



Reaper's Hunt

Author: *N. Slater*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Dark

Description: Lure. Kill. Carve out their hearts.

My job has always been simple, my trophy room begging for my next victim, the itch to make our abusers pay growing with every scene painted in their blood.

Until one target lands me in the hands of men who might even be more unhinged than I am.

But they don't want to turn me in.

They want to possess me. Consume me. Break me.

And after this kill?

They just might.

Reaper's Hunt, the first of three novels in the No Rest for the Wicked Series, is an 18+ MMFM dark(ish) romance following an unhinged FMC out for revenge and three morally black men who fall for her. Dark Themes; HFN; Cliffhanger. TW/CW in Author's Note.

Total Pages (Source): 44

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Selene

I stand at the foot of my bed, staring at the naked man on my mattress. Sprawled out like some prize stag, legs splayed, cock half-hard and glistening with the arrogance of a man who thinks he's won. His lustful smile stretches wide, teeth yellowed from too many cigarettes, eyes glinting with a hunger that makes my stomach churn. Not because it's vile, though it is but because it's so fucking predictable.

They all look at me like this. Like I'm meat to devour. Like they're the hunters. Idiots. I sway toward him, exaggerating my movements to make him seem like I'm falling for his version of seduction. A grin splits across my face that I know from experience is more demented than lustful. In this man's haze, his desire to sink into me, he sees it for nothing other than interest.

He's not even really seeing me. Just the silver hair that spilled over my shoulders at dinner, now in one long braid, the glass-gray eyes he probably thinks are pretty. I hook a leg over his waist, perching on the edge of the bed, my weight sinking into the mattress. His greedy hands shoot up, fingers slipping beneath my shirt, brushing the bare skin at my waist.

I fight the urge to recoil, to rip his grubby paws off me and snap every last bone in them. This is all about the end game and pulling away will have him seeing through the sultry mask I've perfected. Blank expression, big smiles, extra tight bra to push up what little assets I have.

Works like a charm every damn time.

“Goddamn, you’re hot,” he rasps, words slurred from one too many drinks at the last bar we went to and then the half a pint of whiskey he stole from my cabinet. If I wasn’t already going to kill the bastard, I would kill him for drinking my beautiful poison I keep for special occasions.

That’s neither here nor there at this moment as I lean down, letting my hair flop over my shoulder, my lips brushing against his in the softest tease. He chases it, tongue thrusting out, sloppy and desperate. It’s pathetic. Wet. Tastes like ash and regret and a sorry-ass excuse for a husband. Oh, did I not mention that this fucker somehow got married?

I pull back, smirking as he groans, frustrated, his cock twitching against my clothed ass. Nothing about him impresses me. Not his kisses, not that sad little prick he’s so proud of. It’s a shriveled thing, barely worth the effort of looking at. Should’ve stayed hidden in his pants where it belongs.

It’s a shame because I could have done with a good hard fuck tonight but that’s obviously not an option with this one. My brows furrow as I try to remember his name and fail miserably. I only know I have the right guy because the woman who hired me gave me pictures. Thank fuck for those. I don’t have time to be memorizing anything else.

I’ll just be glad that after tonight, I won’t be staring at his ugly mug anymore.

“What did you have in mind, baby?” He purrs, although it sounds a lot more like nails on a chalkboard. He thrusts his hips upward, a sloppy movement as my plan starts to shift into place. Ignoring him, I reach over to the nightstand and grab my trusty sidekick, my fingers curling around the cool metal of my surgical knife. The weight of it sings in my palm, a lover’s promise, the only thing that has never failed me. Lifting it to my lips, I give it a small kiss, the cold seeping into my skin.

The man's eyes widen, that lustful haze flickering into unease. Good. He was just a little too cocky for my taste.

"Hey, uh..." He shifts beneath me, hands stalling on my waist. "I'm not really into that."

A high, brittle giggle falls from my lips because I'm currently enjoying this change of emotion, the fear that's starting to emerge from his expression. "Into what?"

"Knife play." His voice wavers. "I just thought we could fuck around for a while, y'know?"

I snort, leaning closer until my breath ghosts his face. "Neither am I. Not really." My grin stretches wider, until every last one of my teeth are showing. I've been told it's not a pretty smile, that I really should practice on something softer, but I quite like the fear and unease it puts in people's eyes. "I'm more into getting revenge for sweet girls who pay me a lot of money."

He blinks, confusion muddying his features. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh, do you not remember Hailey Cooper?" I tilt my head, watching the name sink in, watching his brain scramble to catch up. It's delicious watching the slow dawn of terror overtake his expression.

"Did that fucking bitch sell me out?"

"No," I say, voice dropping to a soft purr, every last word lethal. "You killed her. But her sister wants you dead. And I'm here to collect."

His face twists into a mixture of emotions, anger, fear, and realization all slamming together. He tries to buck me off, hands shoving at my hips, but I'm faster. My thighs

clamp down, pinning him to the bed, and I press the knife to his throat, just enough to nick the skin.

A small trickle of crimson follows the length of my blade, excitement blooming in my chest as I watch it trickle onto the baby pink duvet. I never liked this bed or any of the decorations in the guest bedroom, so I suppose this is as good a reason as any to replace everything.

His breath hitches and I suspect he's starting to understand just who I am. They call me the Reaper out there, in the shadowed corners of Ashthorne County. A faceless monster, leaving flayed husks strewn across the city, hearts ripped out, souls stolen. No one sees the thread tying them together. No one but me. Men who hurt. Men who broke me once or broke someone else.

I'm not picky. Blood's blood. And tonight, his will paint my hands crimson. I'm so fucking excited.

"You're fucking crazy," he spits, voice trembling despite the bravado. His fingers twitch on my hips but he doesn't move them.

"Crazy's a lazy word," I muse, dragging the blade down his chest, a shallow cut, just enough to tease his skin open, spurring me on. The red mark it leaves isn't quite deep enough but the contrast to his pale skin is fine for now. He hisses, body jerking beneath me. "I prefer... purposeful. You killed Hailey in that alley last week. She said no, and you didn't like that. Snapped her neck like it was nothing. Left her there, skirt hiked up, dignity shredded. Her sister came to me, sobbing, cash in hand. Begged me to make you pay. And I would never say no to a good paycheck."

Thing is, if she hadn't given me money, I still would have been here, contemplating this man's death. He's a vile human who needs to learn a lesson. Granted, the money definitely sweetens the deal.

“You’re lying,” he snarls, but the sweat beading on his forehead betrays him. He definitely remembers that sweet little girl.

“Lying’s for people who care what you think. I don’t.” I shift the knife, pressing the tip against his sternum, right where his heart is buried, my true prize of the night. “You’re not walking out of here, sweetheart. You’re a dead man who just doesn’t know it yet.”

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“Wait, why can’t I move?” He drawls, his words even more slurred. His mind is alert but his body is slowly being paralyzed, lost to the drug I slipped him earlier, a special concoction that has taken years to perfect.

It’s why I made him undress earlier. Getting those clothes off him later would’ve been a bitch, and I don’t work with fabric in the way. Waiting for my concoction to kick in is always a gamble, though. My surgical skills are as sharp as my favorite blade, but anesthesia? That’s a fucking crapshoot. Too much and he’s a drooling corpse before I get my fun. Too little and he’s flailing while I carve. I like it somewhere in the middle. A sweet spot I’m still chasing.

His bravado cracks fully now, eyes darting to the door, the window, anywhere but me. “Please—look, I’ll pay you. Whatever she gave you, I’ll double it. Triple it. Just let me go.”

I tilt my head, considering it for a heartbeat, just to watch hope flicker in his gaze. Then, I laugh again, watching his face fall. “Money’s nice. Blood’s better.” I flick my hair over my shoulder, the single braid flopping against my back, and then plunge the knife in, piercing skin. His scream rips through the room, before it chokes into a wet gurgle. Blood sprays toward me, splattering my shirt, and I’m instantly glad I opted for the thick one. Much less clean up later.

I revel in his shock, the roses and thorns wrapped around my left arm and spreading up the side of my neck now painted in crimson, almost bringing them to life.

“You’re just a little girl, you fucking bitch. And now what? You terrify me a little and then your big boyfriend comes out to rough me up and teach me a lesson?”

I snort, sitting back fully on his stomach. That fucking cock is still hard, still excited, and it might be the next thing I slash. “First off, that’s Miss Bitch to you. I’m not a little girl. Second, what lesson would you possibly learn from me having someone else rough you up? That I can’t handle you on my own?” My grin stretches again, my cheeks starting to hurt from all the fun I’m having. “And I wouldn’t have fucking drugged you if I had someone else to do my dirty work. You’re really not that smart, are you?”

The panic has fully taken over, not that he can really express it as his hands slowly fall to the bedding. It’s my signal that we’re ready for the next step. My absolute favorite fucking part. Well, one of them. “This is where it ends for you,” I purr. “I was at least going to ride your cock before I got down to business, but then I saw it.” I don’t even bother to twist around and stare at the shriveled thing between his legs. “And it’s just... not impressive.”

