



Vicious Little Darling (Love So Cruel #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: I've killed more women than I can count. But this one is different.

I always start by stalking them. I follow them home, break into their rooms... like a predator ambushing unsuspecting prey. The thrill of the hunt makes me feel alive.

But Ember isn't scared of me. She's a fighter... and when I break into her room in the dead of night, she relishes every touch.

I know I should be done with her and move on to my next victim, but something stops me. I'm the masked man that lurks in the shadows – and she can't get enough of me.

Every second spent watching her ignites a spark that threatens to grow into an inferno. I've already claimed her as mine... she just doesn't know it yet.

This will be the best hunt of my life.

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Chapter One

JAXTON

What kind of woman leaves her door unlocked in this city? I nearly roll my eyes as I turn the knob, before slipping in through the only entrance to the shabby apartment. Don't get me wrong. I like it when they make it easy—but good God, just leaving your door unlocked? Come on.

I step inside and stand in the dark entryway. Melody, my newest obsession, is oblivious to everything I've done so far. I've moved her things and followed her home, but not once has she noticed that anything in her world is off. In a way, I guess that's a good thing.

“Oh my God! You should've seen the look on his face when I broke up with him,” Melody's voice drones from the living room, as I softly close the door. “He was so butthurt. I swear he just wanted my parents' money.”

What money, Melody? I have to stifle a laugh. I know everyone has their secrets, but Melody's lying about her parents being something other than useless addicts might really be top tier.

“If he comes crawling back, I'm not even going to give him the time of day,” she continues, as I creep along the entryway wall. I peer past it to see her sitting on the couch. Her back is to me and she's twirling one of her strands of long, blonde hair. My hands begin to sweat as I imagine her hair tangled in my fingers, wrapped tightly as I choke the life right out of her.

I run my tongue along my bottom lip, ready to pounce. I've only been tracking Melody for a couple weeks, but honestly, it's enough. I'm bored of her already. Something's been missing lately and the thrill just isn't quite what it was.

Maybe I'll shake things up after this.

My steps are silent as Melody hangs up the phone, tossing it onto a cushion beside her. Even when I loom just six inches behind her, my six-foot-four frame towering over her, she doesn't notice me. My eyes drift from her to the phone, lying on the couch. With black gloved hands, I pluck it up...

And finally she notices my presence.

She starts and jumps sideways, her head jerking back in my direction.

"Wh-who are you..."

Aw, Melody can't find her words.

I tilt my head, peering down at her from behind my skeleton-faced mask. Terror riddles her conventionally pretty face; her blue eyes are wide and her button nose is scrunched. Her chest heaves, which causes her big, natural tits to rise and fall as she does. I'll enjoy seeing them, I guess.

Damn, something is missing these days.

I spring over the back of the red, velvet couch in one swoop, as she jumps away, but she's not fast enough. In mere seconds, I have her in my hands and pinned to the floor beneath my body. I glare down at her. The scent of her highly floral perfume makes my stomach ill. There's something too familiar about it.

It reminds me of her.

“This isn’t funny Jared.” Melody tries to swat at me, her hand colliding with my arm like a meek child. “Stop it.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I growl as I wrap my hands around her neck, not even remotely turned on by the moment. Usually, I’m bricked up and, sometimes, depending on the situation, I take what I want.

But this...

This whole scenario has left my dick limp and my irritation-level high, while Melody gurgles with pleas for her life the entire time. I roll my eyes and tighten my grip on her neck, listening for the snap of her hyoid bone beneath my fingers.

Almost done.

Melody’s eyes stay wide and grow bulgy as I finish snuffing the life right out of her. Then, I sit there for a few minutes, staring down at the dead woman.

Fuck, what a disappointment.

A grim sigh escapes my lips, and I climb off her, opting to just leave her on the floor. Sometimes I move them. Sometimes I stage them.

But Melody? Nah, she can stay where she is. Stupid, oblivious bitch.

My stomach feels nauseous as I flip through her phone, my urge unfulfilled. It makes me angry that there’s nothing interesting to see on her phone. I toss it down onto her body. Hopefully, her newly ex -boyfriend will be the first suspect on the police’s list.

I've never made it onto a suspect list—unfortunately.

I've always wanted to test the waters and see if I could pass a polygraph test. They say the darkest psychos can manipulate the results, making it look as if they're telling the truth when they're really lying. I have a hunch I would pass the test.

“Maybe you'll be the one,” I mutter to Melody and I kick her limp body with the toe of my combat boot, before I spin on my heels to exit the place, disdain taking hold. I should've kept hunting for a woman more my type—someone who would at least fight for their life. Fucking Melody was too easy.

I need a drink.

I leave her apartment and hurry down the steps, heading back out into the evening. No one will notice Melody's gone for a few days. She doesn't have another shift at the salon for three days, and that's assuming someone gets onto the missing person's report right out of the gate... And they never do that. The cops have enough on their plate. I've been hunting this city for years, and they've never put it together.

Idiots.

After slipping out of her apartment and moving through the quiet streets, I finally step onto the pavement in front of Hidden Books, a small indie bookstore. I remove my mask and shove it into my hoodie pocket. I glance at the window displays, admiring the dark covers of a few of the novels on display. I've never once set foot in there, and it's closed right now, its charming white doors locked up tight.

Maybe tomorrow.

I shrug in response to the thought and continue a few blocks further, until I reach the Mad Hatter pub. It's a hole-in-the-wall bar that always hosts a mixture of rich and

poor, rough and clean, making it the perfect place for me to blend in for a while. I go in and take a seat at one of the small corner tables. I drum my fingers on its sticky top as I wait for someone to come by and grab my order.

Maybe I should've toyed with Melody more. Chased her around her apartment. Something. I rub my jaw, running my perfectly trimmed fingernails along the stubble. Everything about the chase and the game has grown boring. It doesn't hold my attention anymore. Maybe that's because I'm too used to picking the easy ones, the bubbly, preppy, mean-girl ones. Maybe I need a challenge. Some sort of deviation from the norm.

Someone to keep me up at night again.

"What can I get you?" a light voice breaks into my thoughts.

I glance up at the waitress. Her blonde hair is up in a high ponytail, and her blue eyes are bright and flirty. Her big tits are out on display in a white tank top. I frown at the way they're right in my face. Yeah, this is what I need to avoid.

"Sir?" she cocks a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

"Sorry," I mutter. "I'll just have a coke and—"

"Let me guess, rum? Ole Captain Morgan your thing?" She cuts me off, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"No, I'll have Jack Daniels, actually," I correct her, my tone harsh.

She scurries back to the bar. I watch her as she goes, taking in her ass—one that she probably spends hours on at the gym. I need to find someone different this time. I always find myself going for the same women, those who are trying to be

perfectionists, and that's exactly what Betty-Lou-Who-is-taking-my-order is.

My gaze flickers across the crowd, searching for someone with a face that screams, my apartment is messy, while also being pretty. A group to my left bursts into laughter, and I whip my head around, catching sight of two women and two men. One of the women is immediately written off because of her fiery, red hair in pristine curls. She's pretty, hiding behind a pair of dark-rimmed glasses—but she also looks like the type who would move home to mom and dad the moment something went wrong.

I chuckle to myself, straining to get a better look at the other woman, but her features are still hazy. She has blonde hair, and from what I can make out, a full sleeve of ink on one arm.

Probably means she's a handful. The tatted ones always are feistier. I tend to avoid them for that reason. Then, she comes into view and I'm intrigued, but not in the way I usually am. She's just... unreadable. Her hazel eyes are amused by her friends, but she's not trying to be in on the conversation. Her slender shoulders are hidden beneath an old black T-shirt. The T-shirt is paired with dark-wash jeans and Converse that look like they need to be thrown into the garbage.

Yeah, no thanks.

"Your drink," the waitress interrupts my thoughts. "You really shouldn't stare, you know." Her words are sharp, and as I look up, I start to wonder if she's jealous.

That's not a cute trait, honey.

"You shouldn't stare either," I comment, my eyes darting between the waitress and the shabby, tatted woman at the other table. My guess is she spent her grocery money on that sleeve of ink, but of course I can't be sure.

“Ember isn’t going to be interested in a guy like you,” the waitress quips, folding her arms across her chest. “You’re way too much of a pretty boy for her.”

“Sorry?” I shift my attention to the waitress again. “Who are you talking about?”

“Ember,” she nods her head toward the tatted woman. “She’s my friend.”

Somehow, I can’t picture these two being friends. But okay. I’ll play along, just for the hell of it. It’s not as if I plan to choose either of these women.

“She looks easy,” I comment.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The waitress bursts into laughter. “Ember is far from easy. She usually doesn’t give men two seconds of her time. It takes a lot to get her to think about any man that’s not in one of her fucking books.”

I purse my lips. “Interesting.”

“Yeah, exactly,” she snorts. “You’re too much of a pretty boy for her, with your black hair, your green eyes and that annoyingly flawless jawline. You look as if you’re trying to be mysterious, but I bet you go home and spend hours on your Instagram photos.”

“Wow, really pegged me there,” I grunt, too intrigued by Ember to be worried about what Busty Betty has to say. I don’t have an Instagram account, let alone any social media. It makes me too accessible, and that’s the last thing you need when your hobby consists of stalking and murdering women.

“Asshole,” the waitress mutters under her breath as she finally walks away, leaving me there in my dark corner to watch Ember. What a fucking name. It sounds like something from some lame romcom. And the way she comes off unenthused by

everyone, but confident as hell has me almost disgusted.

She's nothing special.

But I still can't seem to stop watching her.

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Chapter Two

EMBER

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as I take a sip of my IPA, but I brush the uneasy feeling off. It's more than likely that some fucking creep is putting his eyes on me, but this is a bar, and bars always have a few sketchy individuals lurking in them. It's nothing new, and it doesn't bother me. I have pepper spray tucked away safely in my back pocket.

"Can you believe that Josh actually took the night off?" Megan says, her obviously fake red hair spilling over her shoulder as she pokes my best friend in the arm.

Josh shrugs, his dark brown eyes gleaming under the light. "I only did it for Ember. She says I don't get out enough."

I chuckle. "All I did was tell you the truth. You needed to take a night off from the bar and get out."

"Just to show up at another one," he teases me, shaking his head. Rich, the owner of the bookstore I work at, bursts into laughter along with Megan. I giggle, but the feeling of being watched still lingers, and I can't shake it.

"You okay?" Megan, my friend and coworker at the bookstore, turns to me, her black brows furrowed. "You seem off."

"I'm just tired," I lie, deciding not to reveal my random onset of paranoia. I'm not

one to question my instincts, but right now, I'm almost annoyed with myself.

"You ready to go then?" Josh throws it out there, eyeing Rich, who sits beside me. I don't think Josh likes my boss for whatever reason, and he doesn't interact with him much other than giving him a side-eye every now and then.

"Let me run to the bathroom and then we can go," I say as I slide off my stool. "I don't want to have to make a pit stop in an alley on the way home."

"Gross, Ember. Seriously," Megan makes a disgusted face. "Have a little class."

"Hey, desperate times call for desperate measures," I tease her, and then I head off for the restrooms just to my right. It's a straight shot, only about ten feet from the table we are sitting at—but with every step towards it, a sick feeling washes over my body.

What the hell is wrong with me tonight? I shake my head at myself as I shove open the door to the ladies' room, revealing a small, three-stall bathroom. I relieve myself quickly, wash my hands, and then pause in front of the mirrors to smooth out my hair. It's frizzy, so I do my best to lay down the baby hairs that are flying everywhere. It's a lost cause though, so after a few moments of trying, I give up.

I roll my shoulders before reaching for the door, and then I whip it open and step out into the little waiting area. However, I quickly realize that my exit is blocked by a tall, athletically built man with black hair and striking green eyes. He is wearing a crisp white button up and jeans, which—together with the fucking Rolex on his left wrist—scream money. Probably worth more than all my organs combined if sold on the black market.

"Um, excuse me," I say, trying to slip by him.

He holds out a hand to stop me. "I've been watching you all night."

Ahh, here's the creep.

I sigh, brushing my hair out of my face. "That's really not a good opening line, you know."

"No, but it's the truth. There's just something about you, and I have a thing for girls who need saving."

I raise my brows. "What is it about me makes you think I need saving?"

He rocks back on his heels. "Okay, maybe nothing. But seriously, I'm horrible at this. I saw you, and I think you're pretty. You looked like you weren't having a great time tonight. I could take you somewhere nicer—not even tonight. Maybe some other time." His shoulders fall slightly, and for a second, I actually feel sorry for him, putting himself out there to hit on a girl like me.

"Honorable, really," I fake a smile. "But I'm not interested."

"Right, of course. I'm probably not your type," he mutters as he finally steps to the side to let me through.

"No one is my type," I say to him, patting his arm like he's a poor little puppy, as I slip past. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against a relationship, but I am against dating some kind of rich, trust fund baby like whoever this guy is.

"I'm ready to go." I breathe a sigh of relief as I make it back to the table, where Josh is keeping a close eye on me. I grab my jacket and slide into it, preparing myself for the chilly evening air.

"You want me to beat him up?" my best friend laughs, extending his arm for me to take. "He seems like the kind of guy who will try to add you on Facebook, later."

“Ew, gross,” I giggle as Josh leads me toward the door. I leave my arm hooked into his as we exit, and I give myself a quick mental check. The creepy feeling has passed, and now I’m positive it was the guy waiting for me outside of the restrooms.

“We’re cutting your night out short,” I say as we head toward my apartment. “I feel bad.”

“Em, literally every night, is a night out for me. I own a bar for fuck’s sake.” He gazes down at me, amusement in his eyes. “I was seriously hoping that you’d want to go to the movies or something. I get tired of the night life.”

“Maybe you should hire someone.”

“Maybe you should come to work for me,” he shoots back at me, his tone growing serious. “I could pay you better than Rich does.”

“I’m not a bartender,” I reason, my eyes dropping to my beat-up Converse. “And not to mention, your bar is way too upscale for me. I stand out like a sore thumb when I just show up to visit you.”

“That’s not true.” Josh shakes his head, his brawny biceps flexing against my arm.

I take in the handsome cut of his jaw, and nearly laugh. He wasn’t always handsome. When we met in our freshman year of college, he was scrawny and nerdy, and his glasses were nearly the same size as his face. He’s really grown into himself, with that perfectly chiseled body he’s worked hard to build, and while I’m proud of him, I get tired of my mom constantly asking why I’m not with him.

I just don’t see him like that.

Attraction isn’t a choice—you either feel it, or you don’t.

“You just deserve better,” Josh grunts from beside me when I don’t say anything further. “Starting with your drabby-ass apartment.”

I roll my eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with my apartment.”

“Your neighbor was stabbed to death last year. I’d say that, in and of itself, is probably a good indicator that you should move.”

I grow defensive. “That could happen anywhere, but seriously, Josh, I don’t want to fight about it. The moment we’re alone, you always start talking about me moving, working for you, or whatever. I’m tired of it. I like my life, and I don’t want your charity.”

Josh drops my arm. “How the hell can you call it charity? After all the years we’ve been friends? It’s not charity, Em. It’s just me taking care of—”

“I don’t want you to take care of me!” I explode, throwing my hands in the air. “I can take care of myself. Just like I don’t need you to walk me all the way back to my apartment. I manage by myself just fine.”

“God, you’re so fucking naïve sometimes,” Josh snaps, his face riddled with visible hurt. “You think that because your aura is off-putting that no one will fuck with you, but this city doesn’t give a shit about that.”

I let out a sharp breath, annoyed up to my fucking eyeballs. “I’ll walk myself home from here,” I say, stopping under the streetlight. There are still quite a few people out and about right now, and the creepy feeling has long passed. Good riddance.

Josh folds his arms across his chest. The two of us are almost in a standoff of sorts. “You’re so hardheaded, Em.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you love me,” I snort back, unable to hide a smile. “But still, I’ll walk myself home from here. I don’t need your protection.”

“Don’t do that,” he argues. “You don’t know who might be creeping around in wait for a woman just like you.”

I laugh. “Absolutely no one is looking for a woman just like me .”

His face falls and his lips part as if he might say something else, but instead, he shakes his head. “Fine. Just text me when you get home then. Please.”

I give him a thumbs up. “You got it, bro.”

He frowns. “Don’t call me bro. But, seriously, I can pay you better, and get you out of this shithole if you’d just give me a chance.”

“Good night, Josh,” I snort, turning around and showing him my back. “Go find someone else to save.” He mutters something that I don’t understand, and I don’t bother to try and work it out. I get that he cares, but for once in my life, I just want someone to believe in me the way I am.

I glance back over my shoulder and see Josh still standing there, watching me as I walk away. He’s always been the type to ensure I make it home safe, and for the longest time, I never understood why. These days, he could rival the strength of just about anyone that might want to cause someone harm. He’s kind of like my guardian angel, albeit stubborn and annoying sometimes.

“Please be safe,” he calls out from behind me.

I throw a little wave and keep going, turning the corner at the end of the next block. My apartment is only four blocks from here, and I’ll be home safe and sound before

Josh even makes it halfway back to his fancy-ass apartment on the upper west side. His parents had the money to invest in his bar, while mine didn't even have enough to help me fly home for the holidays. Josh usually tries to get the bill. But I never let him.

My footsteps echo into the night, and as I make it past another block, I suddenly realize that the streets are now devoid of people. I don't let it bother me. However...

Something else does.

That feeling is back, and the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end again. I swallow the knot in my throat, my pulse throbbing in my temple. It's just in your head.

But, it doesn't feel like it's in my head.

I reach into my back pocket and pull out the pepper spray, clutching it so tightly that my hand cramps. Three blocks to go. That's it. I quicken my pace, though not so much that someone would necessarily grow suspicious that I have noticed them. If someone is lurking in the shadows, I don't want them to think I'm onto them. I just want to make it home, where I can triple lock my apartment.

As I make it past another block, I hear the thud of heavy footsteps behind me. It sounds as if someone is marching, stomping their feet so that I can't miss the sound. I don't look back. I don't give them that satisfaction. I just find the trigger on my pepper spray and prepare for something very bad to happen.

Then the noise stops.

I glance over my shoulder, and no one is there...

But now someone is whistling. A sick, low tune fills the air around me, and it's enough to do me in. I break into a sprint, my feet pounding the pavement as I rush towards my apartment complex. I shoot another glance over my shoulder, and my heart stops.

A shadow of a man is standing only six or so feet away, and as the door buzzer sounds, letting me know that the door is unlocked for me to enter, he lifts his head, revealing a grinning skeleton mask.

As I reach for the handle, and whip the door open, he keeps whistling the same low, revolting tune. I pull the door closed as he starts toward me again, and manage to get the door shut just as he presses a black gloved hand to the glass.

I back away, and then hold up my pepper spray. The door stays locked without the code, but that doesn't stop the fear from coursing through my body. He tilts his head dramatically and then, in a sardonic, cruel, and deep tone...

He fucking laughs.

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Chapter Three

JAXTON

My God, she was terrified. I tip my head back and continue to laugh, unable to stop it as the sound pierces the night. This girl isn't my type in the slightest, but fuck, I'm so hard right now. I could explode in my jeans. This is the first time I've felt like this in years. She had pepper spray. I continue to cackle as I slide away down the alley, watching for any light to kick on in the building. I know that there are only six apartments in this old, run-down building. I saw that as she slammed the door shut in front of me.

Come on, I think as I circle the building, watching and waiting, my cock so goddamn ready to blow it aches. Where are you, baby?

I don't know why I followed her and her friend—or boyfriend—out of the bar. I don't know why the fact that she turned me down turned me on so much. And what's the story with that rich-bitch boy she was with? What woman, in her state, turns down a man who so obviously has money? It was strangely satisfying, the way she patted his arm and left him standing in rejection.

It was something I would've done.

Grinding my teeth, I circle around to the back of the building, peering upwards. I need to know where she is. I could break in tonight, fuck her, and snuff the life right out of her—or I could indulge in new fantasies and put off the satisfaction for a while. As my mind toys with the idea, a sliver of light catches my attention.

I peer up and see the blinds parting slightly on the back, west-facing apartment. A face is peering into the night, searching for someone... As I take in the features, I know who it is. I creep backward into the shadows as she gives me a view of her full face.

There you are, baby. There you are.

My cock throbs for my attention, and I slide my hand beneath my jeans, grabbing hold of it. I take my time stroking as she bites down on her bottom lip, and then disappears from my sight, but it doesn't stop me from continuing.

"Gotcha," I imagine myself saying, threading my fingers around her pretty little neck. I squeeze my shaft like I'd like to squeeze her throat, stifling a groan as I start to pump my hand again. I come hard and fast as I imagine her lips turning a shade of blue with death written all over her. Cum fills my hand, and I wipe it away on the T-shirt beneath my hoodie.

Looks like I've found my next victim, and she promises to be far more entertaining than the others.

Now that my head is clear of lust, I creep back around the building to the entrance. There's a keypad with a code to enter the old building, which is a surprise in this shitty part of town. I'll have to lurk nearby to figure out the code, although I doubt it'll be anything difficult. I could jimmy the lock, but I don't know if there's an alarm—and I don't want to go setting that off just yet.

She already knows I'm here. I don't want to up her fear too much. Not yet, anyway. As I wander up to the keypad, I hear footsteps coming from behind me, and I quickly drop my mask, shoving it into my pocket.

"You don't live here," I hear a scratchy female voice say from behind me. "You need

to get the hell away.”

I turn around to see a short, African American woman with white hair and mean eyes. She is holding a taser. You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Sorry,” I say. “I have a friend who lives here.” I give her my gentlest, I’m a good boy tone.

She doesn’t waver. “You look like a pompous frat rat who needs to get back to their side of town.”

Wow, okay. Now I’m offended.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to pass judgement,” I say, folding my arms across my chest. “I really do have a friend who lives here, and I just wanted to make sure she got home safe.”

“Oh, I highly doubt she needs your help to get home safe, you fuck twat.” She steps toward me, triggering the taser with a crackle. “I’m gonna count to five and then I ain’t gonna count no more.”

I sigh. “Got it.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “My bad. I won’t bother you anymore, ma’am.” I slink off into the darkness, glancing over my shoulder as I go. She’s still watching me, waiting to make sure I leave.

It would figure that Ember has a watchdog for a neighbor. I breathe out a sharp sigh as I trudge off, not sure how she got the idea that I’m a frat rat. I was never in a fraternity. My putrid, abusive mother would never have allowed for her fuck-up of a son to grace the upper crust society. No, only she was allowed to do that.

I spit a wad of saliva onto the sidewalk as I make my way back home, ignoring the

pull to return to Ember's apartment. It'll take time to figure out her routine, her habits, and exactly how I want to torture her. Something about Ember makes me want to really get under her skin. She comes across as a tough girl—as if she thinks she can handle me.

She has no idea who she's dealing with. A little pepper spray won't stop me from spreading her legs and devouring her pussy. It won't stop me from taking everything I want from her. Her buff friend and watchdog neighbor won't stop me. They don't stand a fucking chance.

I'm like a mountain lion; quiet and calculating. She'll never know when I'm creeping in the shadows, intent on stalking her. She'll only see me when I want her to see me. The rest of the time, she'll think she's losing it, going insane. She'll isolate herself out of fear. Maybe she'll go to the police, who will pretend to give a fuck and tell her to keep a journal.

But it'll only send her further into the depths of insanity.

And then, I'll strike.

I mull over a plan as I make it to the fourth block from her apartment complex, hanging a left to make my way back to the bar. I'm curious to see whether her brawny friend returned to the bar, or if he really called it a night. He's a hard bastard to read, and I can't tell if he wants to fuck her or marry her.

Either way, he's unlikely to get either. In fact, I'm going to take his options away from him. The only ceremony he's guaranteed to attend for her is her fucking funeral, and I'll be at that one too.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I grimace, fishing it out and staring at the name on the screen. Of all the damn times, why would my mother be calling me right now? I

close my eyes, before taking a deep breath.

“What?” I answer, my tone cruel and cold.

“Son,” she slurs, her drunken tone as obvious as a whore’s STD. “I don’t understand why you never come home anymore. You know that I just want to see you, right? Can’t you come home for once?”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll bet you’re not even home, Darcy.”

“Don’t call me by my first name,” she seethes, her voice dropping off as I hear a man’s hushed tone somewhere in the background. “You know I want you to call me Mom.”

“And you know good and well that I don’t want you to call me Son,” I snap at her. “Yet, somehow you still call this goddamn phone and try to convince me that I was ever anything to you other than your personal punching bag. Go fuck whoever you’re with and leave me alone.”

“Ted is a nice man.” She burps at the end of her sentence. “He’s going to take care of me, and maybe if you would share some of your inheritance, I wouldn’t be stuck having to rely on the kindness of—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snap. “I owe you nothing for the way you treated me. You’re nothing but a narcissistic bitch.”

“And you’re nothing but a fucked up, weak, pathetic loser.”

I cackle, my voice carrying into the night. “You know what’s funny about that, Ma?”

“Nothing,” she growls. “You’re a disgrace. Your father would be so disappointed if

he knew how you'd turned out."

"Well, there's only one person to blame for that," I pause, ignoring my hammering heart. "And that's the vagina I came out of."

With that, I hang up the phone, fighting the urge to chuck it across the street, as I arrive at my high-rise apartment building. It took my father twenty-five years to find me, and then the bastard went off and had a heart attack. All I have to show for it is a shit ton of money and a vicious problem with sadism.

What a hand of cards I've been dealt.

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Chapter Four

EMBER

My alarm pierces the silence of my bedroom and I startle awake, shooting straight up in bed. I suck in a sharp breath, and run my hands over my face. Sleep didn't come easily last night—not with that creepy masked man who had followed me to my apartment and came out of the shadows, but...

There's nothing I can do about it. Honestly, it was probably a one-time thing, just some guy out to scare people for no reason. Stranger things have happened in this city. I mean, he could've gotten me if he'd wanted to. The stand-off we'd had at the front door of my apartment was tense, but the guy didn't lunge or come at me at all.

You're just trying to justify not telling anyone, aren't you? The intrusive thought has me sighing as I climb out of bed and get ready for my shift at the bookstore. I pad to the bathroom, the image of that skeleton mask lingering in my mind. I shudder as I start the shower and step under the water, before washing myself quickly.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm ready to go. I am wearing a pair of dark jeans and a Beauty and the Beast book-themed shirt with the words Hidden Books scrawled across the front. It's a lame shirt, but it is what it is. I run my fingers through my damp locks, decide I'll make a cup of coffee once I get to work, and then slip out into the hallway.

"I tell you what," a voice startles me, but I instantly recognize it as my nosy neighbor, Rose. "This side of town just gets worse and worse."

“I’m not surprised,” I mutter, trying to slip past her as she tinkers outside of her door. “This area isn’t a great one.”

“Hmm,” she huffs. “I’d think you’d be more concerned knowing there’s some creep wandering around the building and trying to spot you. Not to mention, the nerve of that man.” She shakes her head. “He tried to tell me that he was one of your friends, but I ain’t ever seen one of your friends that looked like that.”

I freeze, spinning around to face her. “Did he have a mask on?”

Rose makes a face at me. “No, if he had, I’d have called the cops or tasered him right on the spot.”

I sigh with relief. “Oh, well, what did he look like?” Part of me is picturing Josh, just making sure that I made it home safely. I wouldn’t put it past him. However, Rose would probably recognize him.

“He looked like a pretty boy.”

My heart stops. “Black hair?”

She shrugs. “Hard to say. He had a hood up, but I told him not to come around here no more.”

My stomach churns, but I force a smile. Maybe it’s nothing... “Thanks, Rose. I’ll keep a lookout.”

“You oughta have a taser,” she responds, not a hint of a smile on her face. “That’s what you really need.”

“I can’t afford one,” I laugh. “I can barely afford to eat most days. I have pepper

spray anyway.”

Rose just stares at me for a few seconds, her expression unreadable, before muttering something under her breath and disappearing into her apartment. I’m left standing in the hallway, checking my phone for the time. I really need to get going to make it to work, and I don’t have time to wonder if Rose is—or isn’t—going to reappear from her neighboring apartment.

I shake my head as if it’ll rid me of the unease I am feeling and head down the stairs to the building’s exit. My footsteps freeze as I make it a few feet from the glass door, and my heart thrums in my head as I suddenly picture that guy with his hands against the glass...

And his laugh.

A chill runs down my spine, but I shove it off. Creepier things have happened in the city, and it’s not the first time some weirdo has tried to make a move on me. Besides, it’s almost eight-thirty, so the streets are busy. I shove through the door and step out into the sunlight.

