken it to an entirely different level.

"Ember?" Orion's worried voice drags my attention to him, and I blink away the tears before he can see them.

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?" He nods toward my purse, where I hid my phone away.

"Of course." I swallow around the lie, even knowing he's going to see right through it. Orion seems to be so in tune with me and my emotions that I doubt I'll ever be able to get much past him, but that goes both ways.

It's actually probably why we're a good match. Our unique ability to read others would make it hard to keep anything from each other. It's too bad this thing can never go any further.

Not when my life isn't my own.

Not while I have my debt to Lucas hanging around my neck like a noose.

The high of my earlier orgasm is long gone, and all that remains is a sense of dread I can't escape.

“You know, Little Flame...” Orion drags a finger up the inside of my thigh, and my breath stutters in my chest. “I don’t like when you lie to me.”

I press my eyes closed for a moment, allowing my emotions to clear and my usual mask to slip into place. Except it doesn’t. Not like it usually does. Not with the practiced ease I’ve grown accustomed to. Something about Orion makes me vulnerable, which isn’t something I can afford to be right now. Maybe ever.

“It’s just Lucas being an asshole,” I tell him a partial truth in the hope of placating him. It’s not like the information will come as a surprise to him. He knows my boss, and he knows what a total fucking cunt he can be.

He nods his understanding but doesn’t remove his hand from the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh. Just a few inches higher, and he would feel how wet I am for him, even as conflicting emotions war inside me. My body responds to him, even when my mind is a mess of contradictions.

“Is he a danger to you?” he asks, his voice low and deadly.

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth as I consider my answer. Technically, Lucas is the biggest danger in my life. He controls me in ways Orion likely could never understand, and he will for years to come. But in a lot of ways, he’s also my security blanket. No one is likely to fuck with me while I’m under his protection, while I’m valuable to him. “Not at the moment.”

“But he could be?”

I nod slowly. “He could.”

Orion watches me for long seconds, likely trying to see through the holes in my story, because there are a lot of them. But I’m too good at what I do for him to do that.

“Let’s go.”

He shoves himself to his feet and pulls his jacket from the back of his chair before shrugging it on. His attention turns to me, still in my seat, staring at him, and he hits me with a panty-melting smirk. I truly didn’t think that was a thing until right this second, and I’m not disappointed to find out I was wrong all my life.

“You coming?” He raises a cocky brow.

I nod and follow his lead without replying. I’m too overwhelmed right now, and the whiplash of emotions whirling around inside me is a recipe for disaster for someone prone to panic attacks.

Orion drops more than enough money to cover our meals, drinks, and the tip on the table, and I stare at it for long seconds. I knew this was going to be an expensive meal, but fuck, that’s close to a grand.

Before I can think too much about it, he slips an arm around my waist and guides me toward the entrance.

I’m shocked there was a place this nice walking distance from my apartment, but then again, LA is full of surprises.

Without missing a beat, Orion surveys the street for danger and turns in the direction of my building, placing himself between me and the road.

In fact, now I think about it, he’s done that every time we’ve walked anywhere

together.

My brows tug together as I look up at the man everyone's desperate to know, but few seem to. The way he checked the street, how alert he was during dinner, and the tension that never fully dropped from his shoulders paint a picture that's very different to the one I read about on the internet, and I find myself wondering who is Orion Henderson?

Because he may be a billionaire entrepreneur now, but there's a darkness in him that I recognize all too well.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ORION

I'm seething all the way back to Ember's apartment.

Not because someone decided to ruin our first date.

Not because she didn't enjoy her meal.

Not even because Killian was his usual asshole self.

No. I'm fucking fuming because I can't think of a way to get Ember's phone to check those texts she got from Lucas.

I haven't had a chance to install the necessary software to gain access to her calls and messages, which means I'm flying blind.

Something I fucking loathe in all aspects of my life, but apparently even more so when it comes to my little flame.

I doubt Ember is conscious of the way she leans into me as we walk. She's been on her own for such a long time, even when her idiot brother was alive, that I don't think she knows what to do with having someone in her corner the way I'm trying to be.

I don't pause on the doorstep, instead guiding her up the few steps to the keypad and giving her little choice but to type in the code.

It's a damn good thing she hasn't asked how I got to her door earlier today, because telling her I've known that code for weeks probably won't do me any favors.

Without hesitation, I match her steps up to her floor, and when we reach her door, I snatch the keys from her hand and make quick work of the locks.

"You know, it's polite to wait for an invitation," Ember barbs, and I don't bother masking the smirk that tugs at my lips. Not once have I noticed how they affect her.

"But then I could be waiting forever." I chuckle and gently pull her into her sparsely decorated apartment. "Now, would you like to discuss why you shut down back at the restaurant?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The mask of indifference she shows the world is back, and I fucking hate it.

I shake my head slowly as I give her a knowing look. Ember will quickly learn she may be a good liar when it comes to everyone else in the world, but not me. I see her. All of her. The good, the bad, and the broken. And all of her is mine.

"I'm sure you can get away with that with everyone else, Ember." I step into her space, backing her up until she hits the edge of the dining table, still littered with the evidence of my gifts. Her breath catches in her throat, and I bring my hand up ever so slowly, giving her more than enough time to escape if she wants. A concession I will

rarely give her. I settle my palm around the base of her throat, applying gentle pressure that has her pupils blown wide as she looks up at me. “But I see through the lies. I see through the bullshit.” I drop my face until I’m so close her breath brushes softly across my cheeks. “I see you, Ember.”

Her pulse speeds up against my fingers, but to her credit, she doesn’t look away. She holds my eyes without flinching, a feat even the toughest of men can rarely achieve.

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“Is that supposed to scare me, Orion?”

I chuckle. “No, Little Flame, but I don’t want us starting this relationship with any misguided notions that you can lie to me, and I won’t see straight through it.”

“Relationship?” She stutters the word, as if the four syllables are the scariest thing she’s ever uttered.

A smirk tugs at the corners of my lips as I flex my fingers around her throat. “Yeah, Ember. Relationship. You can push me away all you like. You can fight and hiss and spit until the cows come home, but I can take it. I can take anything you throw at me.”

She stares at me like I’ve lost my mind, but little does she know my sanity went out the window long ago, and I’m comfortable with the man I am today. Unhinged and obsessed with the woman in my arms.

Ember’s tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I track the movement, the tether of my control stretching to the point it’ll snap any second. I’ve always been the kind of guy who took what I wanted, not giving a fuck about the people around me or what they wanted. But that’s not how I win my little flame’s affections, and that means swallowing down my urge to steamroll her like I would anyone else.

“I don’t think—” Before she can get the refusal out, I slam my lips down on hers, stealing the words before she can say them. I’m not above getting her drunk with pleasure so she’ll agree to seeing things my way.

That's not steamrolling her, right?

Her lips are impossibly soft beneath mine, pulling me in closer until my body pins her much smaller one to the table, my hand still bracketing her slender throat.

A soft moan escapes her, the sweetest sound I think I've ever heard in my miserable fucking life, and it only makes me kiss her deeper. My tongue swipes across the seam of her swollen lips, and they part for me immediately.

Her tongue is more tentative than mine, but she gives as good as she gets, nipping at my bottom lip and dragging groans from my chest.

Fuck, she's going to destroy me.

There's not a fucking doubt in my mind that Ember is going to wreck me every bit as much as I'm going to ruin her.

But what's more romantic than being each other's eternal damnation?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

EMBER

This is not going to plan at all.

I thought I'd be able to say goodbye to Orion out on the street. Tell him dinner was lovely, thank him for the meal and the gifts, and then tell him I wasn't interested in taking things further.

A lie, of course. What woman in her right mind wouldn't want to have a relationship with this man? But that's not in the cards for me. Not because I don't want it, because

I do. Fuck, do I want everything he's offering. But I'm too broken. I'm nothing but shattered pieces of the woman I was before the accident, and I don't want him to cut himself on my jagged edges.

And yet here I am, trapped between Orion's hard body and the edge of my dining table, being devoured in a way I'm not sure I'll ever recover from.

Yeah, this did not go to plan.

A moan slips from my throat as he flexes his grip around my throat, restricting my airflow enough that the heat in my core intensifies to the point I think I'm about to spontaneously combust. That's not a thing, right?

His tongue drags along my bottom lip, giving me enough of a reprieve to drag in a frantic breath, but then he's staring down at me with haunting dark eyes, searching mine for something I'm not sure he's going to find.

I swallow, and his eyes flare, dropping to where his hand is resting.

"You're too fucking tempting, Little Flame," he murmurs, almost to himself, and my breath catches. I'm as scared he's going to walk away as I am that he'll continue. Because if we take this step, if I let him have my body, I don't know if I'll ever be able to walk away from him.

My resolve is wavering with every second he touches me, and I'm certain no woman is immune to his allure.

"Maybe we should slow down," I force out, but each word is like ash on my tongue.

His eyes flare with amusement as a deep chuckle fills the space between us. "I don't think so, Ember. Not before I show you all the reasons you shouldn't run the way I

know you're desperate to."

My eyes widen in surprise. Normally, I'm pretty good at hiding my emotions. The wall I've built between myself and the rest of the world is sky high at the best of times. So...how the hell does Orion see straight through it?

He dips his head and nips at my bottom lip. "Now we can do this one of two ways. Either you can walk your sexy ass over to the bed and strip for me, or I'm more than happy to slice that pretty dress off your body."

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As if to punctuate his point, he tugs a pocketknife from his pocket, and my eyes widen. I shake my head immediately, because this dress cost more than I'll make in a month, maybe two, and if shit goes south, selling it might get me enough to skip town.

With one last drag of his teeth over my bottom lip, he steps back and grasps his obvious bulge through his pants, making my eyes widen all over again. God, if I let this man fuck me, he's going to break me in half. But maybe I'd be okay with that.

I take a moment to steady myself against the edge of the table before stepping forward on shaky legs.

The ache between my thighs is so intense I'm not sure how I'll make it to the bed without begging him to make it go away, but somehow my legs carry me across the room until I'm staring at my rumpled bedsheets.

Maybe I should have changed them this morning, knowing things could lead to this. But then I guess I was under the misguided impression that I could talk us both out of taking things any further.

Orion moves closer, his quiet steps barely registering against the linoleum flooring. How can such a big guy move so silently? And in expensive Italian shoes, no less?

The ruffle of fabric forces my feet to turn just in time to watch as he shucks his jacket and tosses it onto the armchair in the corner.

He moves to his cuff links next, unfastening them with deft fingers that already

brought me unimaginable pleasure tonight.

My cheeks heat at the thought. I can't believe I allowed him to touch me in the middle of a crowded restaurant, and I really can't believe I came harder than I ever have in my life because of it.

Orion clears his throat, and my attention snaps up to the amused expression on his face. "I think I ordered you to strip, Little Flame," he rumbles.

I swallow past the heavy lump in my throat and reach for the zipper at the back of the dress. Getting myself into this thing was a bit of a feat in itself, but I'm relieved when the zipper glides down with ease.

The cool air touches my bare skin, and a shiver moves down my spine at how intently Orion watches every move I make.

I take a steadying breath and carefully remove my arms from the straps, holding the top of the dress in place for a beat as I gather the confidence to drop it.

If I do this, he'll see my scars.

He'll know that I self-harm.

He'll know that I'm broken.

And even though it would make things a whole hell of a lot easier if he turned around and walked out the door of his own free will, I hate the idea. I hate it so much it makes my heart ache.

I nibble at my bottom lip, trying to force words to the surface that simply don't want to come. So instead, I drop the silky fabric, allowing it to pool at my boot-covered

feet, leaving me in nothing but the strapless bra and tiny panties he picked out for me.

Orion's hungry eyes move over every inch of my skin, not catching on the jagged scars across my thighs, or the scars from the surgery I had after the accident to save my life, and my stomach rolls at the idea that he doesn't care that I'm not perfect. He doesn't care that I'm a little broken.

"Fucking perfection," he murmurs to himself as he squeezes himself through his pants again, dragging my eyes to the obscene outline of his cock again. Jesus.

He steps forward, never taking his eyes off me as he continues to peruse my almost naked body, until he's standing right in front of me, and I have to arch my neck to look up into his eyes.

"You have no fucking idea how badly I want to ravage you, sweet Ember." He brushes his fingers across my jaw, his touch completely at odds with the wild gleam in his eyes. "Get on the bed."

I only hesitate for a second before doing as I'm told, slowly crawling up into the middle of the bed with what I hope is a sensual sway of my hips, before slowly moving to my back.

When I meet his eyes again, his pupils are blown and his hands are fisted at his side, as if he's trying to stop himself from reaching for me.

"You obey so beautifully, Little Flame." He reaches for one of my feet and slowly lowers the zipper, dragging the boot from my foot before repeating the process on the other side.

Once he's pulled both my shoes off, he plants my feet on the bed, giving him an unobstructed view of my panty covered pussy, and he takes his time dragging his

eyes over every inch of my skin with a hunger that should have me running in the opposite direction.

And yet I can barely breathe, scared he's going to walk out the door.

His dark eyes finally meet mine, and amusement plays on his lips as he takes in my heated cheeks. "Touch your pussy for me while I go through the rules with you."

"Rules?" I choke out the word.

"Yeah, rules." He chuckles. "I'm a demanding man, and you're going to learn how to be a good girl in the bedroom."

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“And outside?” I whisper, almost afraid of the answer. Things will never work if he thinks I’m going to give up who I am outside these walls. Because being a thief is all I have. It’s the only thing I’m good at, and without it, my entire identity would shatter.

“Outside these walls, you’ll be my queen.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ORION

Ember’s lips part on the declaration I never intended to let slip tonight, but it doesn’t matter. Before, I was scared I would send her running for the hills if I came on strongly. But now I suspect we’d both like the chase.

I give her a few seconds to think through what I’ve just said, to consider the implications of what that would mean for her, even without her knowing my true identity. As soon as she finds out I’m the man who killed her brother, there’s no doubt in my mind that she’ll kick and scream and try to kill me, but we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.

If I have it my way, I’ll have her tied to me in every way possible before she finds out, making it impossible for her to live without me.

“I gave you an order, Ember, and I don’t like repeating myself,” I rumble.

Her tentative fingers slip between her thighs over her panties, accentuating the

growing wet patch on the lacy fabric, and I barely swallow down my groan.

This will be a test in patience for the both of us.

A soft moan tumbles from her lips, and I drag my eyes back up her body to her face, where her eyes have slipped closed. Ordinarily, I would demand her eyes remain on me at all times, but for right now, this suits my agenda just fine.

I want to watch her without the vulnerability slipping in. I didn't miss the way she waited for me to acknowledge her scars. I didn't miss how she hesitantly dropped her dress, as if she expected me to walk out the door once I knew she self-harmed.

Soon, she'll realize the devil himself couldn't convince me to walk out that door.

"Good girl," I murmur. "Now your rules. You are not to come without my explicit permission. I don't care if I've had you dancing on the edge of oblivion for hours. If I don't give you permission to come, you don't come. And believe me when I say you won't like the consequences if you break that rule."

Her eyes snap open, and her lips part as if she's about to argue, but they fall shut as she takes in how serious I am.

"That also means you don't touch your pretty pussy unless I tell you to. It's mine now, and that means I'm in charge of who touches it and when."

"Orion—" She starts, but I give her a swift shake of the head.

"I'm not finished, Little Flame."

She rolls her lips together and lets out an annoyed huff but doesn't continue with whatever argument she was about to throw my way. Her fingers have stopped

moving, and I cut her with a lethal stare.

“Did I tell you to stop, Ember?”

“No,” she whispers and quickly starts circling her clit through the lace again.

“Good girl,” I praise, and her cheeks heat at the words. Good to know she likes being praised as much as I’m sure I’ll like praising her.

My palms twitch to touch her, to slide up her legs to the paradise she’s hiding beneath the barely there thong I bought for her. And fuck, I never knew how heady it would be to see her wear the clothes I picked out. To see her face light up through the cameras as she picked each item out of the box. If there’s a gift-giving kink, I think I might have it.

I shake my head to clear the fog of need that continues to roll through me before continuing. “I want to know where you are at all times.”

“That’s not?—”

“What did I say?” I snap, slapping my palm down on her bare thigh to punctuate the point, and a soft moan tumbles from her lips. How did I know my little flame would like a bite of pain with her pleasure?

“Sorry,” she whispers. “It’s just...there’s things you don’t know about me, things that mean I can’t tell you where I am at all times.”

I sigh, allowing my shoulders to relax slightly and my face to soften. Apart from that first night at the club, we haven’t discussed her work, and perhaps that was a mistake. “I know what you do for Lucas, Ember. I’ve known since the first time we met.”

Her lips part in surprise before confusion fills her gaze. “And you’re okay with that?”

I chuckle, brushing my fingers down her calf in a moment of weakness. Touching her only makes dragging this out harder, but I can’t help myself. I need to feel her softness beneath my palms to remind myself that it’s finally happening.

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After months of being patient, it's finally time to make my sweet Ember the queen I've always dreamed of having by my side.

"We all have darkness living inside us, Ember. We all do things that some would consider wrong in order to survive. Who am I to judge you?"

"But aren't you worried I'll steal from you?"

"As far as I'm concerned, Little Flame, you can take whatever the fuck you want from me as long as you're mine." The words slip from my lips without thought, but she has no fucking idea how true they are. I'd burn my entire empire to the ground if she asked me to. I'd spend every single dollar I've ever made to make her smile. And I'd kill every single asshole who has ever made her cry without hesitation.

Her throat bobs with emotion, and it occurs to me that perhaps I shouldn't have been so frank with her about how our relationship is going to progress from here. She's still a flight risk, but I can't seem to help myself when Ember is concerned.

"Now, I believe I gave you a job while I give you the rest of your rules."

Ember drags her bottom lip between her teeth but doesn't hesitate to start working herself over in tight circles.

"My good girl," I murmur, holding her eyes. "On top of wanting to know where you are at all times, I will also be assigning you a security detail." I hold my hand up when she opens her mouth to argue. This fucking woman is going the right way for the spanking of her life if she interrupts me again. "It's nonnegotiable, Ember. I have

many enemies, and I will not risk you being hurt when word gets out that you're mine." I'm barely holding onto the farce that my life as an entrepreneur is the reason for the danger, but I'm not ready to drop the curtain just yet. Once she's locked in my penthouse with no way to escape me, maybe I'll come clean about who I really am.

She glares at me through thick lashes, but doesn't argue. I'm sure she'll try to get out of most of these rules as soon as her pleasure is no longer on the line, but she'll quickly find I'm serious about every single one.

"If I give you an order that relates to your health and safety, I expect you to follow it without hesitation or argument. Your fire is one of the things that drew me to you, but I'm not willing to risk your safety for anything."

She nods as a soft moan slips from her lips, and I find my eyes dropping to her parted thighs without conscious thought. Fuck, she's tempting. Like a siren calling to a sailor on the shore, I'm no more capable of fighting my need for her.

"Are you close, Ember?"

"Yes," she whispers as her back arches off the bed slightly, her hips moving of their own accord.

"No coming," I command as I round the edge of the bed.

I slowly undo my tie, dropping the silk to the mattress before working on the buttons of my shirt.

Ember tracks my every move, moving from button to button as I undress so slowly it's maddening for us both.

Her chest heaves as a delicate flush moves over the soft skin and up her throat. Jesus,

she's so fucking pretty I can barely handle it.

"Just one more rule for right now, Little Flame," I murmur. I drop my shirt off my shoulders, uncovering my tattooed chest, and she drinks me in with hunger. I kneel on the edge of the bed and brush my fingers over the littering of scars across the tops of her thighs, and her breath catches in her throat as fear creeps into the edges of her gaze. "If you feel the urge to hurt yourself from now on, I want you to tell me."

This time, she doesn't look like she wants to argue. Instead, she wants to run. It's obvious in how her fingers slow and the blush I've become so addicted to recedes slightly, making way for the shame that fills her eyes. "I understand better than most the need to have control of my pain, but I can't cope with the idea of you hurting on your own." The words are a whispered confession. "Let me help you channel your pain, Little Flame. Let me help you." It's a plea more than it is a command.

This is just one of the many ways I'm desperate to care for her, but first I need her to let me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

EMBER

Shame rolls over me like a steamroller, and my chest aches at the thought of Orion leaving.

I've always prided myself on my strength, but I've been anything but since Travis died. I've been falling for months, and this feels like the inevitable crash my therapist warned me about.

And yet my hand is still between my legs, slowly circling my clit even as my body fills with fear that he's about to walk out the door.

“Let me help you channel your pain, Little Flame. Let me help you.”

The words are filled with desperation, like the idea that I hurt myself doesn't disgust him as much as it does terrify him.

Tears fill my eyes of their own volition, and I find myself nodding despite myself. I'm supposed to be walking away after tonight, but at this point, I'm pretty sure I'm deluding myself. There's something about Orion that I doubt I'll be able to give up. Like a drug working its way through my veins, dragging me closer to addiction as I seek my next hit.

“Okay,” I whisper on a choked sob, and he's on me in a second. His warmth envelops me as he covers my body with his, pressing kisses along my exposed throat as his hand covers mine, urging me to move faster, to bring myself closer to the edge.

“Thank you, Little Flame.”

“For what?”

“For letting me take care of you.”

My brows tug together in confusion, because shouldn't I be thanking him for wanting to take care of me? But I'm distracted from my thoughts as he nips the sensitive skin on my collarbone at the same time he presses my fingers lower until the only thing between them and my entrance is the tiny pair of panties I found in the dress box.

“Tell me, Little Flame, when you're alone in the dark, do you press your fingers into your pretty little cunt?”

I swallow down the moan that tries to escape at his question, but find myself nodding my answer without thinking about it.