His lips part, first a wet gasp and then a scream that seems to come from his soul. I just sag further onto his stomach, waiting for the shrill sound to stop. “They always scream,” I mutter, half to myself, half to my current reality. “They always think I haven’t planned for this, like I haven’t done this a billion fucking times to make sure no one else can hear them.” I tap the dull end of my blade against his chest. “Hey, you little fucker, stop screaming. This apartment’s got reinforced steel and the insulation’s soundproof. Oh my fucking God. I haven’t even done anything yet.”

He doesn’t stop but I didn’t expect him to. It’s bravado at first and then the screams, the realization that they can’t move, that they’ve been caught in my web of lies. I tap his chest again but he’s still screaming, squirming beneath me with what little movement he has left. “Jesus Christ,” I mutter before fishing earbuds from my pocket, hoping to dull the sound of this racket.

And as soon as I fit them into my ears, I grimace, Crimson Throat by some band I can’t remember coming alive. For a moment, I think of searching for my phone and

then realize it's good enough for the mood. The bass thumps, drowning the man beneath me out, my gaze dropping to his twisted-up face. His mouth's still moving, but now it's like he's singing along: a silent karaoke act in my own private hell.

A laugh falls from my lips, a sharp bark that cuts through the music in my head. Fucking poetic.

Hailey's sister told me to make him suffer and I had to make sure she understood I don't bring back souvenirs, that there would be no trial. She understood and so started the mission of luring him into my orbit so that I could carve out his heart and store it in my glass wall: my trophy, my pride and joy.

I weave the knife through the air, humming along to the melody before expertly carving into his chest, blade sinking into flesh with a wet, satisfying slice. Blood wells up, spilling over my hands, a fucking mess that I'm more than happy to partake in. Some might have used gloves or gone so far as to wear a hazmat suit.

But I like the crimson rivers, the screams, the squirming. It makes me feel alive in a way that working at the boutique a few streets over as a failed med student never does. The fear in their eyes, the pleas for mercy, the realization that The Reaper is the last thing they'll ever see.

Maybe I'll start wearing a cloak? I mentally tell myself to put that on the list as I refocus my efforts, my surgical knife dancing, precise cuts peeling back skin, muscle parting like the most gorgeous meat curtain. I'm going to filet him, strip him bare, and get to the prize inside. His screams fade, a hoarse rasp dying in his throat, and I shrug out an earbud, glad that he's chosen sanity for once.

"You're a sick fuck," he croaks, just above a whisper.

I snort, digging the blade deeper, a shallow arc along his sternum. "No, a sick fuck

would do this and then fry you up for a dinner platter.” My grin twists, an unhinged tint showing through. “I don’t desecrate my craft like that. Fucking hell, are your ribs made of steel?” I press harder, sawing through sinew, but the bone resists.

It’s always the ribs. The hardest part, the most tedious. Every time, it’s a slog to get to my prize. His heart. That pulsing, frantic thing I rip out and keep—his soul, his essence, locked away in my little collection.

I should’ve finished med school, maybe. Learned the proper way to crack a chest, split the cage, pluck the treasure free. But that would’ve meant money I didn’t have, time I couldn’t spare. And pretending to have some sort of bedside manner for people I could give a fuck about.

No shortcuts there, just debt and lectures and bullshit. So here I am, self-taught, peeling his skin back like a grotesque flower in full bloom. “I should have sprung for clamps,” I tell myself, once again adding to a mental list of shit I’ll need to buy. My usual tools ended up in a swamp two towns over after a job went sideways. Mishaps happen. Now, it’s just me, this knife, and sheer fucking will. Or...

I shouldn’t but the body is never really what I care about and what state it ends up in doesn’t matter to me so long as I have the heart. Reaching over to the nightstand again, I yank open the drawer, searching for the mallet. It’s supposed to be for emergencies or intruders and I would definitely classify this as the first one.

Time’s ticking and I’m pretty sure I’m late for a meeting at the station. Another murder, one that wasn’t mine. Harley’s probably pacing, growling about leads, oblivious that I’m elbow-deep in my own case right now. I heft the mallet, testing its weight, and his eyes dart to it, panic flaring in his eyes.

“What the fuck are you about to do with that?”

“I have to get to my prize. This part’s probably going to hurt.” In all of my concoctions, I’ve never been able to completely dull the pain but it’s also become my favorite part as they scream their last.

“What’s the point?” he rasps, desperation clawing through. He’s still alive, still fighting, even if it’s just words now. Pathetic.

I tilt my head, glass-gray eyes boring into his. “So, I can watch your face as you realize you’re just as helpless as that little girl you killed. You’ll die beaten, bruised, unable to protect yourself. Just like her.”

The first swing cracks down, a dull thud against his ribcage. Bone splinters, a jagged snap echoing in the room, and he screams again, weaker now, blood bubbling at his lips. Of course, one whack wouldn’t be enough; irritation flares through me as I swing again and again, harder and with more force. Each hit has the ribs splintering, cracking apart until the entire cage caves, a fractured gate.

One of them punctures my treasure, a heavy gasp falling from the man’s lips as his eyes roll into the back of his head. He’ll probably die now, but I’ve had my fun. A few jagged cuts later and I’m holding his still-beating heart in my hands, crimson tears running down my arms and seeping into my shirt. It thumps a few more times, slowly, until it stills, absolute perfection in my palms.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper to myself, a prayer to the ruin I’ve wrought.

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The mattress is a slaughterhouse, a soaked, sagging, canvas of gore. I don't care. It's just a thing, disposable, like him. I climb off the bed, heart clutched tight in my hands, blood dripping a trail behind me as I bolt toward my bedroom.

My bare feet slap against the glazed porcelain tiles as I shove open my door, headed for my shrine. It's a hidden closet along the wall, a long door with glass shelves holding all of the souls I've stolen over. The first three shelves are already a gallery of death, each jar holding a heart, suspended in a preservative I perfected from med school.

I run my fingers along the favorites, thinking back to men I've laid to waste—an abusive stepfather, a professor who wouldn't keep his hands off of me, my parole officer because I just didn't like him... It's become something of an art, my own expression in antique little jars holding evil souls.

This guy is next, but I have to find the perfect piece of glass to enshrine him in.

My gaze falls on the lower shelves, empty jars staring back at me, and then I stop on one of them. A mermaid, her tail the handle, iridescent scales glittering in the dim light. An homage to the way he all but drowned in his own blood. Oh, I'm a fucking genius.

Selene

I've been saving that beauty for a kill this sweet, and now that it's finally here, I can barely contain my excitement. I scramble toward the jar, fumbling one bloody hand with it, the other clutching the heart to my chest. Blood is soaking through my shirt,

staining the cotton, but that's the least of my worries.

It's the fact that my favorite lilac lace bra will be splotted with a man who's not worth the time to scrub out the stains. And I just got this set. Expensive as hell and it'll take me at least another paycheck to grab another one.

The top soon comes off and I drop the heart inside, the organ landing with a soft plop, blood pooling at the bottom, still warm from his chest. "I'll preserve it later," I mutter to myself. Right now, it's perfect. Well, mostly perfect. The red swirls around the glass as I tilt it, watching the heart bob. Beautiful. Mine.

The next part's less pretty—dragging a dead asshole out of my apartment and setting him up for the world to choke on. I step back into the hall after placing the jar in its rightful place and glance toward the guest bedroom. He's still there, sprawled out, chest flayed, ribs a jagged ruin. A husk ready for display, just another step in my masterful craft as The Reaper.

Where should I drop him this time? The alley behind the boutique's too obvious, too close to my cover. The park's tempting, letting joggers find him under the rising sun. I don't work tonight, so a lovely night stroll could do it—dump him somewhere poetic, let Ashthorne County wake up to my handiwork.

But the planning will have to wait till later, my stomach interrupting the silence as it yells for me to feed it. "When's the last time I ate?" I count and realize it's been at least twelve hours, maybe longer. If I don't eat something now, I'll regret it later. Harley will just have to wait. The bastard will ridicule me the moment I step into the station anyway, an ex who never truly let go and was definitely one of the ones who thought they could fix me.

With a heavy sigh, I stomp back across the tile and into the kitchen, the bright light showing just how much of me has been soaked in this man's blood. It's crusted under

my nails, streaked up my forearms, covering my shirt and the half top of my jeans. At least my crotch is dry or I'd have to filet that man just a little bit more.

I turn the faucet on, scrubbing at my hands and arms, red swirling down the drain. The river of crimson makes it look like my rose tattoo is actively bleeding: a living breathing thing as the remnants of this man's life disappears into nothingness. I'm almost done when my phone vibrates on the counter. A frown takes over my face as I dry my hands on my ass, the only clean part of me, and then grab my phone. Dante's name lights up the screen and then a text comes in a second later.

Bitch, where are you?

"Fuck."

Childhood friend, ex-cop turned consultant, a nosy bastard who thinks he knows me. I scan the kitchen for a clock and I grimace, realizing I was supposed to meet Harley over an hour ago, but Dante is never far behind, clinging to work he supposedly retired from. And apparently, since I work at the boutique on the strip, they wanted to ask me a few questions about a murder that happened recently.

My fingers fly over the screen.

Hey, sorry, lost track of time, I'll be there.

Don't bother. I'm already here.