My Converse pound the pavement as I head towards work, maintaining a faster pace than usual. It’s a crisp autumn day, but that doesn’t stop the sweat from beading up along my hairline. The air feels charged, even though I know that’s just in my head. There’s no way the masked guy hung around all night, so he could follow me to work almost twelve hours later.

I’m fine. I’m fine. I repeat the words in my head as soon as the bookstore comes into view. I rush for the large white wooden doors and slip inside, breathing a sigh of relief.

“You look strained,” Rich, the owner, looks up from the front counter, his brows

furrowed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say quickly, walking to the back. I slip through the door, hang up my purse and jacket, and then return to the front of the store. We don’t open until nine, and according to my phone, that means we still have fifteen minutes.

“You’re positive you’re okay?” Rich inquires again as I start a batch of coffee. I like Rich, even if Josh doesn’t. He’s like the older brother I never had. He comes from a small trust fund—which is what he used to open the book store—and his upper crust upbringing shows in his close-knit, rich friends. However, he’s always at work, hiding behind his Gucci glasses and slightly graying blonde hair.

“I’m fine. I just overslept.”

He narrows his eyes at me as I straighten up the new release shelf. “You’re not even close to being late.”

“Because I basically ran here,” I joke, shrugging my shoulders. “Is Megan working today?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, she’s going part-time. I can’t afford to give her the raise she wants.” His face looks resigned for a moment, but then he shifts it to more of a smile. “I think it’ll be fine though. I’m going to try some new marketing strategies to hopefully up the traffic in the store.”

“Yeah, that would be cool.” My words come out almost without thinking, as my mind shifts back to the guy outside of my apartment. Maybe I should get a second job and move to a better part of town.

I don’t mention this to Rich, as I get started restocking the shelves and taking care of preorders for a local author’s upcoming release.

It's an uneventful morning with some new and some familiar faces.

"I'm taking an early lunch," Rich calls when it hits eleven. "You got the store?"

"Yeah," I tell him, switching to his spot behind the counter. "Hot date for lunch?"

He smiles. "I wish. But no, it's just my mom."

"Nice," I laugh, and then watch him as he leaves. I settle back into the chair before grabbing a thriller novel and getting comfortable. My stomach growls, but I'll take my lunch after Rich gets back.

I'm lost in the story of a woman, who killed her husband and is on the run, when the door chimes. I look up to offer a greeting, and am met with a pair of sea green eyes.

"Good morning," I say.

"Isn't it like almost noon?" the handsome guy, who stands probably six-foot-three, replies. His sandy blond hair is slightly disheveled, and he's got ink climbing both arms. He's fucking hot, and I struggle not to drool.

"Is there something I can help you with?" I ask, as his biceps flex beneath his tight black T-shirt.

"Yeah, actually, there is." His laugh is light and almost sweet, as he nods to all the shelves. "I'm trying to find a present for my mom. It's her birthday. She loves to read, and..." he pauses, his cheeks blushing crimson, "...well, I don't."

"Ah, then, I am sure I can help you." I slide off the stool, my heart beating unevenly as I slip past him. "What kind of books does your mom read?"

“I don’t know. The kind with the cartoon covers? I don’t know anything else.” He chuckles again, and I can tell he’s embarrassed. It’s not the first time I’ve had to help a guy find a book for someone they care about. Sometimes it’s a mom, daughter, wife, girlfriend—mistress. Whatever.

“My guess is she likes romcoms,” I stop him at that section, and pull a few from the shelf. “These are the new releases, so I guarantee she doesn’t have them yet.”

“You’re a lifesaver.” He takes a fall-themed one from me and then pauses. “Actually, I think I’ll just get them all.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding up toward the counter. “That’s fine by me.”

“Do you get commission?”

I give him an incredulous look. “Are you being serious?”

He bursts into laughter. “Well, I was, but I guess not now.”

“I don’t get commission on them,” I huff a laugh and then ring him up. He pays with the exact cash, and I bag the books up.

“I hope your mom has a great birthday.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” he chuckles as he takes the receipt.

“Have a nice day, Ember.”

I freeze, fear coursing through my body.

“How do you know my name?” I ask.

He turns around, his eyebrows rising as he gestures to the badge on my shirt.

“Right,” I mutter. “I’m sorry. It’s just been a weird day.”

He nods. “I get that. I hope it gets less weird for you. Or weirder?” He laughs. “Whatever you want it to be.”

“Less weird, but hey, what’s your name?” I call after him, catching his attention just as he grabs the door handle.

He shoots me a flirty grin. “Xander, and if you keep asking questions, I might have to come back to visit.” With that, he winks and slips out of the store, the door closing behind him.

I stare after him, heat flushing to my face. God, I made that so awkward! I run my fingers through my hair, just as the door chimes once more. I hope it’s the tattooed hottie coming back in to get my number, but instead, it’s an elderly lady.

“Good morning,” I say to her, feeling a little light-headed after my conversation with that hottie.

She gives me a weird look, and then heads straight for the historical fiction section of the store. I sit quietly on the stool, drumming my fingers on the counter instead of going back to reading my book. Part of me feels as if I missed an opportunity with the guy who came in to buy the books. I rarely get up the nerve to flirt, and he seemed receptive to it, but then again, he could’ve asked for my number if he was actually interested.

Ugh. I never attract the guys that I actually find attractive. That notion sends my heart dropping and, as Rich steps back into the store, he notices that something is off—again.

“What’s with the long face, you’re going to scare off the customers,” he chuckles, setting his to-go drink down on the counter. “Seriously.”

“Nothing.” I let out a sigh. “I swear I just sometimes think I’m going to be alone forever.”

“Yeah, well, join the club,” he snorts, but then grows serious. “I have a friend though. His name is Dylan, super cool guy. He’s trying to find the right one. I could set you guys up. He’s definitely your type.”

I toy with the idea, and then stare longingly at the door, reminded of Xander. “You know what, yeah. Okay. Set us up.”

“Cool, I’ll have him set me up, too. Then we’ll all go out together.”

I nod. “Deal.”

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Chapter Five

JAXTON

“Jaxton Marks,” the receptionist calls out. “Dr. Pitman will see you now.”

Fucking great. I get to my feet and try to brush off the nerves penetrating my chest. I’ve been seeing this dipshit for three years now, and it never gets better. He just fucking pries into the dark corners of my brain. Well, he tries to, anyway.

I sling my backpack over my shoulder and head down the hall to the third door on the right, which is already open and waiting for me. I step across the threshold, avoiding eye contact with Dr. Pitman, and plop down onto the brown microfiber couch. The walls are painted a putrid blue color—it’s hideous.

“Good morning, Jaxton,” Dr. Pitman greets me from behind his black rimmed glasses framed by white hair. “How’s your morning been?”

“Fine,” I say, leaning back against the back of the couch. “Though, I’d rather not be here.”

“Yet, here you are,” he chuckles. “As usual.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, questioning myself about why I do keep showing up. It’s as if I innately want to be better. Except I don’t. I don’t give a fuck about anything.

“So, what were you up to this morning?”

I trailed Ember from home to work, and then found a coffee shop to bide my time until this hell hole. “Not much. I slept in.”

“That’s abnormal for you,” Dr. Pitman crosses his thin legs, clad in gray pants. “You’re an early bird.”

“You mean, I just don’t fucking sleep at all,” I level with him. “And no, I don’t want any of that medication you can prescribe me for that.”

He keeps that same fucking pleasant look on his face. “Well, I know your stance on medication, and I wasn’t going to offer it, Jaxton.”

“Good,” I huff, shifting in my seat like a kid. I don’t know what it is about the guy, but every time I’m in his office, I feel as if I’m seven years old again and in the principal’s office.

“So, why don’t we talk about your week? Have you considered getting a job? Do you remember our chat about that?”

“Sure.”

“Sure, you’ve considered getting a job? Or?” Dr. Pitman’s patience with me is admirable, really. I mean, I’d hate me by now, but I guess that’s why he’s a therapist and I’m a low life serial killer.

“I considered getting a job.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a bar or... a bookstore?” I throw the odd one out, thinking of Ember as she slipped inside that Hidden Books place. She works there. I could work

there. I could see her all day long. What a fright she would get when she realized her coworker, Jaxton, was the same skeleton masked man skulking around in the shadows.

Fuck. That makes my cock hard.

“A bookstore?” Dr. Pitman’s voice draws me out from my fantasy of fucking her in the dark while she sleeps. “Why a bookstore?”

“Uh,” I pause. “I don’t know. I should read more.”

“That’s an interesting reason, Jaxton.”

“Life is interesting,” I say with a shrug. “Or painfully boring. I don’t know which.”

My therapist sighs. “I really think you’d benefit from finding something productive to do with your time. Consistent idleness can be bad for the mind.”

“Mm,” I mutter, my eyes drifting to the window, taking in the city skyline. I just want to fucking disappear into it sometimes—and that thought leaves me depressed.

“Have you spoken with your mom, again?”

My lip twitches. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“She called,” I say flatly, continuing to zone out on the skyscrapers.

“Jaxton,” his voice drops in volume. “You have to set boundaries with her. We’ve discussed this over and over. Just because she’s your mother, doesn’t mean that you

need to continue to have contact with her.”

“Again,” I drawl. “ She called.”

“Let it go to voicemail.”

I whip my head around. “And then do you know what she’ll do? She’ll fucking show up on my doorstep, all wacked out of her mind, or report me missing like she did a few years ago.”

“Narcissists have a hard time letting go of their victims.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I growl back at him. “I’m not a victim.” But as the words slip from my lips, the memories unlock, flooding my mind. Suddenly, I’m ten years old again, with a bloody nose and tears streaming down my face.

‘You deserved it for being so Goddamn stubborn,’ she squeals in my ears.

I squeeze my eyes shut, as my heart rate picks up.

“What are you seeing right now?”

My eyes flutter open. “Not a damned thing. Just a therapist who needs to mind his own business. I don’t know why I keep coming to this.” I shake my head as I get to my feet, before grabbing up my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder again. “It’s always a waste of time. I can’t spend the rest of my life digging up the past. Sometimes you just have to suck it up and move on.”

“Well, I would agree with that in some circumstances...” Dr. Pitman’s voice trails off as I stalk toward the exit. “I’ll see you next week, Jaxton.”

“Fuck off,” I grunt, thundering down the hallway to the stairs. I don’t know why I bother with these appointments. Yet, deep down, there’s a part of me that knows he’s the only person that knows a damn thing about my past. He’s the guy who has had a glimpse into what made me turn into... this.

My head swirls with static as I bust through the front doors onto the street. I need a distraction from the noise in my head. I head toward the other side of the city, where I know Ember is working in that bookstore. But then again, maybe I shouldn’t go barging in there, asking for a job.

No, it’s too soon for that.

Maybe I should just fuck and kill her.

I toy with the idea, and then decide I’d rather move her shit around and scare her for a while. She’s clearly paranoid. I saw the speed she walked to work this morning. She was like an eighties speed walker. Impressive. I haven’t gotten to someone like that in quite a while.

I take a deep breath and decide to go home first. I need to see what I can find on her social media. Then, I’ll go see if I can get into her apartment, under the nose of that fucking neighbor of hers. I make the trek to my high rise and ride up to the penthouse. Dr. Pitman is right about all that idle time, but he’s wrong about how I can fill it.

“Jaxton,” the doorman greets me as I pass through the front lobby doors. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I tell him, shooting him a grin. “How’s your life, Jett?”

“Fine,” he laughs. “Hit me up for a smoke later, yeah?”

“Got it,” I give him a thumbs up and trot to the elevator. I press the penthouse level and slip inside, tapping my foot against the floor. I really want to be set up at that coffee shop, watching Ember—and making sure no one gets to her before me.

I’d hate to think about what I’d have to do.

Excitement pulses through my chest as I step off the elevator and head for the apartment door. I punch in the code and step inside, breathing in the scent of vanilla and lavender. It’s supposed to be calming, but it sure as hell doesn’t feel that way. I drop my backpack on the kitchen counter and head for the desk, where my laptop sits. I sit down and flip it open.

I need to figure out Ember’s details. Does she have parents close by? Who is that buff friend of hers? And what about the guy who works with her? He was out with her last night, too. She’s surrounded by men.

I don’t like that. It could create a challenge.

“Not that I’m opposed to that,” I say to myself. I pause as I pull up my fake online profile. I don’t have her last name, so it’s going to take some leg work to get it done. First, I hunt down the page for the business, Hidden Books, and then scroll through the posts, searching for anything with her in it.

There’s nothing.

Fuck. I go back to the most recent post, and then click to see who liked it. Sure enough, there’s Ember Thatcher. What a fucking name. I curl my lip in disgust. Her last name would sound much better as Marks. Ember Marks.

Yeah, I like that.

I run my tongue over my bottom lip at the thought. I've never put my last name with a victim's. I'm a psycho, but I'm not delusional when it comes to the women I hunt and kill.

I double click on her profile picture, pulling up a photo of her. It's just a headshot, showing off her pretty hazel eyes and olive skin.

My cock goes rigid as I click through the photos, and finally I land on a full-body shot. She's got her hip cocked out to the side, standing there with that brawny friend of hers. Before I give in and start jacking off, I spot him tagged in the image. Instant cockblock.

I click his profile. " Josh ," I grunt. "What a cliché name." I scroll through his page, seeing mostly photos of Josh and Ember. Every one of his profile pictures includes her, and honestly, if I didn't have a good idea that they're just friends, based on her page, I'd think they were a couple based on his.

He likes her more than a friend would. Jealousy rears in my chest. I've never stalked a girl like Ember. I've stalked girls who have boyfriends, plenty who fuck around constantly, but I've never targeted someone who seems so closed off. Besides, this Josh guy is conventionally attractive. I'm sure he has no problem getting pussy...

Just not hers.

I bite back a laugh. I don't know this guy, but I do know that I'm going to get the one thing he can't seem to nab. I like the feeling of winning, but I also have a good feeling this guy might get in my way. He seems too protective. Too caring.

I rub my hands together, before spending the next hour going through everything on Ember's profile. It's not much. She keeps most of her shit private, and I'm not ready to add her as a friend yet. She's too unnerved right now to accept a request from a

stranger.

Which is the perfect time to strike her apartment. I scoot back from the desk.

Let the games begin, Ember.

I'm coming for that pretty little brain of yours.

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Chapter Six

EMBER

“ Glad you’re letting me get your lunch,” Josh says as we stand outside the food truck. “It’s the least I can do.”

I bite down on my lip, waiting on our order of street tacos. I usually offer to pay for my own, and then fight with him over it. Today, though, I’m spaced out, still trying to shake that stupid, creepy skeleton mask. Nothing can get it out of my head.

“Hey,” Josh nudges me, “Em?”

I jerk my head up. “Yeah, sorry? What?”

“Are you okay? You seem really off today.” His expression is one of concern as he studies my face.

“I just...” My voice trails off, and then I finally suck it up. “I think you’re right about me moving. Maybe I do need to live in a better part of town.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Did something happen?”

I hesitate, tempted to tell him about the creep, but I know he’d overreact. “I’ve just been thinking about what you said and I think you’re right, Josh,” I lie. “I think I should pick up a second job so I can afford it. It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

He purses his lips. "I don't see why you couldn't just move in with me."

I blow out an annoyed sigh. "I don't want to mooch off you."

"Good God, Em," Josh grumbles, just as our order is ready. "I'm so tired of you always thinking you're mooching off me. It sucks that you think of it that way." He grabs the two baskets of tacos and hands me one, before guiding me to an outdoor table.

"I don't want you to resent me," I tell him as he takes a bite of his chicken taco. "And I want to make it on my own."

"Okay, fine," Josh swallows. "Then pick up an evening shift at the bar. Just, let me walk you home, okay? It makes me nervous."

As much as I want to argue with him, I don't. "Okay. I guess it will be really late."

"Yeah, and I'll never let you work alone at the bar. I'm planning on hiring a couple of guys, regardless. Once I vet whoever I hire and deem them trustworthy, I'll let them be the ones who close up."

"That's not fair," I reason, picking up one of my tacos. "I don't want you to play favorites or anything."

"I do it for all the women who work for me. I won't treat you any differently, okay? Just please, let me have a little control for once." He looks exasperated, and I find myself feeling guilty for giving him such a hard time.

"Okay," I breathe out. "I'm sorry. I know I'm the biggest pain in the ass."

"No, you're not," he chuckles. "You're just you. I don't think I'd know what to do if

you were any different to what you are.”

“True,” I laugh, picking up my taco. As I lift it to my mouth, the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. My stomach recoils at the feeling, and my gaze darts around, searching for the source of the feeling. I don’t see anything out of the ordinary, but my heart thumps obnoxiously in my chest, rattling my insides as I force myself to take a bite and then glance nonchalantly over my shoulder.

There’s not a single recognizable person in view.

It’s just in my head. I swear. I brush it off, and finish my lunch, letting Josh have the last taco. He devours it, and then mentions something about going to the gym. He knows I won’t set foot in there, preferring to work out in the comfort of my apartment.

“It’s not nearly as intimidating as you think,” he says as he tosses the cardboard baskets into the trash. “In fact, I could go with you. We could be like a power couple—well, friendship couple.”

“That’s not weird at all,” I burst into laughter, shaking my head as his face grows red. “We don’t really have that kind of vibe. I don’t wear enough athleisure clothing, either. Seriously, I’d stick out like sore thumb.”

“You wouldn’t stand out at all, but...” Josh shakes his head as he nudges me. “Fair enough. I don’t want you to change at all. I like you the way you are.”

I meet his gaze, noticing it softening as he looks at me. “I’m glad someone does. I doubt the blind date I have will. You know how those usually go for me.”

“Blind date, huh?” His expression shifts and he looks away from me. “That’s awkward.”

“Rich’s idea,” I tell him with a shrug. “He says that this guy’s my type.”

“And what is your type, Em?”

I look up at him, cracking a smile. “No freaking idea.”

Josh falls into silence for a few beats, the sounds of the city around us filling the gap. I fold my arms across my chest, and scan the faces of the people we pass. I don’t exactly feel as if I’m being watched anymore, but the fact that someone showed up at my apartment complex means I’m not letting my guard down.

It was probably nothing, I remind myself. I just need to get out of that part of town.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Josh’s voice cuts through the noise. “I’m not convinced that something else isn’t going on. You were completely against working for me at the bar and now, you’re determined to move—and you love your apartment.”

I shut my eyes for a split second. “It’s not like that. I mean, it is. I did change my mind. I just had to think about it.”

“Your mom will be relieved,” Josh says, giving me a smile. “She’s been wanting you out of that apartment since you moved in.”

“Yeah, well,” I scoff. “I’m pretty sure my parents would love for me to move out of the city and never look back. They don’t think any part is safe.”

“It’s a valid fear,” Josh shrugs. “If I had a daughter—or even a son, I would be worried, too. My parents always just threw money at me as a way of showing they care.”

I eye him, guilt tugging at me at his mention of them.

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t complain.” I say.

Josh has never had a great relationship with his parents, and he’s not wrong. They don’t ever show up for him, they just send him a check. At least mine do try to be there for me, in all the normal ways, even though they live on the other side of the country. They just don’t have the money to do it as well or completely as they’d like.

Josh and I finish our walk at the bookstore, and we stop just outside. The sun beats down on my head, warming my scalp even with the brisk wind. We linger there, like always, though for some reason, I feel uneasy today.

“I’m worried about you,” Josh lowers his voice, extending a hand and brushing my arm. “Are you feeling okay? Maybe you should ask Rich for the rest of the day off.”

I shake my head, and my stomach lurches at the thought of going back to my apartment so early. “I’m fine, really. I’m just a little stressed and tired. That’s all. Like I said, it’s time for me to take you up on your offer to work at the bar.”

Josh narrows his eyes at me but then nods. “Okay... Okay. I won’t press any further. Just promise me that you’ll tell me if you’re in any sort of predicament. You know I have room at my place.”

“Of course.” I force a smile, and then jut my thumb toward the door of the bookstore. “But I really need to get back to work.”

“Right.” Josh runs his hands over his face. “Enjoy working with Rich. You know he has a crush on you, right?”

My brows skyrocket. “That makes no sense, considering he’s trying to set me up on a blind date. Seems counterintuitive.”

Josh frowns. "I don't know. Maybe it is. I just don't see how the whole world isn't in love with you." He lets out a chuckle, and then wraps me in a side hug. "Enjoy the rest of your day, Em. Let me know if you need anything."

"You got it." I pat his chest, breathing in the scent of his expensive cologne before stepping away and grabbing the door. "I'll talk to you later."

I pull open the door, and step inside the bookstore, breathing out a sigh of relief as soon as I'm inside once again. "I'm back," I call out as I chuck my purse behind the counter.

"Oh hey," Rich says, appearing from one of the aisles with a box of books in his hands. "You weren't gone as long as usual."

"Really?" I glance down at my watch, surprised to see he's right. "I guess they were just faster with our food today." I take a deep breath as he steps up to the counter, and sets the box down.

"Well, I guess it's as good a time as any to get these put out," Rich says, not commenting any further on my lunch. He pulls out stacks of new releases. "I swear, there's a new release every single day, it seems." He chuckles at his own thoughts, as he continues to empty the box.

I join him, picking through the titles. "Some of these look really good."

"Sure," he smiles. "Lots of romance. I know that's your thing." Rich eyes me with a grin, and I roll my eyes in response.

"I saw you with a few of them, too, you know."

"I have to keep up with what the clients are buying." He shrugs, and then we both

burst out laughing. I grab up a few of them and head to the shelves at the front, the ones that are visible from the street. With my back to the window, I start adjusting the titles on the white shelving that's adorned with fake ivy.

I glance down at the copies in my hands, opting for one of the romance novels first. I set the romcom on the top shelf next to a cover with a similar vibe. As I do, a strange feeling sweeps through my body, and I start breathing faster. My hands begin shaking slightly. Great, here we go again—I swear, if I turn around and see someone watching me, I'm officially giving myself the 'Queen of Paranoia' crown.

What is wrong with me? I shake my head, trying to ignore it all as I grow borderline annoyed with myself. However, the moment doesn't last.

"Fucking creep!" Rich shouts and slams down his books on the counter. He takes off running toward the front doors. A surge of adrenaline hits and I spin around. My gaze lands on a black-haired man in a hideous skeleton mask... just as he ducks and disappears into the crowd on the street.

"What the hell is wrong with people?" Rich grunts as he steps back inside and closes the door. He looks over at me. "That guy had a lot of nerve."

I nod, trying to keep my lunch down. "Yeah, he did." I can't find the words to say anything else. My head spins as I retreat from the window. Maybe it's just a coincidence. But something inside me tells me how wrong that is, and how correct Rich is. The guy does have a lot of nerve...

And it's fucking terrifying.

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Chapter Seven

JAXTON

The look on Ember's face has my dick rock solid. She was so fucking scared of me. I love that, and I already know I'm going to come so hard when I finally have her body beneath mine. I rub my hands together as I near her apartment, hanging in the shadows as I wait. I got the code for the door the other night. Now, I just have to make sure that jumpy, nosy old lady isn't going to fuck it up for me.

Or I could scale the building to her window. My gaze scans the brick wall as I imagine clambering up to the second story window. It would be a task, one that could lead to me breaking an appendage if I slipped, but it would avert a run-in with the nosy, cooky lady. I weigh my options and then opt against anything athletic. I also don't need a camera catching me climbing the wall. That's an automatic foul.

Anyway, I don't have an excuse for trying to enter her apartment through the window.

With that, I head for the front entrance, punch in the code and slip through the doors. I stay on high alert as I take the stairs to the second floor, eyeing every nook and cranny for signs of movement. I don't want to draw attention to myself. The apartment building is small, and that always leads to complications in my experience. People know who belongs inside and who doesn't.

I'm able to figure out which door is Ember's by directionally aligning myself with what I saw from outside, as I walk down the hall. There aren't that many doors to

choose from, anyway, and I stop at the second door on the left. It's not a coded lock, which makes it an easier entrance for me. I shove my hand into my pocket, and grab my lock-pick, trying the easiest method first.

Luckily for me it works.

I don't linger in the hallway, and quickly slide into the darkness of the currently uninhabited space. The hardwood floors creak beneath my weight, and I make note of that. I check the time, and then close the door behind me, sliding the deadbolt home. It wasn't locked before and might serve to trip her up when she gets home, but it's a warning I could need.

After my eyes adjust to the dim light, I frown. This place is an absolute shithole. There's barely any furniture, the TV might have a thirty-inch screen, and while the place is clean, there's only so far clean can help an apartment.

"Raise your standards, Ember," I mutter, shaking my head. I don't have the mask on anymore and I keep it in my pocket as I step into the tiny kitchen. A drip-drop of the faucet hits my ears like nails on a chalkboard, and I grimace, reaching out to the old stainless-steel sink and trying to put it to an end.

But nothing fixes it.

Grinding my teeth, I make a mental note that the next time I visit her, I'll fix that. I grab a cup from her cabinet and set it under the unsteady stream, at least silencing the problem for now. My cock strains uncomfortably against my pants as I head toward the bedroom and bathroom. The doors to both rooms are wide open and the scent of her—a musky, feminine scent—reaches into my lungs and fuels my body with desire.

I peer into the bathroom, and am once again disgruntled by the state of the place. The shitty one-person shower has cracked white tiles and, while it might be clean also, the

years of wear and tear have caught up with it. The sink has her makeup bag open on it, and is lined with other products. I know they're cheap, from the generic drug store brands.

I'll fix that for you, Ember. It's not something I usually do for my victims, but that's only because most of the time, they're already breaking the bank to have those things. This woman doesn't seem to care, and I find that intriguing. She's not my type. Nitpicky, controlling women seem to be who I go for.

I close the bathroom door, focusing my attention on the treasure trove of her room. It's much less bare than the rest of the house. It has a queen-sized bed with a wrought iron headboard, a rustic white dresser, two matching night stands, a bookshelf, and a black writing desk, which is shoved in the corner.

It looks as if she literally took as much shit as she could and crammed it into this tiny room. It shows where she must spend most of her time, and I have to turn my six-foot-four body awkwardly to maneuver around all of it. I begin the process slowly, taking my time as I pour over her things, opening drawers and searching for tidbits of information about who she really is.

Unlike my more recent, boring women, I find myself wanting to know this woman better. I'll be her secret keeper; the one that she doesn't have to hide her dark desires from—if she has them.

No, I reason with myself, everyone has them. I know it's the truth. I don't care what people think about themselves. They all have the capability to be dark and dirty. Some people just have that part of them so locked up they can't reach it. Or they are afraid to. And apparently, Ember doesn't like to have many personal possessions... even in the privacy of her own damned room.

I slam the second nightstand drawer shut, after coming across nothing more telling

than tissues and an empty notebook. I drop to my knees, and look beneath her bed. Immediately, I spot a broken picture frame. I drag out the five-by-seven photo. The glass is cracked across an image of Ember and an older version of herself.

“Mommy issues?” I ask aloud, taking in the perfectly styled blonde hair and make-up of the older woman. She looks like the kind of woman I’d target. Looking at Ember, covered in tattoos with edgy hair and a crude band T-shirt, it’s pretty clear that she’s not like her mother. “Black sheep then,” I affirm, tracing my finger along the cracked pane. I stare at Ember a little longer, suddenly uncharmed by the pristine look of the other woman.

Funny, how taste can change so quickly. Maybe this was what I was missing all along. Maybe I was meant for the misfits. I run my tongue along my lower lip and set the frame on the nightstand before reaching back under the bed. My hand lands on a small box, and I drag it across the shitty hardwood floor, a grin peeling my lips upward.

Aha. I flip the lid open, revealing a mixture of photos and knick-knacks. I start sifting through the contents, immediately turned off by the pictures of Josh and her—and seeing how far back they go. I set every single one with him to the side. In fact, any picture with her and a man gets set aside. No person with a dick is going to be in this woman’s memory box.

Once I make it through the pictures, I start sifting through the things, which mostly consist of concert tickets, bookmarks, jewelry, and other odds and ends that I can’t make sense of. I don’t like that.

I have to get close to her somehow for her to explain these things. I pick up a locket necklace, tilting my head as I stare at the silver heart. I pocket that one, and then return the other items to the box—minus the pictures of Ember and men, of course. Those go straight to the trash beside the desk. I hope she fucking finds them, too.