“What about toys? If I open your nightstand, will I find a vibrator or a dildo you use to get yourself off?”

Fuck. His mouth is going to be the end of me if he keeps this up. The trails of kisses and bites continue across my chest, and I'm certain I'll be covered in his marks in the morning. The question is, why the fuck does that turn me on so much?

“Yes,” I whisper. “I have a couple of toys I use when my fingers aren't enough.”

He groans long and deep against my skin, and the sound is almost my undoing as he grinds my palm down on my clit. “Show me.” He brushes his lips along my throat before shoving himself back with his muscles bunched and his hands barely tugging

from my skin.

The cool room rushes around me, and I shiver, already desperate for his body to cover mine again.

Orion makes me feel desired, wanted, needed, and it's a heady feeling to have a powerful man falling apart for me.

He reaches for the bedside table and pulls the drawer out, his eyes widening as he takes in my small collection of toys. It's only a couple of vibrators and a dildo that I've used on rare occasions, but he looks at them like a kid in a fucking candy store.

"Aren't men supposed to be threatened by sex toys?"

He chuckles. "A man that's threatened by a bit of silicone is not a man at all, Little Flame." His hand dips into the drawer. He pulls out the smaller of the two vibrators as well as the dildo, and I swallow thickly at the size of the damn thing.

I still don't know what I was thinking when I bought it. It's too big for me to take unless I'm turned on as hell, which I guess right now probably qualifies. My fingers are dripping with my desire, and the lace of my panties is drenched. Somehow, I think I could probably take it without too much issue.

I bite down on my bottom lip as I circle my clit in focused strokes. I'm so fucking close I can almost taste my orgasm. Usually, if I come once, I can come over and over again with ease, so after the way Orion had me falling apart at the restaurant, it's taking all my effort not to tumble over the edge without his permission.

He drops the toys to the edge of the bed and crawls across the mattress until he's positioned himself between my parted thighs.

“You’re such a pretty sight, Ember,” he murmurs, sliding his hands up my thighs until they’re resting on either side of mine before moving back to my bent knees. “I can barely stop myself from tearing those panties off your body and sinking into your cunt.”

I shiver as his words move over me. “Then why don’t you?” I ask.

His eyes darken until intense black pupils stare back at me. “Because when I slide into your pussy for the first time, I don’t want to be gentle. I want you so fucking wet and desperate that you’re begging me to fuck you so hard you’ll be feeling me for a week.”

My eyes widen, and it earns me a deep chuckle as he squeezes his hardness through his pants. I’m assuming he hasn’t stripped out of them because he doesn’t trust himself not to fuck me, and the idea of that only drags me closer to the edge.

“Do you like that idea, baby?” he asks, leaving one hand on his cock while he reaches for the vibrator with the other. “Are you as desperate for my cock as I am for your sweet pussy?”

I nod against the pillows. “Yes,” I moan, my hips shifting as they unconsciously try to seek more pleasure.

“Are you close?”

“So close,” I breathe.

“I bet you can taste your orgasm, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Your pussy is fucking dripping. Such a needy little hole for me.”

God, his words could make me fall apart on their own.

He drops the vibrator between my thighs and reaches for my panties. His deft fingers wrap around the delicate lace at my hips, and he tugs sharply. There’s a slight sting a moment before the fabric gives way, and he shoves the ruined panties into his pocket, leaving me almost completely bare to him.

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His eyes lock on my pussy, and his groan is so fucking sexy I'm pretty sure he'll be able to see me clenching around nothing as he looks his fill.

"Fuck, Little Flame. I knew your cunt would be pretty, but Jesus. How am I to stop myself from ruining it when it's so fucking tempting?"

"Ruin me," I whisper. "Please, Orion."

He drops his head back, and his eyes fall closed as he tries to regain his control, but from the way his shoulders are bunched and his hands are fisted, I don't think he's having much luck. "I'm pretty sure if you asked me to tear out my own heart and hand it to you, I wouldn't be able to say no to you." I'm not sure the words are even meant for me, but they hit me right in the chest, the fluttering of butterflies in my stomach only intensifying.

"Please." I nibble at my bottom lip. I'm not sure if he'll break, but fuck, I want to watch him as he does. As his control snaps and the feral beast lurking in the shadows breaks free.

His eyes snap to mine, and my breath catches in my throat at just how wild he looks with his chest heaving and his barely there veil of composure. "Not yet, Ember," he forces through gritted teeth. "I don't want your first time to hurt, and that means preparing you appropriately. I'll decide when you're ready for my cock."

A shiver of need spreads across my skin, and his knowing smirk makes my core clench with need.

Orion Henderson is going to ruin me, and I'm going to beg him to do it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ORION

For a man who prides himself on patience and control, I'm teetering on the edge of a losing battle for both.

It's rare that I allow myself to think back on my childhood, but I remember some asshole my junkie mother was dating once telling me that women were designed to ruin men. He then went on to tell me that's why we men have to take a firm hand with them, to keep them in line. To show them who has the power.

Even as a child, I understood he was wrong. That he was an asshole who got his rocks off by beating anyone who was weaker than him just to make himself feel good. But to think that someone could ever have that same thought about my sweet Ember makes me feel fucking sick.

Women are powerful, and none more than the woman laid out in front of me like a fucking goddess. She's been to hell and back, and she's fought for herself every step of the way. I'm more than happy to drop to my knees and worship at her altar until she sees herself the way I see her.

In a moment of weakness, I dip between her parted thighs and drag my tongue along the seam of her sex, reveling as she explodes on my tastebuds. Holy fucking shit.

Without thought, I drop to my stomach and grip her thighs in a tight hold, making sure she can't escape me as I devour her sweet pussy.

"Orion," she moans, her hands falling to my hair as she simultaneously tries to push

me away and pull me closer.

I lick and suck at her delicate folds, occasionally nipping at the tight bundle of nerves, causing her hips to lift from the mattress. “You taste so fucking good.” I rumble against her drenched sex. “I could eat this sweet pussy for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and every fucking snack.”

Another moan tumbles from her lips, and I sneak a look up at her, never allowing my tongue to stop its ministrations. Her eyes have fallen closed, and her soft lips are parted as she tries desperately to hold herself back from the edge I have her walking along.

Part of me wants to make her come just so I can lick her clean, but the other part, the part that only wants her to come when my cock is lodged so deep in her cunt that it hurts, knows I can’t let it happen yet.

“Please, Orion. I need to come. Please don’t make me wait.” Her soft cries are addictive, and I double down on my efforts, sucking her clit into my mouth and softly biting down until tears of pleasure and frustration fall against her cheeks. “I can’t hold it. Oh fuck. I can’t.”

“You can,” I snap. “And you will.”

I shove myself up and slap my palm down on her pussy, enjoying the startled yelp that tears from her throat at the sudden pain.

Before I can bury my face back between her luscious thighs, I pick up the vibrator from where I discarded it and turn it on, testing the settings until I find a continuous vibration that will drive my girl wild.

Ember tracks my every move as I drag the tip of the toy up her bare thigh, bypassing

her pussy to repeat the same trail on the other side. The soft pink silicone against her flushed skin makes it hard to remember all the reasons I want to drag this out, especially as her hips roll unconsciously as she tries to get the vibrations where she needs them.

I rest the toy against her hip bone, just inches from where she needs it, and revel in the soft whimpers that fill her tiny apartment.

“Orion,” she pleads, and this time I don’t make her wait.

The toy glides through her wetness, and her moan is something I’ll be dreaming of for the rest of my fucking life and will absolutely be trying to replicate every day for the rest of our lives.

Her wetness covers the toy as I rest it against her clit, allowing the vibrations to drive her closer to the edge. When she’s so close her legs tremble from the effort it takes not to come, I give her a short reprieve, replacing the toy with my fingers, working her in gentle circles.

“I can’t,” she sobs. “I can’t hold it. Orion, I need you. Please.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

“You can beg all you want, Little Flame, but you’re not getting my cock until I’m good and ready.”

The words are almost laughable considering I’m on the edge right with her, and neither of us is touching my cock. Just the press of my zipper is enough to make me desperate to come in my pants like a horny teenager. But then again, that’s kind of what Ember makes me feel like.

Without warning, I press the toy to her entrance, and I’m met with little resistance as I push it deep and angle it forward until it’s pressed to her G-spot.

Ember screams at the pressure, her hands fisting the sheets as her hips buck wildly. I’m not sure if she’s trying to escape the pleasure or cling to it, but either way, she’s sexy as hell as she rides the wave of vibrations until her entire body is trembling.

“You better not come, Ember,” I bark, forcing her eyes up to meet mine.

“I can’t,” she cries.

“I know you can do it, baby. I know you want to be my good girl.”

“Fuck,” she breathes, forcing a breath into her lungs at the same time I pull the toy from her cunt, and she visibly relaxes into the mattress.

“You have no idea how pretty you are when you beg.” I lean over her flushed body, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. I’m desperate to taste her, but if I allow myself too much rope, I’m going to wind up fucking her into the mattress before I’m ready for

this to end.

I shove myself off the edge of the bed and pick up the dildo, testing the suction cup at the base against my palm.

Once I'm satisfied that it will hold, I move toward the mirror beside the bed and wrap my hand around the edge, tugging at it to make sure it's fastened to the surface and won't fall with what I have planned.

"What are you doing?" Ember asks, her voice breathy with need.

"You'll see." I reach my hand out for her. "Come here."

She only hesitates for a second before slipping off the edge of the bed and taking my hand.

I lead her to the mirror and stand her in front of it, checking the height before positioning her beside it and attaching the dildo to the mirror.

Ember's eyes burn into me as she watches every move I make, but she doesn't ask any more questions, instead waiting patiently with her fingers tangled together restlessly.

Once I'm satisfied it's not going anywhere, I turn to her and peruse her almost naked body, taking in every part of the woman I've been obsessed with for the better part of a year.

"Bra off," I command, and she immediately moves to follow the instruction I've given her.

She drops it to the floor, and despite how badly she clearly wants to cover her bare

chest, she holds her arms at her sides, allowing me to take in her peaked nipples at the tips of perfect breasts.

Fuck me, this woman is perfection.

I only leave her in suspense for a few more seconds before closing the distance between us. I pinch her chin between my fingers and tilt her head to look up at me.

“You’re going to fuck yourself with the dildo while you suck my cock, and only once I’m satisfied will I finally slide into your desperate pussy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

EMBER

“I can’t do that,” I breathe, looking between Orion and the dildo attached to the mirror.

Is he fucking insane?

For one, no one has ever mistaken me for being coordinated, so I don’t know how on earth I would even begin to execute both sucking his cock as well as fucking the dildo.

On top of that, what happens if the mirror comes off the wall and crushes me? Not exactly the sexiest thing that could happen the first time we have sex.

Orion leans down until his lips are just a breath from mine. “When I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it, Ember. Don’t make me punish you.”

“Punish me?” I whisper.

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He chuckles and takes my bottom lip between his teeth, the bite of pain tearing a moan from my throat. “Yeah, Little Flame. Punish you. It’ll look different depending on where we are, how much time we have, and how big a punishment is required, but it’ll range from a spanking, to being denied for hours or days, to ruined orgasms and everything in between.”

My eyes widen, and his amused smirk only seems to grow. “I’ll be good,” I say quickly.

“We’ll see about that.”

He guides me back until the toy presses against my ass, and I swallow heavily. Anxiety bubbles in my chest because while I’ve played with the bright pink dildo a few times, I’ve never used it like this, and for some reason, I’m terrified of disappointing Orion.

He must see the uncertainty in my eyes because he pinches my chin between his fingers and brushes his lips over mine, giving me a barely there kiss that settles me slightly while also driving me wild.

It seems my body is a walking contradiction when Orion is involved.

“Tell me what’s on your mind.”

I sigh and press my eyes closed for a moment. “What if I do it wrong?”

His features soften as he brushes his thumb over my cheek. “Let me help you.” It’s

not a question or even really a request, and before I can respond, he guides the top of my body down until I'm bent at my hips. "Bend your knees slightly."

I do as I'm told and hiss out a breath when his huge palm roams over the globe of my ass.

"Fuck, I can't wait to spank this beautiful ass, Little Flame."

"I thought spanking was a punishment," I breathe, unable to force the desperation from my voice.

He chuckles. "It can be both for pleasure and pain, Ember, and I can't wait to show you both sides of the coin."

He crouches beside me and presses my hips back slightly, positioning the toy at my entrance and stealing the breath straight from my lungs. "Press back for me," he murmurs, brushing a hand down my spine in a comforting trail that only seems to set my body on fire more.

I take a breath and do as he says, pushing the head of the toy inside me and tearing something between a moan and a cry from my chest. "Fuck." I sob.

"Holy fuck," Orion groans. "Your pussy is so fucking pretty, stretching around the toy, Little Flame."

He guides my hips further back until half the toy is seated inside me, and I don't think it's possible for me to take any more. This purchase was optimistic at best, and I think this is more than I've ever taken in the past.

His fingers slowly circle my clit while the hand planted on my hip helps me retreat slightly before pushing back onto the toy harder.

A scream tears from my throat, which earns me a soft groan from Orion.

“Jesus, Ember. The sounds you make are going to have me coming in my pants like a fucking teenager.”

“It’s too much,” I moan as my pussy tightens around the toy. “I need you.”

“Soon,” he murmurs. “Keep fucking the toy for me, baby. I want to watch you bring yourself to the edge.”

He remains crouched beside me for a few more seconds, making sure I’ve got the thrusting movement down before he pushes himself to standing and steps back.

His heated stare moves over my body, and it’s enough for me to ignore how much my body burns from the position he has me in. Muscles I didn’t even know existed are screaming with every move I make, but I couldn’t stop even if I wanted to. Not when he’s looking at me like I’m every star in his fucking sky.

Slowly, too fucking slowly, Orion reaches for his belt and slowly unbuckles it, taking his time as he watches me impale myself on the huge dildo that stretches me to my limits.

My ass brushes the mirror, telling me I’m taking the whole toy for the first time, but I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m so wet I’m dripping down my thighs, and I’m as impressed by that feat as I am horrified.

I’m far too mindless to assess each of his tattoos, but they make him look even sexier than normal, something I didn’t think was possible considering he’s already the most attractive man I’ve ever seen in my life.

“You’re doing so well, Little Flame,” he praises. He steps toward me, taking his hard

cock in his hands and giving it a few rough pumps.

He seems to be about the same size as the toy currently lodged inside me, which explains why he was so insistent on me taking this first.

“Are you close?”

I nod. “So close.”

“But you’re not going to come, are you, baby?”

“Not until you tell me I can.” I whisper the answer he wants to hear, even if I’m not sure I can execute the order.

I’m so close I’m starting to think a light breeze could send me tumbling over the edge, but I’m not going to tell him that. He’d probably try to test it, and for some reason I’m desperate not to disappoint him.

He gives me a wide smile, and I just about stop breathing at the sight. Jesus Christ. How is he even real?

“Open wide for me,” he orders, and my mouth drops open of its own accord. I’ve never been much of a fan of giving blow jobs, not that I’ve given many, but my mouth waters at the sight of his precum beaded at the tip of his cock. The times I’ve done this before were to get information from a target, but this feels so different, like it’s not even the same act.

He presses forward slowly, allowing me to lap at the salty goodness and take my time exploring the hard ridges and prominent veins.

“Holy fuck,” he groans as he fists both hands in my hair, tugging with the perfect amount of strength to have my core clenching with desperation. “Your mouth is everything.”

I hum around him as I try to find a rhythm to take both him and the toy, but I'm too uncoordinated between my burning muscles and the heady pleasure that weighs down on me.

"Let me," he murmurs, stepping us back toward the mirror slightly before guiding me back and forth. Each time I retreat from his cock, I'm impaled on the toy, and each time I pull back from the dildo, his cock lodges at my throat, demanding entry.

"I could fuck your mouth all night, but seeing how your cunt stretches around that toy has me desperate to feel you around my cock." He drags my mouth from his hard length and stares down at me with heated eyes. "Are you ready for me, Little Flame?"

I nod my head, not trusting my voice.

Without missing a beat, Orion lifts, and I groan as the dildo slips from my core, immediately feeling too empty and unsatisfied. God, I need to come so badly. I don't think I've ever been so desperate for an orgasm in my life.

He lifts me with ease, and I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively. He carries me toward the bed and drops me into the center. He doesn't waste a second before he crawls up over my body, pushing my legs up until they rest on his shoulders, and he's staring down at me with fire in his dark eyes.

"I've been dreaming about this for so fucking long," he murmurs into the space between us, but my lust filled mind doesn't bother reminding him we've only known one another for a few weeks. It doesn't matter as long as he gets inside me soon.

He shifts slightly, slipping his hand between us to notch the head of his cock at my entrance, and I lift my hips, immediately trying to get him inside me quicker.

He chuckles. "So desperate for me."

“Please, Orion. I need you. I need you to fuck me. I need to come.” The words tumble from my mouth before I can catch them, but from the way his eyes darken, I don’t think I would if I could. He seems to like it when I beg.

Without warning, he sinks into my aching pussy, and I cry out at the sudden stretch. Okay, maybe I was wrong. He’s thicker than the dildo.

“Jesus,” he hisses through clenched teeth. “Ember, your pussy. God, it’s fucking heaven.”

I lift my arms around his neck, urging his face down, and he crashes his lips to mine as he retreats slightly before thrusting forward again.

Each pump of his hips shoves me closer to the edge, and I have no idea how I’m going to hold my inevitable release off if he tells me I can’t come.

Orion trails kisses along my cheek and down my throat, forcing my legs further back. But I don’t care. If he wants to bend me into a pretzel, I’m not going to say no, so long as there’s an orgasm in it for me.

“Orion,” I moan, tears gathering at the corners of my eyes as I fight against the rush of pleasure gathering in my core. “Please. I need to come. Please let me come.”

He looks down at me through dark lashes, his shoulders bunched with tension, and I realize he’s trying just as hard not to come as I am. “I don’t know how I’ll ever deny you anything, Little Flame.”

As if to punctuate his point, he picks up his pace, fucking me into the mattress with so much force I’m sure I’ll be covered in bruises tomorrow. But I hope I am. I hope the evidence of our time together lasts forever, because after tonight, I know I have to walk away.

It would be far too easy to fall in love with a man like Orion Henderson, and that's a complication I absolutely cannot afford.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ORION

If I didn't already know I was keeping Ember, I sure as hell am now.

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Fuck me. Her cunt is better than anything I've ever felt, and I've been fighting off my release since the second I pushed inside her.

She's so tight and warm I can barely breathe as I fuck her into the mattress, holding on to her hips so tight I know my fingers will be bruised into her skin.

Good.

That way, every single man who sees her will know she's mine.

And anyone who doesn't take the hint will find themselves missing a hand.

"Orion." She sobs beneath me, tears tracking down her cheeks and into the halo of hair resting against the pillow.

"Are you going to run from me, Ember?" I grind out.

Her eyes flare with surprise, her lips parting as she considers her answer. "What?" she whispers.

"Are. You. Going. To. Run?" I growl.

She shakes her head, but I see the hesitation in her eyes, the need to flee, to escape the monster that has her pinned beneath him. Too bad for her, she'll never be rid of me. Even in death, I'll follow her.

"You're mine, Little Flame, and I won't allow anyone to take you from me. Including

you.”

Her surprise is evident, but she doesn't argue with me, which is all I can ask of her for now. She likely thinks I'm being over the top because of the lust running rampant through my body, and I'm fine with allowing her to delude herself for the moment.

Once she's locked up in my penthouse with no escape, she'll understand exactly how things are going to go from here on out.

“Rub your clit for me,” I demand, and she drops her hand between our bodies without thought or hesitation. She has no idea what it does to me when she submits so easily.

The moment her fingers circle the tight bundle of nerves, her hips lift, slamming into mine as her pussy clenches around me so tightly I can barely thrust.

“I'm too close.” She breathes. “I can't hold it anymore. Please don't make me hold it.” She doesn't bother to blink back her tears of pleasure and desperation, instead allowing them to fall against her cheeks.

How is it possible for her to look so perfect as she breaks beneath me?

“A few more seconds,” I grunt, chasing my own release.

“Orion,” she pleads, and I feel the moment she passes the point of no return.

“Come,” I demand, and her pussy clamps down on me so tightly I have no choice but to fall apart right alongside her.

My orgasm tears through me with so much force I almost collapse on top of her from the power. My vision blurs, and all I see is the beautiful broken woman beneath me, completely lost in her own pleasure.

I pump my release deep inside her, shoving my hips to rest against her to make sure she's full of me as we both swallow down desperate breaths.

"Fuck," she murmurs, her eyes falling closed.

I bite my tongue to stop myself from demanding she open them again, that she keep staring at me the way I am at her, but instead, I take the opportunity to take her in. Sweat gathered along her brow, dark tear tracks along her cheeks, her perfect lipstick smudged from my lips and cock.

She's perfect.

I'm not sure how much time passes of me staring down at her as we catch our breath, but I'm confident it was long enough ago that it would now be considered creepy.

Carefully, so as not to jostle her around too much, I help Ember drop her legs from my shoulders before rolling us until I'm on my back and she's spread out over my chest, never allowing my softening cock to dislodge from her warm heat.

Honestly, I'm pretty sure I would live inside her pussy if I could. Fuck my empire. Fuck my legitimate businesses. Fuck everything. If I could spend the rest of my days buried inside Ember, I wouldn't hesitate for a second. But I think the little wildcat would have something to say about that, so I'll have to settle for at least a few times a day.

It takes far longer than I expect for her body to tense and for her to try to roll away from me, but I keep her clutched to my chest. I'm not ready for this to be over yet.