My eyes go wide, heart lurching in my chest from the sudden, electric jolt of oh-fuck. I spin, staring across the living room toward the guest bedroom. The door's still open, carnage and blood-soaked bedding spilling into view, my art laid bare for anyone who steps into the living room. "Shit, shit, shit," I hiss, bolting toward it.

I slam the door shut, frantically looking around for anything and everything that I need to clean before this fucker steps into my apartment. There's nothing in plain view until I look down at myself, and fuck, it's bad.

There's no explaining this, not to Dante, not to anyone. My grin falters, replaced by a groan as I peel off my shirt, the fabric sticking to my skin. The bra's next, a lost cause. I toss them aside, then shimmy out of my jeans, sighing with relief when I find that my panties remain untouched. Thank fuck. I really like this set and knowing that half of it is still wearable is better than nothing.

Gathering up my clothes, making sure to keep them away from my chest, I dart to the washing machine beside the guest bedroom and stuff my clothes inside. There's a multiple step process if I were to salvage the clothing but right now, I just need it out of sight.

That's when I hear my front door creaking open, my pulse spiking as I glare at the entrance. I throw my arms across my chest, confused and a little terrified until I see Dante stepping inside, his dark eyes locking on mine before sliding down my nearly naked body. Heat prickles across my skin, panic trying to take over my rational thought.

I clear my throat, voice rougher than I would have liked. "Hi. Sorry I was late."

He steps further inside, his dress shoes clicking against my tiled floor as the door shuts behind him, a deliberate click echoing in the silence. "What have I told you about locking your doors, kitten?" His voice is always so fucking smooth, like molasses and a melody had a baby. It sends a shiver down my spine as he pulls his gun from its holster, setting it on the counter with a soft thud. His fingers move to his sleeves, rolling them up, revealing forearms corded with muscle. The leather belt goes next, set beside his gun as well, like he's settling in.

Like he lives here.

But I know better. He's about to teach me a lesson and I'm a sick individual for wanting it.

Still, I have to play into the game to make him give me the rough side of him he hides so well. "Hey, wait," I blurt, stepping back, my free arm still clutching my chest. "I just came—I just..." My eyes dart to the guest bedroom door, then snap back to him.

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He tilts his head, a predator sizing up prey, a deviant smile curling his lips. “It could’ve been anyone sliding in here, catching you in those panties.” He stalks forward, closing the gap, and before I can dodge, his hand snakes out, yanking me against him. Everything about his touch is possessive, a reverent claim reminding me who I belong to.

I might be my own woman but in moments like this, there’s no denying he’s in charge.

“We’re not dating,” I snap, shoving my hand into his chest. “You can’t tell me to do anything.” That only serves to piss him off, his breed of irritation on an entirely different level than any other man I’ve been with. I’m torn between terror and turned on, my panties soaked but not with blood. My heart beats a little faster, my fight or flight response kicking in.

But running from a man like Dante would only be a challenge to him; one that he’d win.

A dark chuckle falls from his lips as he steps closer, wrapping a firm hand around the front of my neck, his thumb digging into my chin to angle it upward. His eyes are almost black, a void of lust and dominance that has me giving up my fight. And when he leans down, his breath fanning my ear, a hint of a growl in his words, I’m little more than a puddle. “You’re still mine, sweetheart. I also think we need to have another lesson.” His other hand moves to my waist, fingers roughly digging into the bare skin. “You don’t hide from me, kitten. Now, panties off.”

My stomach lurches from the guest room door mocking me ten feet away. Dante’s

too fucking close for my liking and knowing him, he'll catch a whiff of copper, a smear I missed. "Strip for me," he demands, voice dropping a few more octaves. "The rules haven't changed."

I know they haven't. He's drilled them into my head a billion fucking times after he became my lifeline, a way to get an itch scratched, a booty call that was always just a text away. Dante's so much more than that but that's all he can be to me. After all, he works a rather respectable job while I leave little presents around the county for him to find.

Not that he knows. Even if some twisted part of me wonders if he finds some kind of fascination in my art. Would he lock me up if he found out? Or would he fuck me over one of their corpses as praise for my work?

"Kitten," Dante purrs, tearing me from my thoughts. "Don't make me ask again."

Selene

I hold up a hand, Dante halting his approach. "Wait," I rasp, my other arm still clamped tight over my chest. I'm still searching the open area for anything that will tip him off. Specks of blood dot the hardwood, a breadcrumb trail snaking down the hall to my bedroom. Fuck, that's bad. Worse, the guest room's a slaughterhouse and my real bedroom's got bloody fingerprints smudged across the wall, a map to my hidden stash of glass hearts. One wrong glance and he'll see the Reaper unmasked and my sick little world laid bare.

I still don't know if he'll turn me in, praise me, or punish me—that sadistic part of me mirrored in his eyes at times. Secretly, I'm hoping for one of the last two, maybe a combination. Hell, an entire night session would be fantastic.

Remembering that Dante gave me a command, I face him again, the man an inch

away from me, towering over me. I shouldn't have told him to wait. Telling Dante anything never ends well for me. Before I can blink, his hand shoots out, rough fingers wrapping around my throat. His nose drags along my cheek, no doubt catching the mixture of blood, sweat, and the faint tang of coconut body wash still clinging to my skin. His growl rumbles low in my ear, a shiver running down my spine. "You don't tell me to wait, kitten. That's not how this works."

Another shiver snakes down my spine, my sick twisted mind reveling in the blood, the violence, the sadistic thrill of peeling my victims apart before they break. It's my fucking gospel. But this? Dante's rough hand on my throat, this man demanding my submission? It's a different drug, one I crave just as bad.

I never give in easy, but goddamn, I love every bruising, breathless minute of it. The only thing that'd make this better is if the lights were off. But not now. Darkness would draw him to the bedrooms, to the gore, the jars, the truth.

He growls again, right in my face, and yanks me forward, his lips crashing into mine. It's rough, bruising, all teeth and hunger, his tongue claiming me like I'm his to devour. He wants me to bend but I'm going to make him work for that right, my teeth sinking into his bottom lip, the taste of copper coating the tip of my tongue.

He snarls into the kiss, his free hand moving south, two fingers hooking into the waistband of my panties. The fabric stretches taut before he rips them off as he pulls back just enough for me to see the dark expression on his face.

"You ruined a good fucking pair of panties," I groan at him, the man's fingers digging into my neck a little more. "I really liked those ones." Not quite the most important thing at this moment but still a sore point.

A wild smile slides across this man's face, the embodiment of my own nightmare and desires wrapped up in one. He leans down again, lips brushing against my ear, voice a

husky whisper that has me pressing my thighs together. “You see, I was going to reward you. Take you out to that hamburger joint you like so much after having to deal with your ex, maybe romance you up a little, make love to you.”

My ex, Harley, is a whole bag and chips to deal with, a drag on my otherwise ‘exciting’ life. But that’s not what catches me off guard. “You’ve never made love to me, Dante.” That’s not entirely true. When we were young, irresponsible teenagers, we thought we knew what love was. We thought the world was ours to take, to mold. But then he went off to college and my stepfather died. I definitely killed that bastard for hurting my mother. And then, I found the both of us on different paths.

This is all I deserve now and I will drink up every last drop of what he’s offering like the depraved bitch that I am.

A feral grin splits his face as he brushes his lips against mine again, teasing me. “No, you’re right,” he murmurs, “and I’m not about to start now.”

I yelp as Dante’s hands clamp around my waist and lift me against the wall. “What the fuck are you doing?” My voice cracks, caught between the slick heat flooding my cunt and the confusion spiking my pulse. My thighs clench, already wet, betraying how much I want this even as my mind scrambles.

“Putting you in a position where you can’t move while I take what’s mine,” he growls. His strength’s obscene as he hoists me higher, my legs splaying wide as he hooks them over his shoulders, my pussy level with his face. Before I can catch my breath, he buries his head between my thighs, tongue plunging into me, starting a ruthless pace I’ll never survive.

He sucks my clit hard, teeth grazing just enough to sting, drawing a garbled scream from me as one of my hands flies up, slamming against the ceiling for purchase. The other twists into his hair, yanking viciously, nails raking his scalp as he devours me

like the beast he is. Dante always likes me in vulnerable positions, positions I can't demand my own way, positions where I'm helpless but to take what he's offering.

His hands slide to my ass, fingers sinking deep into the meat of my cheeks. He squeezes, bruising, spreading me wider as his tongue fucks into me, lapping up the slick mess I'm making. My hips buck forward, grinding against his face, chasing the filthy rush as he groans into my cunt, the vibration shuddering through me.

Just as the crest of my orgasm starts moving toward me, the fucking bastard drops me. My pleasure is dangling so fucking close I can taste it as my feet hit the floor. My knees buckle and I stumble against him, an animalistic snarl tearing from my throat. I glare at him, pissed off at being denied my release. Dante just chuckles, spinning me and slamming my tits against the wall, my nipples scraping rough paint. I barely have time to brace myself before he rams his cock into me, splitting me open in one savage thrust.

A ragged, desperate cry fills the air, my body pinned between him and the wall, my traitorous cunt trying to suck him in further. When did he undo his pants? I don't know, don't fucking care, focusing on the pleasure instead. His dick's buried to the hilt, balls slapping my pussy, and my nails claw the wall that will definitely have to be painted over.