As I get to my feet, I hear the deadbolt turn in the lock, and I go still, my heart picking up with excitement. This is exactly what I live for. I race across the room, pulling open the top dresser drawer and grab a pair of her lacey red underwear. Then, I slip silently into the closet.

“Oh my God,” Ember groans as her footsteps carry across the apartment. “I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to wear, Megan.”

Shit. Did she bring a friend home? I listen, realizing that she must be on the phone. I settle back into the depth of the clothing, reaching into my pocket and grabbing the mask—just in case.

“I don’t usually go clubbing. You know that, I know that. Everyone knows that. Yet, somehow, that ’ s where I’m supposed to meet Dylan? How could he possibly be my type if that is where he wants to go.”

I take a deep breath, anger rolling through my body. Why the fuck is she going out tonight? It’s a weeknight. She has to work tomorrow. She should be at home, stripping down and touching herself for me. I flick my jeans open, sliding the pair of panties along my solid shaft. The silky material nearly makes me groan, and even if it’s been washed, it’s still touched her pussy more times than I have.

But that will change.

“I’m just going to wear the black dress,” Ember’s voice draws me back as I stroke my cock. “That should be good enough.”

I pause at that, realizing that I am standing right there in the fucking closet. I glance around in the darkness, trying to figure out where I could sink into the shadows. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The door is cracked, too, so the chances of her hearing me rummage around is highly likely.

“I don’t know. I’m going to shower first. I’ll text you.” Her voice edges with irritation that happens to mirror my own. Shifting slightly, I catch sight of her tossing the phone onto her bed. “ Ugh. ” Her shoulders drop. Her body is angled away from me. I stroke myself faster as she drops her jeans.

Come on, baby. Take it all off for me. I drink in the sight of her bare ass in a black thong, the material shoved between her cheeks like I’d like my cock to be. Then, she strips off her T-shirt, and I nearly come right then at the sight of her glowing olive skin.

Biting down to keep from groaning, I feel my orgasm coming as she slides off her underwear, bending over and giving me a full fucking view of her little pussy. It’s not glistening with my cum like it should be, but it doesn’t stop me from filling my hand with my climax. It’s a full fucking load of juice, and I cover the red fabric in my pants with it. Then, I wipe the remainder on the clothes behind me.

I’m going to be all over this fucking apartment before she ever even gets the privilege of my cock deep inside of her.

And I have never been more excited.

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Chapter Eight

EMBER

I step out of the shower and reach for my towel. I drape the turquoise microfiber material around myself, before starting the routine of getting ready to go out for the evening. I glance toward the closed—and locked—black bathroom door. Something feels off, and I blame the paranoia that has set in after that odd experience this afternoon.

It's just a weird coincidence, I tell myself as I begin the process of blow drying my hair. I spend the next thirty minutes focusing solely on getting ready, doing my hair and makeup. I go for a dark smoky eye and red lipstick, and then add waves to my blonde hair. It looks... decent, I suppose.

Leaving the towel wrapped around my body, I step out into the tiny hallway, my eyes scanning around me. Why the hell does everything feel off in here? I can't put my finger on it, and it's almost as if there's another scent in the air... But I can't be sure.

I try to brush it off, rushing to my bedroom to get dressed. My heart hammers in my chest for unknown reasons as I go for the closet, pulling the door open to reveal my clothes. I sift through them until I find the black halter-top bodycon dress, and then toss it onto the bed. I grab my red heels from the shoe rack and then I close the door. A chill runs down my spine.

I force another deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut.

“Everything is fine.”

I reach into my underwear drawer and pull out a red thong, and then pause at its dampness. What the actual fuck? I rip it out of the drawer, my nose scrunched in disgust.

Turning the material over in my hand, I stare at the creamy white liquid, my stomach jolting at the sight. Is that...?

“No, there’s no way,” I tell myself, my stomach roiling. I toss them to the hamper and try not to think about it any further. It has to be something else. Maybe I accidentally threw my underwear from today into the drawer? But... as I try to shake it off, my phone vibrates on the bed.

I scoop it up and stare at the message.

Unknown: Hey, it’s Dylan. Would you like me to pick you up for tonight?

I hesitate, mulling it over. I don’t like the idea of a stranger picking me up. I also don’t like the idea of having to walk anywhere right now—not late at night. I quickly text him back, accepting the offer. I mean, Rich knows him, so it must be fine, right?

Right. Better than chancing another encounter with the skull-faced weirdo.

For the next ten minutes, I focus on finishing getting ready and trying not to think twice about the underwear I found in my drawer. I’m not an idiot, and I know I’m really playing into my denial... But who the fuck would break in just to jack off on my underwear?

Skull-faced weirdo.

I ignore the shiver of disgusting excitement and adrenaline that rushes through my veins. As if I like that idea. I shrug it off and Dylan hits me with another text that he's waiting outside in his car.

Grabbing my crossbody black purse, I shove my phone into it, and race through my apartment, ensuring that I lock both locks. Both were locked when I got here, too. For some reason, that serves to make me feel a little better and I take the stairs to the ground floor. There's no way someone got past the keycode and both locks. Besides, it would require a key to unlock or lock it back up again.

Everything is fine. I keep repeating that phrase to myself as I step out onto the sidewalk and spot a black Cadillac Escalade. A window in the backseat rolls down, and a handsome, brown-haired stranger with gray eyes flashes me a smile.

"You must be Ember," he says, his deep gravelly voice tugging at my core. "This place really is a bit of a shithole."

"I know," I answer, not having even thought about how it might come across. "I'm working on getting out of here."

"Maybe Rich should pay you more," he chuckles, lighting up a cigarette as I walk toward the car. He opens the door, and climbs out. He's wearing a white dress shirt and pants. He looks phenomenal.

But way too pretty for me.

"I'll let you take that up with him," I joke, sliding past him and into the leather seat. The driver nods to me and Dylan climbs in beside me. His eyes rake over my figure, taking in the ink that runs down both of my arms.

"Where else do you have tattoos?" he chuckles, taking a drag and blowing a cloud of

smoke out the window.

I curl my lip up, trying to smile instead of showing my disgust. “No telling.”

He continues to chuckle, amusement dancing across his face as the car pulls away. “I like your fire.”

“You’re very forthcoming,” I say dryly. It’s not interesting to me. If anything, it’s borderline creepy, but I guess it’s better than skull-faced weirdo creeping around me. I turn my eyes toward the window as the car makes its way to a club on the other side of the city. It takes nearly forty-five minutes, and I spend most of that time avoiding conversation with Dylan.

And it shows.

When the car pulls up beside the curb of the VIP club, he slides out and opens the door for me.

“Well, let’s try to survive this night, I guess.”

I cringe at the sharpness in his tone. “Yeah, it’ll be fun.” I force a smile, looking past him and spotting Rich with a blonde. Relief pours through my body, and I add a bounce to my step as we make our way toward the two of them.

“You look nice,” Rich tells me, giving me a friendly side hug. “This is Sarah.”

I exchange greetings with the blonde bombshell, who has long tan legs running from the hem of her scanty white dress. I don’t know how she’s not freezing as there’s a cool breeze blowing tonight.

“This is one of the nicest places in the city,” Sarah says, eyeing me up. I can tell she’s

judging my Shein dress and Payless shoes, but I ignore it.

“You should’ve seen the shithole she lives in,” Dylan jokes, threading his arm around my waist without warning. “It looks like something straight out of a gangster film. God knows who’s getting shot.”

“Her neighbor got stabbed a few months ago,” Rich chimes in, frowning. “Maybe you should move, Em.”

“I would have to be able to afford that,” I say defensively. “It’s not that bad. Not everyone can afford a penthouse.”

“Not even me,” Dylan chirps. “But I can give you something better than that.”

“Hmm,” I mutter, scanning the crowd. I don’t see any familiar faces, and I’m tempted to text Josh and see what he’s up to, desperate for someone, who actually gets me, to be around.

We all engage in small talk as we make our way inside. Dylan is on some sort of list that gets up to the top floor. It’s what you would expect from some fancy fucking club, but it doesn’t impress me as I sip on my Shirley Temple.

I find a corner safe from the crowd as Rich and Sarah’s bodies grind against each other somewhere, and Dylan starts up a conversation with someone he apparently knows. I pull out my phone and go to Josh’s message thread.

Me: This was the WORST idea ever. OMFG.

Three dots immediately pop up on the screen, and I wait for his reply, trying not to look up and make any other eye contact. I just want to get out of this place ASAP. I thought it might be exactly what I need, but apparently, I’m wrong.

Josh: Need me to save you when I get off work?

Me: YES. PLEASE SAVE ME.

He sends a laughing emoji, and I lean back against the wall, desperately wishing that the time would pass faster. Dylan looks over at me and his face contorts with some sort of emotion—I don't think it's a good one.

I look away, peering down through my glass at the dancing crowd below. It's less cozy down there and, for some reason, there's an appeal to that. I glance back at Dylan, who's no longer looking at me, before I slip down the stairs, after downing the rest of my drink. The bass thuds over the speakers, even louder than upstairs, and I weave my way onto the dance floor, letting my body rock in rhythm. I'm not a dancer, but I can keep time.

Tipping my head back, I let my hips rock, and as I do, I feel a presence behind me. A shiver rolls down my spine as a hand grazes my waist.

"I never pegged you as a club kind of girl," a voice says from behind me, deep and distorted. I freeze, but the grip only tightens, dragging my ass into a rock-hard length.

My breaths pick up, shallowly gasping for oxygen as I tip my head around and am met with the sight of the skull-faced masked man.

"What the actual fuck?! " I nearly scream.

My heart throbs in my temple, and I try to pull away, but he hangs onto me.

"It's just a dance," he growls in my ear. "It's not as if I'm going to fuck you here."

My pussy reacts instantly, aching at his still distorted voice.

“Who are you?” I pant.

“Your date tonight,” he chuckles back. “That guy you’re with is a tool, and you know it.”

“And you’re a pervert,” I snap back at him, glaring into a pair of eyes that I don’t recognize. They’re cold, demeaning. And disturbingly exotic.

“But I guarantee, your pussy is already dripping,” he says, forcing my hips to move against his. “This is the boldest I’ve ever been; you know.” He brushes my hair away from my ear. “But I can’t stand to see you with anybody else.”

“You don’t even fucking know me, weirdo,” I shoot back, trying to spin in his grasp. He lets me, and then pins me to his chest. The bodies of the other dancers bump and grind against us, but his hands remain around my waist, not exploring but not budging either. His hard length is massive, and I can barely think about anything else as I peer up at the masked stranger. I can’t even make out his hair color with the hood up over his head. Somehow, he blends right in with all these people in the club, gyrating under the dark lights.

He grabs my chin, his grip tightening. “Dance with me, and I won’t take you to the dark corner and wear that little pussy of yours out. I’ll let you make it home safely.”

Fear, excitement, and disgust all mix together in the pit of my stomach. But as he grinds into me, I grind back, falling into the heat of the bass.

“Good girl,” he groans, spinning me around. Ass against his cock, I let myself slip right into his trap.

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Chapter Nine

JAXTON

Fuck me. She's doing exactly as I asked—and her unexpected submission is so empowering it's intoxicating. She sways against me, the back of her head resting against my chest. It's like she's dancing with the devil, and she doesn't even care.

I'm so fucking hard right now.

I keep my hands over her hip bones, inhaling the scent of her perfume and sweat. As I nudge her head to the side, I have a strong desire to slip the mask off and kiss my way down her neck. My grip tightens as her chest heaves and wants to be mask-free to wreak havoc on my mind. I never show my face, and I also never kiss the women I fuck and kill.

Fuck me. Fuck her. But fuck, I want this dress off her.

The soft curve of her ass—even through her dress—is a perfect fit for my cock. It pulls me in, so, I grind into her harder. Ember sucks in a sharp breath. It's a light, airy noise that escapes from between her lips. She actually wants me.

It's abnormal for the women I stalk and murder to moan like this. Of course, I'm off the beaten path of my normal protocol. I'd never normally approach one like this, not even with my mask on. I soak in the moment, my grip still ironclad on her hips.

“Can you tell me who you are now? And why you're messing with me?” Ember's

voice says, just loud enough for me to hear over the music. She tries to spin around to face me again, but I stop her—and I choose not to answer. I’m not trying to build a rapport with her. That’s not what I do under the mask.

“There’s a lot of girls in here who would probably let you screw them,” Ember continues into my silence. “You’re wasting your horny time on me.”

I chuckle. “I don’t see any other fuckable women in this club.”

“You must be blind then,” she snorts, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Call it one-track minded,” I growl into her, slipping my hand across her hips to her lower abdomen. She goes still as my other hand trails upward, sensing that I’m about to push her boundaries.

“You’re ballsy,” she pants, her head still resting against me, “To watch me in the window like that at work.”

Fuck, the hand necklace I want to give her. My heart races at the image of dropping her, unconscious, to the floor, and letting all the ensuing chaos begin in such a public place. There would be camera footage to show the public, but there’d be no identifying factors for me. The temptation pulls at me, drowning me as I snake my hand past the bottom of Ember’s dress, my fingertips against her bare thigh.

Her breathing slows as I slip my fingers beneath the hem, and I wait for her hand to stop me, but she doesn’t. She lets me. I’m more turned on than ever, my heart is chugging in my chest and my cock seeping under my jeans. I have only one burning question as I press my hands between her legs.

“Why are you not trying to stop me? You turn every other man away.” My voice is a little distorted by the mask, but even still, it rasps with sadistic lust. My touch trails

inward, pressing against her inner thigh as my other hand pauses for a split second over her breasts but doesn't stop until it's resting just beneath her neck.

"Ember, why?" I repeat when she says nothing in reply.

Instead, she rolls her hips, causing my hand to land right between her legs. I can't stop the groan from rattling my chest as her soaked underwear caresses my skin. My fingers twitch, eager to push inside her, and I relish the little whimper she makes.

She wants this.

Then, before I can go any further, I catch sight of someone familiar in the crowd. I take in the sight of that brawny friend of hers. He's scanning the crowd for Ember. Disappointment surges through me, and while I'd happily take the brute, it would be bad to hand the police someone on whom to pin their investigation. I'm the elusive, torturous shadow, and I must remain only in Ember's individual world.

"Shit," I breathe out, dropping my hands from her.

"What?" Ember spins around, her brows creased with confusion as I start to back away. "What're you doing?"

"We'll finish this later," I tell her, puzzled by the disappointment in her expression. It's as if she's actually hurt by my rejection. I almost laugh at the sight of her, all hot and bothered, but I don't have time for humor. I track backward through the crowd, and Ember takes a step or two toward me. However, the bustling, grimy crowd works in my favor, and it cuts her off.

I find a dark corner the neon lights can't reach, and settle in, immediately spotting my little flame. She's something else, and I can tell by the shift in her demeanor that she's still thinking about me.

Don't worry, Ember. I'll be back to finish you.

I slip the mask off, so as not to draw attention to myself, and remove my hoodie as well. I position them at the back of my body and now, to the rest of the world, I'm just hanging out, watching the crowd. I know that on the exterior I'm not creepy. I don't draw untoward attention towards myself.

My eyes stay on Ember as she walks across the dancefloor to the bar. She downs the drink that is handed to her. I sigh, frowning as one turns to four. She doesn't even realize that her buddy is still searching the place for her. I spot him in the VIP area, now speaking with the bookstore guy, his Barbie date, and the guy that was supposed to be the one fucking Ember tonight. None of them, except the bookstore guy, seem concerned.

If anything, Barbie and Ember's date look relieved when the brawny guy, Josh, leaves with bookstore Rich to go to the floor, presumably to search for Ember. It's striking, the number of men she has around her, although it's also difficult to be sure about their levels of interest in her. For her date tonight, it was a straight zero. The moment he saw her walk out of those shitty apartments, his mind was made up.

I purse my lips as my gaze lands back on Ember. She's searching the crowd now, looking longingly at the dancing bodies. I smile at that, imagining she's looking for me. I mean, she could still be thinking about the way my cock felt against her ass.

I could put it in your ass, Em. We'd just have to take our time to squeeze me in. The thought excites me strangely, though I'm not sure why. I've never bothered with long encounters before, but for some reason...

I want every single inch of Ember covered in me.

Swallowing my lust for the moment, I keep a close eye on her, watching those

desperate haunting irises continue to search the faces on the floor. I know that if she saw me, she might recognize me, but I doubt it.

Finally, Josh spots Ember, and she sees him. I watch her reaction closely, waiting for her eyes to light up or for the recognition to bring her relief, but... she looks disappointed. It's just a brief flicker across her face, but it's perfect—and it confirms that I've gotten under her skin.

Why don't I hate that though? I normally love toying with my victims, but not like this. I'm supposed to scare her, to slip into her nightmares and bring her nothing but fear and terror. Instead, I'm charmed by her seduction. Is she toying with me? Does she think that if she gives me her pussy, I'll suddenly change my mind?

That leaves me pondering, but only for a few seconds, because now Josh, in his tight-fitting, black henley and light-wash jeans, is slipping his arm around her shoulders protectively, while her date scoffs something in their direction.

I hate the gestures of both of them. I hate the primal protective glare on Josh's face. He's overstepping boundaries into my territory, but also... I can't make a move in front of them all, not wearing what I'm wearing. Not right now. Josh escorts Ember toward the exit, and Rich slips off with the blonde Barbie. That leaves Dylan alone.

My heart jumps into my throat. It's as if the universe is dangling a carrot right in front of a donkey. I'm going to fucking bite.

Dylan heads for the bathroom, and I follow, flipping my hood up and avoiding the cameras. I catch the door as soon as he enters.

"Easy there, bud," Dylan smirks arrogantly, eyeing me over his shoulder.

I don't give him a chance to even make it to the stall. I shove him forward as hard as I

can, before slamming his face into the wall. Blood spurts from his nose on impact, and splashes across the light gray tiles. I burst into laughter as he grunts in surprise.

“What the fuck!” he erupts as he spins around, but my fist is faster, as it makes contact with his jaw and splits the bone. One thing about being raised by a piece of shit mom, I became a hell of a fighter from a young age. I had to hold my own.

Clearly, Dylan, here, did not.

“Dude stop,” he groans, limply tossing a punch in my direction.

I continue to cackle, my low voice echoing. “You’re pathetic.”

“And you’re a motherf—”

“Nah, I don’t fuck mothers,” I sneer, grabbing the back of his head and smashing it into the corner of a sink. “But I’ll bet you are.” With that, I knock him unconscious, and then let his body drop violently to the floor.

He’s still alive. His breathing is shallow and ragged and, as much as I intended to kill him, I know better. It’s never good to kill spontaneously. It always ends in a police investigation that I have to escape. It’s too complicated and I don’t want Ember on that radar either.

Speaking of Ember, I still fully intend to pay my little flame a visit tonight. I glance down at the blood on my knuckles and consider washing it off in the sink, but then think better of it. Maybe I’ll wash my hands in the arousal straight from her pussy.

The thought has me panting like a fucking dog as I slide out of the bathroom and head for the exit. I’ll have to be quick. My phone buzzes in my pocket, I ignore it. I already know who it is, and I really don’t have time to worry about him.

He can wait.

I need to finish what I started tonight.

Chapter Ten

EMBER

I can't stop thinking about the skull-faced weirdo on the dance floor—who I'm not even sure I can call a weirdo anymore. I was so fucking turned on. I'm still turned on, so much that I'm desperate to scratch the burning itch pulsing through me. Maybe it's the alcohol that's heightened it, but maybe not. I don't know, but I do know I'm ready to be home alone.

"How much did you have to drink?" Josh's voice starts to grate on my nerves. "You seem really drunk. Did he spike your drink?" I roll my eyes while he steadies me when the train comes to a stop.

"He didn't spike my drink," I reply, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. "He only bought me one. I bought the others."

"Good God," Josh grunts. "You probably spent forty dollars on drinks." He holds my arm as he helps me up, shaking his head. "I'll give you the money back."

Gritting my teeth, I rip my arm away from him. "I don't want your fucking money, Josh. You always treat me like a charity case, and that's not what I am."

He falls silent, and then he catches me as I stumble forward. My cheeks redden with embarrassment, and I look away from him.

"I don't know why you stick around," I mutter, my words slurring slightly as we head

up to the exit. “I’m sure I’m annoying as hell.”

“You’re not annoying,” Josh chuckles. “Frustrating, maybe, but not annoying. Life isn’t cut and dried, you know?” He smiles down at me, his eyes warm and his gaze softening. “I just wish you’d realize that you’re special, Em.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Oh my God. I’m really not. Just shut up.”

We both crack up into laughter, as we exit the train station into the coolness of the night. For some reason, when I’m with Josh, I don’t fear what might be lurking in the dark shadows. There was a time that I actually thought that meant there was something more between us, but then I realized that he was just safe—like a brother or something.

“You should call in sick to work tomorrow,” Josh says carefully. “You’re going to need to sleep this off.”

“Nah,” I shake my head. “That’ll never fly with Rich now that Megan isn’t working all the time like she was before.”

“Right,” Josh sighs. “Well, I have to interview a couple of guys. They’ll probably start around the same time you do. I’m trying to get a good feel of them. I don’t want to hire anyone who’s going to give either of us problems.” There’s a sudden hardness to his tone, and I consider it, but then don’t think any further as we reach my apartment building.

Josh punches in the code for me. “I’m going to walk you all the way up.”

“Why?”

“To make sure you don’t end up sleeping in the hallway or something,” he replies

flatly, dragging me inside. I let him lead me, but I trail behind him, my mind wandering to the skull-faced man. My pussy aches, as I recall the way his touch brushed against my underwear. It was strikingly soft and gentle.

I bite down on my lower lip, tripping over a step.

“Jesus, Em,” Josh grunts, catching me. “You need to get to bed.” He huffs with annoyance as we finally reach my apartment door. He pulls out his set of keys and unlocks it with the spare he has. He pushes the door open and helps me inside, before leading me to the bedroom.

“Do you need any help?”

I stagger away from him, my breath hitching as my eyes land on the broken frame sitting on my nightstand. “Sorry... What?”

“Never mind,” he mutters, stepping behind me and tugging on the zipper at the top of my dress. “I’ll just help you, then.”

I can’t pull my eyes away from the picture of my mom and I. It had fallen off the nightstand and busted one day when I was cleaning. I hadn’t gotten a frame for it yet, and so I’d just stuck it in a box under my bed. I’m certain I didn’t set it on the nightstand.

“Em?” Josh tugs my dress down off my shoulders. “You okay?”

I blink a few times, trying to process everything. “Uh, yeah. Yeah. I’m fine. I got it.” I grab the straps on my arms, and then shoo him out. “You’re good. I’m home safe now. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Are you sure?”

I turn to face him, noticing the genuine concern etched in his expression. “Yeah, I’m just super tired right now. I got it.”

“Let me at least get you something to change into.” He turns to my dresser and pulls out an oversized T-shirt. “Here. I’ll lock up behind me on the way out.”

“Deadbolt, too,” I say as I take the shirt from him, still holding my dress up with one hand.

“I always lock the deadbolt,” he says flatly. “You need a hell of a lot more than that, but whatever. I’ll feel better when you’re out of this shithole.”

“I know, and I will be soon,” I say, forcing a smile.

“Right.” He sighs, and then heads for the exit of my apartment. I drop my dress and unhook my strapless bra, letting it all fall to the floor. I pull the T-shirt over my head and go straight for my bed, trying not to look at the picture frame as I slip by it.

Maybe I put it there. But even in my drunken state of mind, I know that’s not the truth. I didn’t put it there. I know I didn’t. I hear Josh turn the deadbolt, right as I close my eyes, and I am suddenly aware of my solitude. My skin crawls with goosebumps as I consider someone’s having been in my apartment... but who?

I know the answer already. Skull-face.

My pussy comes to life, and I’m met with the memory of his thick cock pressed into me. A small whimper escapes my lips as I slide my hand down my abdomen. I’m not someone who regularly entertains my fantasies, but I’m so turned on right now.

I slide my fingers under my underwear, keeping my eyes shut to avoid staring into the pitch black. I try to imagine his lips on my skin, even though I don’t know what he

looks like. It wouldn't matter. I'd take him regardless. His voice was commanding, even with the mask muffling it.

I flick my clit, and let out a moan that fills the silence. My back arches as arousal pours through my body, swelling between my legs.

That's when I hear the creak of my closet door.

Fear tremors through my body, but I justify it as the old apartment making noises. I'm so close to coming that I don't want to stop, and I pick up my pace, driving a finger inside of myself.

"You couldn't wait for me could you."

A whisper makes me freeze, and my eyes flutter open to take in the sight of a tall, broad shadow lingering at the foot of my bed. I see the skull-face in the small amount of light glinting off the grayish hue.

"How..." I can't even get the words out as he flips the covers off the bed.

"Shut up," he whispers, his voice hard. "Roll over onto your stomach." The tone of his whisper is heady with lust and desire.

And I do what he says.

My heart thuds with nervous anticipation of what's to come. Face down in the pillow, I feel his weight at the end of my bed. Warm, heavy hands grab my thighs, and pull my ass into the air. The cool air causes me to tremble, and he chuckles as he slaps my left cheek with a force that causes me to cry out.

"Look at you," he sneers. "Ass in the air, begging for me to do what I want with you."

Why aren't you desperate for the other men? Huh?"

"I... I don't know," I answer breathlessly as he spreads me open. It's a fucking good question, and I can't answer it. I really don't know why. All I know is I want him to do whatever he wants—even if I have no idea why.

Kink unlocked.

He glides his fingers from back to front, diving them into my pussy as he reaches it. I squeeze my eyes shut and pant at the fullness, realizing he's already stretching me with two or three fingers.

"I'm twice this size," he groans, pressing deeper into me, and I can't hold back a moan as my body responds to him. My hips instinctively arch toward his hand, craving more. "But I'm afraid that once I fuck you, baby, it's over for both of us."

I whimper as I feel his hot, warm, and wet tongue circle my ass. "Oh God," I moan out. He grunts as he drops lower, covering me with his tongue. I nearly fall right over the edge, and he grips my thighs tighter, burying his face between my legs. I rock back, pressing myself against him, writhing to work myself to the orgasm I'm now desperate for.

The stranger drops his hand from my pussy and then wraps his arms around my thighs, lifting my entire body into the air and causing me to straddle his face. I gasp in surprise, realizing how exposed I am. However, his mouth on my clit causes the nerves to dissipate. He sucks so hard that I cry out, and I finally explode, my orgasm rolling through my body in waves and making my legs shake uncontrollably.

"Oh fuck," he growls into me, lapping up every drop my body gives him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, a mixture of regret and embarrassment flooding through my

body as the high recedes. What the hell am I doing? He broke into my apartment. A jolt of fear sends my heart racing and I try to wriggle free from his grasp.

“What’s wrong?” he chuckles, dropping my legs down to the bed. I can barely hear his voice over the ringing in my ears, and I scramble away from him. When I make it to my headboard, I stop, turning to face him and pulling my knees to my chest.

“Why the fuck are you in my apartment?” I demand, a chill running down my spine as my eyes land on the skull mask, already back in place.

“Really?” he retorts, his voice muffled once again.

I wrap my arms around my knees tighter, a burst of new fear hitting me as he comes toward me, his large figure looming over my head. His hand juts out before I can stop him, wrapping around my chin so tightly I whimper.

“For a woman who just willingly put her ass in the air for me and got the best orgasm of her life, you sure aren’t acting very thankful,” he sneers arrogance dripping from his voice, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Get the fuck out of my apartment,” I match his tone, spitting venom despite the fear pulsing in my veins. “ Now. ”

He bursts into a fit of laughter, and then drops my chin. He gets to his feet and starts for the door, but pauses at the threshold of my bedroom, glancing back.

“You’ll never get rid of me, little darling. From now until death, I’ll be the last thing you see when you close your eyes.”

“I’m not your darling,” I snipe out with anger.

With that, he disappears, stopping only to lock the door behind him, gifting me a mocking laugh before he leaves. My skin crawls as I hear the deadbolt turn, and I know it's imperative that I change the fucking locks.

ASAP.

Chapter Eleven

JAXTON

I want all of her.

All. Of. Her.

I pound my fist into the tiled wall of my shower, not even wincing as blood trickles from my knuckles. I don't fucking care. I want to shove my dick so far into her pussy that she feels it in her chest. But, normally, I only do that when the time comes for the kill.

And sometimes, not even then.