"Orion?" Ember mumbles against my throat.

“Yes, Little Flame?”

“You didn’t wear a condom.” There’s an edge of fear in her voice that has an ounce of guilt eating away at me, but I ignore it. I’ve done far worse things in my life than choose not to discuss protection before fucking Ember. I just won’t mention that there’s a part of me that hopes she’s not on any birth control and that my seed is taking root as we speak.

I’ve never been interested in kids, if I’m honest, but if it’ll tie Ember to me for the rest of our lives and make it impossible for her to escape me, I don’t hate the idea of a mini us running around.

“No, I didn’t,” I admit. “I’m clean. I was tested a few months ago, and I haven’t been with anyone since.”

She lifts her head, her brow furrowed. “You haven’t been with anyone in months? But you’re...you!”

I chuckle and guide her head back to my chest, needing to feel her pressed against me for a while longer. “I guess I was getting bored with meaningless sex.”

“And that’s not what this is for you?” She whispers the question.

“No, Ember. This is absolutely the opposite of casual for me. This is everything.”

Silence falls around us for long moments as she considers my words, and I tighten my hold on her just to make sure she can’t escape if I’ve been too honest with her. It’s a

line I have to walk for now, how much honesty to give her, especially when it comes to my intentions.

“You’re insane.” She shakes her head against my chest. “I have an IUD. It helps regulate my cycle. And I was tested when I was in the hospital after my accident. I’m clean.”

She was a virgin before tonight, so it would have been unlikely that she had anything, but I don’t bother pointing that out.

I brush my fingers down her bare back, reveling in the softness beneath my fingertips.

If I weren’t already going to hell, I sure as hell would be now for tainting the angel in my arms.

CHAPTER FORTY

EMBER

Warmth engulfs me as the sun shining through my bedroom window drags me from the most peaceful sleep I can remember having.

No nightmares.

No restlessness.

No late-night wake-ups.

Just solid sleep in the arms of a man I am to walk away from now the sun has risen.

I look over my shoulder and find Orion wrapped around my back, his arm thrown

over my waist while the other is buried beneath my head and the pillow.

Did he sleep like that all night?

I allow myself another few moments to soak up the warmth before carefully extracting myself from Orion's arms.

First, I head to the bathroom to relieve my screaming bladder before moving into the kitchen for my caffeine fix. There's no way I'm going to make it through the morning without some coffee, especially considering what I have to do.

Lucas is going to expect payment from Orion, but I'm not going to charge him for what we did last night. No way am I tainting what we shared because my boss is an asshole, but it is another reminder of why I can't allow things to go any further.

I can't allow myself to get distracted, not when I have my sights set on getting out from under Lucas's thumb.

"Hey." Orion's sleep-rumpled voice startles me from the doorway, and I turn to look at him. He's pulled his boxer briefs on, but apart from that, it's just planes of muscles and tattoos.

Fuck me. Why does he have to look like that?

Part of me was hoping it was the darkness that made him so alluring, but apparently, he looks even better with the sun shining through the apartment.

I swallow heavily and turn back to the coffee machine. "You want coffee?" I inject as much disinterest into the words as I can. This is what I do for a living. I take on personas. I make people believe I'm something I'm not. So why does it feel so hard this time?

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His light footsteps grow closer, and I force my body to remain relaxed until his hands grasp my hips. He steps up behind me, tugging me against him, reminding me I'm wearing nothing but an old, oversized shirt and no panties.

Maybe I should have gotten dressed before I came out here. It would have been a lot easier to have this conversation if my pussy wasn't bare and aching from his rough treatment.

"How about we go out for breakfast?" he offers.

"I can't. I have some work to do." Not a lie. The file on the Hunter is sitting untouched in the bottom drawer to my left, and I'm no closer to finding the asshole than I was when Lucas gave me the damn file.

"Hmm." He presses a kiss to my neck, and a shiver of need rolls through my body. Goddamn it. Why does he have to know my body so well? "You know what I think you're doing?"

"Do tell." I try to distract myself by pouring coffee into my mug, but the way he's holding me is too alluring, and I struggle not to splash myself with the boiling hot liquid.

"I think you're doing exactly what you promised you wouldn't do."

I sigh and turn in his arms, looking up at him through disinterested eyes. "Not everything is that deep, Orion. I have shit to do today. There's nothing more to it."

He stares down at me with his brow quirked up, but there's amusement on his lips, as if he's finding me amusing. "How about you come to my place tonight, then?"

"I might still have to work."

"Okay, tomorrow?"

I shake my head. "I have a job I need to do."

He shakes his head, his smile growing with each lie I tell, and it's unnerving me, something that's pretty hard to do in my experience. "It's really cute that you think you can lie to me, Ember."

Without warning, he wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me, quickly depositing me on the counter beside my coffee and steps between my thighs, trapping me in place.

"I know your default setting is to run from things that are unfamiliar, but I need you to understand that I'm not going to let you go. You can run as much as you want, as far as you want, but I will find you, and I will drag you back to me."

"Is that a threat?" I ask, my voice breathier than I would like.

He chuckles. "No, Ember. Men like me don't make threats."

I swallow and stare into his dark eyes, trying to get a read on him. I don't normally struggle to understand people, but Orion is as much of an enigma as he was the first time we met.

"How about you go have a shower, and I'll cook us some breakfast?"

The change in pace of the conversation gives me whiplash, but he just steps away from me and starts rummaging around the fridge like it's the most natural segue he's ever made.

If he keeps this up, I have no hope of understanding this man at all.

Without pausing, he pulls out the carton of eggs I've been saving for my weekend breakfasts, as well as the milk and cheese, before dumping them all on the limited remaining counter space.

He doesn't pay me any mind as he starts looking through the cupboards until he finds what he's looking for and pulls out a bowl and a frying pan.

What the actual fuck is happening right now?

"I'll have breakfast ready in about ten if you want to shower," he reminds me, not bothering to look up at my confusion.

I sigh and slip off the counter. I may as well take the out he's offering me to gather myself, because I have a feeling Orion was serious about keeping me, and unfortunately for the both of us, that's not an option.

When you owe your soul to the devil, it's not worth clinging to things you know you can't have. That's a reality I accepted a long time ago, and now I just have to find a way to make Orion see we can never be anything more than a one-night stand.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

ORION

The shower flicks on, and I drop the pretense of cooking breakfast.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

I am actually going to make sure she eats, because I get the impression from her fridge that she forgets to do such a simple task, but first, I need answers.

Without hesitation, I cross back to the bedroom and pick up her phone from the bedside table.

The code is easy to guess, her brother's birthday, and I quickly move through the steps of installing the software to access her call and text logs, hiding it in one of the folders I'm sure she doesn't use often. Something tells me she has little use for the compass.

Once it's installed, and I've checked it's working, I click into her texts and find the messages she shared with Lucas last night, and each word has me bristling.

That motherfucker's days are numbered if he keeps talking to her like this.

Lucas: Don't forget to get payment from your little boyfriend for this little date you're on.

Ember: What the fuck are you talking about?

Lucas: Moving your dates from the club elsewhere isn't going to save moneybags any cash. I expect payment in full before the end of the evening.

Ember: You're certifiable. I'm not a prostitute, and I'd appreciate you stop treating me like one.

Lucas: If I tell you to fuck him, that's exactly what you'll do, right up until the last dollar of your debt is paid.

I have a lot of questions as I read through the thread, but when I hear the shower turn off, I quickly click out of the texts and put the phone back where I found it.

Once I'm back in the kitchen working on breakfast, I consider my options.

Lucas is beginning to wear out his usefulness, as well as constantly questioning me and going behind my back to try to take me out.

I could just kill him.

That would solve a lot of issues, but it would leave room for someone who's worse to step into his place.

Lucas may be a fucking asshole, and he may be trying to unmask the Hunter, but at least I know what I'm getting with him.

What I'm sure of is that I need to find out more about this debt he mentioned.

What could Ember possibly owe him? And why?

Regardless, I'll more than happily pay whatever it is to free her from his clutches before he can hurt her. His intentions have never been pure where Ember is involved, and I'm not willing to risk her when I have more than enough money to clear whatever the debt is.

The question is, do I pay it as Orion Henderson? Or do I do it from the Hunter?

It will probably pack more of a punch if it comes from my alter ego, but it also might

lead him closer to finding my true identity, and I'd rather not help him along with his vendetta.

The bathroom door swings open, and Ember steps out, her hair wrapped in a towel on the top of her head and a short, fluffy robe wrapped around her body.

Fuck, she's beautiful. I don't think I'll ever get enough of seeing her in her own space. I just can't wait for that to be my home.

Soon.

"I want to talk about Lucas," I say, making sure there's not a hint of anger in my tone.

"What about him?"

"From my more recent interactions with him, it seems as if he's getting more...aggressive when it comes to you. Would you agree?"

She nibbles at her bottom lip, the only tell that she's uncomfortable as she takes a seat at the dining table. "Maybe a little since the night you first came to the club," she tells me honestly. "He's always been an asshole, but recently it's like someone shit in his morning coffee every day."

I choke on my laugh as I plate the omelets I've made before crossing to the table and dropping both plates to the worn surface. "That's a visual." I chuckle.

Ember smirks and reaches for the fork I got out while the eggs were cooking, taking a bite of the cheesy eggs. A soft groan escapes her throat, and I shift slightly to give my hardening cock room. At least I'm only in my underwear because a hard on against a zipper hurts like a bitch.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:22 am

I have to assume that Lucas's sudden change in behavior toward Ember is because of my interest in her, and knowing that he wants her for himself is really all the confirmation I need of that. But I need to figure out how I'm going to approach this without having to kill him and also without tipping him off as to who the Hunter is.

I have my work cut out for me.

I leave Ember's apartment after breakfast, so she doesn't have to try to think of an excuse to get rid of me. But I've made myself clear that things will continue to progress between us, and if she wants to delude herself into thinking that I'm going to let her go, that's her prerogative.

As soon as I'm behind the wheel of my car, I dial Killian's number and pull away from the curb. Now I can track her calls and texts as well as her location. I don't feel the need to follow her today, although I may change my mind once there's some distance between us.

"Hey, boss," Killian answers, his mood lighter than I'm used to.

"Any luck tracking who hired the guys last night?"

"None," he tells me. "The guys he hired are low-level criminals with no allegiance to anyone. They take cash jobs doing shitty jobs, like staking out people of interest and rummaging through their garbage, but as far as I can tell, the job last night came from an anonymous site they get jobs through."

I sigh and head toward The Velvet Room. "What about Lucas? Any sign that he was

the one to hire them?”

“He was at the club all night last night and didn’t leave until three in the morning with some girl on his arm. Honestly, not sure how she could stand having that sleazeball touching her.”

He can say that again. Lucas is a piece of shit, and he doesn’t even have looks going for him. All he has is his perceived power, something I can take away without even blinking.

“How’s Ember?”

“She’s pushing me away.”

“Are you surprised?”

“No. I knew she would. But that doesn’t mean I’m not frustrated as hell.”

He chuckles. “That’s women for you. It’s why I prefer one-night stands with no names. Saves on the complications.”

I shake my head at his naivety. It’ll only be a matter of time before he finds his Ember, and then all bets will be off, but I don’t bother telling him that. I’ll allow him to believe he’s incapable of falling for someone because it’ll make his fall all the more amusing.

“Do you know anything about a debt Ember and maybe Travis owe Lucas?” I ask.

He’s quiet for a moment. “No, I don’t think that’s come up in my research. But it makes sense. Why else would she still be working for him? She’d be making bank if she did freelance work. It doesn’t actually make a lot of sense for her to work for

him, all things considered, especially knowing he got her brother killed.”

“Well, she blames the Hunter for that,” I remind him.

“She can blame you all she wants, but that’s only because she doesn’t know the truth.”

I run a hand down my face. I want to go and confront Lucas, but it will show my hand, regardless of who I go in as.

So instead, I turn around and head toward my apartment building. I need to get the penthouse ready for Ember’s arrival, because if I have in my way, she’ll be moving in within the week.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

EMBER

After Orion leaves, I head out, knowing if I spend too long in the apartment that smells of our night of fucking, I’ll cave and let him talk me into seeing him again.

So instead, I follow up on a lead I found a couple of days ago.

The Hunter is an enigma.

On paper, he doesn’t exist.

There’s no trail that connects his identity with an actual human being, and believe me, I’ve looked.

I’ve tried connecting phone records, bank accounts, and even medical records from

the times Lucas is certain the Hunter was injured, but nothing matches up.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

If I didn't know any better, I would think he doesn't exist.

But unfortunately, I know that's not the case.

He killed my brother. He almost killed me. And that means I need to find him.

I don't think I'll know peace until he's no longer breathing.

I step into the small corner shop and smile at the girl behind the counter. She's probably a couple of years younger than me, with long raven hair pulled into a neat ponytail on the top of her head.

Wary green eyes look me over as I approach, and I plaster a bright smile on my face.

"Hi! I spoke with someone a couple of days ago about looking at a recording from your cameras out back?"

Her brows tug together, and her eyes look to what I assume is the backroom. I spoke to who I assume is her mother, but she clearly hasn't filled in the girl in front of me.

I take a step closer and pop my hip against the counter. "My boyfriend is notorious for cheating on me. I know I need to leave him, but he's possessive, and he's so good at gaslighting me that I always end up caving." I sigh dramatically. "I thought if I had the footage, maybe he'd actually let me go, you know? If I have a video that shows him with another woman, surely he can't make it look like I'm insane, like he usually does."

It's the same story I told the woman I spoke to, almost to the word, and it seems to do the job as the girl's shoulders relax slightly. "I'm sorry he treats you like that," she says softly. "My mom said someone would be by." She reaches under the counter, and I hold my breath for a moment. I've seen one too many shopkeepers pull a gun, but when she drops a thumb drive on the counter, I relax slightly. "There's an hour either side of the time you mentioned he might be in the area on here. I hope it helps."

I look up at the ceiling, not at all faking the gratitude I feel for her, even if my excuse for needing the footage is a complete fabrication. "Thank you so much. You don't know how much this means to me."

She gives me a slight smile as I slip the thumb drive into my purse and turn on my heel, waving over my shoulder as I push out into the afternoon heat.

At least I'm only about a half-hour walk back to my apartment, because walking in this sun is brutal.

The streets are quieter on the weekend in this area, considering all the office buildings are mostly empty, but there are a few people milling around as I turn down a side street to cut a few minutes off my walk and get out of the beaming sun.

My phone vibrates for the fifth time since I left my apartment, and I sigh. It can only be one of two people, and I don't feel like dealing with either of them. But if it's Lucas, he'll just get more and more agitated the longer I ignore him, and if it's Orion, I don't want him to worry, even if I am trying to break things off with him.

Turns out, it's both of them.

Fantastic.

Lucas: Where's the money, Ember? I expect it by the end of the day, or I'm adding

another ten grand to your debt.

Lucas: Don't ignore me, Ember. And get me an update about the Hunter.

I groan and type out a quick reply, once again reminding him I'm not a prostitute and would not be charging anyone to spend time with me, and tack on the end that I'm working on a lead and will let him know if I have anything.

Orion: I swear I wasn't talking to myself when I laid out your rules last night, Ember. Where are you?

Orion: Please don't ignore me. Let me know where you are and if you're safe.

Orion: Ember?

I roll my eyes at his worry. It's literally been two hours since he left my apartment. What exactly does he think could have happened to me in that time?

Ember: I'm fine. I'm just working. I'll let you know when I'm home.

There. Quick, straight to the point, no emotions. That should put his mind at ease without confusing the situation.

Except my phone vibrates in my hand again before I can think to slip it back into my purse. Oh, for god's sake. He's not making this easy for me.

Probably because you promised you wouldn't run, I remind myself.

Orion: That doesn't answer my question. Where are you?

Ember: About twenty minutes from my apartment. I don't know what street it is, but

I'm fine. No need to worry.

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Having someone care about my whereabouts is new. Travis never cared where I went or who I was with. At least not until toward the end.

He started asking more questions, insisting on coming with me when I left the apartment, but it was right around the time he broke up with Sally, so it probably had more to do with being lonely than what I was doing.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and I roll my eyes when I realize he's calling me. Doesn't he know you don't call anymore?

"Hello?" I insert as much annoyance into my tone as I can, even if there is a funny feeling rolling in my stomach at the idea he cares this much. Why does he have to make it so hard to walk away?

"Where are you? I'll come meet you."

I sigh. "Orion. I'm fine. Seriously. I'm not far from my apartment."

"Where, Ember?" He growls. Why does he have to sound so sexy when he uses that tone? It should annoy me. Hell, if any other man growled at me, I'd probably throat punch him, but with Orion, I have to pointedly ignore the ache between my thighs.

"I don't know what street I'm on." I look around the side street as if it's going to have a sign. "But seriously, I need you to stop worrying about me. I've been taking care of myself all my life. I don't need a big, bad entrepreneur to swoop in and save me."

Silence meets me on the other side of the line, and I can swear I hear him scoff, but

it's long seconds before he speaks again. "Ember, I want to make something perfectly clear to you. The next time you refuse to tell me where you are, I will tie you to the bed and bring you to the edge of orgasm for hours, maybe even days, if I can swing it. You'll be so fucking mindless with need, and even then, I won't take pity on you." He pauses, probably amused by how labored my breathing has become all of a sudden. "I take your safety very seriously, and you're making it difficult for me to make sure you're safe."

I nibble at my bottom lip, considering my options. I'm trying my hardest to distance myself from the man. I thought by giving him the cold shoulder this morning and all but throwing him out of my apartment that he would get the hint, but it's obvious the opposite has happened. Somehow.

God, men are confusing.

The sound of tires on the street behind me drags my attention from the call and onto the nondescript van moving slowly at the end of the street.

My stomach rolls uncomfortably, and I pick up my pace. I need to get back out on the main road, even if I'm sure I'm just being paranoid.

"Ember?"

"I need to go," I say quickly, ending the call and throwing my phone back into my purse.

I check my surroundings again, making sure I haven't missed anyone lurking behind a dumpster, but as far as I can tell, it's just me and the van, which seems to be getting closer.

Why would someone be following me?

It doesn't make a lot of sense, but I'm also not willing to take any chances.

If that van is following me, they could try to get me inside, which is only going to trigger a panic attack and make it impossible for me to escape.

No, I can't allow that to happen.

I pick up my pace, pushing my legs as hard as they'll go without breaking out into a full-on sprint. Even after months of physical therapy after the accident, my hip still aches when I push it too hard, and I have a feeling I'll be spending my night in the bath trying to settle the pain as it is.

It doesn't help that I only threw on a pair of open-toed sandals this morning with the floral dress I picked to make me look sweet and innocent at the corner store.

The van picks up pace behind me, the tires rolling over the uneven street as I approach the mouth of the side street.

So close.

Just a few more yards.

The telltale sound of a door sliding open is all I need to know I'm out of time, and I don't hesitate to run.

I don't care how much it hurts later, as long as they don't get me in that van.

My feet hit the pavement with heavy slaps, and my hip screams in pain, but I ignore it all, just focusing on making it out onto the street.

"She's running," someone shouts, but I ignore them, pushing myself harder.

Hands reach for me, but I manage to dodge them, never pausing even as I round the corner and sprint up the street. It may be more populated, but that doesn't mean I'm safe, especially given that it's the weekend. There are far fewer people loitering when most of the businesses are closed.

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Two sets of footsteps are right behind me, both heavier than mine, telling me they're both men. I already knew at least one of them was from their voice, but confirming both are likely larger and stronger than me has my already labored breathing picking up. One man I can take. Two...not so much.

I am so fucked.

But I can't give up.

At this pace, I'm only another minute, maybe two, from my apartment.

Except that means leading them straight to where I live. If they don't already know.

Fuck.

This is where living alone is tricky.

I try to think of somewhere else I can go, anywhere, but I have no friends, no family. I have no one that would give a fuck if these assholes poached me off the street and killed me, and that's a cold, sobering realization.

The diner I sometimes grab dinner at comes into view, and I don't hesitate, quickly closing the distance between me and the door, and throw it open. I step inside and shove the doorshut behind me, taking in the surprised expressions on the other patrons' faces.

"Are you okay, honey?" Beatrice asks. The older woman has owned this place for

decades and always remembers my order when I come in.

I shake my head, my breathing becoming panicked and rough. Oh god. I can't have a panic attack here. There's no way I can allow all these people to see me weak.

She hurries around the counter and wraps her arm around my waist, helping me further into the aging diner. It may not look like much, but it's always busy, and the food is fucking fantastic for a greasy spoon. "Come sit down. I'll get you some water." She looks around at everyone staring and gives them a pointed glare, which has their attention turning back to their meals. "Nosy fuckers."

A startled laugh tumbles from my throat, and she gives me a soft smile.

Once she's sure I'm not going to fall off the stool she helped me climb onto, she steps behind the counter and busies herself getting me a glass of water as well as a soda, sliding them both over the worn counter toward me.

I flick a glance over my shoulder, but the van is nowhere to be found. Hopefully that means they've fucked off, but I've never been lucky enough to let myself hope.

"Thank you," I murmur, wrapping my hand around the water and taking a few quick sips.

"Have some soda. The sugar should help a little."

I nod and do as she says, my hand trembling as I bring the straw to my mouth and take a healthy sip of the sweet, carbonated drink.

"Can I get you something to eat? Or can I call someone for you?"

I shake my head. "I'm okay. I just got a fright." It was more than that, but I don't

need everyone in here to know my business.

She assesses me for a moment before the bell above the door rings, and she glances up, a soft smile on her face. “I think this one might be here for you.”