Not sure how I'll be able to explain to the landlord about fucking claw marks in the wall if I don't.

His breath scorches my ear, a hissed whisper dripping every last bit of his dominance over me. "You make me so fucking angry sometimes." Each word's a thrust, his cock dragging against my inner walls, hitting spots that make me sob with need. My pussy's drenched, sucking him in, the wet smack of skin on skin filling the room.

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He fucks me like he wants to break me, hands bruising my hips as he yanks me back to meet every punishing stroke. And I love it, crave it, this pleasurable torture he wields like a blade, carving me open in ways my kills never touch.

Dante comes hard, a guttural groan tearing from his chest as his cock pulses, spilling hot and thick inside me. He holds me there as his lips graze my shoulder until he's done, and then he pulls out, my cunt constricting around nothing, my orgasm still just around the corner. "Go change," he says, a hint of amusement lacing his words as he steps back to tuck himself away. "We need to get to the station to meet Harley."

I didn't come and he knows it. Fucking asshole. It's his sick game, his torture, and I'm hooked on it, some depraved part of me panting for the denial. I should have known he wouldn't come over to fuck me, to scratch an itch I desperately needed scratched. No, every last minute of his presence tonight was to teach me a lesson for keeping him waiting. Not Harley, but him.

"I just need to take a quick shower," I rasp, voice wrecked, reaching for a shred of control.

A dark, cruel laugh comes from him as he leans against the edge of my couch. "Only good girls get showers, kitten. And you?" His eyes rake over me, lingering on my flushed tits, the sweat glistening my skin. "Are not. You're gonna walk into that goddamn station with my cum still leaking out of your sloppy little cunt."

My nose scrunches, disgust warring with the twisted heat still coiling in me. I press my thighs together, the odd feeling of his cum starting to trickle back out causing me to grimace. "And to think we were ever childhood sweethearts."

“You’re still my fucking sweetheart,” he purrs, “and I love knowing you’re stuffed with my load while sitting across from that prick Harley, who thinks he’s still got a shot at you.”

I give in, knowing that any fight will have me enduring something else this man throws at me. He’s going to fuck me at some point later anyway so there’s no use continuing to debate him. Leaving the living room might give him time to wander, so I hurry over to the dryer, hoping and praying I was lazy enough to leave clothes in there.

Bingo.

I step into a pair of panties, grimacing at the slickness pressed against my pussy. That’s going to be so fucking uncomfortable, but I keep going, dragging out a black dress that’s really more of a sleeve. It’ll show every last curve, my nipples poking through the thin fabric. The moment I slip it over my head, there’s a grunt of disapproval from behind me.

“Change.”

Just one word, a command that I’m not going to follow. “Actually, I won’t.” I twist around to look at him, that possessive expression back on his face, his arms folded over his chest.

“You do realize what’s going to happen to you if I catch Harley staring at you, right?”

“Empty promises, Dante.”

This man is as possessive as they come, ruining dates and one-night stands to show that he’s the only person who can truly satisfy me. The problem is that he’s right and

I'm constantly trying to prove to myself that I don't need him. That I could break away from him. That one day, I could leave him behind.

But who am I kidding? Dante's not going anywhere.

Dante

I growl under my breath as Selene steps out in that damn dress. Black, tight, clinging to every curve like it's painted on, her hips, ass, and chest all screaming for attention. It's pissing me off. Harley's gonna look at her, I know it. That smug bastard will rake his eyes over what's mine, and I'll have to stop myself from smashing his teeth down his throat. Her body's not for him. It's mine. Every inch, every scar, every fucking breath she takes. I don't care if she's a storm of chaos wrapped in silver hair and glass-gray eyes. She's mine to claim, mine to keep.

But I bite my tongue, gentlemanly enough to hold the door open for her as we head out. She moves past me, that silver hair catching the streetlights in her dimly lit neighborhood. I despise this area but Selene refuses to move for some reason and since I can't make her do anything, the only thing I can do is make sure she doesn't end up dead like the victim of the murder we're currently investigating.

Those mischievous eyes dart to mine, a flicker of fear buried in them. She's wondering if I'll figure out what happened in that goddamn apartment tonight. If I wasn't so fucking smitten, so caught up in watching her when she thinks no one is, I'd tell her right now. I've known for years—her tendencies, her cravings, the way she hungers for the kill.

I was there the night she tore her stepfather apart, blood painting the walls, his screams dying in her hands. I wasn't supposed to be, but I hid in the shadows, my cock half-hard from the sheer brutality of her. She was a goddess of ruin and I was hooked.

Back then, we were innocent. Kids in love playing at something soft before the world broke her. Before survival birthed the monster she is now. She thinks I'd recoil, that I'd reject this jagged, beautiful thing she's become. She has no fucking clue what I'll accept. I want it all. Her flaws, her curves, the scars crisscrossing her soul. That filthy mouth spitting curses, the way she fights back with teeth and nails. I want the darkness, the deviance, the blood on her hands. But I'm having too much fun making her squirm, letting her think I'm blind to it all. Keeping her on edge is my game, and I'm damn good at it.

I watch her now, sliding into the passenger seat of my truck, that dress riding up her thighs. My fingers itch to grab her, to pin her down and growl that I know, that I've always known. Her eyes catch mine again and there's that uncertainty, that teetering doubt: Will I turn her in, or pull her close?

She doesn't dare ask, though. I'm the only warm body she trusts, the only tether she's got left. But it's more than that. I'm the only one who remembers her from before the kills, before the Reaper took root. When she was just Selene, sharp-tongued and wild, but mine in a way that didn't need blood to seal it.

She's still mine. Always will be. She'll figure that out in time.

"Harley's gonna be a prick tonight," I mutter, starting the engine, trying to keep my tone casual.

She smirks, her attention focused forward, but her hands fidgeting in her lap belie her expression. Good. I like her rattled and off-balance. Keeps her close, keeps her guessing. I pull onto the road, my mind drifting back to the state of her apartment. I can picture the blood-soaked sheets, a gutted corpse lying on that bed, and my beautiful woman standing over it with a maniacal grin she sports when she's in the moment.

I'm not sure why Selene thought I wouldn't smell the copper lingering on her skin. Not even a quick shower would be able to hide the evidence of a dead body from me. Not only have I been working in the business too fucking long, but I know her. The worst part is that I fucking love the way it mingles with her natural scent. Hell, I'd lick it off her if she'd let me.

"You're quiet," she muses, her voice a little more curt than usual. She's pissed at me for several reasons, no doubt, most currently that I didn't let her come. That's her fault, though. She shouldn't have been late.

She tries to be discreet as her gaze narrows at me but it's not all that subtle. I merely shrug, not giving her the answer she wants, "Just thinking about how Harley's gonna drool over you in that dress."

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Selene likes the game just as much as I do, but if Harley so much as breathes too close, I'll break his fucking jaw. Gentleman or not, there's a limit.

We roll up to the station, Selene already hopping out of the truck before I fully pull to a stop. We're barely up the steps when she whirls around and pokes me in the chest. Her lip is turned up into a snarl, those glass eyes a stormy gray. "How the fuck did you get in? I know I locked the house."

"Picked the lock. Got bored of waiting."

Selene lets out a little growl that has my cock thickening in my pants. If I were a lesser man, I'd bend her over right here and slide right into that tight cunt. But no, I'll wait until we're back in the car and I'll even let her come.

"So you just came into my apartment and then didn't let me come? Bullshit."

"No, your ex-boyfriend's a drag and I couldn't sit there another fucking moment hearing him drone on about taking you out to dinner on Friday night." I pause, eyes locking on hers. "Which reminds me... you didn't tell me about that." There's a lot of things she doesn't tell me about and it pisses me the fuck off, but Harley is a sore spot for both of us.

For Selene, he's a man who tried to change her, tame her. For me, he's in my fucking way. If I didn't have some kind of business rapport with the guy, he would have already been buried in the ground, six feet deep where no one would find him.

Her glare doesn't waver, but then she sighs, her shoulders falling as if she's just as

tired of Harley's pursuits as I am. "There's nothing to tell, Dante. I'm just finding out about this date night from you."

She pushes into the station and I follow, eyes dipping to the curve of her ass and the way her hair waves across it with every step. "When are you gonna let him know you're not available?"

"I've told him plenty of times. But I like the chase."

I mumble under my breath, too low for her to catch, "If you need someone to chase you, I'll be the one doing it." My hands flex, itching to grab her, to prove it right here that I'm the only person she needs for that type of excitement, but a little self-control goes a long way.

Selene stops just inside the main area and reaches up to twist her hair into a ponytail. That's when I see a speck of blood, clinging to a strand near her ear. And just a few centimeters farther back is a little sliver of flesh beckoning for me to reveal it. In a room full of police officers, there's no way she's going to be able to explain that shit away.

I step up to her and reach over her shoulder before roughly tugging her hair back down, letting it fall loose again. She stiffens, her cheeks flushing as she meets my gaze.

"Decided I wanted it down," I rasp, voice thick with everything I'm not saying.

She snorts, breaking the tension, her flush fading into that sharp-edged grin. "What, are you gonna buy me ice cream like a boyfriend would, too?"