I didn't do it with my most recent kill. I was too bored with her. I wrap my hand around my cock and stroke furiously, desperate to evoke some sort of satisfaction. I squeeze my eyes shut, bringing the taste of Ember's pussy back to my mind. My breathing picks up as I immediately ejaculate into the palm of my hand.

"Fuck!" I shout out the word, fury thrumming through my chest. I don't even feel as if I came at all. My cock is still rigid and unsatiated. My phone alarm goes off, and I shut off the water, plucking the phone off the sink where I left it just within reach.

Time for therapy.

"Great. Just fucking great, " I mutter. I consider skipping the appointment. It's bad

enough that my uncle is in town, a fact I learned from the texts that he bombarded me with while I was busy with Ember.

Wouldn't it be something to date her in real life? Take her to meet my fucked-up family. I cringe at the thought of carrying out such a task. I've never had a real-life girlfriend. I've never had sex with someone consensually, and no one has ever lived to tell the tale either.

I frown at that, and then spend the next ten minutes getting dressed; pulling on a pair of dark jeans and a white T-shirt. I style my hair and glare at myself in the mirror, taking in the ink on my arms and the way I don't look like such a pretty boy without wearing long sleeves. No, the stubble along my jaw quickly eliminates that assumption as well. I shove my wallet into my back pocket and head out for my appointment.

"Jax," the doorman gives me a nod when I make it to the lobby and head out into the street. It's a short walk to the therapist's office and, for the duration of that time, I consider Ember, working away in that shitty little bookstore. I could give her more than that, although I have to admit that I admire her tenacity to thrive and wallow willfully in her poverty.

"Hey," a voice causes me to stop in my tracks.

I spin around to see none other than the reason my balls are blue.

"Hey..." I keep my voice light, pretending like I don't know who she is.

"Did you ever give those books to your mom for her birthday?" Ember's eyes are alight with curiosity.

I rub the back of my neck, reminding myself that she heard my voice last night. I

have to be careful. “Yeah, I did. You’re the girl at the bookstore, right?” I add, like it just dawned on me.

Her smile fades slightly as she fingers the leather strap of her cross-body bag. “Yeah, that’s me. Sorry if I was being creepy.”

I laugh, rocking back on the heels of my black Vans. “Nah, not at all. Brave to confront a near stranger on the street.”

Her cheeks blush a deeper crimson. “Oh God, I’m sorry.”

‘Oh God, oh God.’ I hear her cry out in my head. The people shuffling around us become a blur as I take her in; her dark, skinny jeans clinging to her hips, her Converse mirroring my casual shoes, and her hair pulled up in a high ponytail. It’s fucking cute, and I can’t stop imagining fisting that hair into my hand. But also...

Why is she in this part of town?

“You wanna grab a coffee?” I blurt out before realizing what the fuck I’m saying. “There’s a nice place just up the street.”

Her brows shoot skyward, as if she’s surprised. “Really?”

All the sirens about me doing something wrong are going off in my head, but there I am, ignoring them.

“Unless you’re supposed to be at work,” I say carefully, halfway digging into why she’s not there.

“I called in sick,” she laughs, raking her fingers through her hair. “I had a bit of a long night.”

I bet you did.

“Mm, I get that,” I respond, fighting the urge to ask for details. “Must be why you’re on the other side of the city.”

“Nailed it,” she laughs, her smile reaching her eyes this time. “And I could go for some coffee—if you have time, of course.”

Who needs therapy?

“Yeah, I was just heading there,” I say coolly, nodding in the direction I was traveling. Luckily for me there is a coffee shop a few blocks down from the therapist’s office. Ember gives me the sweetest fucking grin, and falls into step beside me, stealing glances in my direction.

She’s attracted to me, even maskless me.

“So,” I clear my throat, gazing down at her and ignoring the ache of my cock. “Why a bookstore?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a sigh. “I’m actually fixing to take on a second job as a bartender.”

For brawny boy, Josh.

“Ah, I see,” I answer. “Me too, actually. I just interviewed for a position.”

“Oh? Where?”

“The Golden Dog,” I answer, already knowing her reaction.

“ Seriously?!” she exclaims. “That’s where I’m working!”

“No shit?” I feign total surprise. “That’s crazy. I just spend a lot of time in the area, so I thought it would be cool.”

“I hope Josh hires you.” She giggles like a little kid, and I’m not sure what to think about it—mostly because it rattles my fucking chest. She’s so naïve right now, and I find it... cute.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Never mind the fact that I’ve already accepted the position. I need to know this Josh guy better, and this was by far the easiest way to do it—though I was hoping that Ember wouldn’t be around for that. I didn’t know she was going to work for him, too.

I grab the door handle and pull the door open, holding it for her.

“After you.” I gesture for her to enter and I take in her ass as she steps into the hipster coffee shop. I appreciate the round shape, smiling to myself as I know exactly what it looks like without the denim covering it. I blow out a sharp breath.

Be normal. Be cool. Play this right.

I’m careful not to touch Ember as we step up to the counter to order. Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to have as much contact as possible, but there’s also the issue that I’m not sure how close I want to get to her this way.

“What can I get you?” the barista asks the two of us.

“I’ll have a caramel macchiato,” she answers, and then looks up at me.

“Just a small black coffee.” I ignore the way she raises her brows at me. I step up to

pay for the drinks, swiping my card.

“Thanks,” Ember says, her voice meek for whatever reason.

“Yeah, only fair when I’m the one who asked,” I tell her, shooting her a lopsided grin.

Her cheeks blush, and I wonder what’s going through her head as we scoot down the counter to wait for the coffees to be ready. I shove my hands into my pockets, trying to keep my heartbeat steady. I’m a calculating, conniving serial killer. Not whoever the fuck she thinks is taking her to coffee, but...

But I feel way out of my element right now.

“Here you go,” the barista slides them across the countertop, and I pick them up, holding Ember’s out for her. We find a table in the back and take a seat. Her back is to the door, while I sit facing it.

“So, Xander,” she says, taking a sip of her hot drink. “Are you a native to NYC?”

I hesitate, unprepared for these kinds of questions. I clearly didn’t think this part through. “Kind of,” I answer her honestly. “My mom moved here to live with my uncle when I was in high school. Originally, we lived in Connecticut, though. You?”

“No,” she says, letting out a sigh. “My parents live on the other side of the country, in Utah.”

“Utah?” I can’t hide my surprise. “You don’t seem like someone from Utah.”

She narrows her eyes. “I don’t know how to take that, but okay.”

“You seem like you’re from the city, is what I mean,” I chuckle, running my finger across the fine dust on the tabletop. I cringe, the tidy perfectionist in me is instantly sickened. “It’s a compliment.”

“Oh,” she says, blowing out a puff of air. “I guess I always assume the worst.”

“Fair enough.” I force myself to take a sip of the bitter liquid. I never go out to get coffee. It’s always disappointing—and this time is no different. But I don’t show it. “Tell me more about yourself. All I know is that you spend a lot of time reading.”

She laughs. “Not really. I don’t have as much time to read as you’d think.”

“Oh?” I raise a brow. “So you haven’t read the books you recommended?” And I threw them away in the trash.

She visibly shrinks in the chair, eyes darting down to her cup. “Guilty.”

I can’t help it. I smile. “Hey, whatever the job calls for. No judgment from me.”

“Thanks,” she mumbles, her confidence waning right in front of me. I tilt my head as I study her for a few beats, catching her eyes down on her drink. She’s so incredibly confident in front of everyone else I’ve seen her with... Why is she doing this with me? I can’t decide if I like it or not.

“If you’re not reading or working, what do you do in your free time?” I feel like I’m reciting online suggestions for a first date—and this, well, this isn’t a fucking date. Er. Maybe it is? I don’t know.

“I hang out with my friends,” she perks up. “My best friend, Josh, owns the bar you interviewed at. He’s been my friend since college here in the city.”

And he's in love with you.

"It's good to have friends like that," I say instead, feigning support.

She nods eagerly. "He's always been there for me. I don't know what I would've done without him, so many times. Moving to the city from a small town was really tough at first. I'm thankful I did it in college, though."

"I bet," I say, just as my phone begins to ring. I pull it out of my pocket and see my uncle's name on the screen. Shit. I hold up a finger. "I should probably take this."

"Oh, yeah, of course."

I push back from my chair and step away before answering. I do not want her to catch even a single word of this conversation.

Chapter Twelve

EMBER

I stare after Xander. His back is turned to me as he speaks softly on the phone. I don't know where my courage came from when I recognized him on the street, but it's the perfect distraction for my mind right now—and trust me, I need one. I'm in the middle of a crisis.

A fucking moral crisis.

I let a masked stalker face and finger fuck me and, as much as I want to say I was drunk, I know damn well that I was sober enough to know what was going on. I wanted him to do it, and even now, the thought of him between my legs sends a tingle of excitement through my body.

I'm so unbelievably fucked up. I nearly groan as I pull my eyes away from Xander, the nice, way-too-hot-for-me stranger. If the poor guy knew what I'd done to fuck my head up so badly that I didn't feel like going to work, he'd probably sprint out of here—and never give me a second look again.

“Sorry about that,” his deep, velvety voice cuts into my thoughts. “It was my uncle.”

I tilt my head back, taking in the way his warm eyes linger on my face. It's as if he likes what he sees. “No problem at all. I should get going, anyway.”

His brow furrows. “Oh,” he says, disappointment in his voice. It makes my heart

flutter. “Maybe we could continue this another time?”

Pursing my lips, I push back from the table and get to my feet. “Yeah, maybe. If you want to. I have a lot going on in my life right now...” I can’t meet his gaze as the words slip from my mouth, so I focus on his chin—his perfectly dimpled chin, hidden beneath a light layer of dark stubble. As painfully attractive as he is though...

I bet he can’t fuck like Skull-face.

“I guess I’ll just see you around then,” Xander breathes out, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Maybe I’ll get the job at the bar. We can at least be friends.”

Oh God, he thought this was a date... And here I am, ruining it. Had I not had a sexy creep between my legs last night, I’d be elated right now. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“I...” my voice trails off as I try to conjure up the words I want to say to him.

“It’s all good.” But he still frowns at me and then drops his eyes away, picking up his coffee cup and heading toward the door. Within just a few seconds, he’s slipping out of the coffee shop door and walking off down the street.

Shit. Shit. Shit! I leave my coffee on the table like a horrible person and dart through the shop, weaving in between tables until I reach the door. I shove it open and take off in the direction I saw Xander go, scanning the crowd for him.

But he’s nowhere. Well, I mean, he’s somewhere, just nowhere that I can see. I walk a few blocks in that direction I thought he took, my shoulders slumped and then, finally, I give up. So fucking stupid, Ember. You could’ve ruined it with someone you’re actually interested in. I let out a sigh, angry with myself for all the reasons...

Including the fact that I still want the skull-faced weirdo to show back up in my life. And this time, maybe he'll have the balls to fuck me.

And potentially murder me.

"Ready for your first night?" Josh greets me with a massive smile as I step through into the empty pub.

"Yeah, of course." I feign a smile, like I didn't spend all day wondering why my creepy stalker was no longer hanging around. I mean, I told myself last night I'd change the locks, but...

"You seem distracted. Are you okay?" Josh asks as he holds out a hand towel. "I know you took the day off from the bookstore. I was hoping that helped."

"Yeah, it did," I lie, and then am gruesomely reminded of my ruined coffee date. "I also met one of the guys you interviewed."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Oh?"

"Yeah," I say quickly, sensing the need to downplay the encounter. "But it wasn't anything special. He came into the bookstore to get a few things for his mom's birthday, and then I ran into him on the street when I was trying to stay away from the area, to avoid Rich."

"Ah," Josh says, blowing out a sharp breath. "Well, I interviewed four guys, and only extended an offer to two of them. I let the other two know we were going in a different direction."

I nod, acting as if I'm not trying to recall exactly what Xander said. "He seemed nice—like you two might get along." The shot in the dark was meant to draw Josh out, but instead, he only shrugs.

"Let's get your training over with. Those guys won't start until the weekend, anyway." Josh waves me over to the register, and then—for the next forty-five minutes—gives me the rundown of everything, including showing me the list of names that we don't serve.

"What did these people do?"

Josh chuckles, folding his arms across his chest, which shows off his pectoral muscles straining against the fabric of his black henley. "Most of them didn't pay. Some of them are fighters—they come in and they like to pick a fight with anyone that will look them in the eye. I try to avoid those types... And this guy," he pauses as he extends his arm to gesture to the name. "This guy is a fucking creep. He's followed women home from here more than once."

I stare at the name. Jaxton Banks.

"Noted," I say as my stomach does a flipflop in my gut. Could a guy like that be the one stalking me? Since it's happened, I have not considered the fact that more than likely, I'm not an isolated event. I'm just one of many.

Ugh. Gross.

But I still feel my pussy ache at the thought of him there again, bending me over and whispering dirty things.

"You really are out of it." Josh nudges me as he heads around to the front of the bar. "We open in ten minutes, so hopefully, you'll snap back once the customers start

showing up.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” I tell him, giving him a sheepish smile. “I think I just drank too much last night.”

Josh pauses, stopping at the jukebox. “I don’t know that you drank any more than you usually do when you go out, but yeah, I guess. That guy was a prick. I can’t believe Rich set you up with him.”

Right, Dylan.

I laugh, wiping a rag along the counter. “I knew from the moment he picked me up at my apartment that it was not going to work. He was judging me so hard.”

Josh’s face tinges red. “Why the hell would you let a stranger pick you up from your apartment, Em? That’s just asking for something bad to happen.”

My brows shoot upward. I was not expecting that reaction. “Well, I mean, it’s not like I didn’t know who he was. He’s Rich’s friend.”

“Yeah, and you can’t trust anyone in this goddamned city,” he snaps at me, just before kicking on the music. “That’s the problem with you, Em. You’re too trusting of people. You think everyone has good intentions and, in reality, most don’t.”

I open my mouth to spit out an argument, but just then the door swings open and the first bunch of patrons come in. It’s a group of two women and three men, and Josh greets them with a kindness that makes me wish I hadn’t mentioned the date with Dylan.

For the next seven hours, I fly on autopilot, making small talk and serving drinks, wiping tables, and generally helping Josh out to the best of my ability. Nothing

exciting happens, and no one does anything more to me other than compliment my old band T-shirt and talk about the city. It's a relief and serves as a great distraction from my strange day. However, by the time we hit closing, I'm fucking exhausted.

Josh locks the door after the final couple slip out of the doors. "Easy night," he says to me as he turns back to me. "Just as a warning though, it's not always like this. There's usually always someone who tries to be stupid."

"Maybe the universe knew I needed an easy night," I joke, grabbing a rag and wiping down the counter.

"Maybe," he says flatly. "Do you want me to take you home from here? I don't think you should be traveling across this city this late at night. I don't like that idea at all."

"Um..." My eyes drift to the glass, taking in the dark streets outside. They're mostly empty, with only a few stragglers making their way home. "I..." My voice trails off as the shadow of a figure steps into my view and I catch my breath.

"What?" Josh says, his back to the glass.

I stare at the skull-faced man, lingering just outside. "Um, yeah, I think I will take you up on the offer to drive me home." I swallow the knot in my throat. If Skull-face is going to get me, I want it to be in the comfort of my apartment— not in a dark alleyway somewhere.

Josh nods in my peripheral vision. "I wasn't going to let you walk home alone, anyway. At least now I don't have to force you into my car." He laughs, shaking his head as he grabs a broom and starts to sweep up. "Once the other guys start working, we can let them close up and I'll take you."

"Or one of them could take me," I say, my voice quiet as I remain locked in on the

man pressed against the window. “If they’re trustworthy, of course.”

“I guess,” Josh grunts, sweeping up a wad of napkins. “I swear people make such a fucking mess. I don’t even know how they do it.”

“Yeah,” I nod, just as Skull-face slips out of sight again. A shiver rolls down my spine, and I struggle to keep my breath even as I join Josh in the clean-up.

“Why don’t you tell me more about the guy who follows women home from the bar?” I suggest.

Josh chuckles. “I take it you’re in the mood to be scared shitless then.”

“Or hellaciously bored,” I counter.

He stops, looking up at me mid-sweep. “Jaxton is the son of a wealthy tech mogul here in the city. He thinks it’s his right to take whatever he wants—women included. He found my bar about a year ago, and got into the habit of coming in, sitting down, drinking one beer, and then following a pretty girl out of here. He was charged with first degree rape when he was seventeen. Seventeen, Em. That’s fucked up.”

I nod, my stomach feeling sick. “Yeah, that’s super fucked up.”

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Chapter Thirteen

JAXTON

I just know brawny boy is going to take her home tonight and, honestly, it pisses me off even more. Ember turned me away today, and I got to feel the brunt of what it's like for all the other guys who aren't good enough for her. So tonight, I'm taking what's mine.

I linger outside in the shadows, waiting for Josh and Ember to step out into the street. I'm positive her little buff bodyguard is going to either drive or walk her home, and I'm prepared for either scenario.

"Why don't we walk?" Josh throws out the suggestion. "I know I said I'd drive you, but it's nice out."

Ember wraps her arms around herself, scanning the area. "Um... I mean..."

"Come on." Josh finishes locking the door and shoves the keys in his pocket. "You're always telling me that you'd rather walk."

I scrutinize her carefully, smiling to myself as her pretty hazel eyes dart around. She's looking for me. I know she is.

"I think we should drive," she finally says, her voice quiet in the empty street. "I just have a bad feeling."

Josh stares at her for a few minutes. “A bad feeling, huh? Well, that’s even more of a reason to walk. I’ll prove to you that I can handle anything.”

Bro, get your ego in check. It’s already in the stratosphere. I nearly laugh out loud at Josh’s asinine comment. If there’s anything I’ve learned in my time of lurking in the shadows, it’s that anyone can get themselves “unalived” under the right circumstances. And I’m sure that Josh is mostly bark rather than bite...

Though he does have something about him that makes me question just how far he’d go to have Ember. She might be oblivious to it, but I’m not. He’s into her, and I see the way he manages her.

I don’t like it.

“Come on,” Josh repeats, threading his arm through hers. “It’s all going to be fine. Besides you don’t have work at the bookstore, tomorrow, so getting home a little later shouldn’t make a great difference.”

“I really haven’t been sleeping well, though,” Ember shoots back at him. However, she does let him start to guide her down the street.

“How come?” he asks her.

I miss the next part of the conversation, too busy trying to slink along behind them. There really isn’t anyone out on the streets, so if I show myself, they’re going to notice—and that would ruin my plan. I’m a figment in Ember’s life, and only in a way that should make her doubt if I’m really there at all.

I like my women a little crazy, I guess.

My Vans are silent on the concrete as I drift a ways behind them. Part of me was

hoping they'd just take the damned car, so I could walk without having to slink like this, but it is what it is. I keep my distance for the near hour the walk takes, too far back to hear their conversation.

When they reach the apartment building, I slip into the alleyway, giving me the familiar sight of her window. I wait for the light to flicker on, and for Josh to load up in the Uber that shows up a few moments later. As soon as the car pulls away from the curb, I head around to the front, punch in the code and slip inside.

I take the stairs two at a time, my cock already straining against my jeans. I'm not going to go slow with her this time. I'm taking what I want and then I'm ending it.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I kind of like the idea of coming back for more—if she doesn't fucking report it to the cops.

When I reach her apartment, I try the knob, and to my fucking shock, the door is unlocked. I can't decide if I'm flattered or concerned. For all I know, this might be me walking right into a trap. I take a deep breath, and push the door inward, letting the creak of the hinges split the silence.

I ease into the apartment, and the blackness settles in all around me. There's not a single light on in the place, and I shut my eyes as I swing the door closed. It clicks loudly in place. If she doesn't know I'm here by now, then she's either got headphones in or she's deaf.

Flipping the lock behind me, I ease forward, heading toward her room. Excitement and anticipation pulse in my veins, and my cock is desperate to be let loose from my

pants. I can't fucking wait.

"I see you're back," a voice says as I step over the threshold of the bedroom. "I figured you'd show up."

"Hmm," is all I say, unable to read Ember's tone as she sits, her back propped up against the headboard. She's wearing just an oversized T-shirt again, and her bare legs are begging me to spread them apart for me.

"How many girls have you followed home and fucked?"

Whoa. Where is this brazen question coming from? I stand in silence, trying to guess why she'd even care to know such a thing.

"There's a list in the bar," she continues. "It made me think of you. There's a guy on there who is no longer allowed inside, because he follows women home from the bar."

I chuckle, biting back a smile at the jealousy. "Not me, little flame." I distort my voice under the mask to sound deeper, and Ember whips her head around to glare at me.

"So then why are you following me? Do I know you?"

I hesitate on that question. As much as I like to play these little games, sometimes, too much information is dangerous. "I know you," I say, taking a step toward her.

She doesn't flinch with fear, and instead takes a deep breath, blowing it out sharply into the bedroom. "Something is wrong with me."

Yeah, okay. Join the club. But I entertain her. "Why?"

Ember stares at my mask, her eyes flickering with longing and desire. “Because I want you.”

Holy fucking shit. I nearly explode in my jeans as the words leave her mouth, and I take advantage of the moment, going straight for her. I wrap my hands around her ankles and drag her to me. She lets out a whimper as her ass hangs off the edge of the bed.

I spread her legs apart, grinning as I see her clean-shaven, bare pussy. She wanted this to happen. With two fingers, I graze her center, and her body shivers at my touch. With my other hand, I undo my belt and set my cock free.

“Holy...” Ember’s voice comes out in a small whisper, and I chuckle.

“It’ll fit,” I rasp from under my mask. I stroke her clit, drawing out moisture until she’s glistening with need, her hips writhing against me. I don’t let her orgasm, though. I want that feeling around my cock. I’ve never had that happen before.

No one has ever been willing.

A war of arousal rages inside me as I lean over her, pressing my bare tip against her clit. She lets out a moan as I slide through the wetness, catching my breath as I coat myself in her. My heart pounds in my head as I pause at her entrance. I should wear a condom. I have one...

“ Please, ” Ember’s whine breaks my thoughts, her tone thick with desire. She rocks her hips forward, needing more. So fucking desperate.

Why does she want me? The intrusive thought flashes through my mind like a warning sign, but still, I press into her. A deep groan slips from my throat... Her pussy is so fucking tight.

“ Oh God, ” she cries, her voice trembling. “You’re so big.”

“You can take me, baby,” I rasp, my hands locking in around her hips as I drag her further onto me. I’m about to fucking blow just being inside of her, and the way she’s... begging for me.

I thought I liked it when they said no.

But it’s got nothing on the please rolling off her lips.

I slowly push the rest of the way into her, burying myself entirely. I stop as my lower abdomen contacts her bare skin, and then I shift my grip from her waist to her thighs. She squirms against me, her desperation for me to give her relief powerful.

“Get used to this,” I growl as I press my weight into hers. “Because it’s the only cock you’re getting.”

She whimpers and I slide out slowly, feeling her body relax. However, as my tip reaches her entrance, I ruthlessly slam back into her. Ember’s whimper morphs to a near scream, and I tighten my grip around her thighs. I want to hurt her, break her, bruise her, mark her as mine.

“ Oh fuck. ” She clings to the comforter as I thrust into her, feeling her pussy stretch for me. She’s going to be sore tomorrow, and I hope she feels the phantom sensation of me being deep inside of her. For the rest of her short life.

Ember peers up at me, biting down on her lip as I pound into her. “Harder.”

I raise my brows, even though she can’t see it. It’s a fucking challenge, and the monsters beat their chests in my head as I do exactly what she asks me to. I slam into her with all the fucking force I have, each thrust harder than the last. Her wetness

spills between us as choked moans escape her, fueling my sex-driven rage and turning it into a sickening desire to fuck her into oblivion.

My body slaps against hers as my grip breaks her skin. Droplets of blood roll down her flawless, pretty skin, and I lose it at the sight. With a growl from hell itself, I explode inside of her, filling her to the brim with my cum.

She moans at the sensation, her own orgasm clenching down around my cock. I linger inside of her, shutting my eyes and taking in the foreign sensation. It feels so fucking good, I could reach down and strangle the life right out of Ember...

But that means that I wouldn't get to have her like this again.

"Holy shit," Ember breathes out as she tries to pull away from me. "That was intense." A giggle slips from her lips, filling the silence.

Why the fuck is she laughing? Is it at me?

I grow rigid, my lip twitching with uncertainty. Maybe this is why I kill them. I guess in the end they all fucking laugh at me from wherever the hell I sent them to. I drop Ember's legs and lean over her, sliding my hands up her body.

I'll show her who gets the last laugh.

She tips her head back, moaning as I reach her breasts beneath the shirt. "This is the best sex I've ever had, and if people knew, they'd think I was crazy."

I pause, realizing my mistake.

She's laughing at herself.

Chapter Fourteen

EMBER

S kull-face rolls my nipples between the pads of his fingers, and a fresh burst of arousal floods my pussy. A light moan escapes from my lips and the post-sex giggles quickly fade away. My back arches, but before I can go any further, he pulls away.

“Goodnight, Ember,” he mutters, his voice distorted. With that, he turns away, slipping out of my room and consequently my apartment. The door slams behind him, and I jump out of bed, before running to the front door.

I grab the handle, intending to pull it open, but then I stop myself. Why the hell would I go after him? Why do I care that he left so abruptly?

The answer is... I don't.

Well, that's what it should be. Yet, as I roll the deadlock into place, disappointment and confusion are panging in my chest. I should feel scared, relieved, and violated—all of the things that come from someone's breaking into my apartment and demanding sex with me. Instead, I'm pining after him.

And he clearly did not give a shit about that.

He ran out of here as if I did something wrong. Did I do something wrong? I bite down on my lower lip and spin around, pressing my back to the door. As I rest there, moisture oozes from between my legs, further serving to remind me that not only did

I have sex with the man in the mask but I had unprotected sex.

I'm so freaking stupid.

I creep back to my room, knowing the door is locked, and I climb into bed. I'd heard him come in so easily; either he had a key or I forgot to lock it in my fatigue induced stupor. I pull the covers up to my chin, breathing in the scent of my laundry detergent mixed with another more masculine scent.

I have to stop letting him touch me.

The thought bounces around my head as the reality of my situation tugs at my common sense. I'm being reckless and, although I've never been someone who lives in a state of constant fear, I've also never been the type to just throw caution to the wind. I mean, this guy could kill me. He's already breaking and entering and having sex with me—what else is he capable of? Would he have still forced me to have sex if I'd have said no?

The questions swirl around in my head with no answer, and I wrap my arms around my spare pillow, clutching it to my chest. Every little noise sends a jolt of fear through my body, but by some miracle, I'm able to fall asleep.

“My God, you look like a ghost,” Megan drawls as I step into the bookstore, barely able to keep my eyes open.

I brush the hair from my face. “I started a second job last night. It's just going to take some getting used to.”

Megan frowns and her eyes follow me as I walk around the counter and drop my

things to the floor.

“Girl, I don’t think you should be getting a second job if it’s going to run you so ragged.”

I pat her arm as I slip past her and head for the coffee machine.

“It’s not that big of a deal. I just had trouble sleeping last night.” I keep my focus away from her, the sore sensation is a constant reminder of what I let a stranger do to me. I take a deep breath and kick on the machine. “It’s just working for Josh,” I add, glancing back at her. “Not a big deal.”

“So you finally gave into him then?” Megan shoots me a funny look, her red hair pulled half-up and her makeup dark around her eyes. She’s basically a grown-up goth girl and, while I admire her style, I’d never have the energy to put in the amount of effort she does. The thought makes me feel even more fatigued.

“Em?”

“Huh?” I realize I’ve zoned out, just staring at her face. “Oh, sorry.” I shake my head. “Um, yeah, I guess I gave into letting him hire me.”

“You know he’d pay you for absolutely nothing. I don’t know why you’re so honorable.”

You would not be calling me that if you knew what I did last night. I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, and grab a Styrofoam cup, filling it with dark liquid. “I don’t want Josh to pay me for no reason. You know that. He’s my friend, not my sugar daddy.”

She bursts into a cackle. “He’d keel over in fucking joy if you asked him to be your

sugar daddy.”

“No way.” I roll my eyes and dump a load of creamer in and stir the coffee. “We’ve been friends way too long for it to be anything more.”

“That literally means nothing,” Megan counters. “You can be friends with someone your whole life, and not realize what’s right in front of your face until later. I’ve seen it happen plenty of times.”

“Yeah, like when? In the movies?” I turn to face her, sipping on the coffee. I glance down at my Hidden Books shirt, which just so happens to be wrinkled beyond repair this morning, and use my free hand to try and smooth out the wrinkles.