I flick a look over my shoulder and find Orion’s dark eyes staring at me. His suit is rumpled, his hair messier than usual, and the emotions swirling around in his onyx gaze take my breath away. Worry, panic even, as he takes me in, zeroing in on my shaking hands.

Oh, I’m in some trouble.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ORION

As soon as she ended our call, I knew something was wrong.

The issue is, even though I knew exactly where she was and what she was doing, I was on the other side of town getting some things for the apartment to make it feel more like home for her.

I broke more traffic laws than I ever want to admit getting over here, but the cops are smart enough to ignore my car when it flies by.

“What happened?” I ask as softly as I can manage, but from the way she flinches, I know I didn’t succeed.

Ember’s body trembles slightly, her hand shaking around the glass of Coke she has halfway to her mouth. Whatever happened must have more than shaken my girl, because as far as I’ve seen in all the months I’ve been following her, the only thing

that actually frightens her is getting into a car.

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I've watched her fight men twice her size and walk away without so much as a broken nail. She's gone up against Lucas and his asshole security more than a few times. She even walked into a dark room with a perfect stranger and didn't so much as blink.

"I think she was being followed," the older woman behind the counter supplies. "There was a van that sped off as soon as she closed the door behind her."

I nod, reigning in my anger as best I can. I had a feeling something along those lines would be the case, but I had hoped it wasn't.

For a man that's never been scared of anything, I'm fucking terrified of losing Ember.

Once I'm sure I can shove my anger back beneath the mask I show the world, I drop onto the stool beside her with my body facing hers.

"How'd you find me?" she asks, her voice shaky despite her best efforts to keep it even.

"You said you weren't far from your apartment. I did a couple of laps of the area after we got off the phone because you sounded scared, and I saw the van take off. It was a lucky guess that this is where you were."

I leave out the part where I have a tracker on her at all times, because more of what I said was true. In my panicked state, I wasn't thinking about the trackers. I was only going off the general area she told me she was in until I pulled up down the block.

She nibbles at her bottom lip and nods, accepting my explanation without asking any other questions. Probably for the best, seeing as I'm too fucking close to the edge to keep up the pretense.

"Can I get you something to eat, dear?" the older woman asks, her concerned eyes flicking between us.

Ember shakes her head. "No, thank you. You've already done so much. Thank you for helping me."

She smiles. "Of course. Anytime you need somewhere to hide out, you can come here. I'll let my staff know."

"You're too kind."

The woman shakes her head, a soft smile on her lips. "No, honey. I just know what it feels like to always be running with no place to land. If I can give you somewhere to hide out when you have nowhere else to go, it'll make this old woman very happy."

I pull out my wallet and drop all the cash I have on me on the counter, not bothering to count it, which has both women turning to look at me with horrified stares.

"I can't take that," she says.

"You didn't even count it!" Ember whisper shouts.

I shrug and push the cash closer to the woman. "Drink the rest of your Coke, Little Flame, and then I'll take you home."

I omit the part where her home is about to be my penthouse, and she has no say in the matter. At least under my roof, I'll always know where she is and be able to ensure

her safety.

It'll also make it much harder for her to run.

Ember is quiet all the way back to her apartment, her hands shaking even as they're clasped in mine. It's strange seeing her so shaken, but the fact she hasn't tried to erect the walls she usually has piled high is as good a sign as any that she's getting more comfortable with the idea of being with me.

She keys in the code to her building, and I squeeze her hand. "Head on up. I just need to make a quick call."

She nods and takes the stairs slowly. She's favoring her good leg, which means her hip is hurting. She's come a long way with it these past few months, but it's clearly bothering her more than she wants to admit.

Once she's out of sight, I dial Killian's number.

"Did you find her?" he asks without bothering with pleasantries.

"Yeah. She was followed by a van. I'm going to send you the license plate. I want everything you can find on the owner and any possible occupants."

"You got it. Is she okay?" If I didn't know him any better, I'd almost think he's worried about Ember. But Killian doesn't care about anyone except himself, and sometimes me, if I haven't pissed him off recently.

"Shaken," I admit.

"Not an easy feat."

I sigh and flick a look up the stairs a moment before a terrified scream fills the foyer.

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The phone is in my pocket and forgotten about before I make a conscious decision to sprint up the steps toward the sound, my hand poised on the gun in its holster beneath my jacket, ready to take out anyone who could be a threat to my woman.

I'm up the stairs in record time, but don't pause until I reach Ember's apartment, where she's standing in the doorway, her hands covering her mouth as if it's the only way to stop herself from screaming again.

I take in her body, checking she doesn't have any obvious injuries before allowing my gaze to track over her apartment and find exactly what has the look of terror on Ember's face.

It's trashed.

The flowers I bought her yesterday are spread across the floor and trodden on, the vase smashed. Her table and chairs are beyond repair, splintered wood covering the kitchen, along with what I assume is every plate, bowl, and glass broken.

It only gets worse the further into the apartment my eyes move, and I take a step past her to put myself between any danger that could still be lurking.

I pull my gun out, doing a quick sweep of the apartment, checking everywhere someone could hide until I'm satisfied there's no one else here.

"You have a gun?" she whispers.

I nod, but don't bother explaining. I don't have a lie prepared for why I need to walk

around armed, but she drops it without any other questions as she steps inside, closing the broken door.

Whoever came here didn't have a key, and from what I can tell, they didn't even try to pick the lock. No. They wanted to do as much damage to Ember's safe place as possible.

Now that I'm certain there are no lurking threats, I take the time to look around, and I pause in her bedroom doorway, taking in the sight in front of me.

"Oh my god," Ember sobs.

Every piece of bedding is torn to pieces, her mattress gaping open, and a clear as day message in bold red above the head of the bed.

WHORE.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

EMBER

Who would do this?

Who would break into my apartment and ruin...everything?

As far as I can tell, there's nothing that hasn't been destroyed. Not a piece of clothing or a single glass. Everything is beyond saving, which means I have nothing.

Not a single thing.

Tears roll against my cheeks as Orion guides me to the bathroom, where the

destruction is slightly less severe, but only because I don't have that much in here.

He sits me on the closed toilet seat and drops down into a crouch in front of me. "Stay here for me, Little Flame. I'm going to have another look around to see if they left any other messages."

"I should come with you." I move to stand, but his strong hands clamp down on my knees.

"No, baby. Stay here. I won't be long."

"We should call the police."

His face tightens for a moment before nodding. "I'll call them now. But I need you to stay here. I don't want you cutting yourself on any of the broken glass or coming across any traps they've set for you."

The blood drains from my face. Is that possible? Would someone really set a trap to harm me?

I mean, I guess it makes sense. They did break into my apartment and tear it apart, so why would that surprise me?

Orion doesn't wait around for a response, instead moving back into the bedroom and beyond while I try to figure out who could be behind this.

Was it the same person who followed me this afternoon?

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Did they do this while I was in the diner trying to calm down?

This feels like a more personal attack. The destruction indicates there are emotions involved, which makes me think it's probably separate from the van, or at the very least, not the same people.

Plus, the message over my bed is kind of unmistakably emotional. I'm sure it's no coincidence this happened after the night I lost my virginity, but I try not to think too hard about that. Because if that's the case, if that's what set whoever this is off, that means they knew Orion was here, that he stayed the night, and that means someone's following me.

I swallow heavily as my phone starts vibrating in my purse. I can't believe I didn't drop it in my shock, but on muscle memory alone, I pull my phone out and answer the call, not bothering to check the ID.

"Yeah?" I murmur softly.

"I need you at the club tonight." Lucas's voice is cold and indifferent, but I guess he likely doesn't know my entire world has been destroyed.

"I can't."

"You'll do as you're fucking told, Ember," he snaps.

"Someone broke into my apartment and destroyed everything. I'm going to be stuck here with the police for...hours, probably. And then I have to find somewhere to

sleep tonight.” God. Where the hell am I going to stay? Because I sure as hell can’t stay here. Not when whoever did this could come back.

I kick at my spilled bottle of body wash, the soft pink liquid leaking across the tiled floor. Is there anything that wasn’t touched? Is there a single item in this apartment that wasn’t tainted by them?

“That sounds like a personal problem, Ember, and I don’t give a fuck. You’ll come in tonight.”

I’m about to argue when my phone is pulled away from my ear, and I look up at a furious Orion.

“Lucas,” he snaps out. “Ember will not be coming in tonight, or for the foreseeable future. If you want to take it up with someone, you have my number.”

He ends the call and slips my phone in his back pocket, presumably so I don’t have to deal with Lucas’s inevitable temper tantrum.

“The cops will be here soon,” he tells me as a blanket of calm moves over his features.

“Holy fuck.” A voice in the living room drags our attention to the door, and Orion doesn’t hesitate to put his body between me and the door, tugging his gun from under his jacket again. I have questions about why he’s carrying, but I can’t really bring myself to care right now. Not when it means he can protect me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Orion growls, and I peek around his body to find Killian standing in the middle of my ruined bedroom.

“I heard her scream even through the phone. I thought you guys might need backup.”

That makes sense, I guess, seeing as he's on Orion's security team, but I don't know what he thinks he's going to do here other than stare at my ruined possessions.

It's a good thing I don't have much of an emotional attachment to things, because I hate to think how heartbroken I would be if I did.

A thought tears through me, and I slip under Orion's arm and past Killian, not pausing until I reach the closet.

My clothes are strewn across the floor, torn and tattered, but I don't care about any of that.

I drop to my knees and reach into the back corner of the closet, but when my fingers don't touch the small shoebox I stashed there, panic slams into me so hard I can barely breathe.

"Ember?" Orion's voice seems far away, even though I'm sure he's standing at the door.

I don't bother responding, instead tearing through the remains of my clothes, searching, and coming up empty.

All the cash I've saved over the years for my new life—the life without Lucas holding the reins—is gone. The only photos I have of Travis and me from our childhood are gone. Everything I cared about was in that box, and now it's gone.

A ragged sob tears from my throat. The agony in my chest is so familiar, I almost greet it as an old friend.

I'm no stranger to loss, but this just feels like losing Travis all over again, and I don't know if I'll survive this time.

Time passes in a blur.

Orion carries me out of the closet and holds me in his lap as police take my statement. I have no idea what I tell them, but they seem satisfied enough with my responses, and all the while, Orion lends me his strength.

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His arms are steadfast as I fall apart, and he never says a word, never complains, never so much as questions what I need, always seeming to know.

Killian and a couple of other men, who I assume work for Orion, clean up the mess in the kitchen once the police are done with it. But it's no use. Even if fifty men walked through that door, they wouldn't be able to put my home back together again.

The only home that's ever been just mine.

The place I healed from the accident, where I mourned my brother, where I promised myself not to give up despite the pain.

But it's all gone.

"Ember?" Orion murmurs, his breath whispering against my shoulder. "I'd like to take you back to my penthouse. Would that be okay?"

He doesn't much strike me as the kind of man who asks for permission, but the consideration tugs me out of my daze.

I look up into his obsidian gaze and find worry staring back at me. He's probably not used to not being able to just throw money at a problem, and suddenly it's solved.

I try to think of a reason to turn him down, but we both know I can't stay here tonight. There's nowhere for me to sleep, for one, and even if there was, I wouldn't be able to rest, because they could come back. They could come to finish the job.

The police only confirmed what I suspected. This is personal. It's not just someone I've stolen from, not that I told the cops about what I do for a living, but someone with a vested interest in me and my life.

They floated the idea that I may have a stalker, but I dismissed the idea immediately. I would know if I was being followed. After living on the streets for years, you get very good at always being aware of your surroundings.

But they weren't willing to let it go, especially given I was followed by that van just an hour before I got back to the apartment.

"Little Flame?"

I look up at him again, not realizing I'd allowed my eyes to close to ward off the tears that try to surface again.

A few hours ago, I was trying to convince myself I could walk away from Orion, but now I'm realizing he's all I have.

"Okay."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

ORION

Ember is quiet as I lead her to the elevator of my building.

Thankfully, it's only a twenty-minute walk, but with the way her body wavers, it feels much longer. She's trying so hard to be strong, something she's had to be far too much in her life, but that just means I have to be strong enough for the both of us.

Killian is bringing my car back with him, along with the few items we could salvage from Ember's apartment, but it's not going to do her much good. The single pair of pajama shorts and an old dress that she'd forgotten she even owned, paired with a pair of running shoes, don't even make a complete outfit.

But she already has a wardrobe of clothes in the penthouse, something I'm going to have to explain shortly.

There are a lot of things I'm going to have to come clean about, but most of it can wait until she recovers from this setback.

Ember slumps against me as soon as the doors slide shut behind us, and I revel in her surrender. She didn't want to need me, but the fact that she's allowing herself to has my chest aching. Who knew the organ that keeps me alive could beat for someone the way it beats for my little flame.

"Why would someone do that?" she whispers.

"I don't know," I admit. But I will. I had Killian pull out all the cameras I installed before the police arrived, and I'll be checking the footage as soon as I can leave her alone for a few minutes, but I can't see that happening anytime soon.

And it can wait.

The dead man walking will still be there once Ember is strong enough to stand by herself again.

Lucas is another problem I need to deal with. I don't give a fuck how valuable he is. He's been blowing up Ember's phone ever since I took it from her, and the things he's saying to her cannot be allowed to go unchecked.

But again, it'll have to wait.

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The elevator doors slide open straight into the living room of the penthouse, and I guide Ember forward, her eyes darting around like she's not sure what to look at first.

"Holy fuck," she breathes. "You actually live here?"

I chuckle. "Yes, I actually live here."

"I thought places like this only existed in the movies." She looks up at me, her brows furrowed. "So...you're like rich rich?"

Another laugh escapes my throat as I tug her into my side. "I guess so."

Now is not the time to go into just how much money is sitting in my bank account at this very second.

The elevator dings, and Killian steps out with the small bag of items he brought over, but his eyes are focused on Ember. It seems the man who refuses to acknowledge his ability to care for others has, in fact, started caring for someone other than himself. I knew there were benefits to putting him on her tail.

He drops it on the dining table as Ember pulls away from me, crossing the expansive space to the floor-to-ceiling window looking out at the Los Angeles sunset.

Killian stops beside me. "What do you need from me?" he asks softly.

"I need you to find out who the fuck followed her and who broke into her apartment."

“You don’t think they’re the same person?”

“No. The cops may think so, but I don’t. The apartment was a crime of passion, while the van had to be pre-planned. You don’t just have a team of guys available to kidnap someone. It’s unlikely the same person would commit both in the same day.”

“I’m on it. You taking a few days?”

I nod. “Clear my schedule, and don’t call me unless the empire is literally on fire.”

He chuckles. “Roger that. I’ll keep you updated because I know your workaholic ass won’t be able to handle being out of the loop all together.”

I scowl at him, but he’s right. I’ve never taken a single day away from the darker side of my business, and it certainly doesn’t come naturally to me.

When you’ve spent your whole existence working, it’s fucking hard to take a day off.

“You need me to get anything for Ember? Clothes? Toiletries? Those kinds of things?”

“No, she already has a stock of stuff here.”

He raises his brow. “Can I stay while you show her? I can’t wait to hear you explain how you know her exact shoe size and what brand of mascara she prefers.”

“Get the fuck out,” I snap, which only seems to make him laugh harder. This motherfucker is skating on thin ice.

“Call if you need anything.”

He waves at Ember as he strolls back out the way he came and disappears as the elevator doors slide shut, leaving me alone with my little flame.

At last. I've waited what feels like a lifetime for this moment, for her to be in my home, behind every type of security money can buy.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

EMBER

It's been a while since my emotions have shut down like this.

Between the meds my psychiatrist has me on and my regular therapy sessions, I've been getting better. Sure, I've had some slip-ups, but that's what happens when you're in recovery.

Except right now, I feel like I'm right back to the week after the accident.

The loss of the money I was saving for my new life and the photos from our childhood...it's too much. It hurts so badly I can barely breathe.

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And it doesn't help that Orion is hovering.

Logically, I realize it's because he wants to take care of me, but it's annoying as hell for someone who has always taken care of themselves.

"Can I get you something to eat?" he asks for the third time in the last hour.

I shake my head, burrowing further into the soft blanket Orion wrapped me in after Killian left. He's been taking hushed phone calls in between hovering over me like a fly to a bad smell.

I'm too numb. It's unnerving, and the itch to reach for the razor blade is so strong I can barely think past the blessed pain it would bring. So I could feel something. Anything.

There's a razor blade in my purse. I slipped it inside right alongside the thumb drive I haven't had a chance to check yet.

Fuck.

My laptop.

I don't remember seeing it among my other destroyed items at my apartment, and it certainly wasn't something I saw Killian pack even after I insisted it wasn't necessary.

"I think they took my laptop," I whisper.

“What?” Orion’s brows tug together in confusion. “But nothing else was stolen other than the shoebox with the cash?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t even think about my laptop. It didn’t occur to me.” My voice shakes, and the aching in my chest intensifies.

I don’t have the money for another one, let alone to replace all my other belongings, and that means working is going to be that much harder.

Hacking isn’t my thing, but that doesn’t mean I can’t super sleuth with the best of them. If there’s a piece of dirt on someone on the internet, I can find it.

People are not as careful with their social media pages as they should be, and I’m more than happy to exploit that carelessness at every opportunity.

Orion considers me for a moment before typing out a text and pocketing his phone. “Can you think of a reason someone would want your laptop?”

I shake my head. Why would anyone want my shitty old laptop? I don’t even store anything on it apart from whatever mark I’m working on. It’s old and slow at the best of times, so storing anything other than a few files on it has the thing losing its shit.

Unless...

The Hunter.

It has to be him. If he’s caught on to me looking into him, that would explain all of this.

Except for how personal the attack on my apartment was. Or maybe that’s just how they made it look. Maybe that’s just a way of throwing me off the scent. Making it

look like I have someone stalking me so they can get away with it.

“Ember?” Orion’s worried voice comes from closer than I expect, and when I blink past the tears I don’t remember shedding, he’s crouched in front of the couch. “Are you okay? Did you think of something?”

I shake my head. I can’t drag Orion into this. If it is the Hunter who broke into my apartment, I can’t allow him to become collateral damage in my search for revenge.

His brows tug together, and I can tell he doesn’t believe me, but he doesn’t ask any other questions. Instead, he carefully lifts my head and shifts me slightly so he can sit beside me before his fingers start working through my hair in comforting strokes.

“Rest for a while, Little Flame. We’ll get everything sorted once you’ve slept.”

Sleep felt miles away just a few minutes ago, but with his warmth so close, I can’t help but fall into dreamland, a world away from the hell of my reality.

Heat radiates off the body beneath mine, and it takes long moments for me to remember where I am.

Somehow, I’ve ended up sprawled across Orion’s chest, my head resting in the crook of his neck and his arms wound around me tightly, holding onto me like I’m the most precious thing in the world. Which I’m definitely not.

I’m a mess. A mess that he could do without.

He’s a wildly successful businessman. He doesn’t need all my shit on his doorstep, and that’s exactly why I need to leave.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

It's the middle of the night, the moon high in the sky, providing soft light through the otherwise dark penthouse.

As carefully as I can manage, I slip out of his warm embrace and miss it immediately. I've been touch-starved my whole life. I thought if the time ever came that I would have someone around who would want to hold me, that I'd get over it very quickly and want my space. But that's the exact opposite of what I want right now, even if it's my only choice.

I look around for where he stashed the sandals he pulled off my feet when he sat me down on the couch and find them by the elevator.

The bag of my belongings is still sitting in the middle of the dining table alongside my purse, and I move toward them first. All my worldly possessions are in those bags, and I'm not going anywhere without them.

I flick another look over my shoulder at Orion still on the couch, his arm thrown over his head, and a soft snore filling the otherwise quiet space.

A pang of guilt shoots through my chest at leaving in the middle of the night like this. I don't even know where I'm going to go. To Lucas, maybe? I'm sure he'll tack some extra money on to my debt, but at least Orion will be free of my baggage.

I'm not so naïve to think he's not going to look for me. A man like Orion is used to getting exactly what he wants, and for some reason, that's me. But I refuse to put him in danger because of me.

The threat was written on the wall, literally. Whoever broke in knew he spent the night with me. They knew I slept with him, and that means they could go after him next.

No. I can't allow that.

With fortified resolve, I move to the elevator and quietly strap my sandals in place before pressing the call button, but nothing happens.

No banging and whirring, no light above the doors. Nothing.

"You need the code to call the elevator at night," a groggy voice comes from behind me, and I just about jump out of my skin as I turn around so quickly my head spins.

Orion stands a few feet away, his dark eyes assessing me with a mixture of hurt and irritation. Apparently, I didn't think this through quite as well as I thought I had.

Of course, a man like him doesn't make the elevator that opens straight into his living room accessible to just anyone.

That makes a lot of sense, but it didn't occur to my sleepy and panic-ridden mind.

Fuck. What am I going to do now?

Without missing a beat, Orion crosses the room until he's right in front of me, and I'm forced to tilt my head back to look into his dark gaze.

"Were you going to run from me, Little Flame?" He drops his face until his lips are just a breath from mine. "Because you should know I really fucking love to chase."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

ORION

It's in Ember's nature to run.

It's what she's been doing her whole life.

And I can't say I blame her. Today was a shit show of epic proportions. She left her apartment thinking the hardest thing she was going to do all day was to try to convince my stubborn ass that things couldn't work out between us. Then she was chased down by thugs in a van, and her apartment was trashed.

Killian is working on tracking down whoever is responsible for both stunts, but that leaves me to wrangle the woman who is trying to escape.

She stares at me, her lips parted in surprise, but I don't miss the blush that moves over her cheeks and down her neck.

Yeah, my girl likes the idea of being chased.

Me too, baby. Me too.