Keeping my voice low, I lean in, eyes peeled for anyone watching. They aren't, minding their own business, working on cases that have kept them here at this late

hour. “Good girls get to come,” I breathe into her ear before heading down the hall. I swallow down the anxiety I’m trying to keep in, the weight of being in this place with Selene creeping in.

I volunteered to be here for this meeting because I don’t want her anywhere near this mess or near law enforcement in general. She’s getting sloppy and I’ve covered her tracks more than once. She’s not perfect, but it’s gotten worse over the last few months. Like she’s losing steam, or maybe she just thinks she’s untouchable, some silver-haired goddess above the law. The last few kills scattered around Ashthorne County were a fucking mess, less than pretty, her artwork rushed, jagged, sloppy in a way that doesn’t fit her. The Reaper’s supposed to be precise, a surgeon with a scythe, not some butcher hacking away.

I check on her when I can, poke at her, bother her enough to glimpse what’s churning in that twisted head of hers. Without asking outright, though, I’m stuck guessing. This last kill, the one they’re buzzing about tonight wasn’t her. I hope. Messy, rushed, blood everywhere, no rhyme or reason. Nothing about it screams her name, but I wouldn’t put it past her to fuck with the system, to throw us all off just for the hell of it.

Harley’s office is at the back, the fucker getting promoted in the last few weeks to head detective or something. I didn’t really pay attention except for the fact that it gives me more access. I’m supposed to have been retired, rehired as a consultant, but I’ve basically turned into Harley’s lackey in exchange for access to information. I knock on the entrance to his office, the man looking up with a tired smile.

It quickly spreads into an annoying grin when his gaze locks on Selene, the man giving her a slow, deliberate once over as if he’s got a shot. Fuck. She’s mine, every scar, every sin, and he doesn’t even know the half of it.

Selene plops into the chair across from him, then grimaces, crossing her legs tight. I

can only imagine how uncomfortable she is, my cum dribbling out of her, a reminder that I've claimed her. Even if Harley is eyefucking her at the moment.

"Did something happen?" Harley leans forward as he asks, gaze darting to me and then back to Selene. He seems genuinely concerned as to why she's later than planned.

Selene shrugs, unbothered by his attention. "I was enjoying my evening. Got caught up in the bliss of things."

Harley smirks, tapping a pen against his notepad. "Sure. Look, we're questioning everyone about the murder a few doors down from the boutique. Would've been just after your shift Monday night."

Her nose scrunches up as if she's trying to determine if Harley's stupid or not. Then she just sighs, resting back in her chair, putting up all those damn walls until her eyes are that clear, unphased color again. "If I was off, I'm not sure I'd be anywhere near that. Personally, Harley, you know I don't fuck with people. I go home, waste away in the darkness or whatever poetic bullshit you spouted when we broke up."

Harley groans as he stands and rounds the desk before pulling up a seat near her. I don't like the way he reaches for her hands, but she scoots back fast, her chair scraping across the floor. Defeat flickers in his expression before he sets his hands in his lap. "Hey, you're not a suspect. There was no reason this meeting had to happen tonight."

He shoots me a glare but I brush it off. Selene could've swung by tomorrow, breezed in on her way to the boutique, but I like fucking with her. So I dragged her here tonight, interrupted whatever she had brewing for the fun of it; and not because I missed her pussy, her scent, or anything else equally ridiculous.

Harley turns his attention back to my woman. “Selene, the murder happened Monday night, but sometime during your shift on Tuesday, that’s when the body showed up.”

Her head tilts just a fraction as those gorgeous eyes widen, a flicker of something alive behind them before she clamps it down. It’s an odd as fuck case and that reaction? It’s screaming she didn’t do it. I know her tells. Her pulse doesn’t lie. This mess of a kill—body vanishing, then dumped back at the scene, no cameras, no trace? It’s not her.

But that just raises more questions. Who the fuck murdered someone, hauled the corpse off, then brought it back like a goddamn trophy?

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“Harley, I’m not sure why this couldn’t have been a phone call or a quick chat during my shift. I don’t leave the boutique when I’m working. I keep my head down, don’t cause trouble, don’t have friends. If I remember something, you’ll be the first one I tell. Excuse me, I have plans tonight.” She abruptly pushes out of her chair and heads for the door, but she doesn’t get far.

Harley’s halfway to her, hand outstretched again as if he’s going to grab for her. I’ll rip that hand off his arm if he does. “Hey, you have plans?” His hopeful tone makes me gag, the sparkle in his expression telling me that he’s still stuck on a woman he couldn’t even begin to handle. “I was hoping you might go out with me—”

“It’s never gonna happen again, Harley,” she cuts him off. “You’re the guy who always thought you could change me. Nothing to change here. This is me.”

He steps closer, his voice more desperate now. “But you didn’t used to be like this all the time. Babe—”

She throws up a hand, stopping him dead. “First off, I’m not your babe. I’m not your anything. You made that crystal fucking clear when you broke up with me, telling me if I wouldn’t change, things wouldn’t work. I’m not mad, just stating facts. Second, life changes a person. Watching my stepfather get ripped apart and then dealing with my mother’s hatred because I didn’t stop it? Makes it kind of hard to be some sweet, innocent little girl hoping for the best in a cruel world. Excuse me.”

There’s a hint of a smirk on her lips, the triumph that comes from tearing her stepfather apart but it’s gone just as fast as she exits his office. I offer Harley a smug grin and mumble that I’ll go after her.

Dante

I'm trying real fucking hard not to laugh, trailing Selene out of the station, her silver hair swinging like a scythe with every pissed-off step. Everyone calls her The Reaper because of her artistic kills left bleeding without a heart. She's my Reaper because of the way she's stolen my attention, my soul, and the very air I breathe.

Fuck, maybe I should have been a poet instead of a profiler.

Selene has always been a force to be reckoned with, but this version of her is so much more exciting, especially with the way she dropped that note about her stepfather like she didn't gut him herself. He's dead; that's what really matters and if he wasn't, I'd have hunted him down myself, dragged him to the pits of hell, and beat the shit out of him until his bones were dust. Just so she'd know someone's got her back and always will. She doesn't need saving, but fuck, I'd kill for her anyway.

We hit the parking lot, and I unlock the truck, sliding into the driver's seat as she climbs in beside me. She slams the door, turning those glass-gray eyes on me, narrowed to slits. "Tell me the real reason why it was so important for me to show up at the station for two goddamn questions," she snaps, a hint of a growl at the edge of her voice.

For a moment, I don't say anything, pulling out onto the main street to take her back home. "Harley knew you'd hang up on him if he tried to ask you out on a date." It's half-true and I lean back, grinning at her glare. One day she'll snap at me for real, but until then, I'm going to keep fucking with her.

She scoffs, crossing her arms tight around her chest, that black dress pulling a few inches up her thighs. "It's 8 p.m. on a Wednesday night, Dante. Give me something else."

I sigh, dragging a hand through my hair before shifting to face her. “Harley’s under the impression you know more than you’re telling. Hear me out. I know you were nowhere near that murder, because I’ve seen the cameras. You’re clean on this one. But every time he asked you a question earlier this week, you dodged it while still flapping your lips. It’s like watching a fucking magician dodge a bullet.”

She smirks, obviously proud of herself from my imagery, but she also knows I’m right. She tends to talk her way out of a problem, but Harley isn’t as stupid as he lets on. “That’s not a crime. I don’t like cops, Harley’s my ex, and you’re my… whatever you are, who smothers me with unwanted attention.” Her words are doused in sarcasm, but there’s a flicker in her eyes testing me, pushing me, daring me to do something.

I wait until I pull up to her apartment, kill the engine, and then yank her over the console. She gasps, straddling my lap, her thighs clamping my hips as I grip her waist hard. “Unwanted attention?” I growl, sliding a hand up to grip her tit through that dress, squeezing until she squirms for relief. “Did you not want me to finish you off, kitten?” My thumb brushes her nipple, and I feel it harden, her breath hitching despite the fire in her eyes.

Her gaze darkens, pupils blowing wide as she leans in close, lips brushing my ear. “You’re a bastard,” she hisses, her voice a venomous purr that sends heat straight to my cock.

“I’ll take that as a yes, princess. Get me out.” My free hand digs into her thigh, sliding under the dress, fingers brushing the damp heat between her legs. She’s still mine—wet from earlier, marked by me, and I’ll be damned if she forgets it.

For a brief moment, I think she’s going to climb off me and storm her sexy little ass back into that apartment, but we both know she needs release. It’s the one thing I can give her that no one else can. Her eyes flash with anger again before her hand dives

between us and rips my pants open, the zipper's rasp a jagged tease in the silence.

My breath hitches, cock straining as she pulls it free, already leaking for her. Her touch is molten, a slow stroke that sets me on fire, and then she's shifting, yanking her panties aside, her fingers tugging the soaked fabric, baring her glistening cunt. She doesn't tease, doesn't wait, just slides down, impaling herself on me in one slick, agonizing thrust.