“Weren’t your parents like friends forever before they got with each other?” Megan throws it out, and I cringe.

“That was different though. My mom always had a crush on my dad, and vice versa. They just didn’t realize it until they were older. I don’t have a crush on Josh. I never have and I never will.” I say the words with confidence. Josh is a handsome guy by all standards, but... It’s just not there for us. “He’s just like my family.”

“Yeah, family that wants to fuck you,” Megan snorts, just as the doors to the bookstore open. A couple of older ladies enter, heading for the historical fiction section, and I let out a sharp breath.

“I’m going to go grab that box of new releases and set them out,” I tell her, taking a sip of my coffee and walking away.

She makes another off the wall remark, but I don’t catch it—nor do I want to. Megan is one of my closest girlfriends, but there’s a reason I don’t let her in on the really personal stuff. In fact, I can’t think of anyone I let in on the personal stuff. If I did

have someone I could trust with that kind of information, I would be blowing up their phone over my new stalker problem.

I glance over at the ladies, giggling as they pull out a novel I don't recognize. I open up the door to the back, weaving through a few boxes. Rich keeps way too much on the floor, but I've learned to just deal with it. Then again, maybe if he hyper-focused less on his inventory, he would be able to pay Megan and me better.

Then I wouldn't have to work for Josh. I frown at that, feeling guilty. I should be more thankful to Josh, but I hate it when someone harps on about the two of us being together. It used to happen a lot more to him—back when he hadn't grown into himself—and he would complain about it constantly. Now, I never hear a word.

I lean against the break-room table in the drab, dimly lit room as I finish the rest of my coffee, and then I reach for the small cardboard box with today's date on it. It seems as if there's a box of new releases for damned near every day. I keep wondering when the store is going to run out of room.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I fish it out, seeing Josh's name lighting up the screen. Ugh. You know I'm at work. I almost don't answer it, but then force myself to—just in case it's an emergency.

"Hey," I answer.

"I just wanted to make sure you made it into work," he chimes on the other end. "I know I had you out late last night. I think I'm going to put you on an earlier shift. I'll stay behind with one of the new guys to close up. I'll pay for you to Uber home."

I let out a sigh, instantly annoyed by his parental tone. "I'll work whatever shift you'd like for me to, since you're my boss."

“I just don’t want you out that late on a regular basis. You won’t get enough sleep.”

I press my lips together. “Well, it’s not as if I’m a kid—or that I’m going to be doing this long term. I just have to make it work until I can move.”

“Why is that you’re suddenly so determined to move?” The question leaves my stomach churning, and the pain I feel between my legs with every movement is the real answer. However, I’m not so sure it would solve the problem.

“I’m just ready to move to a better neighborhood,” I lie. “I thought I told you all of this?”

“Yeah, I just...” He pauses for a beat or two. “What if I paid you just as much as you make at the bookstore? Then you could just work here, and it’d be a hell of a lot easier on you.”

I squeeze the cup so hard the Styrofoam cracks. “I don’t want to leave here, and not to mention, I think it’s illegal to do something like that.”

“It’s not,” he laughs. “But I get it. You want to keep working at the bookstore. It’s fine. Meet me for lunch at least?”

I smile. “Yeah. I can do that.” With that he hangs up, and I try not to let myself feel offended by his offer. It’s as if he heard the exact fucking conversation between Megan and me. Honestly, he’s so dead set on helping me out of my situation, it’s probably all he ever thinks about.

After tossing the cup in the trash, I scoop up the box and carry it out into the store, eyeing the women who are still lingering by the shelves. I mean, I could spend all day long looking at books, too, but it’s a luxury I don’t have anymore.

“Some guy came in here looking for you,” Megan says as I set the box down at the foot of the main new release table. “He was hot as fuck.”

I furrow my brow. “What’d he look like?”

“Uh... Not your type.” She bursts into laughter, but my heart flipflops.

“Come on, just tell me,” I urge, thinking of how little time has passed between then and now. “Why didn’t you tell him to wait?”

“I told him he could, but he didn’t.” Megan shrugs. “But, um, he had this pretty boy look about him, I think. I don’t know. Tall, broad shouldered. Maybe a little creepy? He was in a hoodie, so I couldn’t make out much else. Clean shaven. Reeked of money trying to hide money.”

“Odd description,” I mutter, turning back to the table as my cheeks flood with heat.

It almost sounds as if all he was missing was the mask.

Chapter Fifteen

JAXTON

I should've killed her before the thought of killing her started to bother me—but how was I supposed to know that was going to even happen? I've never regretted snuffing the life right out of anyone. But I've also never been able to come by sticking my cock in someone either.

It usually takes death to get me off.

I take a long sip of my coffee, staring at the sign Hidden Books. I shouldn't have gone in there in this state, but I couldn't see her through the window—and I needed to make sure she'd made it to work okay. Why do I even care? I shudder as I walk away from the bookstore, heading in the direction of the restaurant where my uncle demanded I meet him.

The walk will take me only fifteen minutes, and all I can think about is Ember as my shoes pound the pavement. I don't know why she's under my skin like this. Sure, I'm obsessive, but it's about ruining the stupid whores for existing...

Not because I'm intrigued by their very existence.

Maybe I should put a little space between us. I laugh out loud at the high-school-puppy-love thought. But seriously, I might actually need some fucking space from her. I can't even imagine wrapping my hand around her throat right now, and that's troublesome to my unempathetic brain.

I get to the Italian cuisine place and peel my hoodie off from over my head. I had to shave this morning, just for this fucking meeting.

“Name please?” the hostess asks without even looking up.

“Marks,” I grunt, smoothing out my dress shirt. I hate meeting up with my fucking uncle.

She looks up at the name, taking me in. There’s judgment saturating her expression, but I ignore it, unfazed by the way she waves at me to follow her without saying a word. Her black heels click on the tile floor as she leads me to a private dining room.

“In here,” she mutters, swinging the door open.

I don’t thank her as I step inside. I catch sight of my uncle, getting up from the table in his Armani suit, his dark hair slicked back. Roman Marks looks like a drug king pin. Not a soul would ever guess that he owns a chain of domestic car dealerships—well, and a drug smuggling business as well. Someone might call that one.

“Jaxton,” he greets me, raising a brow. “I see we’re still struggling to dress appropriately for business meetings.”

“This isn’t a business meeting,” I snap, not shaking his hand before I take a seat at the table. “I’m not interested in getting involved in the family business. I thought I’d made that clear. I’m not going to feed people’s addictions.”

He’s unamused. “But you’re perfectly fine feeding your own, yes? Because let’s not forget who’s been covering your ass for the past six years. It’s getting old, Jax. You need to find something else to do.”

“Like lines of cocaine? The same shit that fucked my mom up for years.” I fold my arms across my chest. Call me a fucking hypocrite, but I’ll happily murder a bitch over helping some tweaker get their next fix.

“I don’t know why you’re so stubborn,” he grimaces. “Your father would be disappointed.”

“And why should I care what he thinks? He’s six feet under and probably burning in hell right now.” I pick up a glass of water and take a sip.

“You’re where you are financially because of his inheritance.”

“Cool,” I say. “Maybe he shouldn’t have gifted me all that. It’s not my problem that he didn’t sign it over to you.”

My uncle rubs his eyes and sighs. “I don’t want your father’s money. I have my own. I’m glad you have it—just like I was glad to take in you and your mother when she couldn’t keep herself sober.”

I sigh, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. I hate these kinds of conversations. “She only got hooked because of my father.”

“She was a junkie long before he came along. He spent years trying to get her ass clean, and you know as well as I do what kind of woman your mother is.”

“She’s the same as the rest of them,” I grunt, my gaze dropping to the table. “They’re all worthless.”

“Mm, till you meet the right one,” he chuckles. “And you’re gonna have a hard time explaining your hobby to her.”

I cringe inwardly at that for some reason. “I won’t ever have to explain it.”

“I know you’re interested in a girl who works at a bookstore...” A wicked grin pulls at his mouth. “Or is that just another hobby? ”

My heart thuds an extra beat. “She’s just another hobby.”

“What a fucking shame. She’s pretty.”

“How do you even know about her?” I ask.

“It’s my job to clean up after you, Jax. If I’m not one step ahead, then I’ll get royally fucked. I keep thinking this charade is going to end, but I’m starting to question that thought.” He leans back in his chair as a waitress appears, to pour him a new glass of wine. He thanks her, orders for the two of us, and waits for her to leave.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, sighing. “I’m doing what you want. Therapy. Staying away from your side of the city. I’m not breaking any of the rules you’ve set in place.”

“Consider this me checking up on you,” he says, crossing his own arms across his chest, mirroring me. “I want you to get a job—just fucking do something with your life, Jax. I’m tired of you spending all your time playing Ted Bundy.”

“I don’t lure random girls into my car,” I joke.

He glares at me, his gaze menacing. “Same thing in my book.” He’s got more blood on his hands than I do, but he’s a different kind of killer. If he gets a hard on from dismembering bodies, I’d never fucking know it.

“I want you to do something else. I’ve given you years to figure your shit out. I’m

done.”

“Well, lucky for you, I got a job,” I snap, pushing back from the table. “And I don’t need your fucking charity meal.”

He rolls his eyes. “What’s the job?”

“Bartending,” I quip, waiting for him to have some kind of reaction.

His face stays stone cold. “I see. I’d guess this is in connection to your hobby, yes?”

I hesitate. “Kind of. She works there.”

“That’s quite ballsy, Jax.” He frowns. “It’s not a good idea, though. You’ll put yourself on the radar. You’ve always been more methodical and invisible than this.”

“Okay, yeah, but this girl...” I trail off when I realize how stupid I sound, and I get to my feet, suddenly feeling suffocated in the private dining room.

Clearly, my uncle is intrigued now.

“What about her? Is she finally waking up that dead heart of yours?”

“No,” I mutter. “I’m just more curious .”

“Tell your therapist.”

“Fuck no,” I spit back at him, shaking my head. “He’ll call the cops, and you know it. He can’t know shit about me.”

“He already does, dumbass. Why do you think I hired him?”

I ignore that comment. “I got shit to do. I’ll see you later.”

“Maybe ask her on a real date instead of strangling her, kid,” he laughs after me, and I cringe as I storm out. I’m overreacting. Being emotional. I hate that. It’s abnormal for me. I don’t need to have this kind of thing going on. It’ll cloud my judgment, and I don’t want that.

The hostess gives me the stink eye as I slip out into the street, and I run my hands over my face. I have a shift at the bar tonight, and I have to be ready to face Ember, as the guy who bought her a coffee—and then was fucking rejected. I can’t act as if I know how tight her pussy is.

I swallow hard at that thought, my cock growing rigid and my mind running wild. I head back toward my penthouse, thankful that shadowy facial hair will line my jaw by the afternoon. I don’t want Ember to see me with my pretty boy face. It’s obnoxious, and she’d immediately be turned off by it.

That’s the man behind the mask.

My stomach lurches at my uncle’s mention of someone finding out about me. It’s annoying being so fucking messed up in the head. I’ve never tried to get close to someone as myself, while also intending to harm them.

He’s right, it might be a mistake.

I could just let her go as far as stalking goes... But I don’t like the idea of being just another rejected friend of hers. I run my fingers through my hair as I make it to my apartment building.

“Jax,” the doorman greets me with his usual nod, and I slip past him, wondering who my uncle has on his payroll to keep an eye on me. He’s got the whole city under his

thumb and, as much as I dislike the guy, he's the reason I'm probably not locked up in a cell somewhere.

Though I probably should be. I laugh at my own joke as I step into the elevator. My phone begins to vibrate in my pocket and I fish it out, expecting it to be my uncle, trailing me to verbally assault me for leaving.

But no.

It's my fucking narcissistic mother. I hesitate, but then I answer.

"What?" I demand.

"I got the books you bought me for my birthday. They suck. Maybe you should return them and get some new ones."

"Maybe you should just say 'thanks' when someone buys you something," I seethe into the phone. "It's rude to complain about a present."

"You have enough money to buy me a lot more than just a couple books, Jax, honey. I thought I raised you to take care of your family. This isn't what that looks like."

"I pay your fucking rent, your utilities, and make sure you have groceries." I step out onto my floor. "You're lucky that I do that. I think that's more than you deserve."

"Wow, okay," she answers, her tone full of false hurt. "I guess I'm just a burden to you then. Never mind. You don't have to pay my rent."

I bite back the urge to scream at her, but instead, I keep it cool. "Okay. That's fine. You can live on the fucking street then."

“God, I had no idea I’d raised an asshole.”

“Yeah, fuck you, Mom.”

I hang up then and, as soon as I step into my apartment, I chuck the device across the apartment. It shatters on impact with the corner.

It does not make me feel better.

Chapter Sixteen

EMBER

It's been over a week since Skull-face last showed himself, and I hate that I feel disappointed. I should be reveling in the lack of stalking, but there's not a single chill has run down my spine since that night. Either I'm going numb, or he got what he wanted. I swallow the disgusting hurt, and push through the entrance into the bar.

"Hey!" Josh calls over the light music starting to play in the background.

I look up, and immediately catch my breath. But it's not at the sight of Josh. It's Xander, standing a few feet behind him, wiping down a glass. Fuck, I forgot how handsome the guy is. There's another blond guy behind him, also wiping glassware.

"We're fully staffed tonight, which is great as there's a private costume party being thrown in here," Josh continues, as I slip behind the bar. "They specifically asked that we not be in costume, so don't get any ideas." He shoots me a wink as I grab a towel, before tucking it in my back pocket.

"Must be upscale people," I joke, trying to avoid the gaze that's heating up my skin.

"Yeah," Josh laughs. "Anyway, Look. I know that it's just been us lately, so let me introduce you to the two new guys that I hired." He gestures to the blond. "That's Major. We went to high school together, and this is Xander. He's local to the city as well. He's cool."

I nod, smiling at the two of them. “Nice to meet you both. I’m Ember.” I extend a hand, and Major readily takes it, before shaking it.

“Josh has told me so much about you. It’s nice to finally meet you.” He gives me a handsome grin, but it does nothing for me.

I smile at Major and then turn to Xander, trying to keep my heart rate in check. “Nice to see you again,” I force out, trying not to choke on air. His tattooed biceps are rock solid, and covered in black ink. His five o’clock shadow adds to his rough appeal, and I try not to stare too long.

Why on earth did I fuck the dynamic up between us?

“Right back at ya,” he quips, but then returns his attention to the glass in his hand.

“Cool, everyone is good to go now,” Josh laughs, but then he grows serious. “We’re going to run two drink stations . One here, and one over there.” He points to the other, smaller bar. “I’ll stay right here at this bar with Major. Ember and Xander, you’ll work the small one.”

I feel my face flush with heat, but try to hide it. “Sounds good.”

“Great, because they’re lining up outside. Get a move on.” Josh shoos me out from behind the bar, and I walk across to the smaller counter on the other side, noting that it’s fully stocked. Josh opens the door, letting in a whole group of women clad in scanty costumes that barely cover their bodies.

Oh boy. This is going to be fun.

“Kinda cramped over here,” a voice cuts through my thoughts along with a strong masculine scent of sandalwood and leather.

“Yeah,” I breathe out, forcing myself to look up at Xander, whose shoulder is only about a foot from mine. “This’ll be fun.”

He chuckles. “I think so, but we’ll see.”

Within fifteen minutes, the bar is packed, and I’m making drinks so quickly that I don’t even have a chance to talk to Xander, who I’m becoming more and more aware of with every passing brush of his arm against mine. It takes two hours for things to slow, and when everyone is good and liquored up, I finally have my chance.

“Hey,” I turn to him. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for rushing out on you before, when we got coffee.”

“It’s all good,” he answers, pouring us two shots of tequila. “Water under the bridge.” We clink glasses and down the shots. I sputter at the burn, and he chuckles. “Not used to shooting it straight?”

“I guess not,” I cough.

Xander quickly pours me a water and slides it across to me. “I won’t do that again. Sorry.” He gives me a sheepish grin, and I try not to stare at the way his black T-shirt clings to his muscles.

I sip the water, and wave him off. “It’s okay. I’m just having an off week, I think.”

He raises his brows. “Yeah? What’s happened?” There’s something soothing in his voice, which is just loud enough for me to hear over the hum of the bass.

I hesitate, running my finger across the slick counter. “Um, it’s kind of hard to explain.”

“A breakup?”

My cheeks flush. “I’m not sure I could call it that. I just kind of got hung up on this guy, and then he ghosted me.”

“Damn, that’s cruel. I took this girl out for coffee and then she kind of did the same thing.” His joke sets me giggling, overcome with guilt and relief at his playful tone.

“I’m so sorry.” I place my hand on his bicep lightly. “I messed up doing that. My head was just all over the place.”

“Seems like it still is.” He grins down at me. “But lucky for you, I don’t mind giving second chances to my friends.”

My smile falters slightly. “Right. Look at you, being so kind.” I instantly drop my hand from his arm, inwardly chiding myself for even thinking that he’d want to look at me in any other way, given that I just alluded to a breakup.

Dammit, I’m so stupid.

I swallow hard, relieved that one of the partygoers is approaching the bar. It’s a woman in a bralette and sheer black shirt, with handcuffs attached to her leather skirt.

She goes straight for Xander, naturally.

“Hey Handsome,” she says, leaning against the counter, her ample breasts—something I don’t have—spilling out of her top in a way that makes me jealous.

“What can I get you?” Xander asks, his eyes remaining on hers.

“Out of here,” she giggles, her breasts jostling as her chest heaves. “But for now, maybe just a Shirley Temple?”

“Got it,” he says, immediately beginning to make the drink.

“I’ve not seen you in here before,” she continues. “I used to come here all the time with my boyfriend, but we broke up about six months ago.”

“I’m new here,” he answers, sliding the glass across the bar to her. She places her hand on his forearm, her long manicured nails dragging across his skin. He instantly pulls away. “Enjoy.” He leaves her cold, and she stares after him as he slips off to the bathroom.

“Wow, he’s an asshole,” she turns to me, shock still apparent on her face. “I’m sorry you have to work with that.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I clear my throat, staring at the spot Xander slipped off to. I consider going after him, but hesitate, not wanting to leave the counter unmanned. Luckily for me, he returns in just a few minutes, jumping right back into serving customers.

“What’re you doing after this?” Xander asks randomly, hours later as the party begins to thin out.

“Going home to sleep,” I sigh. “I have to work at the bookstore in the morning.”

“Oh shit, the bookstore,” he gives me a sympathetic look. “That’s tough.”

I shrug, studying the way his lips appear so fucking alluring. “It’s what I have to do to get out of the shithole I am living in.”

“I get it,” he says, grabbing a glass and wiping it down. “How far are you from here?”

“Like a forty-minute walk.”

“Damn,” he mutters. “That’s a long way. You want me to give you a ride home? I rode my Ducati tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say quickly, embarrassed for some reason at the thought of him seeing where I live.

He holds my gaze, making my breath to catch. “Why not? Just means you’ll get home quicker.”

I swallow the knot in my throat. “Okay. You just have to promise...”

“Promise, what?” Xander looks confused.

“Nothing,” I say quickly. We fall back into work for the final hour, and then Josh lets the two of us go.

“I’m giving her a ride home,” Xander tells Josh. “Promise I’ll get her there safe.” He pats Josh’s shoulder, and reluctantly, my best friend agrees.

Josh turns to me. “Text me when you make it. I’ll call the cops if you don’t.”

“Deal,” I salute him, and Xander and Josh chuckle. Xander holds open the door for me and leads me around the corner to a black Ducati. It’s dimly lit beneath the street lights, but I don’t feel uneasy in the slightest, not even as I slide the helmet over my head and climb onto the back.

“Hang on tight,” he warns me after I give him the directions. I cling to him, breathing in the comforting scent of his cologne. I swear, I could bathe myself in it, and for the first time in a week, I don’t think about Skull-face and his big dick.

I keep my arms wrapped around Xander's waist for the entire ride, wishing I could melt into his body. After only ten minutes, he pulls up alongside the curb of the apartment building and kills the bike's engine.

"Thanks for the ride," I tell him, swinging my leg over and pulling the helmet off my head.

"I'll walk you in," he offers, removing his own helmet and taking mine. "Just to make sure you make it all the way in."

I linger in his gaze for a few moments, my body shivering with something familiar. "Um, okay. I guess that would probably make Josh happy."

"I doubt it," he chuckles from behind me. I lead the way to the front door, and punch in the code. I'm so fucking nervous, waiting for him to say something about the shithole apartment complex I live in...

...but he makes no comment as he climbs the stairs behind me.

My heart rattles my chest, and when I make it to my apartment door, I shove the key into the lock and turn it, opening the door slightly before turning back to Xander, whose gaze is on me.

"Thanks for getting me home," I say, my voice wavering with nerves.

"Thank you for letting me," he murmurs, his eyes dropping to my lips. I can barely breathe as he takes a step closer. "I don't know what the policy is, but..." His voice trails off as his fingers thread through my hair and draw my mouth to his.

I eagerly let him in, his tongue hungrily claiming my mouth. I moan as he pulls me into his chest, and my hands cling to him, much as I did earlier on his bike.

Something about kissing him hits deep, and I cling to him as our kiss grows heavier and more desperate. I kick the door to my apartment open with my heel, tugging him inside, but he goes rigid.

“I’m sorry, Ember,” he whispers, pulling away from me. “I can’t.”

Rejection rips through me.

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Just a heat of the moment thing,” he tells me, clearing his throat and smiling. “I don’t really want to be a rebound. Goodnight, Ember.”

With that, he turns away, leaving me there in the threshold of my apartment, completely speechless.

And totally crushed.

Fuck me.

And fuck Skull-faced Stalker.

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Chapter Seventeen

JAXTON

My hands sweat at my sides and my cock strains against my jeans. I want her so fucking bad, but Xander has the same cock as me—and she'd fucking know it the moment I shoved it in her tight little pussy. Her memories of me are too fresh in her mind. It wouldn't end well. I'd have to kill her.

But I should do that anyway.

That's why I started this.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, already changed into a different pair of jeans and my black hoodie. It covers the ink on my arms that I know she'd recognize. I'm going back as Jaxton Marks, the shadow she lets between her legs so goddamn easily. I run my fingers over my facial hair, knowing that the mask will irritate it, but it is what it is...

I need to fuck her.

"And maybe finish this," I say under my breath, my head spinning. I don't like the way I'm feeling—the way I'm starting to think a lot harder about my uncle's suggestion of dating someone for real. I don't need that in my life. I know women are conniving little freaks that I don't want any part of...

But damn, if Ember doesn't have me going crazy.

I take a deep breath and throw my backpack over my shoulder before heading out of the twenty-four-seven convenience store and back into the night. It's nearly four in the morning, and I know I'm risking blowing my cover, especially if I can just... do it.

I can find another Ember.

My stomach reacts strangely to the thought as I hang my backpack on the handles of my motorcycle, which is parked a few blocks away in a much better area. These days, CCTV footage can spot almost anything, and I'll already be on some footage around the building for dropping her off on the night she was murdered. A shiver of excitement hits me at that, my mind conjuring how much fun it might be to play a role in a police investigation. I bet ole Uncle Marks would be so thrilled to be a part of that. I grin to myself as I pull on my skull-faced mask.

Here we go. I punch in the code to the apartment building as per usual, and make my way inside, keeping an eye on the nosy-ass neighbor's door. She hasn't caught me again, since I started this escapade, but I don't want to take any chances—not tonight. I insert the master key I'd copied into the lock of her apartment, and push open the door, careful not to make too much noise.

I click the door back into place and lock both the knob and the deadbolt before slinking toward the open bedroom door. I don't know why she always leaves the door open, her body stretched out in the open beneath the covers for my viewing pleasure. My black gloves feel as though they're restricting the blood flow to my hands, but I know all the blood is in my fucking dick right now.

Ember's sigh cuts the silence as I linger in the door.

"Why are you back?" Her brazen way of speaking to me is so different to anything I've experienced before.

“Why?” She repeats herself.

I sigh into my mask. “Because you thought you were going to move on with someone else.” I nearly laugh at the irony.

“I thought you quit watching me,” she says, her tone dry. “I figured you’d gotten what you wanted from me.”

“God, the mouth on you,” I growl, irritation stirring in my chest.

Her warm hazel eyes are tainted with desire, and maybe even... hurt? Why the fuck would she be hurt? I glare down at her as I make my way to the bed, and then rip the covers off, tossing them across the room.

“You don’t scare me.”

“I should,” I grab her chin, digging my gloves into the side of her face. If she notices the new addition to my wardrobe, she doesn’t mention it. “You should be pissing yourself with fear the moment I step in the room.”

“Why?” she manages to mutter through gritted teeth. “You leave as soon as you’ve fucked me.”

The fucking nerve of this woman...

Gripping her face, I go for my jeans, nearly tearing the zipper from its teeth as I jerk it down. I free my rigid cock and bring her face to it.

“Open up,” I command, smearing precum across her upper lip.

“I’ll bite it off,” she seethes.

I chuckle. "You know exactly how to turn me on then."

Ember manages a sickened look, but I'm faster, pinching her bottom lip between my fingers. She immediately parts her perfect lips, and before she realizes what she's done, I spit into her open mouth. I watch as her pupils dilate in shock, then almost immediately, defiance flickers in her gaze as she spits back at me. Slowly, I wipe it off my face, a smirk pulling at my lips as the heat and tension between us rise.

"Oh, Little Flame. You are playing my game now," I hiss, my voice low and threatening, daring her to defy me again. She doesn't. Good girl. I squeeze her jaw, forcing her to open up once more.

Her eyes lock onto mine as my cock fills her mouth, gagging her, and I begin to move rhythmically, the intensity building with every thrust.

"It'll fit if you just fucking relax," I groan, forcefully hitting the back of her throat. "You're going to take this whole goddamn dick for being such a little whore."

Her chest heaves at my words, and she braces against my legs, squeezing her eyes shut as she finally lets me slide down the back of her throat, the vibration of her moan sending a tingling sensation through me. I fist her hair, holding her there as I savor the pleasure. After a few beats, she begins to thrash against me, desperate for air. A dash of adrenaline and pleasure rushes through my body at the fight she puts up.

Maybe I am still a sadistic asshole.

I rip her head backward just as her face begins to turn a deep shade of purple, and she gasps for air, saliva dripping from around her mouth. I lean down, staring at the sight of color returning to her face, a mixture of shock and lust etched into her features. Did she just... enjoy suffocating on my cock?

I don't give it another thought, as I ride the high of tormenting her. I rip her oversized T-shirt over her head, revealing her perky little breasts. For a moment, I have the strong urge to suck her nipples into my mouth, biting down until I draw blood. But that would require my mask to lift, and I haven't shaved. She might notice who I am.

Ember takes a shaky breath, and then begins to slink backward on the bed. I don't let her, reaching down and grabbing her waist. I flip her onto her stomach and find her thin thong. Wrapping it around two fingers, I pull the material taut against her pussy, soaking it before tearing it in two to bare her to me.

She whimpers in pain, but she doesn't fight me.

Fuck, Ember. Fight me.

I need her to fucking fight me so I can do what I do best—so I have a reason to wipe the fucking life right out of her face. With a predatory grunt, I run my fingers between her slit, feeling the abundance of moisture between her legs.

Of course, she's ready for me. I consider tasting her again, drinking in her arousal, but it's too much to fuck up my head. So, instead, I shove the head of my unprotected cock right into her pussy, stretching her to take me.

"Oh God," she pants, her legs trembling at my size.

"The only God you're going to call out to is me," I groan, shoving myself without care into her pussy. I don't care how fucking painful it is for her, and her squirming and whining against the force of my hips leaves me all the more turned on.

"Slow down," she pleads, peering back over her shoulder at me. "It's a lot."

I pretend like I don't hear her cries, forcing myself all the way in. I bury my cock

deep inside of her, my gloved fingertips digging into her bare skin. She'll never know what it's like to feel my bare skin against hers. That's a privilege for no one.

"Please," Ember cries out as I back out and then slam into her again, my hips like a fucking sledgehammer.

"I thought you could take all of me," I grunt with amusement, pausing to give her ass a hard, painful slap. "Isn't this what you want, Little Flame? You want me to come in here and fuck you until you can't take it anymore. If I'm not fucking you, you go searching for someone else." With that, I slam into her so hard that she collapses forward, a sob rattling her chest. I feel a momentary pang of guilt, but she quickly gives me reason to continue.