But that's a thought for later. First, I need to make sure she's safe and ensure she's not going to continue trying to escape.

I don't want to frighten her, but I will if it means keeping her here with me.

Before she can think to move, I drop my shoulder and toss her over it, eliciting a startled yelp from her throat.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

I move further into the penthouse to the hallway I haven't bothered showing her yet and straight into my bedroom.

It's not until I reach the bed that I throw her into the center, allowing my eyes to move over her gorgeous body. She's still wearing the summer dress from earlier, but now it's sleep rumpled and barely covering her panties. The bust is skewed, and if I look hard enough, I can see the edge of one of her nipples.

Without thinking, I lean forward and grip the material of the dress, tugging it until the thin cotton gives way and tears straight from her body.

"Orion, what the fuck?" she snaps, batting at my hand as if it's going to do anything to save her. "I have like three items of clothing, and you go ahead and tear it?" The anger blazing in her eyes is a far cry from the dejected look she had all afternoon, and I'd much rather her anger than the soul-destroying pain she was in earlier.

"I'll buy you another dress," I rumble. If she opens the closet on the left side of the bed, she'll find it fully stocked for her already, but for now, I keep that piece of information to myself. And if she doesn't like the things I've bought, she can take my credit card and buy whatever the fuck she wants. I have more money than I could spend in a hundred lifetimes, so it might be fun to see her try.

"That's not the point," she growls, her eyes darting around the room for an escape.

But there isn't one.

I shove the ruined material off her shoulders, leaving her in nothing but a skimpy pair

of soft pink panties. “Did you wear these for me, Little Flame?” I murmur a moment before they meet the same fate the dress did.

So quickly, neither of us seems to realize what’s happening, her hand shoots out and slaps against my cheek. The burst of unexpected pain startles me for a second before I snap my eyes to hers, full of surprise, like she can’t quite believe she did that.

If only she knew who I really was. She’d be fucking terrified.

But she has no reason to fear me.

Not now. Not ever.

I’d never hurt her in a way she didn’t enjoy. I just have to make her see that.

Without missing a beat, I crawl up the mattress over her, forcing her to fall back against the mattress.

“You gotta stop trying to run, Little Flame,” I murmur. I drop my face until our breaths mingle, and her tempting, lush lips are so close I can almost taste them.

“I can’t stay here, Orion. It’s not fair to you. You don’t need me fucking up your life.” There’s a sadness in her voice that tugs at the part of me I thought died when I was a kid. The thing most people would call a soul. I fucking hate the idea of Ember being sad, or scared, or hurt, but the reality is, that’s all she’s ever really known. I’m sure there are happy times in there somewhere, but for the most part, she’s just been trying to survive. I want her to know that ends now.

Because I want to make sure she thrives.

“You will stay here, Ember, and I’m not accepting any arguments you’re going to

throw my way.”

“You’re being unreasonable.” Her tiny hands come up to my chest and try to shove me away, but I don’t budge. I have no doubt she could put most men on their asses, but I very much doubt I’m one of them.

“Do I strike you as a reasonable man?” I raise a brow. “Or do I seem like a man who gets what I want, when I want it?”

She huffs, but her arguments die on her lips when I press mine against her throat. A soft moan escapes, and I smirk against her impossibly soft skin. She may try to fight, but she’s not going anywhere, even if I need to use her body’s need for me to my advantage.

I shift slightly, hooking an arm around the back of her knee and forcing it up so I can seat myself between her thighs.

She rubs her hot pussy against the bulge in my lounge pants, and I curse myself for not planning ahead. I should have stripped before I crawled over her, but I was too desperate to pin her to the mattress, to hold her exactly where I want her.

“You can’t use sex to get your way,” she moans, but the fight is gone from her eyes.

I chuckle. “I can, and I will.” I slip a hand between our bodies and brush my fingers through her wetness. “Fuck, you’re so ready for me, aren’t you, baby?” I nip at her throat, and her hips jerk up to meet my touch. “Are you sore?”

I wasn’t exactly gentle with her last night, and even if she has played with those toys on occasion, she probably hasn’t for such an extended amount of time.

Ember nibbles at her bottom lip and nods. “A little.”

I wish I could tell her I'm not going to fuck her, but I don't want to lie to her any more than I have to, and right now, keeping my identity a secret is enough.

“Hands on the pillows. Do not move them.”

There's no hesitation in her movements as she does exactly as I've instructed, her eyes flaring with heat that matches what's burning in my chest.

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Fuck, she's so beautiful when she submits to me.

Once her hands are fisted in the pillows, I drag my body down hers, licking and sucking at the soft skin of her throat, her breasts, her hips, until she's writhing beneath me like I've been tormenting her for hours.

My little flame is a little too receptive to me, it seems.

"What are your rules, Ember?"

"I'm not allowed to come without permission," she breathes.

"And?"

"I need to do everything you tell me without hesitation."

"Good girl."

A shiver of desire moves through her, and I don't bother hiding the smirk that tugs at my lips. I fucking love how she responds to those words on my lips.

I press gentle kisses along her upper thighs, not following a set path. Sometimes, so close to her pussy I can almost taste her, and other times nowhere near where either of us want me.

"Has anyone ever eaten your pretty cunt, Ember?"

“No,” she whispers. “No one but you and me has ever made me come.”

I chuckle. “Sadly, that wouldn’t surprise me even if you’d had multiple partners between these silky thighs.” But I’m fucking glad no one was here before me, because they’d probably have to die.

As it is, I’m pretty sure there are men that will be on my hit list for feeling her lips around their tiny cocks before me, but alas, that’s a problem for another day.

“Orion,” Ember moans. “Please, I need you.”

I blow softly against her aching core, and her hips lift from the mattress. Ideally, I’d like to tie her up for this, but right now that’s the worst thing I could do. I need her to see just how badly she wants to do as I say, including when I tell her she’s staying with me forever.

“Mmm, I’m sure you do. I’m sure you’re aching so badly. But the thing is, you promised you wouldn’t run from me. Remember? You were so close to the edge, mindless with the pleasure I was giving you. And you swore you wouldn’t run from me. But what did you do?”

“I ran,” she whispers.

I nod, swiping my tongue along the juncture of her thigh and pussy. “Indeed, you did. Multiple times, in fact. This morning you were putting distance between us, and then again tonight, sneaking out while I slept.” I shake my head disapprovingly. “But here’s the thing, Little Flame. I have no intention of letting you go. Ever.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

EMBER

Part of me wants to believe he's being dramatic by saying he wants to keep me forever, but there's something in the way he stares up at me that tells me he's dead serious. That scares me just as much as it has my heart fluttering in my chest at the idea of someone wanting me for me.

Not because of who my brother is.

Not because of who my boss is.

Not because I'm pretending to be something I'm not.

Orion has seen the real me from day one, and he's never faltered. He's seen me at my worst. He's seen my scars. He's seen what a complete fucking disaster my life is, and he hasn't blinked.

I can't quite understand why he hasn't run for the hills, but I probably shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when I don't have anywhere else to go.

"I think a little punishment will get that through your head. What do you think, Ember?"

"Punishment?" My voice shakes under the weight of the word. The last punishment I received was from one of my foster parents when I was five. They were big on only providing one meal a day, and I missed it because I was sick. I snuck into the kitchen in the middle of the night and took a piece of bread. It was the end piece that no one ever eats, and I remember how loudly my stomach grumbled when I got it in my hand.

I only got one bite before my foster mother found me.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

She took the piece of bread, threw it in the trash, and spent the next ten minutes hitting me with the wooden spoon.

Yeah, I don't think I want to be punished.

The bed dips, and when I blink next, Orion is hovering over me, his hand cupping my cheek. "Hey, where'd you go?" The worry lacing his voice has my brows tugging together. It's so foreign to me, having someone that gives a shit about me, and I don't know what to do with the feeling.

"What kind of punishment?" My voice wobbles, and the worry in his dark eyes only seems to deepen.

"Ember—"

"I don't want to be hit with anything," I say quickly.

"Hit with—" He cuts off the question as his muscles bunch in his shoulders. "Who hurt you, Ember?" There's a hint of menace in his voice that makes my stomach roll, but not because I'm scared. No, for some reason, a protective Orion has me desperate to slip my hand between us and bring myself to the edge.

I shake my head. "It was a long time ago. I don't even remember her name. I just...I don't want to be spanked with any kind of wooden object. Is that okay?"

God, I sound so fucking weak. It's a wonder he hasn't decided I'm too damaged, but I'm sure it's only a matter of time.

Orion stares down at me for long seconds. I can't tell if he's considering leaving or what he's doing. I wouldn't blame him. That's for damn sure.

His thumb brushes along my cheek as he dips his head and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. "I will never hurt you in anger, Ember. I need you to know that. I need you to know that if you tell me no, I will stop. I will never harm you in a way that I don't think you'll enjoy." He presses another soft kiss to my lips. "And I will always protect you from anything and anyone that thinks about hurting you."

The declaration has my heart beating hard in my chest, the fear from the memory of my childhood falling away as easily as it appeared.

How does he do that?

How does he settle the storm inside me without even knowing it was raging?

"Okay," I murmur. It feels a lot like admitting defeat, and maybe it is, because the longer I spend with Orion, the less I believe I'll actually be able to escape him.

His lips crash down on mine, stealing the breath straight from my lungs as he devours me. Handing over power to someone like this doesn't come naturally to me, but for some reason, obeying his commands is as easy as breathing.

He nips at my bottom lip so hard I hiss out a breath as pleasure shoots straight to my aching core. God, if you'd told me I would like pain with my pleasure, I would have thought you had lost your mind. But here we are.

"Such a good girl for me, Ember," he whispers against my lips. "But that doesn't mean you're escaping your punishment. Even good girls can be bad sometimes."

I open my mouth to argue, but my protests die on my tongue as he trails kisses down

my body. Even after such a short amount of time together, he knows every spot that makes me gasp.

“What are you going to do?” I ask as he reaches my aching sex.

“I thought we might start with a touch of denial before introducing you to the world of ruined orgasms.”

My mouth drops open. “That sounds...painful.”

He chuckles and presses a chaste kiss to my throbbing clit. “Oh, it is. But it’s a delicious kind of pain that’ll leave you aching and desperate for me.”

“You say that like you have experience.” I challenge.

“You think I’d do something to you that I wasn’t willing to do to myself, Little Flame?” He raises a brow at me, and the shock renders me speechless.

Orion drags his tongue along the length of my core, and I barely bite back the cry that tries to escape my throat. Oh fuck.

“Hold on tight, Ember.” He nods to where my hands are fisted in the pillows above my head. “Every time you let go, I’m adding ten minutes to your punishment.”

I grasp the soft bedding tighter and will myself to obey. He’s going to ruin me, destroy me, obliterate me, and I’m going to beg for more.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

ORION

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

Staring up her body from between her thighs is a lesson in patience.

A part of me, and not a small part at that, wants to spend the rest of the night devouring her whole. Tearing orgasms from her perfect body until she passes out, only to wake her up with another.

But the other part is desperate to punish her for trying to run from me. Twice. I need her to think about the consequences if she decides to try for a third, but I'm hoping this will get my point across without the need for another reminder.

I drag my tongue through her sweetness again, and I can't swallow the groan that tears from somewhere deep in my chest. I'm never going to fucking recover from her. That much I'm certain of.

Ember may think I'm going to destroy her, but she's already ruined me.

I smirk against her core as she clutches the pillows like her life depends on it. There's something about dragging her into the darkness of my tastes that has my body settled for the first time in what feels like forever.

I'm a kinky motherfucker, but I've rarely had the chance to explore the way I've wanted to. No one ever called to me the way my little flame does, and I'm more than happy to be the moth in this situation.

Ember can burn me all she likes, and I'll likely ask for more without hesitation.

"Orion," she moans.

“You need more, Little Flame?”

She nods, her hair rustling against the pillow and catching my eye.

There were times I never thought I’d share this bed with anyone. A man like me doesn’t deserve a happily ever after or whatever bullshit the fairy tales sprout. I don’t deserve love or anything good in my life. But I wanted it. And I was prepared to beg, borrow, and steal to make it happen.

Lucky for me, my perfect woman fell into my lap without any of the above, but I’ll have to do it all to keep her.

I slip two fingers into her core, reveling in how wet she is for me. Her muscles clamp down around me immediately, and I groan, lapping at her clit in time with the movements of my fingers. Just the thought of sinking into her tight cunt again has me grinding against the mattress like a teenaged boy during his first make-out session.

I have to be careful, or I’m going to wind up ruining my own orgasm. Wouldn’t that be some immediate karma being delivered?

“Fuck.” Ember’s sweet voice comes from above me, but I’m too lost in her as she babbles restlessly.

“You getting close, baby?”

“Yes. Fuck. It’s too much. Orion, please.”

If she thinks she’s getting an orgasm anytime soon, she is sorely mistaken.

Her pussy clenches around my fingers so tight I can barely move them, telling me she’s right where I want her. She stares down at me with hope, like she thinks her

sweet face can change my mind about her punishment.

I pull away and kiss down her thigh at the same time my fingers slip from her pussy, and she lets out a tortured sob.

“No,” she cries.

“You got a long way to go before you’re getting what you want, Little Flame.”

CHAPTER FIFTY

EMBER

Time stopped having meaning a while ago, right around the time Orion stole my fifth orgasm right out from under me.

I can’t stop my body from trembling, and I’ve given up trying, because every touch of his hands, every pass of his tongue, every flick of his deft fingers against my G-spot is more than I can handle.

“Orion, please,” I cry out a moment before he pulls back again, giving me a self-satisfied smirk.

“Do you think you’ve learned your lesson, Ember?”

“Yes!” I nod against the pillows. “I won’t run again. I’ll stay. Just please let me come.”

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Tears fall against my cheeks, and even though I know he's manipulating me to get what he wants, I don't care. I'll tell him he can have my first-born child if it means he'll finally let me have the release my body is screaming for.

"See, I wish I could believe you, Ember. But I've believed you before, and you've turned around and done the exact opposite of what you promised." He nips at the inside of my thigh as his fingers drag over my G-spot over and over again until my entire body shakes with the effort it takes not to come. "I just want to know you're safe. And the safest place in the city, perhaps even the state, is within these walls."

I press my eyes closed and breathe through the wave of pleasure that slams into me. Jesus Christ. It's too much. It's all too fucking much. And yet I don't put a stop to it.

Even with how mad he is, I know Orion would stop if I asked him to. He'd pull me into his arms, hold me while I cried, just like he did that night at the club, and I don't even think he'd hold it against me.

But the reality is, I don't want him to stop.

There's a part of me that fucking loves everything he's doing to my body, and maybe that makes me fucked up, but I don't care.

All I care about right now is following every command Orion gives me.

"I'm sorry," I whimper. "I'm sorry I tried to run. I'm sorry I wouldn't tell you where I was. I'm sorry I worried you."

He looks up at me through soft eyes, and my heart skips a beat. Strong, demanding Orion is a force to be reckoned with, and one I'll probably always fall over myself to obey. But soft, domineering Orion takes my breath away.

"You're forgiven, baby," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my clit, and my hips lift of their own volition. My body has long stopped listening to what I tell it to do. "You're doing so good for me. So fucking good. So fucking perfect."

The praise hits me right in the chest, and the tears I've been trying to get a hold of come in renewed waves. God, why does he have to always say the right thing?

"Please, can I come?" I sob.

He considers me for a moment, his dark eyes moving over my heaving chest and trembling body before he nods. "You may come, Ember."

And with that, I allow my body to relax, allow the walls I've built between me and my release to fall, and I hand my body over to Orion completely.

His fingers continue their slow assault, moving over the place inside me that will detonate me in a matter of seconds while he uses his other hand to massage my throbbing clit.

"Oh, fuck," I cry out, my release building to the point I can barely breathe, and then I'm falling. The cliff I stood on the edge of for all this time falls away.

But the moment I fall, it's all gone. Orion's fingers disappear from my pussy so quickly I'm beginning to wonder if he has super speed.

The orgasm that threatened to destroy me disappears as my muscles clench around nothing, desperate for some kind of stimulation.

But there's nothing, and the sob that tears from my throat is gut-wrenching even to my own ears.

Before I can even process what happened, or curse Orion out for stealing my release so ruthlessly, he's on me.

His lips devour mine with a ferocity I didn't think existed outside the animal kingdom. The kiss is all teeth and tongue, and I'm addicted to the way his body presses mine into the mattress.

"You're an asshole," I snap the second he gives me enough room to breathe.

"I told you that was part of your punishment, Little Flame. Not my fault you forgot." He shifts slightly, and I realize he's shoving his pants down around his knees. Before I can breathe, he's inside me in one brutal thrust.

The scream that tears from my throat is barely human, and a ragged sob escapes me as I try to differentiate pain from pleasure, but it's one and the same at this point. One cannot exist without the other.

Maybe this is the substitute for cutting that I didn't know I needed. Someone to take my pain into their own hands and make it so fucking addictive I'll never get enough.

"Holy fuck," I sob, burying my face in Orion's throat as I try to get my breathing under control. I may have had him inside me last night, but that doesn't make his thickness any less imposing as he grinds into me, hitting the perfect place with every single thrust.

"Your pussy is my favorite place in the fucking world, Little Flame," he groans. "Fuck, I would live and die inside you if I could."

“No dying,” I pant.

He chuckles. “Why? Are you getting attached?”

“I’m getting really fucking attached to your cock.”

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“Is that the only part of me you like?”

She shakes her head. “No. But so far, this is the only place you’ve let me have a real orgasm in private.”

Orion huffs out a laugh as he rolls his hips, the motion pressing his thickness right to my still-sensitive G-spot. I’m beginning to think I might have to clean up my act if his idea of punishment is ruined orgasms. The denial I can deal with. Hell, I’d go as far as to say I enjoy it. But I’m going to have nightmares about the way my poor pussy clenched around nothing, desperate for the pleasure that should have come right alongside the release.

“Maybe that’s a new rule,” he murmurs. “The only place you’re allowed to come is on my dick.”

“You wouldn’t.” I glare up at him.

He shifts his weight to one elbow before moving his hand to bracket my throat, pressing with just enough pressure that my pussy clenches around him. “I think you’ll find I absolutely would, and you’d fucking love it.”

His thrusts increase in speed, and the orgasm that was so harshly stolen from me begins to build again.

“Please don’t ruin it again,” I plead.

He stares down at me for long seconds, his hips rocking into mine in rough strokes. “I

won't, Little Flame. You can come whenever you're ready. I want to feel you milk my cock so I can fill you up with my cum."

"Fuck." My eyes slip shut at his filthy words.

"Eyes on me, Ember," Orion demands, and I'm following the command before I make the conscious decision to. My body is desperate for his approval, even as my mind tries to make sense of how natural everything feels with him. "Good girl." He dips his head and brushes his lips against mine in a kiss that feels entirely too intimate as he picks up his pace, slamming into me as he chases his own release.

My orgasm wraps around me slowly, much slower than I expected, considering how keyed up I am. But as it hits, my breath tears from my lungs, and I gasp. My vision blurs around me as pleasure so fucking strong it's like I'm drowning in it rolls through me.

I'm vaguely aware of Orion's groans as his hot cum fills me, but I'm too caught up in what feels like the never-ending release.

"Good girl," Orion murmurs against the shell of my ear. "Such a good girl."

The praise only seems to prolong my pleasure, even as his thrusts slow, until I'm nothing more than a puddle of boneless exhaustion.

"Jesus," I murmur, my eyes falling closed. I've never been able to fall asleep after an orgasm, always finding it gives me too much energy. But that wasn't an orgasm, at least not like any I've ever had before, and my body is taking matters into its own proverbial hands.

He chuckles and carefully rolls us until I'm settled on his chest with his softening cock inside me. Part of me wants to protest, to run to the bathroom just so I can have

a few moments to myself, but I'm not ready to be separated from him yet.

And that's when it occurs to me that I've allowed myself to rely on someone again. I've given my mind, body, and soul to Orion, which means he has the ability to break me.

I did the one thing I promised myself I wouldn't.

I fell in love, and that startling reality makes it hard to breathe.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

ORION

"This better be fucking good," I snap as I cross the lobby of my apartment building to where Killian is waiting.

Normally, he wouldn't hesitate to come up to the apartment, but he probably realizes that if he accidentally sees Ember naked, I'll end him, even if he is the best second in charge I could ever hope to have by my side.

"I know who trashed Ember's apartment," he says, nodding toward the street where his car is idling. "And I know where he is right now if you want to go take care of the problem."

It's five in the morning, but there are a few people milling around the street on their morning run or getting coffee before starting their day. Normally, I prefer to keep the killing to the dead of night, but perhaps I can make an exception this one time.

"Who?"

“Lucas.”

I stare at him for long seconds, and a lesser man would likely flinch as the rage overwhelms me. That fucking asshole. I knew he wanted her. He always did. And her fucking brother was going to make it happen too before I stopped any fucked-up deal before it could be made.

Travis was going to trade Ember for what remained on his debt to Lucas, and then he was going to high-tail it out of here before his sister could find out.

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That wasn't what got him killed, but it certainly didn't help his case.

He pissed off a lot of powerful people, myself included, and he paid the price for it.

"Where is he?" I growl.

"He's at the club. Closing time was about twenty minutes ago, so the place should be cleared out."

"How do you know it's him?"

"Because he wasn't very thorough with covering his tracks. I have security footage of him at the apartment building from across the street." He starts toward the car, and I'm on his heels. "The corner store's security system is a fucking joke. I got in with one password attempt."

"Please don't tell me it was 'password123.'" I half laugh, but the anger burning in my chest is too bright to find anything all that amusing right now.

"Close." Killian smirks.

"What about the van? Was that him too?"