"Fuck," I rasp as she clenches around me. She swivels her hips, a filthy grind that drags her clit against me, starting up a pace she knows won't make me come but will send her spiraling. And that's all I crave—to watch her shatter on my cock, to feel her cunt pulse as she breaks, those glass-gray eyes glazing with raw, desperate need. Her lips crash to my neck, sucking hard, teeth scraping my pulse until I'm throbbing inside her. Her fingers claw my shoulders, nails sinking through my shirt, drawing blood, I'd bleed for her a thousand times.

I knew she'd take it. She always does. Her one-night stands, those nameless fucks she tosses aside? None of them get this. Harley got a taste once and botched it, but me? I'm the only one she drags back, the only one she lets split her open again and again.

My hands slide under her dress and grip her ass, spreading her wider, fingers brushing where we're joined. She's a mess stretched around me, and I want to bury myself deeper, fuck her until she can't walk.

She's close. I feel it in the hitch of her breath, the way her thighs tremble, the frantic bite of her nails. Her lips suck a bruise into my neck, a mark I'll wear like a badge, and then she shatters. Her cunt clamps down, a pulsing wave that milks me as she comes, a broken moan spilling against my skin. This is for her—her pleasure, her ruin, the way she gives herself to me like no one else gets to see.

Selene sags against my chest, little trembles from the release I denied her earlier

rumbling through her. I fight the urge to crush her to me, to wrap my arms around her and hold her until she truly melts into me. My chest burns with a need I've buried for years. She doesn't like to remember the moments when we were just innocent kids, when I swore we'd be each other's forever. She's never stopped being mine, not through the blood, the kills, the twisted shit we've become. Our tastes are warped, sure. I crave her darkness, her deviance but I still want her in my bed, under me, screaming my name every night. Permanent.Mine.

It feels like it's too soon when she reaches over to the handle and opens my door, before climbing off my lap and stepping out onto the gravel. I don't bother cleaning myself up, staring at the woman who unknowingly has my heart.

"Don't wait up," she throws at me, slamming my door closed.

I lean out through the window, watching as she resituates her dress. "Make sure to lock your fucking door, princess."

She snorts, sauntering off, hips swaying in that way that makes my blood boil. "I'm gonna need a fucking deadbolt when it comes to you," she fires back, her silver hair catching the moonlight, a siren calling me to ruin.

I watch her until she's gone, disappearing into her building, and then I mutter to myself as I tuck my cock back into my pants. "A deadbolt won't keep me away from you, kitten."

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Selene

I can't get the dress off fast enough, leaving it haphazardly in the living room, the panties following soon after. Thank fuck Dante finished me off, but I'm still pissed at him, my mind already working in a thousand different ways to make sure that he'll pay for it later. For now, though, I have a dead body to contend with and a long night ahead of me because of it.

I don't spend nearly enough time washing Dante's scent down the drain, wanting to relax beneath the heated spray but knowing the longer I wait, the more likely I'll crawl into bed and have to deal with the bastard in my guestroom tomorrow morning. And I don't do dead people with my morning coffee. Thanks but no thanks.

Towel-drying off fast, I slip on the routine garments needed to complete my evening task: leggings, tank top, boots, and a black hoodie that smells faintly of musk. My nose turns up at the godawful smell, but it'll be torched when I get back, so I can suffer through it for an hour or two. The next few steps are the ones I hate most: the ones that require covering up my identity so that some fucker doesn't detail me to the police, God forbid someone's out there watching.

The homemade lab sitting in my bathroom drawer consists of two very special, homemade concoctions meant to conceal every last bit of evidence including my DNA and anything else I leave behind. It's not perfect and it rubs my skin raw but it's kept me out of trouble all these years. So, unfortunately, it's a process I have continued and then added a 7-step skin care regimen to bring my flesh back to its former beauty.

I grimace through the quick acidic wash, making sure to cover any and all skin around my wrists, hands, neck and face. Then comes the horrid blonde wig. I should have bought the red one. Blonde makes my face look like...Not the focus, Selene. I check myself in the mirror, grimace at my disguise and then fuck off into the hallway.

“Alright, let’s get you ready, fucker,” I mumble to myself, stepping into the guest bedroom and grimacing at the sight before me. The dead guy’s still there, sprawled on the mattress, gutted and heartless, blood pooling beneath him in a thick, dark puddle. It’s going to be a bitch to clean this room but fuck, it was fun while it lasted. Now, it’s time to finish the art piece, to wrap him up and make him disappear. I grab the roll of industrial plastic stationed in the corner, cursing as I wrestle his limp bulk. “You’re so fucking heavy,” I growl out, wishing he was still alive so I could have him wrap himself up.

I could have laid the plastic out on the floor, terrified the fuck out of him a little more, and then let him flop himself off the bed right into his own little grave. But no, then I would have gotten wrinkles on my knees from the plastic as I knelt over him to cut out his heart and the sounds that came with it just wouldn’t mesh. No, no, this step is necessary.

A grunt tears from my throat as I finally get him off the bed with a heavy thud, struggling to roll him up like a fat sardine in a blanket. I’ve just about got the plastic all tucked in when I slip and my elbow jabs into his flabby dick.

“Leave it alone, Selene. It’s fine. We’re fine. Everything’s fine.”

But it’s not, is it? He’s taunting me with that sorry bullshit even after he’s dead. Yeah, no, not today mister.

Neither one of us have time for this, but I find myself unraveling the plastic just to get to his dick. I hastily reach for my knife from the nightstand and then slice off his cock

with one vicious cut. Blood oozes from the gaping wound as I gently shake the flesh now in my hands. How he ever convinced someone to let this inside of them is beyond, me but there will be one last person who will enjoy it.

Him.

“Eat it,” I growl, stuffing it into his mouth, shoving until it’s lodged deep, teeth framing it like a grotesque gag. A cackle falls from my lips as I stare at my masterpiece and then wrap him back up, using the spark of the moment to keep me going.

I’m still laughing as I hoist him up over my shoulder, grunting at the heavy weight that I now have to lug through the hallway. Years of training and dating gym rats who taught me to lift more than their bullshit, have made me a machine.

I cut all the lights in the apartment and haul him toward the back door—a tenant-only alley that’s been my heaven and my escape route. I fumble with the door, about to jam my foot through it when it finally clicks and swings open, the night air hitting me all at once with a mixture of petrichor and garbage. “Smells like home,” I chuckle, taking in a deep breath before heading for my beat-up car parked in the shadows.

This shithole’s why I’m here. Rent’s cheap and matches the part-time boutique gig everyone thinks barely keeps me afloat. To them, I’m scraping by, poor little Selene, silver hair and sad eyes. Bullshit. I could afford better, but this place is perfect. Cameras are mostly fake and the few that work don’t record or the landlord’s too broke to check. Neighbors keep their mouths shut—crackheads and drunks who learned fast after the last snitch, some busybody hag who ended up dead in Lake Ashthorne. Not my kill, but it set the tone. Everyone minds their business, and I’m the girl they want to save, never suspecting I’m the Reaper.

Most of my victims end up in the trunk, stashed away like some dirty secret but this

fucker is too large, and I think I forgot to empty my car out, so into the backseat he goes. I lay him across the seat, plastic crinkling as he slumps. His head bangs the armrest, and a smirk plays on my lips. "Careful, don't bruise yourself."

The joke dies, though, as I lock up my apartment and slide into the driver's seat, fishing my burner phone from the middle console.

Job's done. Payment due in 24 hours. Don't fuck with me.

I probably could have left off the last part. She's really sweet and she did just lose her sister. Unfortunately, I've had one too many 'sweet' people who think that they don't have to finish paying and that I won't end up coming after them. The whole anonymity thing and all. That's their mistake, though because my knife doesn't discriminate and while I prefer carving open abusers, I do make exceptions.

Now, is the difficult part: finding somewhere to leave this fucker without getting caught. I twist around, peering at him in the backseat, a feral grin spreading across my lips. "Now, where should we drop you? Park's too easy, too clean. Alleyway's too symbolic, all that poetic crap. Let's go on a nice drive, shall we?"

I pull onto the back road and crank the window down, letting the cold air bite my face. The radio's off because silence suits me tonight, just me and the dead fuck, my captive audience. "You're lucky, you know," I muse, looking in the rear-view mirror to meet the plastic roll behind me. "You're just a job. Some prick who grabbed a girl, thinking you could take what wasn't yours. Had this been any other county, you might have gotten away with it or just ended up in jail for the rest of your life. Unfortunately, you got me. But hey, you screamed real pretty. So, that's something." The laugh that falls from my lips has a bitter tang to it, a sigh following as my shoulders fall. "But I'm getting tired. Tired of carving up losers like you. It's fun, don't get me wrong but it's not enough. There's really only one guy I want under my knife. The bastard who stole my innocence, the reason my stepfather's dead."

Maybe I shouldn't be pouring my heart out to the dead guy, but it means he'll listen, and I get to work through my issues. It's like free therapy. I take a sharp turn, his body flopping to the side. Now, it looks like he's sitting up and alert, his flaccid dick flopping ever so slightly beneath the plastic between his lips. Perfect listening position.