"Fuck you," she sneers, over her shoulder. "You're the one who did a two hump and dump."

Fury flares in my veins, my face suddenly hot and hands shaking. "You don't know who you're fucking with, Ember."

"No, because you hide like a coward under a mask," she spits back as I pause, my dick still deeply buried in her cunt.

I break into a vicious cackle, and then pull out of her. She visibly relaxes, but she's only proven to me in this moment that she's just as deserving as the rest of them. I twist her hips with a commanding grip, ignoring her kicking fit.

"You can't fight me off, Little Flame," I chuckle, climbing onto the bed and forcing her legs apart. I knee the inside of her upper thigh with force, knowing that I'll leave a bruise. But it doesn't matter. She'll be dead.

I flatten my body against hers as she tries to wriggle out from underneath me, letting

my cock brush against her entrance. She startles me with a moan, fresh moisture coating my shaft.

“You still want me,” I laugh, reaching between us and guiding the head into her cunt. “You’re such a little slut.”

“It turns me on when you call me that,” she snaps back at me, and I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or not. However, as I thrust into her again, pleasure passes over her face, contorting the anger she seems to feel toward me. This is a better angle for her to take me, and for some reason, I make a mental note of that—like it’s going to matter when her body is dead and cold.

“You’ve got the tightest fucking cunt I’ve ever felt,” I rumble as my forehead falls against hers, only the mask between us.

She whimpers, turning her head away from me—like she’s refusing to give me any amount of intimacy. It burns in my chest, and I chide myself for growing so damned attached to this woman.

I won’t let you win, Ember.

Chapter Eighteen

EMBER

Don't let him get to you. Don't let him in.

But even as I chant the mantra in my head, my body disagrees with me. His cock is buried inside me, hitting a spot so deep it sends waves of pleasure I never knew existed. He grinds his body into mine, and I breathe in his masculine cologne. There's something familiar about it—but I can't place it.

I hate that I'm so fucking turned on.

I open my mouth to protest, but I can't bring myself to do it. I can't bring myself to say anything at all to him. Arousal floods my mind, a lustful haze encompassing my consciousness. I tip my head back as Skull-face buries his face in the nape of my neck, taking long deep breaths, as if he's struggling with the same feelings as me.

An orgasm looms over me, as with one more thrust, I come, crying out in pure fucking ecstasy. It's everything I never wanted tonight from him, and as my eyes shut, Xander flashes in front of my eyes. For some reason, that draws it out longer, imagining him between my legs.

Maybe I'm not as fucked up as I thought.

But as my eyes flutter open, I suddenly can't fucking breathe. I gasp for air, but something is blocking the oxygen from reaching my lungs. Oh my fucking God.

What's going on? My vision begins to blur, my hands flying up to a heavy pressure clamped around my neck.

It's his hands.

"Wh-what are you..." I can't get the words out, my eyes wide at the mask peering down at me. I feel his cock pulsing inside of me, his cum filling me.

Maybe he'll stop once he comes... But I know it's a pipe dream. I don't know why I'm surprised. This is what sadistic fucks do. They kill you. Tears slip down my cheeks, as I conjure up the courage to fucking fight.

If I can make it through this, this fuck is never getting back in here.

I drive a knee upward, hitting his rock-hard lower stomach, and he jolts, but then laughs.

"You're nothing for me, Little Flame." He squeezes tighter, and I throw an arm out, knocking over the busted frame. It splinters even further, a shard of glass cutting my hand. I would cry out, but I can't.

Because I can't breathe.

My arms weaken as my vision slips into darkness, my hand lying atop the shattered glass on the nightstand. I'm dying. I'm really fucking dying. My lashes flutter, pain now searing around my throat. It feels like my skin is on fire. However, the burn is just enough to wake rile my senses.

With one last burst of a renewed will to survive, I wrap my fingers around a shard of glass from the frame, my hand numb to the way it slices my palm. With all my fucking force, I sling my arm right into Skull-face's side. Much to my surprise, my

shank lands on his lower side, where his hoodie has ridden up.

And I fucking bury it in him.

He lets out a howl, so deep and disturbing that it seems to rattle the walls. His grip loosens, and I suck in a lungful of oxygen, igniting my adrenaline. I fly into motion, rolling out from under him, and grabbing my T-shirt.

“You fucking cunt, ” he shouts, leaning over and grabbing his side. I don’t give him any time to react, before I race from the bedroom. I reach the exit before he can even clamber off the bed. I use my good hand to unlock the door and, within seconds, I’m in the hallway. I run straight for Rose’s door, and beat my fists on it.

Luckily for me, it swings open within seconds.

“What the—”

I nearly run her over as I shove past her.

“Just lock the fucking door,” I rasp, my throat on fire from fear and dread. It hasn’t even really registered with me that I’m naked, but Rose’s wide-eyed gaze is a quick reminder.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumble under my breath, beginning to shiver and shake. I glance back at the door, expecting him to come back for me, finishing both of us off.

She’s already dictating the address into the phone to someone who I presume is a 9-1-1 operator. I glance down at my hand and see that blood is rolling down my arm and dripping onto the floor. A few splashes land on the top of my foot, a stark contrast to the paleness of my skin.

What the fuck happened tonight?

I can hardly comprehend what Skull-face tried to do, with me being so fucking turned on the entire time. I can still feel him there as I force myself to pull on my T-shirt, relieved that it covers my ass fully.

“The police are on their way,” Rose says, setting the phone down on the kitchen counter. Her apartment mirrors mine, although hers is more completely furnished and smells of musty lavender.

“I take it you had a date go horribly wrong.” The judgment in her gaze is unsettling—as if it’s all my fault.

But maybe it is?

“It was something like that...” I can’t find the words, unsure of how she’d take me mostly willfully fucking my stalker—until he started trying to strangle me. Why do I feel sharp pangs of pain knowing that he tried to hurt me? Well. He didn’t just want to hurt me. He wanted to kill me. The ache I feel shatters my soul into thousands of pieces, and I shut my eyes as my head grows light. I’m so pathetic...

“It’s okay,” Rose finally lets out a sigh. “Let’s just get you set down, so I can start working on that hand.”

She pulls out a rickety kitchen chair, and guides me to it, forcing me to sit down. “I’m sure the guy is long gone now. Hopefully, you know his name.”

I blink a couple of times, and then shake my head. “I don’t know him at all. I’m being stalked.” I don’t know why I give her that information, after already reminding myself that she—nor the police—are going to buy any bit of my story.

“Hmm,” she hums, staring down at my hand. “Wouldn’t happen to be that creep I saw hanging around outside the apartments the other night, would it?”

Relief fills my chest. “It might be. I noticed that my apartment had been broken into, but... I don’t know.” I avoid telling the whole truth and tell myself I’ll do the same with the cops.

“They’ll want to do a rape kit,” Rose says. The r- word jolts my senses.

I wasn’t raped though... Or was I? Fuck, my head is a wreck. I feel lost in the moment, and out of pure desperation, I get to my feet. “I need to get my phone.”

“No, you can wait on the cops.”

“ No, I need to call someone now.” I stand up, and push past her, slinging the door open. My heart thumps in my chest as I make my way down the hallway to my own apartment. The door is wide open.

Rose curses under her breath as she stumbles after me, but I ignore her and step inside, trying to ignore the way it makes my stomach do somersaults. I go to my bedroom, half expecting him to come out of nowhere. It’s stupid to be back in here without the cops, but the cool breeze coming from the open window helps me relax a little more.

I pick up my cellphone, and hurry back out to where Rose is standing in the entryway.

“Sorry, I just... I really need to call someone.”

“Uh huh,” Rose mutters, shaking her head and leading me by the elbow back to her apartment. “If you’re gonna live in this big city, you’re gonna have to have more

sense about you.”

I grit my teeth as her comment adds insult to injury. I know I’ve been stupid, and that exact thought is the reason I cancel the call to Josh. He’ll force me to stay with him. I need someone else... Megan? I check the time, shaking my head. Embarrassment floods my system. Is there anyone I can call? I swallow hard as I scroll to Xander’s contact, sent to me in an email from Josh, which contained all employees’ numbers.

Can I trust him with this information? It feels stupid. But again... I don’t want Josh to have some sort of reason to be any more protective and controlling than normal. I hit the call button and put the phone to my ear.

On the third ring, it connects.

“Hello?” Xander’s voice comes over the line, sounding groggy and out of focus. I open my mouth to say something, realizing how well we don’t know each other. I suddenly feel like I’m going to be a nuisance. “Ember?” My own name jolts me. “Hello?”

“Um, sorry,” I mutter. “It was an accident... I didn’t mean to call... I... Um...” My face floods with heat.

“Is everything okay?” he immediately asks, concern tinged in his groggy tone. “You sound shaken up.”

“Something... Um... Something happened.”

“Do I need to come get you?” His voice sounds much clearer, as if he’s waking up more and more.

I hesitate, eyeing Rose, who seems completely unenthused. “Um, the police will be

here soon...”

“The police?” He sounds shocked. “What the hell happened, Ember? Are you okay? What do you need from me?”

“I don’t know,” I breathe out. “I’m so sorry for calling. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ll see you at work—”

“No, just tell me what you need, and I’ll be there. I promise.” His tone is so calming and comforting, smoothing out my frayed nerves.

“I don’t know, I have to see what the cops want to do...” My voice trails off just as a loud knock resounds on Rose’s door. “I have to go. I’m sorry.” I hang up immediately and set my phone down on the table.

“Get ready for a worthless shit show,” Rose warns me in a low tone as she goes to the door, frowning just before swinging it open and pasting a smile on. “Good evening, officers.” She gestures for them to come in. There are two of them.

“We already checked out the apartment number you called in, and it seems like there was a struggle. Perp isn’t there,” says the tallest and oldest-looking one. He looks like he’s straight out of a movie and his expression isn’t the least bit welcoming as he turns to me.

“What happened?”

I stumble over my words then, doing my best to tell the tale in the most truthful way, while also leaving out the fact that I started out as a willingly participant. However, the longer they listen, the more I feel like a liar—the more I feel like I am the one to blame for everything that happened.

“You have a nasty cut on your hand,” he points out. “You stabbed him, yeah?”

I stare down at the cut. “Yeah.”

“I think we need to take you to a hospital,” he replies. “They’ll also want to do a kit on you as well. There’s always a whole damn list of offenders walking the streets. Never know which one it might be.”

I grimace, hating the idea of going, but... I also know I want this to stop before I end up on the other side.

“Okay. I’ll go,” I agree finally.

Chapter Nineteen

JAXTON

F uck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Fuck.

I press the edges of the gash together, wincing as I hold the superglued wound closed. I would've called my uncle, but I didn't want to hear about his ranting—and then Ember called, further fucking my head up. This should've been over tonight.

But she outdid me with the shock factor.

I grab a bandage from the counter and tape it over the wound, grimacing in pain as I do so. Everything about this is bad; bad that I didn't get it done, bad that the police were called, and bad that she called me afterward.

Why did she call me? I stare at my phone, lying on the bathroom sink. It's covered in blood from my trying to stop the bleeding with my hands, as I scrambled out of her apartment. If the police do their job correctly, they're going to have a fuck ton of DNA—and what if they want to compare it to samples from people she knows?

I'm pissed, and I'm pissed that I'm more intrigued by her than ever. I'm pissed that I jumped to be at her beck and call the moment she offered it. She's a fucking siren, that's what she is.

I want her so bad.

I double over in pain as a cramp runs through my side, and I groan into the night. It's going to be hard to pretend that I didn't get shanked with a massive shard of glass, and it's going to be even harder to keep it hidden around Ember—if she calls me, again. Technically, if I stay in the game, I don't have to see her for another two days, as that's when my next shift is.

Maybe she won't call again.

I grab my phone and trudge from the bathroom to my bedroom, before collapsing onto the bed. I take a deep breath and stare up at the ceiling fan. This is a big fuck-up. I know they'll match my DNA to other killings around the city, and then my uncle will be left to pull all his connections to cover it. He'll warn me to stay away from her, or to let his guys take care of it.

But she's mine.

I roll onto my good side and rest my head against the pillow. When did I get so fucked up? What made me this way?

I drift off into a restless sleep, dreaming of Ember's cunt wrapped around my cock, the color draining from her face...

And once again I feel the same fucking panic I felt when I realized I might actually kill the one woman who's ever intrigued me.

“Good to see you back after you missed your last session,” Dr. Pitman says, his voice flat and unreadable as usual. “I spoke with your uncle, you know.”

“Mmm,” is all I say, trying not to favor my right side. It’s healing, and thank God Ember didn’t call me again.

Dr. Pitman sighs and leans forward in his chair.

“Listen, Jax—can I call you Jax?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

He nods. “Listen, Jax, it’s time for us to cut the bullshit out of these sessions. I know what you’re doing out there, and I know how you’re spending your time. I know you’re the psycho that slipped into that apartment on the bad side of town and tried to assault and kill that woman. I’m not an idiot. So why don’t we talk about why the fuck you do that?”

I raise my brows. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Doc.”

“Well, news to you, I’m not cheap, and I’m always willing to take on patients of all varieties.”

I pop my jaw as I fold my arms across my chest. “Okay, so what do you want from me, huh?”

“I want you to be open to fixing this... habit of yours,” he mutters. “Otherwise, your uncle is wasting his time and his money. He’s fighting a losing cause, Jax. We both know that. Your mom fucked you up, and I don’t know how, exactly, but you’re never going to get rid of your urges. However, we can find healthier ways to work them out of your system.”

“I don’t have urges. ”

“Right, so what was your reasoning behind assaulting that young woman last night?”

I rub my forehead. “She had sex with me. Willingly.”

“Don’t fucking lie to yourself,” Dr. Pitman laughs, his tone almost condescending.

“No,” I say flatly. “This time it was different.” I shift in my chair uncomfortably. “She wanted me, and I like her.”

“So why try to kill her?” he reasons, suddenly softening. “That doesn’t fit your MO.”

I shake my head, ignoring the emotions that well up in my chest. “She likes the real me, too.”

“Oh boy,” Dr. Pitman sighs. “You’ve gotten yourself into a real mess, I see.”

“I thought that was the best way to fix it and, now, there’s no way she can know the truth about me.” I bite down on the inside of my cheek until I taste copper. “I’m afraid this one has just gotten out of control.”

“I’ll say.” He almost laughs. “You do know you’re going to have to stay away from her, right? The police are all over this one. Ember Thatcher has a family that cares about her, and they’re going to be all over this once it gets out.”

I frown. “They all do.”

“Yeah, but Ember is alive to tell the tale. I suggest your best course of action would be to let her go. Entirely. Or end her.”

“That’s some advice from a therapist,” I mutter.

“I’m being up front and honest with you—unless you somehow think you can tell her the truth and convince her to stay silent.”

I give it some thought, shifting in the chair. I wince at the wound in my side.

“I’ll figure it out.” I push off the chair and get to my feet. “Session over.”

Dr. Pitman nods, as I head for the door.

“What’d your mom do to you, kid? Molest you? Let a boyfriend touch you?”

I glance over at him, meeting his gaze. “She left me to my own devices, and killed my father with an overdose of drugs I know he never took.”

I don’t give Pitman a chance to reply before I swing the door open and exit out into the hallway. As if on cue, my phone begins to vibrate in my pocket. I expect it to be my uncle, but instead, it’s Ember.

Fuck.

“Hello?” I answer lazily, heading down the hall for the elevator.

“Hey,” Ember’s voice sounds meek. “I’m so sorry for scaring you last night. I just had something bad happen, and you were the only person I felt like I could call. Josh would’ve freaked out too badly.”

“Yeah,” I said, my tone flat. As much as I want to bend to her, and be Xander right now, Pitman has me contemplating my next move—and I’m starting to think he’s right to some extent.

“Are you busy?” She sounds wounded.

“Uh, not really.”

“Oh.”

Silence hangs on the line between us, and I try not to let my mind wander too much—to what it could’ve been like had I kept myself from fucking her. My alter ego could’ve disappeared. Xander could’ve stepped in. I could’ve kept her. Alive. Forever.

“I just wanted to apologize,” Ember breaks the silence. “So yeah. Sorry. I’ll let you go. See you at work.”

“Wait,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. “Are you at the bookstore today?”

“No,” she says. “I took the day off. I’m trying to find another place to stay, actually. I, um... with the way everything has gone...”

“You can stay with me,” I offer stupidly, as if I’m in a trance and have forgotten everything that was just discussed. “I won’t tell Josh.”

She falls silent.

“As friends,” I add, thinking maybe that’ll lessen the blow. I don’t know why she’d agree to move in with a guy she barely knows after everything she’s just experienced, but maybe she doesn’t equate me with the guy behind the mask.

“Um... Maybe. Maybe just until I feel comfortable to stay at home again... The police said the sample matched one taken from around the city... from a... serial killer.” She chokes on the words, and I wince at how bad they make me sound.

“Wow,” I force myself to sound surprised. “I don’t know what happened, but it must

be bad. Pack a bag. I'll come get you."

"Okay, I'm staying with my neighbor, Rose."

Fuck, the nosy lady. She'll recognize me. Shit.

"Oh damn," I say, keeping my cool. "I'm on the other side of town, which is usually not a big deal, but..." My voice trails off. "I have an appointment. Do you think you could meet me at the coffee shop? If you don't feel safe, I can come and get you afterward. I just thought you might be on this side of town if it was... Well, you know... I..." I play myself off as struggling to say the words.

It must work.

"I'll meet you," she says quickly. "I want out of here ASAP. I can meet you at the coffee shop in like an hour. If you're not done with your appointment, I'll just wait for you. I don't have a lot to take, as you can probably guess." She gives a stilted, embarrassed laugh, but I try not to read into it or react. I don't give a shit if she's poor.

"Okay, cool. I'll pick you up from there. You might want to let someone know where you're staying, just in case the police need to speak with you again. I don't know shit about it, but I've watched plenty of those crime shows." Lies. I know all about it from personal experience, and I also know that the moment the cops know she's staying with me, they'll back the fuck off. They'll assume I'm the big bad boyfriend, there to extract my own revenge—as long as she's living with me...

After all, I'm the son of a high-ranking cartel legend, and the nephew of the current man who's running the business. No one is going to fucking touch Ember once she's here. That's where Pitman has it all wrong. I haven't been giving myself enough credit. Because of my blood, I can have what I want.

And I want her.

No matter the fucking cost.

Now, I just need to go clean up my apartment.

Chapter Twenty

EMBER

“Hi!” I blow out a breath of relief as Xander steps into the coffeeshop, where I’m nervously bouncing my foot against the tile, a duffle bag sitting beside me on the floor.

“Sorry I’m late,” he says, swinging the bag up and over his left shoulder. “I picked up a few things for dinner, since it’s your first night.” He smiles in a way that makes my insides feel warm. And safe. Which is something I haven’t felt since what happened last night...

The police made it all the worse when they called a few hours later to confirm a pending match to a fucking serial killer.

My hands start to sweat as I get to my feet, but I just wipe them on my dark-wash skinny jeans.

“Let’s go. I think I could use some peace and quiet. I swear I keep looking over my shoulder.” I brush the hair from my face and avoid Xander’s gaze.

His hand lands lightly on my back to guide me past him, and I jump, stumbling sideways and running into another woman. She lets out an angry huff as her iced coffee spills down the front of her.

“Really?” she spits at me, her tone harsh and she immediately starts dabbing the

droplets away. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you blind?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Xander growls before I can even respond with an apology. “She’s having a shitty day.” His voice is stone cold and it sends a shiver down my spine. “I’m sure you can afford to replace that with another Nordstrom Rack find.”

The woman’s jaw drops, and before anything else can be said or done, Xander ushers me out of the coffeeshop, grunting as he swings the door open for me.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say, peering up at him.

He gives me a terse smile. “She was about to be a total bitch to you. I know her type way to well.”

I nod, deciding not to press it. “Thanks for letting me stay with you,” I repeat again, like a shy idiot, while allowing myself to be fully immersed in the comforting feeling of someone protecting me instead of having to do it myself.

Xander gives me a smile, but stays quiet for the rest of the walk to his apartment. I trail behind in silence, trying not to focus on how good he looks in his black Levi’s. We walk another five blocks, until we reach a high-rise apartment complex...

I’m shocked when he heads for the front doors.

“This is where you live?” I choke out as we pass through the front doors.

He glances over his shoulder at me as the doorman calls out to him—something that I miss. “Yeah, this is it. I have the top floor.”

The penthouse is what you mean, I think, trying to hold back my utter embarrassment. God knows what he thought when he showed up at my shitty

apartment. My shoulders fall as I step into the elevator beside Xander, and as I gaze up at him. I wonder just how much I don't know about him.

"When my father was killed, I inherited the penthouse," he says, as if he's already reading my mind. "I was his only son."

I nod. "Oh... I'm sorry for your—"

"Don't be. My mom kept him out of my life for most of it. I didn't know him all that well. I wound up moving in with my uncle, and that's how I got to know who he was."

I don't know what to say, so I stupidly mutter, "Oh, I see."

"I swear, I'm not some snobby rich prick." Xander steps out of the elevator on the penthouse level and turns back to me. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah, sorry." I scramble out of the elevator and follow him to the door. He punches in a code, and goes in. I follow him, soaking in the luxurious penthouse apartment. Given the sight of a spiral staircase, in the middle of the industrially decorated pad, I assume he's actually got two floors. I sigh, trying not to let it bother me.

No wonder he invited me to stay. He has all the room he could ever need.

"You can take the spare room on this floor. I stay upstairs," Xander continues, leading me through the deco living room, and down a hallway. He pushes open a bedroom door, to reveal an elegant, wrought-iron-canopied bedframe with a red velvet comforter.

"Wow," I breathe out. "Okay. Thanks."

He tosses my duffle bag onto the bed.

“Does this work for you? Do we need to go get more of your things from your apartment? I can have some guys—”

“No,” I cut him off, shaking my head. “You’re doing enough as it is. I can figure that out. What do I owe you for rent?”

He looks offended. “Uh... No?” He folds his arms across his chest and his face darkens slightly, sending a wave of arousal through my core. “You’re a guest. You stay for free. Don’t mention rent again. It’s an insult. You deserve a place here.”

My face flushes. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize either.” He takes a step toward me, and I catch my breath as I smell his cologne. “I don’t mean to be harsh. I just want you to feel welcome here—that’s all.”

“Well, thank you,” I say, lost in his deep-green eyes for a few moments. I finally rip my gaze away from his, and step around him to the duffle bag.

He catches my arm, his grip making me shiver with excitement.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ember. Really.”

The next twenty-four hours pass in a blur, and other than calling to update the police of my new address, I don’t hear anything more about the man who attacked me in my apartment. Xander spends most of his time by himself—or out. But he’s nice enough to make dinner for us the first night.

It's homey, even though it's over-the-top luxurious. I have the best fucking sleep of my life the first night, passing out so hard that my alarm blares for an hour before I finally rouse myself. I call in to the bookstore, to take another day off—which thankfully, Rich agrees to without asking any questions. I spend the day in my room and then get ready for work at the bar.

I still haven't told Josh about any of it. My eyes drift to my bandaged hand, and worry creeps into my chest. A knock on my door breaks into my thoughts and I call, "Come in," turning around to see Xander in his usual black T-shirt and jeans.

"You don't have to go to work tonight," he comments, gauging my black skinny jeans and white tank top. "Just say you don't feel well."

I shake my head. "Josh will have so many questions. He knows I need the money."

"Tell him the truth then. You're living with me."

I raise my brows at that suggestion. "No way. Can you imagine what he'd think about that? We barely know each other, and I can't see him not throwing some massive fucking fit about it. I wouldn't even move in with him after a decade of knowing him."

Xander purses his lips. "Okay. That's fine. I told you we didn't have to tell him—and we don't. But it seems non-sensible for you not to catch a ride to work with me. How will we explain that?"

I hesitate, my mind drifting back to Skull-face, following me in the shadows. A pang of disappointment hits me in the strangest way, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. I should be relieved to have a ride, but something inside of me feels like it's not over between the two of us... Maybe I should see a therapist.

“I’ll just tell him I picked you up,” Xander huffs when I don’t say anything. “I don’t want you walking with some psycho on the loose.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I lie, avoiding his gaze. I grab my purse and sling it around my body. “I’m ready when you are.”

He nods, and I follow him out of the apartment, once again drooling over him from behind. He made it clear the arrangement was as friends, and as much as I want to say that I can handle that, there’s something about Xander that makes me want so much more.

And it would be the perfect way to forget about Skull-face.

We head down to the bottom floor silently and take the exit to the parking garage on the back side. When he hits his key fob, the lights flash on a Mercedes. I push away the surprise—which is something I shouldn’t feel at this point—and climb into the passenger seat beside him. He starts the engine, and then backs out of his spot.

“Did you inherit this, too?” I ask, my tone joking.

He chuckles. “Something like that.”

“Why even work then? It appears you’re set for life.” I try not to sound like I’m jealous, but I can’t help it... I am. Maybe a little.

“Well, I mean, money does run out,” he eyes me. “And I don’t like just sitting around all day. It gets boring. Plus, I’m not exactly the most social guy, so if I’m not working, I’d just stay by myself all the time.”

“Me, too,” I admit, catching his gaze.

“Then I guess we can just be hermits together.” He shoots me a wink that makes my heart flutter, and I’m once again left mulling over that whole friends thing.

I giggle, and he adjusts the radio to a rock station, turning it up as we fly across the city, weaving through the traffic. I peer out the window, halfway wondering why I didn’t take the help from Josh. For some reason, I’ve always kept him at arm’s length when it comes to that kind of closeness... but why?

Xander parks behind the bar and jumps out, quickly moving around to open my door. I thank him as I step out, and we head toward the entrance. He gestures for me to go ahead as he holds the door open.

“Perfect timing,” Josh snaps as we walk in, glaring at both of us.

“Um...” My voice trails off. “What’s wrong? We’re ten minutes early for the shift.” My eyes bounce from Josh to Major, who’s standing at the back, staring at his phone screen in one hand and holding the broom in the other.

“I didn’t know you were taking rides now,” Josh says, his eyes boring into mine.

“It was just a ride,” Xander cuts in. “Nothing more. Don’t worry.” He pats Josh’s shoulder as he passes by him, heading for the back. Major perks up at the sight of Xander, and follows him to the back room, leaving Josh and I alone.

“What’s your deal?” I immediately throw at him. “So what, he gave me a ride?”

“I haven’t fucking heard from you since your last shift, when you darted off on his motorcycle with him—and now you’re showing up in his car? Is there something you need to tell me, Em?”

I frown, surprised by the outburst. “No... He gave me a ride. That’s it.”

“You never let me give you a ride,” Josh grunts, shaking his head. “But I guess I don’t look like a guy straight out of Inked magazine, either.” With that, he leaves me, and goes towards the back room. He passes Xander on his way, and bumps his shoulder into his. My gut sinks at the confusion on Xander’s face.

This is not good.

Chapter Twenty-One

JAXTON

I can't help it. I'm enjoying every fucking second of the tension between Josh and Ember. He abhors that I gave his secret love a ride back and forth to work, and I revel in every glare he sends my way. Yeah, am I living a lie with Ember? Kind of.

But I'll work that out. Well, or I won't. Still, I can always make her disappear if I can't pull this off.

"I'll take you home tonight," Josh says at the end of the shift to Ember. "And I'll be driving you to your apartment."

I frown at this exchange, especially when Ember agrees. That makes no fucking sense. She's not staying there, so when Josh takes the money to the back to place in the safe, I pull Ember aside.

"Why are you letting him take you back to your old apartment?" I demand, trying to sound like I'm concerned, not jealous as fuck. "That guy could be skulking around."

"I need to get some stuff from there anyway. I'll let him take me there, and then I'll come to your place," she says, her words careful, but I don't miss the hint of something else there.

She's not over my alter ego.

It pisses me off. I don't know why it pisses me off. I mean, I am him, but I need her to see me as something more. I have noticed that she is showing signs of being attracted to me. I just need to seal the deal with the real me.

I need to fuck Ember as Xander.

As soon as Ember meets Josh at the door of the back room, I start to think about how the hell I can pull this off. I still have the nasty, painful injury in my side. It's going to take alcohol in Ember's system to keep her from recognizing me, at least to some degree. But that's not impossible. I can make this work. I leave the bar in front of Josh, Major, and Ember, and head straight for my car. My cock strains against my jeans as I think about having Ember again.