"I think so. Although he wasn't with them. Without corroboration, this is pure speculation, but if I had to guess, I would say that the van was meant to grab Ember while Lucas trashed the apartment and make it look like someone abducted her. Someone who was romantically involved, perhaps. Someone whose DNA was

already all over the apartment.”

“Are you saying he was trying to implicate me?”

“Yep.”

We climb into the car, and Killian doesn’t hesitate to take off toward the club where I officially met my little flame.

“That little fucking asshole.”

“It all tracks to that being his intention. The insistence that Ember get payment from you for your time together. The amount you spent to see her. It’s all on record, and it would be easy for Lucas to put all the evidence together so the cops don’t bother looking into him.”

“Even though he was basically pimping her out.” I roll my eyes.

“He was absolutely doing that, but Ember’s continuous insistence that she wasn’t a prostitute actually may benefit him.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “I should have killed him months ago.”

“I’ve been telling you that ever since Travis died,” Killian points out. “He’s not going to give up until he has the identity of the Hunter, and that means you won’t be safe until he’s no longer breathing.”

I tap my fingers against my thigh. Even if I was pissed as hell when I had to drag my sorry ass away from a very naked Ember, I assumed I was going to have to leave the building. So I dressed in my usual dark suit and made sure my girl couldn’t escape if she decided she was going to try again.

I saw the moment right before she fell asleep that she realized she felt something deeper than just simple attraction to me, and I saw the terror that accompanied that realization.

Ember will try to run again, but I've made sure she won't get very far.

The rest of the drive is quiet as I seethe in silence.

Lucas has always been a pest, but he was a necessary evil. He had his uses, and I exploited them whenever I needed to.

But this is too coordinated, and I don't like it.

Sure, he has power. Not as much as me, and certainly not as much as a lot of the crime families in the state, but he has people that work for him, people that respect him, that think he deserves more power than he's been allowed to have.

But again, not enough to pull off what he did today. His guys wouldn't blindly grab a woman off the streets the way they tried to grab Ember today. That was a kidnapping attempt if I've ever seen one.

I shake my head as the fog of anger tries to blind me.

If there's one thing I've learned after all these years, it's that you shouldn't kill angry. I know that sounds counterproductive as hell, but trust me. The more anger you have raging through your body, the sloppier the kill will be, and the greater the chances of being caught rise.

I've made it through these many years under the radar. I have no intention of slipping up on someone like Lucas.

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Killian parks the car at the curb, and we get out without a word, each checking our weapons as we stroll toward the front door.

We could be stealthy about this, but that would mean dragging this out, and that's the last thing I want to do.

"Mask," Killian reminds me, and I tug it from my pocket and slip it over my face. As it is, I'm exposing myself by coming after him after his attacks on Ember, but I don't need to confirm any suspicions he might have by walking in without my alter ego firmly in place.

The front door is still unlocked, telling me that we got here in time, and he hasn't gone home for the night.

Killian goes in first, his back pressing to the wall as he slips down the hallway that leads into the main floor of the club.

I follow him, my own gun trained in front of me, frequently glancing over my shoulder as I move. Of course, this could be a trap. Hell, it probably is. But I'm past caring.

All I care about now is wiping any threat to my woman off the face of the earth.

We reach the hallway that leads to the asshole's office, and I take the lead, allowing Killian to have my six. We move as one, like we have for years, until we reach the office we're looking for.

I only hesitate for a moment before shoving the door open, my gun trained perfectly to where I know Lucas usually sits.

Except when the door swings open, the room is empty.

“Fuck,” I growl, taking a step forward to check his desk for any clues as to where he may be.

Instead, I find an envelope with the words “The Phantom” scrawled across the front in messy handwriting.

I flick a look to Killian as he checks the hallway to make sure no one is planning on sneaking up on us.

I empty the contents into the middle of the desk, and my stomach rolls as a single piece of paper falls to the solid wood.

You shouldn’t touch what doesn’t belong to you. Your little flame will burn for your mistakes.

The paper crumbles in my hands as they turn to fists.

I’m going to fucking kill him, even if that means exposing my identity to the world.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

EMBER

I was absolutely certain dick drunk was a myth.

Like, who would have thought sex, albeit good sex, could put someone into what

amounts to a coma? But that's exactly what happened to me.

The sun shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows drags me from my deep slumber, and although I try to sink back into the soft sheets and go back to sleep, my bladder screams at me to be relieved.

I stretch my arms above my head as a yawn overwhelms me. Jesus. How can I feel completely refreshed as well as exhausted all at once?

Something clanks nearby, and I slowly open my eyes, giving them a moment to adjust before looking for the offending sound, only to find a cuff around my wrist and a set of handcuffs attached to the headboard.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

"Orion," I yell. "Please do not tell me you handcuffed me to the fucking bed!"

Anger seethes through my body as I shove myself to the edge of the bed to assess the situation. There's a chain resting on the ground that I think will give me enough leeway to get to the bathroom. At least he was considerate enough not to make me pee all over his pillows, however tempting it may be.

Deciding I need to take care of business before I can deal with the predicament I've found myself in, I rush for the bathroom, ignoring the sound of the chain trailing after me.

This is going too far.

Way too fucking far.

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I promised I wouldn't run, so why is he bothering with this bullshit? Surely, he could just lock the elevator so I couldn't get away.

But maybe he knows me well enough to know I'd escape even that. It would have to have a failsafe in the event of an emergency, and it wouldn't be hard to set off some smoke detectors throughout the penthouse until the fire escape unlocks.

I sigh. Damn it. That would have been a fun escape plan to enact.

But alas, it's not an option while I'm chained up like a dog.

Asshole.

Once I've done my business and my bladder isn't so mad at me, I head back into the bedroom, testing the chain to see how far I can reach. If I can find something to pick the lock with, I could be out of this in just a few seconds.

There were no hairpins in the bathroom, but there's a closet on either side of the bed, and a fancy place like this probably has a dressing area in at least one.

The first one I tug open is filled with suits, but the chain stops me from getting anywhere near the end of the space where I can see Orion's cuff links sitting on top of a dresser.

Fuck.

Panic begins to etch itself into my chest, but I need to keep moving. I've never

claimed to be very good at spotting red flags, but chaining someone to your bed so they can't get away is so obvious even I can't miss it.

The doors to the other closet swing open, and I stop dead in my tracks as my eyes move over racks of women's clothing.

Panic bleeds into anger until something catches my eye.

A note pinned to the set of drawers by the door.

I snatch it up, my heart pounding in my chest as I read over the words.

Little Flame,

Just in case you find this closet before I can show it to you, these are all the things I've bought for you. If you need proof of that, I'm sure the fact that everything, including the shoes, is your size.

There are also some monogrammed pajamas in the bottom drawer below.

Don't doubt my devotion to you, Ember.

Yours, Orion.

Okay, I actually can't tell if this is more or less of a red flag than the chains.

Because there are hundreds of items in here, and that's not including the drawers and whatever is around the corner at the end of the shelves.

To buy this much stuff, he must have been shopping for me for weeks, if not months.

“He probably has an assistant who does that kind of thing for him,” I murmur the explanation to myself. That would make sense. Because I’ve only known him a few weeks, so it’s not reasonable to think he could have been buying me clothes for all that time.

Right?

Jesus. This is a lot to take in first thing in the morning. Especially without any caffeine.

I swallow heavily and back out of the closet, allowing the door to swing shut behind me. Maybe once I’ve been unchained I can investigate more, but right now I can only take one batshit crazy thing at a time.

I bite down on my lip, checking the room for any other notes before my eyes settle on my phone on the bedside table.

That’s something, I guess.

Snatching it up, I bring up his number and hit dial.

“Little Flame,” Orion answers on the second ring.

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“You chained me to the bed,” I growl.

“I did.”

“And you think that’s okay? You think that’s normal fucking behavior in a very new relationship?”

“Well, at least you’re admitting we’re in a relationship. That’s a good start.”

“That’s not an answer to my question,” I snap.

He sighs. “No. I don’t believe chaining someone up is normal behavior in a normal relationship. But that’s not what this is, and therefore treating it as such would be counterproductive.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that while normal relationships progress slowly over months, or even years, ours will be moving much faster than that.”

“Like hell it will,” I mutter. “Come unchain me now, Orion. I have work to do, and I can’t do it while attached to your bed like some kind of sex slave.”

“Now there’s an idea.” He chuckles.

A growl of frustration escapes my throat. “I’m not fucking joking, Orion. I will stab you in your sleep if you don’t come unchain me right this moment.”

“I doubt that, Ember. But even if I wanted to, I can’t. I’m not in the apartment right now and won’t be back for a few hours yet.”

My eyes widen. “What if there’s a fire? You just going to let me burn?”

“Never.” His answer is immediate, and I don’t miss the edge of emotion. “One of the guards would come right up and cut you free.”

“How much money do you have that you have guards that turn a blind eye to the fact that you have a woman chained up in your bed?”

“A lot. Now, there’s a brand-new laptop under your side of the bed for you, and your purse is in the top drawer. I’ve given your phone back to you, but if I get wind of you calling someone to come rescue you from your tower, I will confiscate it all. Don’t test me, Ember.”

I open my mouth to respond, but snap it shut again when I realize he’s rendered me speechless. Where the fuck does he get off with this bullshit?

“You can’t keep me chained up forever, Orion. That’s not fair to me, and it’s not how I want to live my life.” My words are softer now as I try to stamp down the panic edging into my vision.

“It’s not forever. Just until I know you’re not going to run off and get yourself hurt. Someone tried to kidnap you yesterday. I need to know you’re safe, and if that means keeping you locked up, that’s what I’m going to do. Even if you hate me for it.”

I sigh and press my eyes closed to ward off the tears that threaten to fall. In a weird way, what he’s doing is kind of sweet. And I know that makes me sound as insane as he is. But to have someone care about me so much they’re willing to lock me away to keep me safe? I don’t know, it’s not as terrifying an idea as it seemed a few minutes

ago.

“I need to shower, and the chain doesn’t reach.”

“I’ll shower with you when I get back.”

“I’m hungry and thirsty.” I’m grasping at straws here, but I refuse to concede until I’ve been through every available option, even as my anger eases.

“There’s a bottle of water on the bedside table as well as a couple of granola bars. We’ll have lunch together when I get home.”

I run my hand over my face, trying to think of any other argument I can make, but there aren’t any. He’s got me exactly where he wants me, and I’m powerless to do anything other than remain exactly where I am.

“Fine. But I’m really fucking mad at you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” He chuckles. “I have to go. Be good, and I’ll see you soon.”

The call ends, and I throw the phone down on the comforter.

It figures that the first man I ever have feelings for is a low-key sociopath. It seems there is a reason I spent so many years avoiding relationships like the plague.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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ORION

“You chained her to your bed?” Killian growls.

I smirk at his anger. Seems the big bad second in charge is capable of caring for someone. “She’s a flight risk.” I shrug.

“That’s fucked, man. Like, really fucked up.”

I don’t disagree with him because he’s right. Ember makes me lose my fucking mind, and this is just the most recent example of that.

“Let’s get this over with so I can get home and unchain her.”

He shakes his head but shoves his car door open without telling me how fucked up I am again.

I slip my mask into place before following his lead. As much as I want to take a step back from my usual work for a few days to be with Ember, to get her settled, and make sure she’s safe and happy, it hasn’t worked out that way.

I prowl into the warehouse the drugs have been disappearing from. It’s the first day we’ve been able to get all our workers who have access to this place here at the same time, and we will be getting to the bottom of who thinks they can steal from me.

We have our suspicions about who it could be, but I won’t jump the gun until we’re absolutely certain. Keeping our people loyal has always been a priority, and going

into this meeting half-cocked will only push people to doubt us and our abilities, and they'll be more likely to turn on us.

I still can't get that note Lucas wrote out of my head. I have no doubt that he knows Orion Henderson and the Hunter are one and the same, but while Killian works on tracking him down, we have to continue with business as usual.

He leads the way into the warehouse, where we find our workers waiting for us. This was posed as a mandatory staff meeting, because yes, even criminal enterprises need one of those from time to time. We intentionally arrived late, giving me a chance to watch them through the cameras to see if anyone started getting antsy.

They're all sitting on foldout chairs in the corner of the warehouse. The no phones rule means there's nothing to distract them while they wait for us and has left a few people looking even more suspicious.

I nod to Killian, telling him without words to remain behind the group, giving him the vantage point he'll need if they're stupid enough to run.

"Someone's been stealing from me," I say, my voice even and confident as I look around at the people in front of me. "Boxes of oxy have disappeared, and we need to get to the bottom of it today before anyone here can leave."

"How do you know it's one of us?" Joey asks. The guy has been with us for a year since he ran away from his abusive parents at just seventeen. He's not someone we believe is involved, but again, we can't rule anyone out until we're one hundred percent sure of who the culprit is.

"Because the people in this room are the only people who have access to this warehouse. We have cameras surrounding the place and have studied the footage to ensure it hasn't been doctored. Therefore, it has to be someone who regularly comes

here.”

“We believe it has likely been stolen in small batches, enough that anyone here could walk out the door without raising any suspicions from us or your fellow employees,” Killian says from the back, and I don’t miss the sob from one of the women in the back row, terror written all over her features. We’ve already ruled out Julia as being involved. She hasn’t been here anytime we’ve been able to tell the drugs have gone missing, and there have been no changes to her financial position, nor anyone in her immediate family.

“Now, we would like to get this sorted without anyone getting hurt, but for that to be possible, we need to ascertain if anyone here knows anything about any of their fellow employees stealing from us,” I say, crossing my arms across my chest.

“So you want us to snitch?” Graham snaps from right in front of me. The old man has been working for us for years, and he’s on our suspect list. Seems he’s taken a liking to poker despite being shit at it, giving him the motivation to steal from us.

“Yes.” I nod. “Anyone who provides us with any information that leads to the apprehension of the responsible party will receive a ten-thousand-dollar bonus for their help, as well as a paid two-week vacation.”

Everyone in this room is a criminal, even if they don’t want to admit it. Sure, there are people here who work for us out of desperation more than anything else, but that doesn’t make what they do for us any less illegal, and that means money talks.

Silence greets me, and I take a moment to cast my eyes over every single person in the room, assessing their body language and their ability to hold my gaze.

“We will be interviewing each of you separately to give you a chance to give information without your fellow employees everknowing. We understand there is a

sense of camaraderie here that we've always encouraged, but right now we need your help to remove this threat to our business, remembering that if this ship sinks, everyone here is out of work," Killian explains.

"Like a few kilos of oxy is going to make a difference," Graham grumbles. I'd put money on this motherfucker being involved.

"You're right," I agree. "But if we allow our own employees to steal from us, it's only a matter of time before our enemies think they can as well, and that's where things get bloody."

"Let's get this show on the road." Killian claps and starts toward his office in the back corner. "Graham, you're up first."

Killian and I settle on one side of his desk while Graham takes the chair across from us. The small room is barely big enough to hold the desk and a filing cabinet, let alone three men, which makes it the perfect place to hold these interviews.

No place to hide. No way to hide their tells. And an easy kill when the time comes because there's no place for them to run.

We stare at one another for long minutes, no one saying a word as we work to unnerve Graham. Beads of sweat gather along his hairline and trickle down the side of his face. In fairness, it is hot in here, but I doubt that's why he's sweating.

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He knows he's found out.

He knows we're onto him.

The question is, will he lie to us? Or will he accept his fate?

"Why don't you tell us what you know, Graham?" I say, folding my arms against the edge of the desk.

"I don't know anything," he answers too quickly.

I nod, considering him for a few seconds. "Okay. Tell me about your gambling debt and how you plan on paying it off."

His eyes widen for a split second before he leans back in his chair, as if he's unfazed by the situation he's found himself in. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Killian makes a sound in the back of his throat as he rustles through the stack of paper in front of him before sliding a few sheets across the desk. "That's funny, because these photos and bank statements tell a different story."

Something other than indifference slips into Graham's eyes as he looks down at the photos we have from inside the illegal casino he's been frequenting. He clearly forgets who he's dealing with if he didn't think we could get access to these cameras. Panic etches into his previously calm gaze, his breathing picking up slightly.

"I'm not so cliché to say we can do this the easy way or the hard way, but we can get

this all squared away quickly if you'll just come clean with us," I offer.

He drops his elbows to his knees and his face to his hands, his body trembling. He knows his time is up. The question is, will he go out gracefully? Or is he going to make this harder than it needs to be?

"He said I wouldn't get caught. He said he had it under control."

"Who said that, Graham?" I ask, looking over at Killian to see him just as confused as I am. We assumed this was just one person looking to make a few bucks. But if someone was paying him to take the drugs, there's no telling how deep this goes.

"Lucas Trainer."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

EMBER

When I say I've tried everything to get myself out of this cuff, I mean literally everything.

If I thought breaking my thumb would help, like in those spy movies, I'd have tried that as well, but Orion knew what he was doing when he secured this cuff around my wrist.

It really begs the question, how many women has he chained to his bed?

An unreasonable wave of jealousy hits me right in the chest, and I groan.

This stunt should have me more motivated to run for the hills the second he lets me go, but for some reason, his desperation to keep me safe, and to have me with him,

has my stomach doing somersaults.

God, my poor therapist is not ready for our next session. She's going to start asking for double the payment if I'm not careful.

I stare at the unopened box sitting on the bed in front of me.

When Orion said he bought me a new laptop, I kind of expected just your standard, run-of-the-mill laptop you can get from Walmart for a few hundred dollars.

That's not what's sitting in front of me.

No, the top of the range computer that costs thousands is still in its box while I try to wrangle with myself not to open it.

It's too much.

But I guess so are the rows of designer dresses in the closet a few feet away.

I sigh and brush my fingers over the smooth white box. I've dreamed of having a laptop like this for years. I'm not sure if it's because I was always the poor kid in clothes that were too small and never had anything that wasn't thrifted, or if it's because it's so fucking pretty, but either way, every single part of me wants to pull this baby out of the box and take it for a test drive.

After a few more minutes of staring, I can't take it anymore.

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“Fuck it,” I murmur to myself, unwrapping the box and pulling the laptop out.

It only takes a few minutes to get it set up, seeing as I have nothing to back up onto it, and then I’m staring at a blank screen, uncertain where I should start.

I haven’t bothered calling Lucas back. I’m already in trouble, and honestly, I can only handle one emergency at a time. Which is currently being chained to a billionaire’s bed.

When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound very dire.

I roll my eyes at my own thought and pull the flash drive out of my purse, quickly plugging it in. I may as well watch a few hours of security footage while I can’t go anywhere.

God, I’m so bored.

This alley may just be the only alley in Los Angeles that isn’t seeing at least a small-time drug deal, amugging, or an argument every hour. Anything would be better than the nothing I’ve been watching for the last fifty-seven minutes.

I’m almost ready to give up when a black Escalade pulls into the mouth of the alley.

No one gets out for a few minutes, and I fast forward to see how long it takes for someone to emerge.

My breath catches in my throat when the passenger side door swings open, and the

Hunter steps out, his mask in place as he strides toward the camera with confident steps. His suit is impeccably tailored, which surprises me. I don't know why, but I assumed he would wear cargo pants or something, but I guess a suit makes sense.

The other door on the Escalade opens, and my throat closes, panic slamming into me as I stare at the driver.

The driver I know. The one I've met more than once.

Killian follows the Hunter, his own suit clinging to his body like it was made for him.

Questions slam into me so quickly, I can't make sense of them before the next one is on the tip of my tongue. Has the key to unlocking this mystery really been guarding the man I've been dating?

Does Orion have a connection to the Hunter, or does Killian work for them both?

He's not here all the time, as far as I can tell, and I'm pretty sure Orion spends a decent amount of time in his office, so I guess he would have no use for security during those times.

The elevator dings in the living room, and I slam the lid to the laptop closed. I'll have to wait for Orion to leave again before I can watch the rest, but the Hunter's mask plays on a loop in my head as I stash the laptop under the bed where I found it.

The man who killed my brother is close. I just have to keep going, and finally I'll be able to put his ghost to rest, so long as Lucas lets me be the one to end him.

"Hey," Orion says from the doorway, his eyes trailing over me with concern etched in his brow. "You okay?"

“You mean other than being chained to a bed?” I snap. “I’m fine.”

I adjust the sheet I’ve wrapped around my body, seeing as I couldn’t get anything else on with the chain attached to my wrist.

“You’re white as a ghost,” he murmurs as he crosses the room and drops into a crouch beside the bed. He takes my chin between his fingers and tilts my head to face him. “Tell me what’s going on, Little Flame.”

“It’s nothing. It’s just been a rough couple of days, and I’m shaken.” I lift my wrist with the cuff attached. “And this really hasn’t helped.”

He brushes his thumb over the apple of my cheek before reaching into his pocket, producing a small key. He makes quick work of unlocking me, and the moment the cuff is free from my wrist, he massages the skin with such care I can hardly believe it’s the same man the media often calls cold and callous. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I didn’t mean to scare you, but I needed to make sure you were safe while I was otherwise occupied. I couldn’t handle the thought that someone could get to you while I wasn’t here to protect you.”

My heart does another little flip it shouldn’t be doing for the man who has kept us locked in his bedroom all day, but I can’t help it.

I’ve refused to let anyone take care of me for such a long time, and it’s kind of nice for someone to do just that, even if it is against my will.

“Maybe we can find another way for you to be assured I’m safe without you keeping me chained to the bed?”

He chuckles. “We can do that.”

My stomach chooses then to give an almighty growl, which only seems to amuse Orion more.

“Put some clothes on and come out to the kitchen. I got us some lunch on my way home.”

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Before I can respond, he pushes himself to his feet and strides out of the room, leaving me with my confusing emotions when it comes to this man.