So, I continue. "Stepdaddy was a piece of shit, sure. Slapped me around, left bruises that I hid under hoodies. I could take it—counted the days till college, till I could bolt. But then he sold me. Fucking sold me to his friend, like I was nothing. That guy pinned me down, took what wasn't his, and I snapped. What girl wouldn't? After all, he's the fucker who taught me to defend myself and all I did was follow his rules. Gutted my stepfather for touching me and my mom, made him scream till his throat gave out. That was my first, my baptism in blood. You? You're just practice, a warm-up for when I find that other fucker. I can't wait to carve him into nothing."

The guy who stole my innocence bothers me more than I care to admit. I think it has more to do with the fact that I have no idea who he is besides a nightmare I've never gotten over. He wasn't one of my stepfather's sleazy friends or my mother's coke dealer. Just a random face burned into my memory.

I start humming, filling the silence, eyes peeled for the perfect place to offload my creation. Too many of these places I've used before or it's just not the right spot. My town slowly fades into the next as I cross the bridge, heaven in a little courtyard off the main drag, tucked behind where the old city hall used to be. It's abandoned now, a circle of cracked stones and dead grass, no cameras, no passersby, not even a stray dog to sniff around.

It's been on my list forever, a pristine little void begging for blood, a canvas for my art. I hastily pull off just behind a row of bushes, several feet from the large tree in the center, before leaning back and whispering to my victim. "Found the perfect place. You wanted attention, didn't you? Grabbing girls, thinking you're a king.

They'll scream for you here, I promise.”

I might have lost a little of my spark, my desire for blood waning just a little bit, but that doesn't mean I don't still enjoy aspects of this life. Ripping out their hearts and keeping them in my jars is definitely the highlight. But the art piece I create so that the world can find them? Not far behind.

Because this is why they truly call me The Reaper. Sure, that pesky little organ is missing but it's the masterpiece I leave behind—a crucifixion, a message wrapped up in a fileted nightmare—that has truly given me my name. Because I don't just kill. I take their dignity, their pride, and their soul.

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“Now, let’s make you pretty, alright?” I tell the guy in the back, imagining him nodding his head as he chokes on his own cock.

Selene

Kicking the cardo open, I step into the cold night air, thick with the stench of wet stone and decay. My nose scrunches up at the thought of a dead animal messing with my art piece, but I’m already out of the car, and I feel like I need another shower. Besides, this wig isn’t doing it for me, and the sooner I get this shit off, get a drink in me, and find some random guy to fuck me, I’ll be right as rain again.

I move to the backseat, groaning at the way this guy’s weight sinks into it as I drag him over my shoulder and make my way to the tree sitting in the middle of the courtyard. The plastic crinkles in the soft breeze, the loud thud of his body as it slumps against the bark a little too loud for my liking. Granted, no one is out here but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be quiet.

“Stay here for a moment. I need to find the right tools for you. I’m thinking... strung up might be a good name for this art piece.” I pop my hip out, placing a hand on it as I stare at the man slumped over. Yeah, definitely ‘strung up’ but I’m not sure I have the right equipment.

A cursory look in my trunk tells me I’m right as I continue talking to myself like a fucking psychopath. “What’s it gonna be, huh? Rope’s too flimsy and that’s so cliché to hang you from the branch. Duct tape’s a joke and it’s only fun peeling it off when people are alive. God, the scream that comes after yanking it off...” Heat bleeds through me with the sudden desire to lean further forward and have someone just

fuck me right here as I pick out my tools.

Unfortunately, that's not an option, so I'll just have to tuck that fantasy away. My gaze sifts through my labyrinth of shiny metal—knives with crusted blades, pliers, a tangled coil of wire—before landing on the heavy-duty staple gun. I pull it out, testing its weight in my hand, and glance at the slumped bastard against the tree. “Nah, you're not worth the effort,” I say, shaking my head, tossing it back with a clatter. Not to mention, his ribs already gave me issues, and I don't want to fight with a dead man anymore.

I keep rummaging, hoping that I won't have to just leave the poor guy there wrapped in plastic. It's not the work of The Reaper, and I'd never forgive myself. “Come on, give me something worth using.” And that's when I find it: a hammer, crusted with old paint and blood, and a handful of rusty, industrial nails, long as my forearm, sharp enough to punch through anything. A feral smile splits across my face. “Oh, Gertrude, I never thought I'd need you again, but you're fucking perfect for this.”

I skip back to the guy, starting up a low, twisted tune as I kneel beside him and start delicately unwrapping him like a present. He's a bloody mess, his open chest already leaking out onto the earth below him as I prop him up. His head flops, something I'll fix later before I position the first nail over his shoulder, the tip dragging out another small trickle of blood, staining his pale flesh. “This might hurt a little,” I cackle. “Stay still, okay?” I swing the hammer down, the nail crunching through muscle, ripping skin, and crushing bone with a wet, splintering crack. “Guess working out in the gym has been useful for more than just carrying bodies,” I mutter to myself, staring at how more blood wells up, oozing around the metal and adding to the slow, torturous crimson stream. Excitement bleeds through me, mixing with the heat as my desire grows and the love for my art beckons a masterpiece.

I continue hammering that nail until it hits bark, the man's shoulder now pinned to the tree behind him. If I'm not fast enough, he'll sag and just tear through the metal. I

almost want to watch and see it but we don't have the time. Moving to his other shoulder, I place another nail and swing again. The impact jars my arm, but I savor every second.

His body jerks as I finish the second nail and start on the third, admiring how he's taking shape, a grotesque puppet strung up for my amusement. But it's not enough. I grab another nail, then another, losing myself in the rhythm. One through his wrist, shattering bone to pin it to the trunk by his side. Another through his thigh, the muscle tearing open, blood soaking the grass beneath him. I'm going too far but this is the whole point, isn't it?

A thorough display of art, of emotion, of however I was feeling at the moment. That punishment comes in death or whatever bullshit I'm supposed to think right now. And so, I continue my assault on a man who has already suffered his crime, albeit not enough.

A nail through his cheek, splitting his face wider, making the dick stuffed in his mouth twitch a little and then flag. Another through his palm, crunching through bone like it's nothing. Nails through his nose, ear, and one driven into his knee for no reason other than to hear the bone crack beneath my hammer. And then my favorite spot as one goes through his eyeball, the rusty point sinking deep inside, popping the orb with a soft, wet squelch. Blood and fluid drip from the wound, mixing with the red pooling below, and another cackle falls from my lips, showing off the truly demented side of Selene Banks.

I lean forward, running my fingers down his ruined cheek, dragging my touch along the nail there. "You were the most fun I've had in a while," I whisper. "Too bad I can't get you to play again." His face is unrecognizable, a pincushion of rust and flesh, my masterpiece complete. This isn't just a body; it's art, a warning, a fucking beacon to anyone who dares step here. I wipe my hands on my black leggings, streaking them with blood, the rush still burning through my veins. This is going to

be one of the messier cleanups because I wasn't as careful.

Still, they won't be looking for me, and even if Harley manages to drag me into the station, I can say I went out on a date with this man. That would explain my DNA. Everything else, I'll just have to work out as it comes.

Heaving a sigh, I grab my hammer and the plastic before heading back to my trunk. There's a special trash bag meant to lug all this bullshit back to the house, including my bloodstained clothes, a ritual I've gone through time and time again. My concentration is broken as a siren pierces the silence, my grin fading. No one should be here. This courtyard's dead, abandoned since city hall moved. The sound drags closer and my heart slams against my ribs, a rare jolt of panic cutting through the high.

I shove everything into the trunk, knowing that I'm going to have to completely gut my car before I can use it again. Blood is everywhere, but I don't have the time to be careful. I slam the trunk shut just as a light flickers in the distance, a cruiser rolling slowly below just on the other side of the courtyard.

I didn't prepare for patrol. I'm always ready, but this isn't Harley's turf, and some asshole must've changed the routes. "Fucking shit!" I whisper-yell to myself, about to run over to the driver's side when the police car takes a sharp turn onto the street I parked. He won't see the car from where he is, not easily anyway, but if I open my door, the lights will alert him that something is wrong.

Is this where I get caught? Because there is no way to explain why I'm covered in my art's blood, right now. I need people to find that man in the early morning, to truly understand and take away the gravity of my emotions.

A rough hand clamps over my mouth, an arm locking around my waist as I'm yanked back into the shadows behind a crumbling wall. My scream dies in my throat,

knowing that that will only alert the officer to check out his surroundings more thoroughly. Instead, I go rigid, waiting for the cruiser's lights to pass us. The officer must be blind not to have seen the present I left, but I'm not complaining.

However, now I have a new asshole to deal with. Someone who knows that I just propped up a dead man in the courtyard. I try to shake him off but fail as he pushes me into the stone. His lips brush my ear, sending a shudder down my spine that I hate myself for. "Sparrow," he murmurs, a dangerous growl following his words, "you really should be more careful."

My eyes go wide, breath hitching as his lips graze my jaw. Dante is the only one who's ever treated me like this, but the silky, uneasy edge to this man's voice is an entirely different vibe. I'm both turned on and a little terrified. The way he's pressed up against me, fingers sliding around the front of my face to cover my mouth, ensures that I can't move without his permission.

I try to curse— "The fuck?"—but it's muffled against his hand.