It's taken everything I have not to fuck her while she's been in my apartment, and as much as I could let her think the killer has found her at my apartment, it would take away the sense of safety I've managed to give her—and that's something Josh hasn't given her...

And I have a pretty good idea why.

That's also the exact reason I follow Josh and Ember toward her apartment when he pulls away from the curb. The beauty of living in the city means I can keep my distance and blend in, without having to make that much of an effort, even at this time of night.

So, I follow them to Ember's apartment building, and watch as she climbs out of the car. The two exchange some words, none of which I can make out. She leaves to go inside of the building, a pep in her step, and Josh pulls away as soon as she's inside. As soon as he leaves, I pull up my phone, and send her a text.

Me: I'll pick you up from outside. Be there in five.

Three dots appear, but nothing comes through. I tap my finger on the steering wheel. I hate the game that Ember and I are playing right now. She rejected me first, then I rejected her, and now we're at this standstill of awkward tension. I don't know how the fuck I'm supposed to handle it, and I can't ask Pitman.

Everything I'm doing goes against his wishes.

Finally, a text comes through twenty minutes later.

Ember: On my way out. Thanks.

I like the text and then lean back in the seat, waiting for her to show her face. A few minutes later, she appears, carrying a suitcase. I hop out and rush across the street to join her. At the same time, that fucking neighbor of hers appears at the doorway.

Holy shit. This isn't good.

"Let me get that," I clear my throat, and grab the suitcase from Ember's hand.

"Hey," the neighbor calls out. "I think I know you."

I grimace as I turn my back to her and Ember both. "I don't think so."

"He was here a few nights ago," Ember explains. "The night of... You know. He had taken me home, but then he went home."

"No, I've seen him before that," she mutters, clambering after me, and grabbing my arm.

"Whoa," I snap. "Easy. I haven't seen you before. Jesus."

“Rose,” Ember calls after her, looking absolutely mortified. “You haven’t seen him before, I swear. Please stop.”

“Just get in the car,” I say to Ember, keep my voice cool. “It’s fine. I guess I have that kind of face. It’s not that big of a deal. She’s just worried about you, I’m sure.”

Ember nods and climbs into the passenger seat of the car, but Rose stands there, even as I close the trunk. She stands in my fucking way as I go to step around her, sashaying to block my path.

“I saw you before. You didn’t have the beard, and you was covered up.” She glares at me. “I know you’re bad news. You’re a pretty boy under all that disguise you’ve put so much work into, and there ain’t nothin’ good about a pretty boy like you.”

I shake my head, deciding to play it off. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about, and I just want to keep Ember safe from everything that’s happened.” I slip past her then, before trotting to the driver’s side and slipping inside the car.

“Sorry about that,” Ember frowns. “She’s a little off her rocker.”

“Ya think?” I chuckle, relieved that Ember isn’t suspicious. “Let’s go home.”

“Home.” She repeats it with a distant look in her eye. Without even thinking about it, I reach across and take her hand, interlacing my fingers with hers. I can be the good guy for her. I just have to figure out how to keep my bad guy under the surface.

Guess I’ll have to pay attention in therapy now.

“Wine?” I offer as soon as Ember reappears from her room, having put away the

things in her second suitcase. “It’s been a long night.”

She nods, a fatigued expression on her face. “I could go for wine.”

I hand her an already poured glass, laced with something to help her loosen up a little faster. “Same. Let’s get fucked tonight. We’re off tomorrow. It’ll be fun.”

She giggles. “I don’t get fucked all that often.”

My cock twitches. “Well, when you say it like that,” I pour myself a stiffer drink as she downs her glass of wine in one go. “Jesus, okay, you’re going to be hammered before me at this rate.”

“I know,” she laughs as I pour her another glass. “But it won’t take much. It never does. Consider me a cheap date.”

I take in the way her cheeks are flushed, and how her blonde hair frames her heart-shaped face. Her deep-hazel eyes linger on my face, with that familiar spark of desire interlaced in her irises. It’s the same way she looked at me through the fucking mask, only this time, it’s my face. It’s me.

I take a step around the island, but Ember is already moving, turning to face to the wall of windows, taking in the cityscape.

“This is such a gorgeous view,” she hums, going over to stare out the window, her eyes fixed on the lights. I grab the wine bottle and my drink, and join her. I need her to down the whole fucking bottle.

It’s the only way to mask my massive cock and ugly scar—and still get a piece of her sweet, sweet fucking cunt. I’m desperate to taste her, have her, fuck her. I’m still a little pissed she got the best of me, but I also have this newfound respect for her.

And I want to keep her.

I keep her glass full and then down the rest of mine, setting it on the end table. I slide in behind her, brushing my chest against her back. She sighs, and then leans her head back to rest against me. I grow rigid at the gesture, turned on by the simplicity and the softness. I brush her hair away, exposing her feminine neckline.

She sucks in a deep, heavy breath as I lean down, pressing my lips to her skin. I inhale her musky perfume, and as she downs the last of the bottle, I remove the glass from her hands, tossing it to the couch behind us. I don't care if the remnants stain the couch. I'll buy a new one.

“ Xander, ” Ember's words slur, and I know I can take her now. I slide my hands up the front of her shirt, palming her breasts over her bra as I suck the skin of her neck into my mouth. I nip at her as I tug the front of her bra down, and quickly find her erect nipples. I squeeze. Hard.

My little flame.

I press my cock into her ass, grinding denim against denim. She moans out, and I'm quick to take it as an invitation. I undo her jeans, and as I do, my patience to move slowly starts to wane, the monster in me raging.

Just fucking breathe.

But I need the high. I tear her jeans and underwear down her legs, and then spin her around to face the couch.

“ Oh God, ” she cries out as I force her over and run my hand through her soaked folds.

“You want me, deep in your pussy, don’t you?” I growl, undoing my pants and setting myself free.

“ Yes, ” she cries out, wriggling her little ass for me, trying to find my cock. However, before I do that, I lean over, running my tongue from her ass to her clit, drinking in her taste.

“You’re so sweet,” I murmur, burying my face in her pussy. I spread her cheeks with my hands as I kneel to suck her clit. I still don’t know what it is about Ember that makes me want to go down on one knee, but I know she craves the darkness I can give her. It’ll just take time for her to fully accept that.

“ Oh God, Xander. Oh God.” She writhes against my face, bucking her hips wildly as she covers me in her arousal. I drink her up, taking her all the way to the edge. As I work my jaw methodically, she orgasms, her legs trembling around me.

“ Good girl, ” I groan into her center. I give her pussy one last kiss before getting to my feet. She goes to straighten clumsily, but I don’t let her. I plunge inside her, knowing this is the position where I can get the deepest.

She screams as I fill her, my guttural growl nearly drowning hers out. I don’t know if she recognizes my cock, but part of me hopes she fucking does as I pound into the back of her. However, in typical Ember fashion, she shocks me with her cries that send goosebumps over my skin.

" Harder, Xander. Please, I want you to fuck me as hard as you can."

Chapter Twenty-Two

EMBER

My head spins a hundred miles an hour as Xander fists my hair, and as if I have no control at all, I give in to his grip. He's so big, it fucking hurts, but the way he fucks reminds me of Skull-face, and for some reason, it feels so right for Xander to be the one to wash him from my veins.

"You like that, don't you?" Xander rasps from behind me.

"Yes," I whimper, his cock moving in and out of me is the only thing I can feel at the moment. I let myself get way too drunk. I probably won't remember this in the morning, and for that I'm sad.

"My little flame," I hear from behind me. Or maybe I don't hear it. Maybe it's in my head. My pussy clenches with a second orgasm because of it, though. I'm so fucked up.

"Harder," I demand.

His palm connects with my ass cheek, and the sting is revitalizing. It's everything I fucking need as he thrusts into me over and over. I scream his name as he finally comes full force, his groan rattling my entire body. At the feeling of him pulsing inside of me, I collapse forward.

Then everything goes black.

My eyes flutter open. My head is pounding. I let out a sharp sigh as I rub my face and then turn my head. I instantly grow still as I see Xander sleeping peacefully beside me in the bed. I take in his razor-sharp jaw and the way his arm is resting over his head.

What the fuck did I do last night?

Blips of last night follow, most of it consisting of me being full of Xander's dick. I let out a light groan as I shift my legs, feeling soreness between them. My alarm goes off again, and I realize I have a shift at the bookstore this morning.

Shit.

I flip back the covers, embarrassment rolling through me at my stark-naked body. I stumble across the room to the dresser, and pull out fresh clothes before heading for the shower.

"Where are you going?" Xander's voice stops me as I reach the bathroom door. "Don't fucking run off."

A smile tugs at my lips as I turn to meet his hazy gaze. "I'm not running off . I just have to go to work. I'll be back, I promise."

He nods, his eyes raking over my body. "Maybe you should call in again."

"No, I can't keep doing that," I say quickly, my pussy so sore, I can barely fathom the idea of taking him again. I can't remember the details, but I'm certain he fucked me harder than I've ever been before. In fact, he put Skull-face to shame.

“Suit yourself,” Xander chuckles, as I slip off into the bathroom and start the shower. I try to replay as much as I can from last night, but I allowed myself to get way too drunk, and that’s disappointing.

I finish getting ready for work, while Xander watches my every move, an endearing expression on his face. Something about him leaves me feeling giddy, and before I dart off to work, I return to the bedside.

“I was wondering if you were going to take off without saying goodbye,” he groans as he tugs me onto him, leaving me to straddle him. I feel his length through my jeans and underwear, reminding me of how sore I am. I lean over and kiss his lips lightly.

He deepens it immediately, hunger washing over me. “You’re so fucking sweet, Ember,” he murmurs as I finally break apart from him.

“You can show me again when I get back tonight,” I kiss him once more, and then push off of him, one hand on either side of his abdomen. He groans, his face contorting as I press my weight into him, and I still.

“Are you okay?”

He nods quickly. “Yeah. I just hit the gym hard before you moved in here, and it’s catching up with me after last night.” He chuckles, and I laugh, grabbing my purse and slinging it over my shoulder. “Hurry the fuck back,” he calls after me. “I’m gonna miss you.”

My cheeks flush as I glance back at him. “I think I might miss you, too.”

With that, I head out of the apartment, a cheesy grin on my face. Despite feeling sore, I feel good— probably the best I’ve ever felt. And there’s no freaking stalker in the mix anymore.

Well, hopefully. Maybe, the masked guy has just given up. I have no intention of telling Xander about what I did with that the guy. It doesn't matter. It's the past. I punch the down button on the elevator and, as I do so, my phone buzzes in my hand.

Josh.

I answer it, blowing out a sigh. "Hey."

"Hey." His voice is flat. "Care to fucking tell me why you're not at your apartment. Rose said you moved out? She also told me you were assaulted? What the hell, Em? What are you hiding from me? I've already called Rich and let him know. You're meeting me to talk about this... now. "

I squeeze my eyes shut, dread rolling through me. "Okay. Okay. I can explain. Where do you want to meet?"

"The bar will do. I'm here already. I'll see you when you get here, and he better not be with you." Josh hangs up then, and the phone beeps twice in my ear. I drop it to my side, feeling defeated. So much for a good fucking day.

I wave down a cab and give the address of the bar. I almost send a text to Xander to let him know all the shit has hit the fan, but I don't want to worry him—and he seems to be the type to come running to my aid. After all, he was right there at my apartment, worried about me.

It's a nice change, and the way he does it isn't as suffocating as Josh. Or maybe it's that I want him to do it? I don't know, and I don't think about it anymore for the rest of the ride, choosing to zone out and focus on the thud of my headache in my temple.

Ugh.

As soon as the cab pulls up outside of the bar, I get a sick feeling in my stomach that I haven't felt since Skull-face, the serial killer, was lurking. I glance around. But there's no one who seems out of place, and so I step into the bar, and then lock the door behind me.

"Spill it," Josh grumbles from where he's leaning against the counter. "Don't leave out one fucking detail."

I rub my forehead, my headache increasing with the added stress. "Um... I had this guy stalking me, I guess. He broke into my apartment and tried to, um, you know."

"And so then, what? You take off and run to Xander? How is it fucking him, by the way?"

"What?" I can't hide the shock.

"Don't play stupid, Em. I saw how you walked in here."

My cheeks flush with heat. "It's none of your damned business who I sleep with, Josh. You've never given me a hard time before."

"He's an employee of mine, and a coworker of yours. That complicates things, Em. You can't just go sleeping around the bar staff. Before I know it, you'll be fucking Major, too, and I know he won't tell you no."

My jaw drops. "I would not. I really like Xander..."

"Why?" Josh demands, taking a step toward me. "Because he's covered in tattoos and has a lot of money? You know I did some background checks on him, right? He's a fucking cartel mogul's nephew. Roman Marks. Xander isn't even his real fucking name."

I swallow my nerves, trying not to let him get to me. “Does any of that matter?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you want a man who’s honest with you? His name is Jaxton Alexander Marks. He’s never had a fucking job until now. Can you believe that? He just randomly decided to come work at my bar. Bet he’s setting up some kind of drug ring right under my nose.”

I furrow my brow. “He doesn’t do drugs...”

“That you know of,” Josh snorts, and then turns back to me. “You don’t know what’s good for you, Em. You never see what’s right in front of your goddamn face. You get yourself into these ridiculous situations. For all you know, that stalker could’ve been him. ”

I feel myself growing defensive. “It doesn’t matter. I fucked the stalker, too,” I shout at him, realizing my mistake as soon as it leaves my lips.

“What’s wrong with you?” He bellows back at me, throwing his hands in the air. “You’re fucking nuts.”

“I’m leaving,” I snap, shaking my head. I spin on my heels and head for the door, but before I can reach the handle, a firm grip lands on my wrist, jerking me back. I slam into Josh’s chest, and he spins me, pinning me up against the counter.

“ Ow, ” I cry out. “Let me go.”

“Why? You liked it when some fucking creep did it to you, didn’t you? Maybe you’d like it if I did it, too.”

“Josh, stop,” I choke out as he grinds against me, his hard on nearly making me vomit. “ Please. You’re my friend.”

“You’re so fucking selfish thinking I only ever wanted to just be friends.” He pins my arms behind my back, the healing part of my palm tearing open again. His hot breath causes me to cringe, and that only seems to make him angrier.

He presses his mouth to my neck, the same place Xander was just last night. Tears well up in my eyes as I try to wriggle my way out.

“Let me go,” I beg him, sobbing. “I don’t want this.”

“But you wanted some strange fuck to do it. I’m sure it started like this. I bet he forced it in you, didn’t he? I bet you liked it. You’ll learn to like it, baby.”

I cringe at the pet name, just as Little Flame pops into my mind. Didn’t Xander call me that last night? No. He didn’t. It’s just in my head, and just like that, I have to force myself not to disassociate in the moment.

I have to fight my way out.

“Let me go,” I shout at Josh as he tries to snake his hand down my pants. I throw my knee to keep him off me, and it lands.

In just the right place.

I bolt, just as I did the night Skull-face came for me. I flip the lock on the bar door, but as I rip it open, Josh grabs my sleeve.

“ Fuck off! ” I scream at the top of my lungs, tearing myself away from him with such force that my shirt rips. I take off down the street at a sprint and dive into a coffee shop, to take refuge as Josh calls after me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial 9-1-1, but then stop. That’s not who I want

to handle this.

Xander pulls up alongside the curb outside of the coffee shop, and I don't give him the chance to get out before I dart out of the shop and jump into the passenger seat.

"Holy fuck," he leans over, grabbing my forearm with the ripped sleeve. "What the fuck did he do to you, Ember?"

"I don't know... I don't know what I did wrong... He probably thinks I'm a whore." The words come out, followed by a stream of tears down my cheeks. "I don't mean to be. He freaked out because I slept with my stalker, and I know that's so gross. I know, but..." My voice trails off as my head falls to my hands, and I break into a full-blown sob.

Xander stiffens in the seat beside me, and I prepare for him to have some sort of negative reaction. However, the words that come out of his mouth leave me damned near speechless.

"I think it's hot."

"What?" I choke out through the tears.

He nods. "Yeah, it's fucking hot. You fucked the stalker. That's brave. You chose the psycho over the guys that are at your feet begging for your attention. I like it. It makes you stand out."

I shake my head and then laugh, batting away my tears. "Oh my God. Why are you so perfect?"

"I'm not." He reaches for my chin, tipping it up to meet his mouth.

“But I might be perfect for you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

JAXTON

I t's taking everything I have not to fucking destroy Josh right then and there, but somehow, I manage to pull away from the curb, doing nothing more than squeezing Ember's hand to show my support—and for that reason, I have to ask...

“Do you want to go to the police?”

She eyes me and then shakes her head.

“I don't think I want to deal with the cops twice. It'll make them think I'm crying wolf.” Disdain riddles her face as she leans back against the leather seat. I'm fairly certain I've never seen anyone more beautiful in my passenger seat.

Fuck, I'm going soft...

But only for Ember.

“What do you think I should do?” she asks it in a meek voice, like she's looking to me for guidance. For the first time in my life, I feel as if someone trusts me to be in control.

“I think...” My voice trails off as I navigate my way through the city. “I think that you should let karma handle it. I'm sure he'll get what's coming to him.”

She falls silent in the seat beside me, and then angles her body toward me. “You don’t think he’ll try to come and find me? He knows where I work...”

I shrug. “He won’t be able to touch you again, Ember. I’ll take care of you, I promise. No one will touch you but me.”

Her cheeks turn a deep shade of red, and my cock hardens at the sight. It’s amazing the things that this woman can do to me. I’ve never wanted to keep someone alive so bad—and now I just have to handle all my shit so it can stay that way. Well, that and Josh. That asshole is gonna have to go.

And I’ll enjoy every fucking second of it.

Every. Fucking. Second.

“Do you want to stop and grab some food?” I throw the offer out there at her continued silence, trying to gauge how she’s feeling. “If you’re hungry...”

“I’m okay,” she says, letting out a sigh. “If anything I’d like a bit of normalcy. I really wanted to go to work today, but Josh said he called in sick for me.”

I grit my teeth, not wanting her to go to work, but also... As long as I take care of Josh pronto, then she should be safe. I mean, I knew something was wrong with that Josh guy the moment I interviewed with him. He worked way too hard to act like a damned saint.

“I can tell Rich not to let Josh in,” Ember says, squeezing my hand.

Nodding, I take a right to turn around and head back in the direction of the bookstore. “If you want to go to work, then you should. I’ll pick you up when your shift is over. I don’t think Josh will bother you there, but he might once you’re off work.”

“That sounds fair.” She smiles up at me softly. “I just can’t believe that I’ve told you all my secrets, and you still want me.”

My stomach rolls with guilt. “Everyone has things in their life that they aren’t proud of, or that maybe don’t represent them in the best way. I don’t know.” I shake my head, wondering if it’s possible to hide my dark secret from her forever. I’m obsessed with Ember—but I don’t know what would happen if she walked away.

Keeping her alive might not matter so much.

I rub the back of my neck, desperate to relieve the tension, as I put the car in park outside of the bookstore. “Do you want me to walk you in? I don’t mind.”

She shakes her head. “Megan is probably working today, and I’m already going to have to explain so much to her. I’m not ready to explain you, as well—I mean, introduce you. I’ll have to explain you in order to—”

I cut her off with my mouth, giving her the best fucking goodbye kiss that I can manage. Going up against women is one thing, but going up against brawny Josh... I don’t know what kind of fight I’m in for.

Ember lets a light moan out in my mouth and as I break the kiss, she looks up at me with lust sparkling in her eyes. “You’re kissing me as if you’re not going to see me again.”

I chuckle, running the pad of my thumb along her jaw. “No, Ember. I’m kissing you as if I don’t want you to forget how fucking amazing we are together.”

She rolls her swollen lips and then lightly brushes them once more across my mouth. “Good, because you’re the only good thing I have now.”

A lump forms in my throat as I manage to mutter, “Me, too.”

Then, she releases my hand and slides out of the car, giving me a wave as she jogs up to the front door of the bookstore. I watch her walk in; my eyes stuck on the door long after she’s gone. A rush of emotion sweeps through me after our encounter, and I can’t believe what’s happened...

I’ve fallen for Ember.

I pull out my phone as I head back in the direction of the bar. I’m sure Josh is probably thinking that cops will be showing up, and unlike most, my guess is he’s going to play the “her word against mine” card. It’s a solid one to use in this instance—other than the ripped shirt. Ember being worried about crying wolf is a real possibility, and I’m certain Josh will use that to his advantage.

I park down the side of the bar where the car can’t be seen from inside. I scroll through my contacts. There’s one person who needs to know what I’m about to do—and why.

“Jax,” my uncle answers. “How nice of you to finally call. Pitman said you had a decent session.”

“Uh, not sure if I’d go that far with it,” I tell him, letting out a chuckle. “But actually there’s something you need to know.”

“And what’s that?”

“I think I love her,” I blurt out the words, regardless of how fucking elementary they sound. “And I’m about to do whatever it takes to protect her from an asshole in her life.”

“Don’t hurt yourself—”

“Shut up,” I snap, cutting him off. “I’m not going off myself. I’m taking care of some prick that thought he could touch what’s mine. I’ll give you the address. God knows what kind of fucking mess this is going to be.”

“Okay,” is all my uncle says.

“Okay,” I echo him, pulling the phone away from my ear to drop the pin. I’m just about to hang up, when his voice catches my attention.

“One more thing,” he calls out.

“What’s that?” I put the phone back to my ear.

“I’m proud of you. I told you it’d just take the right one to straighten it all out.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, and then hang up.

There’s nothing about this situation that’s straightened out, but this is one step in the right direction. I grab my hoodie from the backseat, and consequently my mask. I fully intend not only to annihilate this motherfucker but also to scare him shitless in the process.

I gear up, put the mask in place and climb out of the car. I head around to the back entrance of the bar, rather than the front. It’s the entrance that Josh uses, allowing him to park his car a few feet away; probably thinking about a safe exit. For that reason alone, I think this might be an easier fight than I think.

But, I have backup.

I tuck the pistol in my belt and try the door handle, surprised that it's unlocked. You fucking idiot. I grin under my mask as I slip inside the bar, and I lock the door behind me. The backroom's lights are off, which gives me another advantage. I listen to the stillness, and then just like that, Josh's voice rings out.

"I don't know what the fuck I was thinking, man," he groans. "But she's clearly willing to give it to everyone else, so I don't understand why she wouldn't do it for me."

I clench my fists, but force deep, even breaths. Nothing will be accomplished if I fly off the handle right now, but I've already decided one thing now. I'm confronting this bastard head on.

"She literally has the loosest pussy," Josh breaks out into laughter. "And she had the balls to say she didn't—but the sick slut fucked her stalker and assailant. I don't know why I'd be any different. Besides, we've been friends for years. She doesn't understand what I could give her." The fact that I hear only one side of the conversation tells me that he is speaking to someone on the phone.

I wait just outside the area for a few minutes, while Josh bashes Ember a little more, ensuring the most painful death I can give him. Finally, the motherfucker hangs up, and I step into the light. He doesn't notice at first, and so I clear my throat, the sound cutting through the silence.

Josh spins around, his eyes going wide. "What the fuck? Who the fuck are you?"

I chuckle, deep and unsettling. "I thought I'd come here and size up my competition."

Josh's face flashes with recognition. "You're the sick fuck who's been screwing Ember in the shadows, huh?" He gives an evil grin.

“I don’t have to fuck her in the shadows anymore,” I say, breaking into a wicked laugh. “She lets me fuck her any time I want after she moved into my place.”

Josh is silent, as if he’s trying to piece together what I’ve just said. As the seconds tick by, he shakes his head.

“It’s fucking ingenious. Does she know yet?”

“I think you should be more worried about what’s going to happen to you,” I growl, taking a step toward him.

He tilts his head at me. “Why? You and I should be fucking friends. Cut from the same cloth.”

“Wrong.” I pull out the pistol and point it straight at his crotch, firing off two silenced shots. “We’re not the same. I don’t pretend like I’m a good guy.”

Josh doubles over, screaming with pain as blood seeps from his appendage and runs between his legs. “You’re a fucking psycho.” He glares up at me as the color drains from his face. “And you are playing the good guy. If Ember doesn’t know who you are, you’re no fucking better than—”

He doesn’t get to finish.

I put a bullet right between his eyes. My sanity might have snapped completely if I’d have let him keep running his mouth. Because, for a minute there, he was starting to make sense.

And I can’t have that.

Chapter Twenty-Four

EMBER

“Holy shit...” Megan just stares at me as I finish telling her everything. “That’s... That’s a lot to go through in a short amount of time. Maybe you should take some vacation time.”

“And do what? Hang out in Xander’s apartment? I literally can’t stay there forever.”

“But you’re together?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what we are. It’s impossible to know. It’s happening so fast, and I just don’t know what to think.”

Megan leans against the counter, her red hair spilling over her shoulder. “You could just be thankful that you met him when you did? I mean, granted, I think he fueled Josh’s ridiculous reaction. I’ve always known that Josh had feelings for you—and I knew he was a bad seed, too.”

My jaw drops. “So why the hell would you not tell me that?” I throw my hands in the air, able to show my true emotions thanks to the empty store. Rich is out running errands. I’m pretty sure he didn’t want to have to try and find the right words for me.

“I don’t know! You’ve known Josh for way longer than I have, and the two of you have always been so close... Plus, you know, sometimes I read people wrong. You seemed to trust him so easily.”

“That’s concerning,” I mutter, letting out a ragged breath. “What if I’m reading Xander all wrong? What if he’s not a good guy either?”

“Don’t let what’s happened to you, ruin what you’ve found. You always said you’d never spend the night with Josh.... Why?” She gives me a knowing look, and I shrug.

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly, but I think you have your own intuition, too. It’s just not screaming as loudly as mine was.”

“But you didn’t say anything,” I reason.

“I’m sorry. Had I known... I just didn’t...” Megan’s voice trails off as she frowns. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be saying anything like this right now. You’ve been through hell, and here I am trying to say I told you so.”

I give her a smile and run my chipped black fingernails along the counter. “Nah, it’s okay. I think I knew deep down that something wasn’t totally right with Josh this whole time, but I just... I never thought...” My voice breaks and tears slip down my cheeks.

Megan rushes around the counter and wraps me up into a hug.

“I’m so sorry Josh is such an asshole. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. It’s not fair at all, especially after... Well, you know.”

I sniffle, batting away the tears. I didn’t tell her that I slept with the guy who tried to murder me willingly . I didn’t tell her that we had sex twice. I didn’t tell her that I wanted him. I still don’t know why I wanted him. I like Xander though. I like him a lot and feel the same intense attraction to him.

And he didn't care what I'd done.

I blow out a sharp breath as Megan backs away, and my eyes drift toward the door. Part of me expects Josh to come looking for me, trying to make a million excuses for what happened, but at the same time... I don't think he'd have the nerve to show up at the bookstore—or even guess that I'm here.

Does he know where Xander lives? Would he show up there? I rake my fingers through my hair as I move towards the box of books that need to be distributed throughout the store.

“You don't have to do that,” Megan says, frowning. “It's totally okay for you to just hang out and let the day pass. You won't hear me complain.”

I wave her off. “No, that's okay. I need something to take my mind off everything.”

She nods. “Whatever you need, Em, and if you need to stay somewhere else, don't feel trapped at Xander's. I can come and get you. I have a couch you'd fit on just fine.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

With that, I busy myself with putting up the books and trying to pass the time. I don't want to think about Josh, but for some reason, my mind replays all of the times little red flags popped up and I ignored them.

I just thought he was protective. But protective looks different with Xander. He doesn't berate me for anything. He doesn't judge me for where I live or how I live. Of course, I guess he could change... But Josh has always been like that. From the very beginning.

“He’s outside,” Megan calls from the front of the store. “Black Mercedes, right?”

“Right.” My heart skips a beat and I glance down at my watch. He’s right on time. I emerge from the back and peer out through the window. Sure enough, his car is pulled alongside the curb, waiting for me. I don’t know why it feels so fucking nice, but it does.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Megan holds out my purse. “And try not to worry about Josh. Burn that bridge and never go back, girl. Start a new life with your new rich man, and I’ll cheer you on.”

“Thanks,” I laugh, shaking my head as I go out the front door. I jog to the curb, and Xander is already there, opening the door for me. “Thank you.”

He grabs my hand, stopping me before I can slide in. “You’re not getting away that easy.” Xander chuckles, as he draws my mouth to his, kissing me lightly before letting me go.

My face flushes as the memories of last night come flooding back. However, in the moment, they seem to mix with other, darker ones. I shake the feelings off and climb into the car, pulling the seatbelt across my lap and buckling in.