God, life was so much simpler before I started breaking my own rules.

But you were also getting far fewer orgasms.

When my stomach grumbles again, I move into the closet and open one of the drawers, finding the pajamas he referenced in his note.

The soft black satin is simple but elegant, like rich people in reality television wear with their faces full of makeup, and I can't help but brush my fingers over my name embroidered into the breast pocket.

Before I can allow my mind to overload with more questions to add to all the ones I have about Orion's security, I drop the sheet and quickly change into the comfortable set.

It's best Orion finds out now that I'll always reach for the comfortable option over anything anyone would consider sexy.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

ORION

I busy myself in the kitchen scooping the three different pastas I picked up onto the plate.

I didn't know what Ember would want, so I got my favorites and hoped for the best, along with a serving of garlic bread, because frankly, anyone who doesn't like garlic bread is weird as hell.

It's only a few minutes before she emerges wearing the monogrammed pajamas I picked up yesterday before everything went to hell.

I knew it wouldn't be long before I moved Ember into my apartment, and I needed to make sure she didn't think the clothes in that closet belonged to anyone apart from her.

She shuffles across the tiled floor and peeks at the food I picked up. "That smells incredible," she groans.

I press my eyes closed for a moment as my cock kicks up. Jesus, I hope one day my body isn't so attuned to every sound Ember makes, or it's going to be a very awkward existence for the rest of our lives. Getting hard every time she makes a sound that she could make during sex will definitely make things uncomfortable when we're in public.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I got a selection," I explain, pushing the bowl across the kitchen island until she can reach it.

Her eyes move over the choices until her body shimmies from side to side before she settles on one of the stools. Was that a happy dance? I didn't know people actually did those.

Her gaze darts up to mine, and her brow dips with concern. "What?"

"The little dance. It's cute."

A soft blush touches her cheeks as she looks back down at her food. “I really like pasta,” she explains, her voice soft. “When I was little, we didn’t have much food, and so now that I’m an adult, I have an appreciation for every meal I eat.”

I reach across the smooth marble and take her hand, prompting her to look up at me. “I wasn’t judging you, Little Flame. I like it. I love that you get joy out of something I’ve provided you with, and I never want you to be embarrassed about that. I think you’ll find I think everything you do really fucking cute.”

Ember shakes her head, but a soft smile spreads across her face as she stabs a piece of pasta with her fork and brings it to her mouth.

I watch with rapt attention, reveling in the way her head tips back slightly and her eyes fall closed as the flavors wash over her.

“Holy fuck, this is incredible,” Ember moans.

I adjust my hardening cock and will it to settle down. As much as I would like to bend her over the kitchen counter and fuck her, it’s probably a good idea that I don’t feed into her idea that I’m treating her like a sex slave.

To distract myself, I take a bite of my own food. It’s my favorite too, and not only because I own the place. No, it’s because I can relate to Ember’s enjoyment of food. The couple who used to own the place would feed me sometimes when I was on the streets. That’s why when they were ready to retire, I gave them well over the asking price.

They deserved to be repaid for all the times they helped a dirty kid on the streets.

Last time I checked, they were living in Florida, close to their army of grandchildren.

“How was work?” Ember asks between mouthfuls of garlic bread.

“It was fine,” I reply vaguely. “Just a couple of problem employees that needed to be dealt with.”

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She nods her understanding as she takes another bite. There's something on her mind. That much has been obvious when I came home and found her looking guilty as hell. But I'll let her come to me when she's ready to talk about it.

I've already been pushy. It will only make her more likely to run if I keep it up.

"Is Killian your full-time security?" she asks, trying her best to appear conversational, but I see right through it.

She's digging.

"No," I reply. "He has a few other clients that he works with, although he does spend the bulk of his time with me."

She bobs her head in understanding as she scoops another bite of pasta into her mouth. God, has it always been erotic watching a woman eat? Or is it just this woman?

"Do you know much about his other clients?"

I busy myself with my own food, giving me a chance to think through my answer. I'll need to warn Killian that she might ask him some questions the next time he's here, but until then, I can skate around the truth without outwardly lying to her. It won't be long before Ember knows exactly who I am, and I don't want to throw fuel onto the fire by adding to the lies the foundation of our relationship is built on.

"He's bound by NDAs," I explain. "Sometimes I get a funny anecdote out of him

about one of his other jobs, but he doesn't really give names."

There. That wasn't an outright lie. Well, it was. But it was one I can live with.

Ember nods, but I don't miss the way she frowns down at her food.

What has my little flame uncovered?

And how close is she to finding out I'm the man that killed her brother?

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

EMBER

I escape the kitchen as soon as I can, telling Orion I need a shower and locking the door behind me.

I'm under no illusions that he can't get into the bathroom if he wants to, but I'm hoping the unspoken request for privacy is enough that he leaves me be for a while.

I turn the shower on as hot as my hand can handle and make quick work of stripping out of my clothes. I'm so ready for this shower because I'm fucking gross.

The mixture of mine and Orion's cum is still dried on the insides of my thighs because I was too tired last night to do a thorough job of cleaning up, and in the time since my last shower someone has attempted to kidnap me and someone else has trashed my apartment.

Yeah, it's been a really fucking long twenty-four hours.

The moment I step into the steaming hot water, I tip my head back and allow it to

soak through my hair. The best part of having shoulder-length hair is that it's easy to dry and style, which means I've never had to stick to a strict hair wash schedule.

I scrub my body and hair twice to rid myself of the lingering feeling of filth on my skin before leaning against the wall to give myself time to breathe.

A few weeks ago, I was a thief with PTSD and a mountain of debt to a man that was more than happy to exploit me for every dollar I'm worth.

And now I'm...I don't even know what I am.

I'm overwhelmed for sure. I'm exhausted and scared.

But I'm also pretty sure I'm falling in love with Orion, and the thought of that is fucking terrifying.

I've never loved anyone aside from my brother. I've never even had close friends that I could say I loved. The feeling is foreign and terrifying. But it's also warm and all-consuming. Orion makes me feel safe even when I'm not. Even as my entire world falls apart, it doesn't feel so bad because I have him holding my hand.

"Fuck," I whisper into the streaming water. This could go one of two ways, and I hate to think how broken I'll be if he decides this is all too much for him.

Which he won't, right?

I mean, he has a closet full of clothes he's purchased for me. He's been seemingly all in from the start, even when I was hesitant to continue things between us.

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I guess only time will tell if I'll finally get a happily ever after or if my life is about to hit an all new low.

Living with Orion is surprisingly easy.

He cooks, cleans up after himself, and I haven't walked into a bathroom to find the seat up once in the week I've been here.

Not that I've admitted that I live here to him.

He's adamant that I'm staying, so much so that he still has all kinds of crazy security measures to make sure I can't leave without his knowledge, but I understand it more and more each day.

I need to deal with Lucas, but right now I'm just giving him daily updates on my search for the Hunter, which include much more theory than fact.

Because honestly, I'm enjoying just being for the first time in my life.

I don't have to hustle. I don't have to put in crazy hours on recon for a job. I can just binge-watch stupid television shows and spend time with the man that I get more and more confident I'm in love with, with each day that passes.

Truthfully, Orion makes it really fucking easy to love him, and I can't remember a time I was this happy.

I nibble at my bottom lip as I look over the dresses hanging in the closet. I'm still

overwhelmed every time I step foot in here, but it also always has butterflies fluttering in my stomach at the thought that Orion bought these things for me.

“What are you up to, Little Flame?” he asks from the doorway, his eyes tracking over my almost naked body. So far, I’ve only managed to settle on a lacy black thong.

“I need to meet with Lucas, and then I have an appointment I need to go to,” I tell him, forcing myself back to the task at hand. Maybe I should wear jeans instead. After avoiding him for over a week, I’m probably better off in something like that.

I step further into the deep closet and pull open the drawer I’m pretty sure the jeans live in. Where I’ve always only had a pair, maybe two, of worn, usually thrifted jeans, I now have seven pairs. Yep, I counted them because I couldn’t quite believe my eyes.

“No,” he rumbles.

“Excuse me?” I raise a brow at him. His frown and the concern swirling in his eyes has been enough to stop me from leaving every other time I’ve floated the idea, but I can’t put it off forever. I have to show my face, or Lucas is going to demand I pay up the remaining balance on the loan, and I can’t afford that right now. Hell, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to.

“I said no, Ember.” He prowls toward me like a lion stalking his prey, and I realize too late that I’m exactly that.

“Orion,” I warn, but in my next breath, his body presses mine against the drawers, effectively trapping me.

“It’s not safe for you to be out on your own, Little Flame.” The worry in his voice strikes me in the chest, and I soften slightly. As controlling and manipulative as he’s

been, I can tell it's only because he's scared for me. I don't think it will always be like this, but I also can't allow it to set a precedent for the future. If this relationship is going to work, I need for him to let me make decisions for myself.

I sigh. "I can't stay locked up in this apartment forever, Orion. I need to live my life. I've spent so long living in fear, and I don't want to do that anymore. I want to get back to being who I was before the accident." The words hurt, but that doesn't make them any less true. I'm not so naïve as to think that I'll ever be the person I was before I lost my brother. She died right alongside him. But I can try to get pieces of her back.

He looks like he wants to argue, and I'm sure he does. He doesn't know how to relinquish control any more than I know how to allow others to help me. It's ingrained in our very beings. But I need this.

"I don't like the idea."

"I know."

"But you're going to go regardless, aren't you?"

I nod. "Yeah, I am."

Realistically, I need him to okay this because he still has a code on the elevator, and I don't feel like setting the penthouse on fire in order to get out on my own, but I also want him to recognize that this is my decision to make.

"Okay, you can go. But I'm coming with you."

"No." I shake my head. "You can't come with me every time I step foot out of this apartment. That's not practical, and you have better things to do than follow me

around all day, every day.”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do than follow you around, Ember.”

“That’s just because you want to look at my ass.” I smirk.

“You’re damn right.” He chuckles, but the amusement falls away a moment later.

“Fine, but I want to know where you are at all times. I want updates every ten minutes so I know you’re safe, and I want you to allow Killian to go with you.”

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Just his name makes my chest go tight, but I force my face to remain neutral. I've watched the security footage twice through, and although it's clear that he works for the Hunter, I couldn't see who they were meeting with because they were out of frame.

But he is my key to finding out more about his other boss, so maybe a day with him wouldn't be so bad.

"Okay," I whisper. "But maybe we could stretch the check-ins a little. I don't know how my therapist is going to feel about that."

He sighs, reaching out to brush a stray hair from my cheek. "Fine. Ten minutes while you're with Lucas, but for your appointment, I'll stretch it to twenty minutes."

"Thank you." I smile up at him. It may not seem like a big deal to some, but the fact that a man like Orion is willing to make concessions and compromise with me makes all the red flags in our relationship lose some of their color.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

ORION

The way Ember stares up at me like I hung the moon has my chest tightening.

I never thought I was capable of love. Obsession, sure. Infatuation, absolutely. But love? How can a man with a heart as cold as mine fall in love?

Before I can stop myself, I press my lips to hers, reveling in her sweetness as it explodes on my tongue. Working from home has its perks, but fucking my girl over every available surface in the middle of the day is better than any of the others.

“I don’t have time,” she murmurs against my lips.

“We’ll be quick.” I lift her off her feet, and she immediately wraps her legs around my waist. She can protest all she likes, but it’s obvious she wants this as badly as I do.

“I’m sore from this morning.”

I smirk. I’m sure she is. I fucked her with the dildo I bought to replace the one we played with the first night we spent together while I fingered her perfect ass for close to an hour, and then I fucked her into the mattress so hard the scratches on my back are still prominent hours later.

But I can’t get enough of her, and the feeling seems to be mutual.

“The only way you’re stepping foot out of this building is full of my cum.”

A soft gasp escapes her full lips a moment before I crash mine down on them. God, she tastes so fucking good she barely seems real.

I reach between us and slip my fingers into the waistband of her panties, making quick work of tearing them from her body.

“Orion,” she snaps. “You have to stop ruining my underwear.”

“Why? I’ll just buy you more. Or better yet, you could just stop wearing them.”

Her lips part in surprise at my words a moment before I press my fingers to her entrance, finding her wet and needy for me. “Oh, Little Flame. You have no idea what it does to me every time I find this pretty little pussy wet for me. Always ready to take my cock like a good girl.”

She moans as she slips her hands between us and works my sweatpants down until she wraps her hand around my achingly hard cock. “I could say the same about you. Always hard for me.”

“You have no idea, Ember. I’m always fucking desperate for you. Have been since the first time I saw you.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond, instead lifting her slightly until my cock presses to her entrance, and I slowly lower her.

We let out a mutual groan, our lips so close to one another that they brush with every thrust of my hips.

“It’s your lucky day, Little Flame. I’m feeling generous, so you don’t have to wait for my permission to come.”

Her eyes flare with heat as she wraps her arms around my neck and crashes her lips down to mine, devouring me the same way I do her.

This isn’t like all the other times we’ve fucked. There’s nothing teasing about the way I slam my hips into hers over and over again, driving us both to the edge of oblivion while pouring everything into our kiss.

I want to tell her how I feel so desperately, but there’s a chance it will have her running for the hills, and that’s not something I’m willing to risk.

Until I'm sure of how her feelings for me are progressing, I'll keep the word that I'm more and more certain of to myself.

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“Your cunt is squeezing me so tight, Little Flame.” I pant against her lips. “You gonna come for me? Are you going to milk my cock so your greedy pussy can spend the day full of my cum?”

“Fuck, Orion,” she moans, her eyes sliding closed as she clenches around me. One thing I’ve learned about my girl is she fucking loves dirty talk. And I am more than happy to oblige her. “I’m so close.”

“I know, baby. Let go for me. Give it to me.” I pick up my pace, slamming into her so hard the dresser at her back hits the wall with every thrust, but I don’t give a fuck. The whole apartment could implode, and it wouldn’t stop me from fucking my woman.

Ember clenches around me so tight I can barely keep thrusting as her orgasm rolls through her, and I’m right behind her. My cock pulses inside her with one final thrust, burying myself to the hilt to ensure my cum is as deep as I can get it.

I don’t know where this obsession with filling her with me came from, because before Ember came along, I’d never fucked anyone without a condom. But there’s something about knowing she’s full of my cum that has my baser instincts going wild.

Fuck, if I thought I could knock her up while she’s on her birth control, I think I’d be fucking her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner to make that happen, and I’ve never even wanted kids.

I’ve never even thought about them.

Probably not what you'd expect to hear from the leader of a criminal enterprise. Every Mafia boss I know is obsessed with giving their kingdom an heir.

But now that I have Ember, the thought of a little girl with her eyes definitely has some appeal.

"Holy fuck," she mumbles against my shoulder.

"Mmhmm." I press a kiss to her neck as I try to will myself to pull out of her warm heat.

"I need to go."

"Or you could stay here. I could prop you up on my desk and spend the day eating you out between meetings?"

"As tempting as that may be, I'm already running late."

I sigh. "Fine. But don't forget the rules. If you break them, if you give Killian the slip, if you don't follow all his orders, you will find yourself chained to the bed again. Understand?"

She nibbles at her bottom lip, but nods.

I barely bite back the smirk that tries to tug at my lips.

I don't think my little flame hated being chained up half as much as she thinks she did.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

EMBER

I was hoping to talk to Killian on the way over to the club, but he spent the whole time on a phone call, walking behind me, which meant when I stepped into Lucas's office, I didn't have much to tell him.

Actually, I had nothing.

Less than nothing when you consider all I had was on my laptop, which was stolen.

I'm so fucked.

Killian stops by the door, gives the room a once-over, and must decide it's safe before he turns his back to lean against the wall beside the door.

I steel my shoulders and take a seat across from Lucas, barely containing the eye roll when I notice the blonde kneeling at his feet.

God, he's a piece of shit.

I just really hope she's down there because she wants to be and not because he's forcing her.

"I'm disappointed with you, Ember," Lucas starts, his cold, calculating gaze locked on me as he leans forward, pressing his elbows to the desk in front of him.

If it weren't for the fact that it's me sitting in this seat right now, I'd probably find the scene amusing because my boss seems to think he's some kind of mob boss, when in reality, he runs a strip club and has a few thieves on his payroll that he hires out to people.

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Not exactly the same as having a drug or arms empire.

I guess this is what they're talking about when they talk about small man's syndrome.

"I'm sorry I haven't been around this last week," I say. "It's taken some time to get things sorted after my apartment was trashed, and I've had to restart my search for the Hunter because my laptop was stolen."

None of this is new information to him. In fact, I've told him this same thing every day this week because he constantly expects me to have something new.

"You know what I think, Ember? I think you've got a new boyfriend, so you've been slacking off."

"That's not it. It's just like I said."

"It's been weeks since I gave you that file, and you've got nothing?"

I glare across the desk. "Every other person you've given this assignment to has had months and has come up with nothing. I don't think it's surprising that after weeks—and losing all my progress—I don't have anything concrete. I have a few leads that I'm chasing up, but unlike all the incompetent idiots you've had doing this search in the past, I'm not going to go off half-cocked with information that, not only is not true, but could get me killed."

"Your brother was one of those idiots."

The reminder only makes me pause for a second before I shake it off. “He was an idiot. He was too cocky, and that’s what got him killed. I don’t intend to follow in his footsteps, which means I need time, and I need you to stop blowing up my phone every day asking for updates. When I have one, I’ll let you know, but in the meantime, just let me be.”

He shoots to his feet so quickly I can’t help but flinch, but I hold his eye, never letting him see my fear. Because the reality is, I am scared. I’m scared of Lucas. I’m scared of whoever tried to have me kidnapped. I’m scared of whoever trashed my apartment. I’m just fucking scared, and I’m sick of it. “You do not speak to me that way,” he growls, and not for the first time, I’m glad there’s a desk between us. When he gets like this, he gets violent, and somehow, I don’t think I’d be able to explain away a black eye to Orion when I get home. “I am your boss. I am your fucking owner until you pay off your debt.” The malice in his words makes me swallow around the whimper that tries to escape.

I’ve always known Lucas isn’t completely sane, but until recently, I’ve felt like I could handle myself with him. Suddenly, that doesn’t seem as true as it has in the past.

I press my lips together to stop myself from arguing with him. It’s not going to get me anywhere, not while he’s this amped up.

“If you can’t pay off your debt in a timely manner, I’ll start using your body to speed up the process.”

“You can’t do that,” I whisper.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want, Ember. And you’ll do well to remember that.”

He nods to one of the men standing by the door, and before I can think to push myself

out of my chair, they're on me.

The first punch comes so quickly that I don't even have a chance to take a breath before the pain radiates through my skull.

Agony hits me in the stomach next, my entire body keeling over to protect itself, but that just leaves my ribs vulnerable.

Hit after hit leaves me gasping for air, and I don't bother trying to stop the tears from falling. What would be the point when this is the most pain I've felt since the accident?

"Stop," I beg, but I'm not even sure they hear me as the chair I was sitting in is tipped on its side, sending me tumbling to the hard floor. Usually, I would be disgusted at the idea of being on the ground in a place like this, but right now I'm just focusing on not passing out from the pain.

If I pass out, they could do anything to me, and just the thought has a wave of panic slicing through my chest.

A kick to my already excruciating ribs steals a yelp from my throat, and another round of pleas falls before I can swallow them.

A slamming door in the distance vaguely processes through my foggy mind, but I can't bring myself to think anything of it.

At least not until a familiar voice cuts through the pain.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Killian barks.

"This is none of your business," Lucas snaps.

“Oh, I think it is very much my business. Do you think it’s wise making an enemy of a man like Orion?”

It’s only now I realize the hits have stopped coming, but I don’t move, too afraid of causing myself more pain.

“This has nothing to do with him. This is between me and Ember.”

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“Not anymore.”

Strong arms carefully wrap around my body and lift me from the ground. The pain radiates through my chest, my back, my stomach, my head. Every muscle in my body feels like it’s been torn straight from the bone, and I can barely stop the cry from slipping from my lips.

“If you need to communicate with Ember, you will do it through Orion. And if I catch you anywhere near her from now on, I’ll fucking kill you myself.”

And with that, we’re walking.

Each step Killian takes is like knives stabbing me over and over again, but I ignore the pain. Or at least I try to.

The warm sun hits me the moment we step outside, but Killian doesn’t pause. He just keeps walking until we’re at least a block from the club.

I can’t be sure, of course, because I still haven’t managed to force my eyes to open, but I’ve done this walk a million times. I know approximately how many steps it is.

“Ember?” Killian’s voice is soft, void of the anger from moments ago. “Can I take you to a hospital?”

“No,” I choke out. “No hospitals.”

He curses but doesn’t bother arguing with me as he shifts my weight slightly.

I hiss as agony slices through me, and he flinches.

“I’m sorry, Ember. Fuck, I’m so sorry. I need to call Orion so he can get his personal doctor to the penthouse ASAP.”

“I don’t need a doctor. I’m fine.” But even to my own ears, the argument is weak.

“Somehow, I don’t think Orion is going to see it that way.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

ORION

I pace back and forth across my office, stopping to check my phone with each lap.

It’s been half an hour since Ember’s last update. She promised to check in every ten minutes while she was with Lucas, and it’s been three times as long.

To say I was hesitant to let her meet with him is an understatement. He’s been holed up somewhere for the last week, hiding like the weasel he is, and this is the first time we’ve had a credible lead on his location.

The plan is to let Ember meet with him at the club, and then as soon as she’s safely at her therapist’s office, he’ll meet his end with a bullet to the skull. Not nearly enough suffering considering all the pain he’s caused my girl, but to no longer have him as a threat is worth the quick death.