Jaxton Alexander Marks. Josh’s use of his full name comes rushing back to my mind, and I can’t help but stare at Xander as he climbs back into the car. In all the mess, I hadn’t even remembered what I’d learned.

“Hungry?” Xander asks, reaching over and grabbing my hand.

I hesitate, biting down on my lower lip. “Actually... Um... I have a question.”

He puts the car back in park, as if he senses that it's going to be important.

"Okay. Shoot. I'm ready."

Xander's expression is difficult for me to read in the moment, and I can't tell if he's nervous or completely at ease.

"When I was with Josh, he said your full name is Jaxton Alexander Marks."

Xander's brow furrows. "Okay... I mean, that would be correct. I go by Jax or Xander. My family all call me Jax, but sometimes it's nice to disassociate from my shit family. I'm sorry I didn't tell you my full name sooner?" He seems confused, and I start to feel stupid.

"He also said you were connected to a drug cartel." I blurt the words out, but it sounds so freaking ridiculous I feel silly for even asking. It's outlandish to think—

"Yes, that's right." Xander's words cut right through my thoughts.

"What?" I can't hide my shock. "I thought he was just fucking with my head."

Xander shakes his head. "He wasn't. It's the truth. My mom was a fucking junkie. She got my dad to do the drugs he sold, and then she killed him with them. I moved in with my uncle and he tried to get my mom help, but she didn't want it. She's a fucking horrible person, honestly. I'm not hiding who I am from you. I'm not involved with that. I have my father's inheritance, but that's it. I'm not in the drug business, Ember."

I nod slowly, slightly relieved. "Thanks for being so honest."

He narrows his eyes at me, and then puts the car in gear, before pulling away from

the curb. “Do you have any more questions for me? I’ll answer whatever it is. I’m not going to lie to you. That’s not how I want us to work.”

“Not right now. I just want to go home,” I say, letting out a sigh. He squeezes my hand, and we make the rest of the trip in silence, not speaking again until I’m safely inside the penthouse. Something about the place is so comforting. It wraps me up in a warmth that I haven’t felt in a long time.

“Wine?” Xander offers as he opens the fridge.

My stomach knots up. “I don’t think so. I’m still trying to get over last night.”

He frowns but nods. “That’s a good point. What do you want for dinner?”

My legs clench, and even in the soreness, I know the exact thing I want.

“Actually, maybe we could put dinner off till later?” I suggest, walking around the island to meet him. I stand on my tiptoes and press my lips to his jaw, my skin brushing the stubble on his face.

He lets out a groan as I run my hand down his chest, feeling his taut muscles flex beneath his shirt.

“Jesus, Ember. The things you do to me.” His hands run down my sides as his breaths pick up, my lips slipping down his jaw to his neck. “Holy fuck.”

“Isn’t this better than dinner?” I giggle, slipping my hands up the front of his shirt. He instantly stills, grabbing my hands and pulling them down.

“We should give your body a rest,” he rasps. “You’ve been through a lot today. I don’t think it’s a good idea...”

I swallow the rejection, confusion riddling my mind. “Oh... Um... Right... But...”

He leans his head into the nape of my neck, kissing my neck. “I can see how sore you are, too. Let’s give it a rest. We can fuck all night tomorrow.”

I nod, pulling away from him. “Yeah, sure. Okay.”

I try to hide my disappointment and hurt from him, but I know it’s written all over my face.

“I think I’ll go take a shower then.”

He nods, his eyes downcast and avoiding mine. “I’ll make dinner.”

As soon as I walk away from him, fresh tears slip down my cheeks.

Does he think there’s something wrong with me now?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

Chapter Twenty-Five

JAXTON

God, how I want to fuck her. I stare at the ceiling, my cock so fucking hard it hurts. I've had blue balls since she came on to me yesterday evening, but the moment she got her fingertips close to the wound—which is close to healing, I was immediately reminded that while I'm giving her all the truths she's asking for, I'm not giving her all of it.

I should just tell her.

I turn my head to take in the sight of Ember, her face peaceful and thick lashes closed tightly. Ever since I turned her down, I've noticed her pulling away from me. I hate it. I hate the way it's pushing us apart.

My phone vibrates against the nightstand, and I pick it up, seeing a text from my uncle.

Roman Marks: Bring her to lunch. 12:30PM. I want to meet her.

"Fuck," I mutter, running my hand over my face. I flip through the other notifications, noting that I've missed seven calls from my mom. I sigh, and do the one thing I should've done a long time ago...

Block her.

I set the phone back on the nightstand and turn to Ember, wishing I could give her what she wants. But there's still a lingering concern that she'll know I almost killed her—and even though I know I'm never going to try that again, she's not going to understand. With that thought, I flip the covers off and head for the bathroom, hoping to relieve more than just my fucking bladder.

I lock the door behind me and strip down, noting that the hamper in the corner has Ember's clothes on top. I make my way to the top of it and find her underwear from yesterday. I wrap them around my shaft and lean back against the counter, stroking myself in rapid succession.

But it's not enough.

I want her.

I grimace as I grow more and more frustrated with the entire situation. Had I just not fucked her with that stupid fucking mask, things would've been way easier between us now. How long will it take for her to forget about the masked man?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I toss the underwear back into the hamper, and jump into the shower, making quick work of it. My hard-on is relentless, but I do my best to ignore it. I catch sight of the healing gash on my side. It's better, but it's still really noticeable. I rub my brow as I pull on a black T-shirt and dark wash jeans.

A light knock on the bathroom door draws me from my thoughts. I walk across to unlock and open it. Ember peers up at me with sleepy eyes, slightly squinted and her hair a mess. She's fucking gorgeous.

"Sorry, I just didn't want to barge in on you," Ember says, her voice groggy.

I lean down and tip her chin back for a kiss. “Never. You can barge in anytime you want. How’re you feeling this morning?”

She lets out a light sigh. “Fine, I guess.”

“Good, get dressed, because we’re meeting my uncle for lunch today. He wants to meet you.”

Her eyes widen, and she suddenly appears wide awake. “What?”

I laugh. “Don’t sweat it. It’ll be fine.”

Ember looks nervous. “I don’t know... I’ve never met anyone’s family before, and we haven’t really been together very long... I don’t... I don’t know what to do—or how to act. You saw where I lived... I don’t... I don’t fit in with the upper crust crowd.”

I smile. “Neither do I, and for the record,” I say, slipping past her. “I’ve never introduced anyone to my family either. It’ll be a first for both of us. I’ve never actually, um... had a girlfriend.”

She frowns. “Boyfriend then?”

I burst into laughter. “No, I don’t swing that way. I just haven’t met anyone like you. I’ve been waiting for you my whole fucking life, and I never even knew it.”

She nods, her eyes dropping to the bulge in my pants as her upper teeth press into her lower lip. “How soon do we have to go?”

“Unfortunately, very soon,” I grumble, not bothering to hide my disappointment. “Otherwise, I would be bending you over this damned counter. I’m dying to be inside

you.”

Her cheeks flush and she smiles. “Maybe when we get back then?”

“Yes,” I say, kissing her forehead. I sure fucking hope so. I leave her to get ready and head upstairs to my own bedroom. I have every intention of bringing her up here soon, but at the moment there’s just too much evidence of the other me. As soon as I step inside, I see the skull mask on the dresser.

Part of me just wants to take it right down and show her, but I know she needs to meet my uncle first. One step at a time, and taking my uncle is much easier than taking the fact that I tried to murder her. I blow out a sigh and grab my jacket from the closet. The sight of the row of hoodies inside makes my stomach hurt, now, for some reason.

I have no problem with killing. But damn, if I don’t want to change my MO.

I reach in and grab the hoodies along with the skull mask and toss them into a heap behind the door of my room. I’ll throw that shit away after I take Ember to work tomorrow. That makes me feel a little better, and with that, I head downstairs to wait for her.

“Don’t be nervous.” I squeeze Ember’s hand as we walk into the same Italian restaurant I always meet my uncle at. The hostess gives me the same funny look, and then guides me to the private dining room.

“I feel as if I’m going to throw up,” Ember says under her breath, her hand sweating inside of mine. It doesn’t bother me—nothing about her does. I don’t know why she’s so fucking different, but she is.

My uncle gets up from the table to greet us.

“Jax.” He turns to Ember. “You must be his girlfriend. He hasn’t said much about you, but the fact he’s said anything must mean you’re very important.”

Ember blushes. “Thank you. I’m not sure if I’m his—”

“You are my girlfriend,” I say, gazing down at her. “We can make that official today.”

She laughs softly. “Okay then.”

My uncle shoots me a look and then gestures towards the table. “Shall we sit down and eat? I have a lot I’d like to talk about.”

“Of course,” Ember says.

I pull out a chair for her, eyeing my uncle. I have no idea what the fuck he wants to talk about, but the thought makes me feel sick. There’s so much he could say that could genuinely hurt my relationship with Ember. Would he do that? He always seemed like he was rooting for me, but now...

I’m not so fucking sure.

What if he wants her for himself? The thought makes my hands clench. I’d fucking murder anyone who tries to take her from me. She’s mine.

“So, I take it you’re both quitting the bar job, yeah?” Roman raises his brows as he takes a sip of his water.

“Yes,” I answer for us. “Seems like the right thing to do considering.”

“I agree.” He nods, and then turns to Ember. “And what do you do for your second job?”

You already know, asshole.

“Um,” she hesitates, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “I work at a bookstore.”

“I take it you like working there?”

She nods. “Yes. I do.”

My uncle doesn’t press any more on that. “I think it’s important to work a job you enjoy doing, which is why I’d really like for Jax to come to work for me. I have the perfect job for you.” His eyes meet mine. “I think it’ll help you, greatly.”

Ember goes very silent, knowing full well what the family business is. I feel her eyes on me, but I don’t know what to do with the offer my uncle’s dangling in front of me. It does make sense to some degree. I could let out some of my murderous urges...

“I don’t know,” I answer him. “My primary concern is for Ember’s safety.”

“I see.” Roman stifles a laugh by coughing. “I’m sorry. The irony is killing me.”

I freeze in the seat, my expression fucking begging him not to go any deeper into the topic. Please don’t fucking sabotage me. Let me take care of telling her. Or never telling her.

“With all due respect, what would he be doing?” Ember asks carefully, her voice quiet. She peers between the two of us, and I realize the comment went right over her head, thankfully.

“Well, nothing that would cause you any concern, but it would allow you to continue working at the bookstore—or open your own?” Roman says, shrugging. “The man sitting beside you has the connections and capability to give you anything your little heart could ever desire, and I do hope—for his sake—that he does. It’s time for him to move on with his life.”

I nod. “It is time to move on. I’ve cut my mother off, though I’ll continue to let her live in the apartment.”

“I think that’s fair. She’s blood after all, but it can end there.”

“Agreed.”

Roman cracks his neck and takes a deep breath, leaning back in his chair. His eyes bounce between the two of us, as if studying how well the two of us match. “I like this pairing. I can bless it.”

“We don’t need your blessing,” I snort, shaking my head.

His expression darkens. “You damned sure do, Jaxton. There’s mutual respect between the two of us, and despite your goddamned fuck ups, I happen to think of you as if you’re my own son. I’m happy for you.”

Ember shifts uncomfortably in the chair beside me, and I reach out, placing my hand on her upper thigh, feeling her quad muscle beneath her denim skirt. Briefly, my mind conjures up the scenario of taking her to the bathroom and burying my fucking face between her legs, but I brush it off.

“Ah,” my uncle says as the waiter appears. “Let’s order.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

EMBER

“That was intense,” I mutter as we exit the restaurant. My phone is vibrating like crazy in my purse. “I had no idea what I was getting myself into.”

“You don’t have to take him seriously,” Xander huffs as we head the two blocks to his high rise apartment.

“He seems very serious,” I say, choosing to ignore my phone until we make it back to the penthouse. “I still don’t understand what you’re going to be doing for him.”

“He’s never going to outright say hitman, but that’s basically what he’s trying to pull on me.” Xander sounds frustrated, and I can’t quite put my finger on why—other than he doesn’t want to whack people like the mafia.

I can’t blame him for that, and I don’t bother hiding my reaction to it.

“That’s... very illegal.”

“It is,” Xander glances down at me as we step inside of the building. “But what do you think about me being involved in something like that? I mean, honestly. Would you turn me away if I was a part of the family business? I know I said I don’t want anything to do with it, but for us... It might make sense.”

I raise my brows. “Um...”

“You can think on it.” He presses the call button for the elevator, and we fall into silence. “It’s a lot. All of this is a lot for you, I’m sure.”

“Yeah,” I say stupidly, stepping into the elevator beside him. His eyes stay focused on the wall of buttons, and I take in the worry in his face. He’s torn about something, and while it’s a lot...

For some reason, my answer doesn’t take any thought.

“I don’t care.”

“What?” He turns to me as the elevator dings and the doors open.

“I don’t care,” I repeat as we step out into the hallway. “I don’t care if you’re a hitman or whatever. This is the safest I’ve ever felt, and no, it’s not about the money. I don’t care about the money. It’s just you. I like you.”

He nods, a slight smile pulling at his lips. “I like you, too, and if that’s the case, then I’ll probably take the job. My inheritance won’t last forever, but...” His voice trails off as he punches in the code and pushes the door in. “...I want us to.”

My heart jumps to my throat. “You got serious really fast.”

“Isn’t there a saying for that?” he jokes, shutting the door behind us.

“When you know, you know,” I finish, smiling. Before I can say anything else, his phone rings. He pulls it out and shows me the screen. It’s his uncle.

“I’ll be back.” He answers the call and slips out onto the balcony. I take the opportunity to pull my own phone out of my pocket and I see a text from Megan.

Megan: Josh was found dead.

A lump forms in my throat, and I hit the call button beside her name, taking off up the stairs so I can speak in privacy.

“It’s crazy,” Megan says into the phone as soon she answers. “Although that prick had it coming. They say he got a couple of shots right into the crotch. Found him on display outside of a gay bar.”

Xander did it. The thought shocks me, but something in my gut believes it. After all, we just had a conversation about him being a fucking hitman. Wouldn’t it make sense? Should I call the police? I wait for my body to start to shake with grief.

But there’s nothing. Nothing but relief—relief that Josh is gone from my life, and I don’t have to worry about him anymore. I squeeze my eyes shut, and breathe out a sigh.

“I guess he did have it coming.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Megan exclaims. “I’m so glad you get that. I was so worried it would upset you and send you spiraling.”

I shake my head. “I might be really fucked up, but I don’t... I don’t care.” The realization that I might be a little darker than I ever thought slips into my mind. I fucked the psycho that tried to kill me—and it still turns me on to think about it. Also, Xander being a hitman? My thighs clench.

That’s hot, too.

A stilted laugh slips from my lips. “I’m actually relieved,” I admit. “That sounds so bad.”

“No, it doesn’t sound bad at all,” Megan reassures me. I stop outside of one of the doors. I haven’t ever been to the second floor, so I turn the knob and peer inside. It’s clearly Xander’s bedroom.

I go to open the door the rest of the way, but it comes to a hard stop, as if something is blocking it. I frown, and then look around the door. Shock rolls through my body.

Holy fucking shit.

“I have to go. I’ll call you later.” I hang up, nearly dropping the phone as I stare at the skull-faced mask laying on top of a pile of familiar black hoodies.

‘The irony’ is what Xander’s uncle had remarked, when he mentioned keeping me safe as his priority. It confused me at the time, but now I understand. I really fucking understand.

And to make it all the more confusing, my pussy aches with arousal.

“Ember?” Xander’s voice echoes through the penthouse, causing my heart to pick up its pace.

Is he planning to kill me?

No, he would’ve done that already.

But didn’t he try?

I back out of the room and turn to leave, but freeze as Xander appears at the end of the hallway, blocking the exit.

“Hey,” I croak out but, his expression remains unmoving. As I take in his shape, it all

comes together, the way he's built, the familiar scent of him.

The soreness.

My heart pounds. My thighs clench. I don't know whether to be terrified or fucking jump his goddamn bones.

"Whatcha doin' up here?" His voice stays cold and flat as he slides his phone back into his pocket, his eyes studying my every move.

"I just found out Josh was murdered," I say carefully.

"Oh," he replies, the air between us full of fucking uncertainty as I try to process everything I know now—and the way it's making me fucking feel.

"Did you kill him?" I ask, my voice confident.

He nods, and then shrugs. "Yep. He tried to touch what's mine."

I take a deep breath, and then bite down on my lip. "Take off your shirt."

Xander's eyes darken. "Why?"

I mimic his nonchalance. "So I know it's true."

With a smirk and a shake of his head, he peels the black T-shirt over his head and tosses it to the floor. "Is this what you were looking for?" He twists his body, just enough for me to see the scar that's still healing on his side.

My breath catches, but I can't hold back.

“Why?”

“Why what?” he asks carefully, still giving me space.

“Why’d you try to kill me?”

He goes silent for a few moments, his eyes on the mark on his side. Then, he looks up at me. “Because it used to be the only thing that could get me off, the only thing that made me feel anything. But then I met you, and you complicated things for me.”

“But you still tried to kill me, Xander,” I say, my voice growing sharp.

“Yeah, because I thought things would get more complicated if I let you know the real me. I thought that was the answer, but you proved otherwise to me. And here we are.”

“Here we are,” I echo him. “Now what?”

“Now, I love you,” he rasps. “And I don’t have to fucking hide this gash or this monstrous cock anymore, Little Flame.”

My pussy gushes for him. “How do you know you won’t still want to kill me?”

He laughs. “Because I’d kill myself before I ever killed you, Ember. I’ll never hurt you again—unless it’s that soreness you’re feeling now.”

My head spins.

Why do I actually believe him?

I step back and then go into his room to peer down at the pile of shit that’s there.

I know he's a serial killer.

He's killed other women.

"I've found a better way to feed my urges." His voice is closer now, right behind me. "I need you. I've been fucking dying for you. I'll work as a hitman for my uncle, and then I'll fuck you every night when I get home. I never knew what I was missing out on."

I glance over my shoulder as his frame fills the doorway, and then I grab the mask up and look at it closely. Excitement thrums through my body, and I turn to toss it to him.

He catches it, raising his brows. "I was going to throw it away."

I shake my head. "No, you're going to put it on."

"I am?" He tilts his head at me, but I can already see the desire forming behind his perfectly handsome face.

"Yeah, and then you're going fuck me like the skull-faced psycho that you are."

"Jesus, Ember," he growls, pulling the mask over his face. "You're exactly what I dreamed of."

My heart thumps unevenly in my chest. "But you'll have to catch me first." I shoot him a grin, and then dive past him and out the door of the bedroom. He bursts into a cackle of evil laughter, the distortion in his voice proving he is exactly who I think he is.

I race down the stairs, but stumble as I make it to the living room. It's truly useless.

Xander is faster than me and, before I even make it to the couch, his arm is threaded around my waist.

He reaches around me with precision and unsnaps my jeans.

“You’ll never get away from me, Little Flame.”

He rips my jeans and underwear down my hips, and the cool air on my wet pussy makes me gasp for air. “Oh fuck, you’re so into this.”

“ Yes, ” I moan as he presses two fingers deep inside of me. He finger fucks me hard, slapping his hand against me. Then, he pulls his hand away and flips me around, tearing my shirt up over my head. I unhook my bra as he peels off his own clothes, and then he’s standing before me completely naked.

“You’re a fucking dream,” he growls down at me, forcefully spreading my legs, and pushing me back on the couch. Xander climbs in between them and presses the head of his thick cock inside of me. “You’re always going to be full of me, Little Flame.”

“You’ll have to marry me,” I throw out as he fills me entirely. “My parents are old-fashioned—and I know all of your secrets now.”

He reaches up and tears the mask off his face, his eyes boring into mine. “It’s so fucking hot when you blackmail me. Keep talking like that.”

I arch back as he thrusts into me. “Good, because if you try to leave me, I’ll do more damage than before.”

“Oh fuck,” he groans, pounding into me and sending me straight into a powerful orgasm.

“You’re such a bad girl, aren’t you? You like it like this? All fucked up.”

“I just love you,” I breathe out, meeting his gaze. “All fucked up or not.”

Xander’s expression softens as his body stills. “Yeah? You do?”

I nod. “I do. I truly do.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

JAXTON

Three Years Later

I snap his neck and let the body drop, frowning at how easy it was.

“You didn’t fight hard enough, buddy,” I joke, stepping over the limp man. “But you really should’ve gotten better at paying back loans.”

Slipping out of the alley, I check my watch, and see that it’s half past midnight. I pull out my phone, and dial Roman’s number.

“Done?” he answers.

“Yep,” I say, breathing out a sigh. “He didn’t fight. Spent most of our encounter begging for his life, but you know how that goes.”

“Never well,” he chuckles.

“Nope. I’m leaving him there. I don’t think anyone will think twice about a junkie dropping dead in the middle of this part of town. Just another casualty of addiction.”

“Good plan.” He sounds indifferent to the idea. I take the moment to hail a fucking cab to get back home. Ember’s probably waiting, and she knows what happens on nights like tonight. Turns out, I was right.

She is all I need.

“Have a good night,” I tell him. “We’ll meet up sometime tomorrow.”

“Got it.” Roman hangs up the phone, and I shove it into the pocket of my jacket and climb into the backseat of the cab. I lean my head back against the seat. Megan was supposed to come over, but I hope like hell she’s gone by now.

We’ll see.

I’m still not a huge fan of any woman other than mine, but that’s okay. I don’t think Ember minds at all. She never has to worry about me fucking one of her friends. No one but her will ever do it for me. I swallow hard, shifting as my dick gets hard thinking about what’s to come.

“Late night?” the cab driver tries to make conversation, and I roll my eyes.

“Guess that depends on what you call late,” I say.

“True,” the driver chuckles.

I spend the rest of the ride in silence, and by the time I’m back at the apartment complex, my fucking hands are shaking with need. I blow through the front doors and head straight for the elevator, punching the damned button like a madman. My foot taps on the floor and what’s only a few minutes feels like hours.

The doors finally chime open, and I step inside, the light glinting off the silver wedding band on my left hand. Mrs. Marks is waiting for me, and I know she’s just as fucking excited as I am about what’s to come.

I take a few raspy breaths as the elevator rises to the penthouse level. I step off onto the floor as soon as the doors are open wide enough for me to fit through. I punch in the code of my front door, and then shove it open, letting it bang against the wall.

I'm home, Ember.

But she's nowhere to be found.

The whole of the apartment is pitch black, and it ups the ante. I shut and lock the door, before reaching into my jacket pocket. I pull out the old faithful mask, and slide it onto my head.

"Where are you, Little Flame?" I call out into the silent house. My voice seems to echo, but I grin at the little squeal of excitement I hear coming from upstairs. I nearly laugh at how excited she sounds. As much as she loves to play this game...

She's terrible at it.

I do not creep toward the stairs; instead I let my footsteps echo on the floor. I know that gets her riled up, hearing me coming for her pussy. I climb the stairs to the second floor, and then quietly ease down the hallway.

Our bedroom door is cracked and the light from the TV floods the hallway. I now shift to creeping, wanting to get my eyes on her before she knows I'm there. I peer in and catch sight of her lying on the bed, dressed in her best lingerie.

Of course, she's going to torture me.

I take in the way her breasts tease me from behind a sheer black teddy, and it cuts into a deep V at her hips. Her hand slides down her body, not stopping until she's rubbing herself over the thin fabric.

You know I'm watching.

But still, I linger, enjoying the show she's putting on for me. Her back arches and a moan slips from her pretty lips. Her hair is spread across the bed, cascading like silk.

She's a goddess.

She's my goddess.

"Don't you dare fucking come yet," I growl as I push the door the rest of the way open. Her back is arched so much that there's a gap between her lower back and the bed. "I'd hate to have to punish you for it."

"In that case," she moans out, bringing herself all the way there. "Jaxton," she cries out my first name as she comes, which has become a moment of fucking magic. She comes beneath that fucking little piece of fabric, and she knows what that does to me.

"You're such a bad girl," I rumble, stepping inside and shutting the door. "You're lucky you're so goddamned pretty."

She grins up at me wickedly. "What are you gonna do about it?"

I grab her ankles, dragging her to the edge of the bed. I lift the mask up just enough for my mouth and run my tongue over the material between her legs. "Such a shame you're covered, Little Flame."

Ember gasps, reaching down and fumbling with the release for the bottom of the piece. "I can fix that," she pants.

"No," I grab her wrists pinning them down. "I think you're going to pay the price for taking away my turn to make you come. You've already gone, so it's my turn."

She giggles as I stand, pulling the mask back down. As hot as it is to be serious and dark, I love the way she laughs. It's fucking music to my ears, and I'll take any sound she makes over anything else in the world.

I flip her onto her stomach, and pull the fabric to the side, giving myself just enough

room to plunge right into her. “Oh fuck,” I groan as she whimpers with pleasure. “My turn. My. Fucking. Turn.”

I pound into the back of her mercilessly, giving her every inch of me over and over, until she’s screaming my name all over again. I rip the mask off my head as I lean down over her, fisting her hair and biting down on her shoulder.

She comes a second time, and I follow her, pumping her pussy full of my cum. I groan with satisfaction, and then kiss the place I bit her.

“I love you, Ember,” I murmur into her skin, inhaling her like I’m starved for oxygen.

“I love you, too,” she sighs back to me, rolling over as I pull out of her.

“How was it?”

“Mm, I’d rate it a ten out of ten, just like always,” I smirk, leaning over and planting a kiss on her lips. “It’s you. It’s always good.”

She giggles but then swats my shoulder. “I mean how was the job tonight. You haven’t gone out in a while.”

I suck in a breath. “It was fine. The guy was a limp fucking noodle, really. I snapped his neck in a few seconds and that was that.”

“Damn,” Ember sits up, stretching her arms over her head. “You fucked me like it was more exciting than that.”

I laugh, palming her pretty tits. “Anytime I come home to this, it’s exciting. It has nothing to do with the job.”

I let out a sigh and take a seat next to her. “In fact, I don’t think it does anything for

me at all. I just need you, Little Flame.”

She smiles softly up at me, tracing her fingers along my jaw. “I just need you, too, Jaxton.”

I rest my forehead against hers. “I think we might need one more thing.”

“What’s that?” she hums. “Because I hope it’s not adding a third. I could never handle you touching someone else. I might turn into a serial killer myself—and my parents are coming, too.”

I chuckle. “No one for me, but you.” I run my hand down her bare thigh. “But I was thinking that maybe it’s time to expand the family.”

She falls silent and pulls away from me, tipping her head back.

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” I say the word carefully, trying to gauge her expression. “I mean, I’m surprised it hasn’t happened yet, because we never try not to, you know? And I don’t know... I think...” My voice trails off as I push some of her hair out of her face. “I think I’d like to see you as a mother.”

Her eyes glisten with tears. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I say, confused as she gets to her feet and grabs for my T-shirt, pulling it over her head. It drops to the middle of her thighs, and I feel the familiar pang of disappointment as her body is suddenly covered. “We don’t have to. I’m happy either way.”

She disappears into the bathroom, and I curse under my breath. I thought this is what she’d want. She’s been making fucking hints for months, and even my uncle noticed

that she's been talking to his new wife about it. I run my fingers through my hair, waiting to see if she's going to come back—or if I'm going to have to go after her.

“You know,” Ember's voice called from the bathroom. “Has your uncle talked to you?”

“What?” I call out, shaking my head. “No, I mean, yeah, but not like that. I just thought...”

She reappears from the bathroom, a soft expression on her face. “I'm glad you want that. I am...”

“But?” I raise my brows as she comes to stand between my legs, putting my head at her chest level. “But not right now?”

“No,” she says, and then presses something into my hand. “I think right now might be the perfect time, actually.”

I wrap my fingers around what she's placed in my hand, already with a clue as to what it is. A blast of anxiety and excitement thrums through my chest as I pull my hand away from hers and reveal the pregnancy test stick.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, seeing two-pink lines pop on the test. “You're pregnant, Ember.”

“I am,” she says quietly.

I stare at the two lines for a few moments longer, taking it all in. Then, I peer up at her, seeing the way her eyes are glistening and the way her expression is etched with nerves. She's been nervous about telling me.

“This is amazing,” I say to her. “The second-best day of my life.”

“Really?” she breaks into a smile and a tear rolls down her cheek. “What was the first?”

I pull her in for a kiss. “The day I found you.”

THE END.