Her tracker is still locked on the club, which is the only ounce of comfort I have to cling to.

Maybe they confiscated her phone for the meeting, I reason with myself, but it does

nothing to calm my worry.

I hover my thumb over Killian's name, but he'll get pissed if I call. It's not that I don't trust him with Ember's life, because I do. But there's no one I trust with her more than myself.

As if I've conjured the devil himself, my phone starts vibrating with his name across the screen.

"Killian." I force my voice to remain even, but to my own ears it sounds strained.

"We have a problem." He starts.

"What happened? Is Ember okay?" I rush out.

"Shut up for a minute so I can tell you," he snaps. "Ember is hurt. I'm on my way back to the penthouse now. You need to get the doctor there as soon as possible." His voice is too calm, too even, and it's unnerving me.

A soft whimper comes down the line, and I tighten my hold on my phone so much I swear I hear it crack under the pressure.

"Killian." I force out through gritted teeth.

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“You need to calm down before we get there, Orion. She does not need to see you angry right now. Get the doctor, and I’ll have her to you as soon as I can.”

He ends the call, and I throw the phone against the wall so hard the entire thing shatters.

Well, fuck.

I reach into my desk and pull out a burner I use for some of my Hunter business, quickly dialing the doctor’s number.

He’s not really a doctor, at least not as far as the board is concerned, but he’s the only person I trust to patch me up when I’ve been injured, and it seems I’m going to have to extend that trust to treating the most important thing in my life.

The five minutes Killian promised seems like a lifetime, but I make good use of the time.

Parker is on his way, promising to get across town as quickly as he can.

Without knowing what injuries Ember has, I couldn’t do much in the way of preparing the apartment, but I did lay out some towels and blankets in the living room as well as the bedroom.

Fuck.

I haven’t felt powerless in years.

So many years I forgot what it felt like to have the world falling down around you and no way of stopping it.

Each breath is a mixture of pure rage and fear, and the two emotions warring in my chest only seem to make the time go slower.

The elevator dings, and my feet are carrying me closer before I can stop myself. But the sight before me does just that.

I stop in my tracks, my chest constricting as the doors slide open and Killian holds Ember against his chest. She's covered in blood and bruises, her face turned into his chest as she lets out small whimpers of agony.

"What the fuck happened?" I try to keep my voice soft. Really, I do. But it comes out harsh and abrupt, causing Ember to jolt in Killian's arms.

He hits me with a glare before walking straight past me toward the couch. "I'm going to put you down on here so we can have a look at where you're hurt. Okay?"

I don't think I've ever heard Killian sound so caring in all the years I've known him, but I can't allow myself to think too much about that right now.

I have to make sure Ember is okay.

She gives a slight nod, and I wince as more of her bruised body is revealed.

Almost every inch of her is black and blue. Her face is covered in swelling and bruising, and I barely manage to contain the rumble of anger that tries to set itself free.

I'm going to fucking kill them all, and I'm going to do it slowly.

They're going to feel every ounce of pain Ember has tenfold, and I'm going to enjoy every second.

I drop into a crouch beside the couch, brushing my fingers over Ember's bruised cheek. "Tell me what happened, Little Flame," I murmur, flicking a look at Killian.

"She went into the meeting with Lucas. He had another girl in the room, along with two of his guards. I thought she was safe, and there wasn't enough room for me as well, and when I did try to stay, they promptly insisted I didn't need to know what they were talking about," he explains. "But then I heard Ember cry out. The walls in that place are thick as fuck, so the second I heard it, I knew she was in pain. I got her out of there and told Lucas he can expect to be dealing with you from now on."

"Damn fucking right," I mutter. "Why did he do this, Ember?"

Tears fall against her bruised cheeks, and she hisses out a breath when they hit the cut at the corner of her mouth.

"He said I was slacking off on a job he gave me. He said I was his until I paid off my debt to him, and that if I didn't start working faster, then he would start selling my body." She chokes on her words, and my vision flashes with vibrant red.

Oh, this motherfucker is going to regret the day he was born for making a threat like that to my woman.

"What debt, baby?" I force my words to remain low and even despite the storm raging inside me.

She presses her eyes closed, and a violent tremble racks through her body.

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“Can’t this wait?” Killian snaps, causing her to jolt, and his eyes flash with regret. “I’m sorry, Ember. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “Travis got us involved with Lucas when I was sixteen. We were in a really bad position, living on the streets, sometimes going days without food. Travis couldn’t get any steady work, and the money I made washing dishes at a diner a couple of nights a week didn’t even come close to being enough to feed us, let alone put a roof over our head.” She winces as she shifts slightly. I ache to help her, but anything I do right now is only going to bring her more pain. “One night, we were sleeping in an abandoned building with a bunch of other transients, and these men came in, raiding everyone’s belongings. They were looking for someone, I guess, but then they caught sight of me. Travis tried to hide me, but it was too late. They tried to take me, saying I could get them a pretty penny on the black market.”

“Let me guess, it was the Lounders?” Killian asks dryly.

She nods slightly. “Yeah. They said if we could gather the money to pay what I was worth, they would leave me be. They gave us twenty-four hours to get half a million in cash together. An impossible task.”

“But Lucas stepped in and helped?”

“He and Travis knew each other. I don’t know how. I never bothered to ask. I was just so relieved when he agreed to help us. But the provision was that we would each take half the debt plus interest and work it off over time. We’d both gotten good at stealing, and I guess Lucas saw us, particularly me, as a potential asset. A pretty girl who could manipulate and steal from the most powerful men in the city.

“I did a lot of big-money jobs early on. Turns out there are a lot of politicians who prefer their women underage. I never let them touch me. That was my line, and up until recently, Lucas was happy to abide by it. But after Travis died, Lucas tacked his debt on top of mine, and I was basically back to square one. All those years I spent hustling, never truly living, were for nothing, and on top of that, I was left with no one.”

I press my eyes closed to contain my anger. Part of me wants to tell her what Lucas and Travis had planned for her, how they were planning to use her, to force her into all the things she swore she never wanted to do. But I don't. I can't bear to bring her more pain right now. Not when she looks so fragile.

“How much do you owe now, Ember?” I ask through clenched teeth, trying and failing to sound calm and collected.

“I'm not sure.” She sighs. “The numbers never really added up, but I didn't have a leg to stand on. It's not like the deal was legal or anything. But I think it's at least two hundred grand, probably more.”

I run my hand over my face at the same time the elevator doors slide open, and Parker steps out. The ex-military doctor doesn't hesitate to cross to us, his hand running through his dark salt and pepper hair as he looks over Ember's injuries on his approach before flicking rage-filled eyes up at me. “Who the fuck did this to her?”

“Obviously it wasn't me, you asshole,” I snap. “Her boss did it.” It's more information than I likely need to give him, but Parker has never taken it well when women or children are hurt. He was always our first call when we helped take down shipments the Lounders were making, and he would drop everything to help out. It probably doesn't hurt that I pay him a pretty penny to be on call for me anytime I need him.

“You gonna take care of that problem?” he asks as he drops his bag on the table.

“Well, he’s certainly not going to be allowed to breathe after putting hands on my woman.”

“Your woman?” he asks, his brows raised in surprise.

“You’re not here to question my relationship status,” I growl, and a smirk plays on his lips before he moves past me to Ember.

“I’m Parker. I was an army medic and should be able to get you patched up in no time.”

Ember watches him with wary eyes for a moment before she allows her body to relax slightly. “Thank you for coming. I’m sure it’s just a few cuts and bruises. Probably a waste of your time.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

CHAPTER SIXTY

EMBER

Everything hurts.

Like, literally everything. There isn’t a single part of my body that doesn’t hurt when I move it, my eyes included.

Parker left earlier, leaving me with some painkillers and an antibiotic for the cuts I’m covered in. He assured Orion that nothing is broken and that I will be fine in a week or so once I’ve had a chance to rest and heal.

Killian also headed out, telling us he'd be back in the morning but to call if we needed anything.

“Are you hungry, Little Flame?” Orion asks. He just carried me into the bedroom and put me to bed wearing nothing but a black T-shirt I'm pretty sure belongs to him. The heat I've become accustomed to was missing from his eyes as he helped me change, and his gaze never strayed for a moment.

He probably doesn't want you anymore now he knows how fucked up your life is.

I try to shake off the thought, but there's a part of me that's terrified it's the truth.

If I were a billionaire with hundreds of supermodels chasing after me, I don't think I'd choose me either. I bring nothing to this arrangement apart from baggage so heavy it would sink the Titanic.

“Ember?”

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I look up at him, my chest tightening at how worried he looks. He cares about me. Despite everything. Despite the fact that I don't belong in this world. Despite how broken I am. Orion cares about me. "No, I'm not hungry," I say softly.

He nods before climbing into the bed beside me, immediately wrapping his body around mine with such care that it brings tears to my eyes. "I'm sorry you were hurt today, Little Flame. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"You can't protect me from everything, Orion."

"I can, and I will. You are the light in my eternal darkness, Ember, and I will do anything I have to do to keep you where you belong. With me."

I sigh and allow my eyes to fall closed, reveling in his warmth on my sore body.

"Get some sleep. I'll be right here when you wake up."

And I do just that. The painkillers and exhaustion from the day drag me under, and I don't fight it. I'm safe in Orion's arms, where nothing can hurt me.

Three words I have no business saying linger on my lips as I fall into a deep sleep, but I manage to keep them to myself.

For now, at least.

Travis fidgets in the driver's seat.

He's been on edge for the last week. Looking over his shoulder. Checking the locks of our apartment over and over. Even going so far as to put me on lockdown.

But he won't tell me why. He won't tell me anything at all, for that matter.

"Travis, what's going on?" I ask, looking over my shoulder. There's a black Escalade behind us, but they don't seem to be doing anything to make me think they're following us.

"Nothing," he snaps back, checking the mirrors for what feels like the fiftieth time since we got in the car ten minutes ago.

"Don't lie to me. If you're in some kind of trouble, we can work it out. Together. Just like we always do," I plead, but I already know his answer. He's always been overprotective of me, but the last six months have been to the extreme. Constantly demanding to know where I am and who I'm with. But every time I've asked him about it, he's denied doing it at all.

"I don't need your help."

The admission burns the backs of my eyes as I try to blink back tears. He never used to be this short with me either, but more and more, his patience has waned, to the point he's actually scared me a few times.

I look out the passenger window and take in our surroundings. "Why are we in the hills?" I ask. I've been too distracted with his behavior that I haven't been paying any attention to where we're going.

"You'll see when we get there."

My throat closes over as panic settles in my chest. What the hell does that even

mean?

The speed ticks higher, and our old car starts to struggle as he pushes it too hard up the hill. If he's not careful, he's going to blow the engine, but he doesn't seem to notice as his eyes flick to the mirrors again.

Travis curses, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking what's going on again. I don't want to make him any angrier than he already is.

I look behind us again, still finding the SUV behind us, except it seems like there's less distance now.

Are they getting closer?

I'm about to turn back around when the black bumper of the other car pulls even closer, and a yelp escapes my throat as they ram into the back of our car.

"What the fuck, Travis? Tell me what the fuck is happening."

"Shut up," he yells, trying to right the wheel without us spinning out of control.

Another slam of metal on metal has a startled scream escaping my throat. What the fuck is going on? Why are they doing this?

"Motherfucker!" Travis struggles to keep control of the car as he pushes it to its limits, the engine revving loudly.

I catch sight of a sharp bend in front of us, and instinctively, I grip onto the door and my seat. "You need to slow down. The tires are too bald to make it around this corner at this speed."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am

“Shut the fuck up, Ember.” The malice in his voice startles me almost as much as the next slam of the SUV to the back of ours.

I press my eyes closed, willing the panic to settle so I can think clearly, but I don’t know what use that’s going to do. I’m just as powerless right now as I have been my whole life, depending on my brother to save me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” He slams his hands against the steering wheel, and the car drops speed a little, allowing me to pull in a full breath.

But then we’re flying.

The sound of our tires spinning out distracts me until my head slams against my window, making stars dance in my vision.

Our car soars over the edge of the road, and I can’t swallow the scream that forces its way from my lungs. This is how I die. In a fiery car wreck with my brother.

Screeching metal pulls my focus from the blinding agony that envelops me the moment we hit what I can only assume is the ground.

There’s a faint scent of smoke swirling around us, but I’m distracted when I manage to turn my head, and I’m staring into the cold, dead eyes of my brother.

Another scream tears from me as tears fall against my cheeks in rough sobs. “No, Travis. Please, no.”

I move to reach for him, but my seat belt keeps me in place. It's only then I realize we're upside down. No wonder the blood is rushing to my sore head.

Footsteps pull my attention from my pain and sorrow, only to add panic back to the mix.

Oh god, are they coming back to finish the job?

Are they going to kill me too?

I reach for the seat belt release, but it doesn't budge at first, and I tug at it frantically.

The footsteps pause outside the car, and I hold my breath. Should I pretend to be dead? Or at least passed out? Yeah, that's what I'll do.

I force all the calm I can manage into my body, pushing away the pain, the panic, and the loss as my fight-or-flight instincts take over.

I allow myself to fall limp against the seat belt, swallowing down the cry at how badly my hip hurts.

There's rustling for a few moments, followed by hands wrapping gently around my middle a moment before the seat belt gives way, first around the chest, and then around my hips.

Did they just cut me out?

I push down the question and force my body to remain limp as whoever ran us off the road pulls me free of the car so gently I can barely reconcile the fact that they just tried to kill us.

They carry me for a few seconds before setting me down on the ground gently.

Their fingers press to my pulse point, and I swear I hear a sigh of relief when they realize my heart is still beating steadily.

If they wanted to hurt me, surely they would have just left me to die in the car alongside my brother?

Taking a chance, I allow my eyes to flutter open, and my breath catches in my chest as I stare up into the darkest eyes I've ever seen. They're deep, like the depths of the ocean, and solid, like onyx.

The rest of his face is covered by a mask, but I can't tear my eyes from his to take it in.

Those eyes are going to haunt my nightmares for the rest of my life.

I startle awake, my body trapped beneath a heavy weight as I fight to pull myself out of my dream. For almost a year, my subconscious has been protecting me from what happened after we were run off the road, and a part of me wishes it stayed that way.

"Ember, are you okay?" Orion asks, sitting up enough that he can stare down at me.

My breath catches in my throat as panic hits me.

The eyes from my nightmares are the same ones I'm staring into now.

Because it's been him all along.

Orion is the Hunter.

Which means Orion killed my brother.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

ORION

I watch as recognition turns to pure panic, and then she's gone.

Ember clambers off the edge of the bed, pain lancing over her features from moving too quickly, and I flinch at the idea she'd rather hurt herself than be close to me.

"Little Flame," I say carefully, my hands up in front of me. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Not going to hurt me?" she asks incredulously. "You almost killed me! And you did kill my brother. The only person that's ever had my back. You stole everything from me!" A ragged sob tears from her throat as she backs away, putting more and more distance between us.

"Just let me explain."

"What's there to explain, Orion? Or should I call you Hunter?" She drops her head for a moment, trying to get control of her raging emotions. "You've lied to me every

single day since we met! You're the reason my whole fucking life fell apart! The reason I can't get into a car. The reason I've wanted to die every day since Travis died!"

I flinch at the admission. I knew she was struggling. I knew she was hurting herself. But I didn't realize how deep that pain ran. I didn't realize she'd thought about making it all go away. Forever.

The thought of a world without Ember is so painful that I barely keep my legs underneath me. She's the stars that shine in my darkness, and I wouldn't want to live in a world where she's not.

"You don't understand," I say carefully. "There are things you don't know."

"I'm sure there are. Like that the man I let inside me is the same man that tore my life apart."

She doesn't give me another second to explain before she slips into the bathroom and slams the door closed behind her. The lock clicks into place a moment later, and I eat up the distance between myself and the door.

"Ember, please let me explain. It's not what you think." That's a lie. In a lot of ways, it's exactly what she thinks.

I did do all the things she's accusing me of.

I killed her brother.

I almost killed her.

I am the reason she's been miserable since the accident. The reason she's struggled.

The reason Lucas threw even more debt onto her plate.

But it wasn't purely selfish.

"Go away." She sobs from the other side of the door.

"No," I say. "I'm not going anywhere. It's you and me, Ember. Forever."

"I'll never let you touch me again, Orion. I'd rather die than have your hands on me ever again."

"You don't mean that," I murmur, but there's truth in those words. I can feel her anger, her despair, even through the door. "That night, the night of the accident, Travis was driving you up into the hills to force you to marry Lucas. He traded the rest of his debt for you."

Silence greets me on the other side of the door, but I wait. It's a truth I've been desperate to give her for months, long before I allowed myself close to her.

"You're lying."

"I'm not, Ember. I promise I'm not. Didn't you wonder why they got so protective of you all of a sudden? Why they tracked your movements? Why wouldn't they let you out on jobs that involved men? Why they sabotaged your dates?"

"How do you know about all of that?"

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“Because Lucas works with the Hunter closely, and I make it my business to know everything that’s happening in the lives of the people I work with, especially liabilities like Lucas. He had Travis digging into my identity for most of the time they were working on the deal. Finding out my identity, as well as your hand in marriage, was the price of paying off Travis’s debt, and then he planned to leave LA. To leave you behind.”

I hate knowing what I’m telling her will only hurt her more than she’s already hurting, but I have to give her the truth. I have to lay it all out on the line and hope she doesn’t run for the hills.

Not that I would blame her. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The problem is, it doesn’t matter how far she runs. It doesn’t matter where she hides. I’ll be right there on her heels.

I’ll never let her go, no matter how hard she begs.

I’ve never claimed to be a good man. I’m a killer. A criminal. A notorious sociopath. But I’ll always take care of what belongs to me.

“That’s not true. Travis wouldn’t do that to me.”

“I’m sorry, Ember. I wish I were lying. Fuck, I wish everything was different. I wish I’d met you before that night. I wish I’d known that I would fall for you the second I pulled you from that wreck.”

“Stop.” She chokes on the word. “Just please stop. I can’t take any more right now.”

I sigh and drop down to the ground, leaning my back against the door. “I’ll be right here when you’re ready to talk.”

“And if that’s never?”

“You underestimate my obsession with you, Little Flame.”

She doesn’t reply to that, and I don’t expect her to.

Instead, we fall into a deep silence that I feel in my bones.

I always knew this was a possibility. I just wish I could take away her pain.

I lose track of time leaning against that door, listening for any sound that comes from the other side.

The occasional broken sob draws me closer to breaking down the door and hauling her against my chest, but I manage to rationalize myself away from doing that.

As much as I may want to, I can’t steamroll her at every turn. I have to give her time to accept everything I’ve thrown at her tonight.

My eyes fall closed as I fight off a yawn. Even if I fell asleep, she wouldn’t be able to make it out of the apartment without me knowing, but I want to be here if she decides she needs me.

A soft cry of pain has my eyes snapping open. Maybe she just needs more of those painkillers Parker gave her.

I shove myself to my feet and head into the kitchen, moving through the motions of adding some crackers to a small bowl, pouring her some water and popping the pills from their bottle.

Once I've got everything ready, I head back to the bathroom and knock softly. "Ember, I have some pain meds here for you. You don't have to talk to me if you don't want to, but it's important to keep on top of your pain so your body can heal."

There. That was nice and gentle, not pushy.

But still there's no response.

"Ember?"

Nothing.

Panic creeps into my chest. What if she's fallen and hurt herself?

You would have heard that, I remind myself.

But that doesn't mean she isn't hurt and can't get to the door to let me in.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I drop the bowl and glass on the bedside table and move back to the bathroom.

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“Step away from the door, Little Flame.”

I give her a few seconds to do as I’ve instructed before slamming my shoulder into the solid wood.

The flimsy lock gives way beneath the weight with ease, and I look around the room, but it’s not Ember that catches my attention.

No, it’s the blood.

So much fucking blood it looks like someone’s been tortured in here.

“No,” I breathe, frantically looking for the woman who holds the heart and soul I didn’t think I was capable of having.

It takes two passes before I find her. The high rim of the bathtub hid her from my view, and with each step I take, more and more panic rages through me.

Because she’s the source of the blood.

A bloody razor blade sits on the edge of the bathtub, and there are deep slices across both of her wrists. She’s covered in crimson, and I race toward her, immediately tugging her out of the tub and against my chest.

“Ember, please wake up, Little Flame,” I choke on the plea as I lower us to the tiled floor. I need to get the bleeding under control before I can get her to the hospital, because she’s already lost too much blood to make it if I don’t.

I reach for the towels beneath the sink and wrap them around her wrists, securing them with sports tape I had from when I hurt my shoulder last year in a fight, wrapping it tightly so it won't budge.

But the blood immediately turns the white towels red.

"Ember, please."

Her head lolls to the side, and her sapphire eyes look up at me. The vibrant color I fell in love with is dull and muted, but it's the dejection that stares back at me that feels like someone has reached into my chest and pulled out my heart.

Her skin is so pale, void of the vibrance I'm used to seeing, and I realize that she's dying in my arms, and there's nothing I can do about it.

She coughs, her body jolting in my arms. She's losing the battle, and I'm paralyzed in place, unable to move.

Her eyes drift closed slowly, and I tug her against me harder.

"No, Ember. Please don't leave me. Please stay. Please fight. Please, Little Flame." Tears roll down my cheeks, and I try to remember the last time I cried. But it's been years. Decades even.

Ember's lips part, her labored breaths whispering against my bare chest as I hold her tighter, uncaring about the blood that covers us both.

She forces her eyes open again and stares at me so deeply, I swear she can see right into my soul before she says the words that will haunt me for the rest of my days.

"Why did you have to make me love you?"

To Be Continued...