His other hand moves up my side, threatening to loosen a whimper at the back of my throat. I always need a hard fuck after my kills. Calling Dante would be suspicious, so I was just going to find a bar and some unsuspecting asshole and then leave when he falls asleep. The man behind me rocks his hips against mine, the full length of his arousal nestled against my ass, and when he jerks my head back so that it's leaning against his shoulder, my neck exposed, I moan.

I fuckingmoan.

"It would be a shame to lose such a pretty thing so early in the game," he purrs, voice thick with that smug edge that makes my blood boil and my core clench. His hand moves farther north until it's in my wig and then he yanks it off, grinning. "Ah, there's my little sparrow." Silver hair spills into my face, horror filling my chest that

this man knows just a little too much about me.

And what the fuck is this sparrow thing?

I wriggle around in his grip, trying to get purchase, when the presence behind me just disappears. There's nothing behind me or even fading into the bushes and as much as I want to hunt whoever the fuck that was, I don't have time. Getting back home, burning the shit out of everything I used, and then leaving this town are the only next steps I need to be focused on.

So much for that drink and fuck I was planning on.

Selene

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The cleanup is always the worst part, peeling off the blood-soaked clothes and getting rid of the evidence well enough that the crack police in this town have no leads. However, tonight, I'm pretty sure that this is the end of my game. Not only does someone know who I am, there's a likelihood that I left a little too much evidence at the scene this time.

Regardless, I start shedding clothes into the bag I've prepared, each wet plop making my stomach churn with regret. What did I do wrong to have someone follow me? And why did it feel like he was protecting me? A tendril of heat follows that question, the fantasy of Dante falling in love with this grotesque version of me if I ever managed to tell him.

Instead, it feels like someone has already fallen in love with this version of me. He's just a little...much.

"What the fuck are you even talking about, Selene? He pushed you up against a wall and made you moan." I growl at that and then the growl deepens as I focus on that stupid pet name. Sparrow? Seriously? "That motherfucker stole my wig," I grumble to myself, peeling off my bra and panties as well. All of it's going to go into the little fireplace I have in the living room before I then have to scoop out the ashes and drop them off in the dumpster. It's an annoying process, but it'll save me the headache later.

I used to obsess over fingerprints, DNA, hair residue, every microscopic trace that could pin me down. Not anymore. My record is clean, my fingerprints aren't in the system, and I live the life of someone who's already been burdened by The Reaper, so... it obviously couldn't be me, right?

Another quick shower is in order, the fastest, hottest five minutes of my life, prepping me for the cleanup in my guest bedroom. It's not going to be perfect, but the faster I get myself out of this place, the better. Someone knows who I am. He saw me, saw my work, and didn't flinch. That's not allowed. No one gets to know the Reaper and walk away.

I pace the apartment as I gather up homemade chemicals and washcloths, still naked, my mind spinning with plans. I need to pack, move, hide out somewhere in a new shithole, another town where no one asks questions.

I could head north, find a city big enough to swallow me and start fresh. But moving's a bitch with all the new contacts I'd have to set up. I'd need a new name, too, so that Dante couldn't find me like he did last time. He'd eventually find me, that sneaky fucker, but I need a cooling off period to make up a story, a plan, something. God, is this what freaking out feels like? Because it fucking sucks ass. Zero stars.

I drop the supplies at the foot of the guest bedroom when my phone rings. Not the burner phone but my regular cell, the one sitting on the kitchen counter, an alibi if ever someone were to try and check my whereabouts. No one ever calls me other than my boss, Dante, and Harley when he's trying to get a date, so I'm not expecting anyone.

The number isn't one I recognize, a text just beneath it that has me starting to freak out just a little more.

Don't go anywhere, Sparrow. I want to play.

For the first time in my entire life, I don't know what to do. I don't have anyone to call, to tell, to scream to for help. Not even a good fuck is going to make this all go away. I've been sloppy, not safe, and now I'm paying for it.

The urgency of cleaning up the guest bedroom resurges, and I rush over to start on the bloody mess. “Get it together, Selene.” My chemical concoction pulls the blood from the carpet easily, but the bedding will have to go, and most likely the mattress will as well. I thought I would have a day or two at least to dispose of this, but it’s too close too fast. I’m halfway through scrubbing when the phone buzzes again, and I nearly throw it across the room, my heart in my throat.

Because what this unknown caller sends me is a picture of something he shouldn’t fucking have. My beautiful Gertrude. I could have sworn I stuck that shit in my trunk, but it could have tumbled out just as well. After all, he has my blonde wig, and while I didn’t like it, it was mine.

I’ll keep this safe, Sparrow.

Him knowing who I am was bad. Him having evidence is worse. Him having Gertrude is a fucking disaster because it’s one of the few things I kept from my childhood. The handle’s engraved, a gift from Dante years ago, before I became this. Our names scratched into the wood, his and mine, with a heart between them. But it’s not Selene. It’s my birth name, the one I buried, the one only he would know. My real name, tied to a girl who doesn’t exist anymore. God, I’m so fucked.

I fumble to reply, fingers shaking as I type.

Who the fuck are you?

I’ll give it back the next time we meet. It might be sooner than you think.

I’m the Reaper, Ashthorne’s nightmare, but tonight, I’m exposed, a ghost with a name someone remembers. I call the number, but it immediately goes to voicemail, frustration bleeding through me as I shake my fist at the air. It won’t help much, but it helped dissipate the strong emotions just a bit. Now, I can’t just leave this forsaken

town. I have to wait and find out who has my identity. And then I'll rip him limb from limb, make sure the entire world knows The Reaper has a vendetta, and then disappear into the wind.

Dante

I ease my truck into the gravel lot of Sinner's Notch, the bar's neon sign flickering red against the night, a beacon for every degenerate in Ashthorne. This place is a fucking sewer. A one-stop shop for dope, blood, and quick fucks in the shadows. The air hits me as I step out, thick with the stench of stale beer and cigarette ash but it feels like home.

The mixture of dealers, drunks slurring their words, hookers sizing up marks, and the occasional someone visiting are the sweet spot of Sinner's Notch. It's a chaotic place but I love it. Ronan runs this shithole, an old bounty hunter buddy who trades info when it's worth his while. Most of his work's legit or so he says. I don't ask questions. Keeps my hands clean enough to sleep at night, not that I do much of that.

I cut through the crowd, eyes sliding off me like oil. They know me—ex-cop, or whatever bullshit label they've slapped on me. They don't trust me, don't talk to me, but they don't snitch either. I'm a ghost they tolerate, a shadow they avoid. My spot's in the back corner, a small section of the bar reserved for me alone. Ronan's king of this dump, but I'm his right hand, the bastard everyone knows not to fuck with.

I slide onto the stool, scanning the room for anything interesting but it seems a low-key night for the most part. Nothing that would give me insight to the bastard who brought back a dead body, the case Harley's currently on and dragged me into. Ronan glances up at me from behind the bar, throwing me a wild boyish smile as he polishes off one of the glasses. He moves toward me when he's done, grabbing a bottle of whiskey and pouring a fifth into the glass.

Setting it down in front of me, it doesn't even take two seconds before bullshit comes out of his mouth. "You smell like her," he mutters, a smirk curling his lips.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I scowl.

Most guys would flinch but Ronan doesn't. He's dealt with some of the worst bastards I've ever known and having to drag them in alive isn't a feat I'd wish on anyone. Ronan quirks his head to the side, studying me. "That spiced coconut shit. Perfume, body wash, something. Every time you're with her, you come back stinking of it."

A sharp laugh tears from my throat, the sound lost in the bar's drone. "Yeah, well, Harley had some questions," I say, taking a swig. The whiskey burns down my throat, just the way I need it to.

Ronan props his elbows up on the bar, still trying to search my expression for something. "When's it gonna be official?" he teases. "Don't feed me crap, Tay. You don't care about anyone, but I see how you get around her. Well, I've never seen her, but I see how you get when you come back from her. I don't even know what she looks like or what she does for a living. Hell, you've never even mentioned her name but I know that it's her."

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I drain the glass, slamming it down harder than I mean to. “I care about Malik,” I retort, staring Ronan down. Selene isminewhich is why I’ve never mentioned her to anyone that didn’t need to know. Ronan doesn’t need to know and Malikdefinitelydoesn’t need to know, that crazy bastard.

He snorts, pouring me another. “You and Malik got the most fucked-up relationship I’ve ever seen,” he says, shaking his head. “Where’s he at, anyway?”

I manage a shrug, sipping from the glass again. God, that’s good. “Hell if I know.” Malik’s out there, probably hunting some lowlife who crossed the wrong guy, his hands twitching for something to break. I don’t track him unless he’s in my bed, fucking me like it’s the only thing keeping him sane. Ronan isn’t wrong, though. We do have a fucked-up relationship and it’s toxic as hell but there’s a twisted part of me that knows I need Malik just as much as he needs me.

However, some part of me also needs,cravesSelene which just makes all this shit messier.

Ronan leans forward, his eyes narrowing. “Rough shift?”

I nod, my fingers tightening around the glass. “Got another player in town. Not the Reaper, no leads. Definitely a player, though—dropped the body back at the crime scene, right where it went down.” My mind flashes to the case, the corpse laid out like a taunt, just a middle finger to me and the precinct. I want to internalize it, believe that this is a message to me or even The Reaper but it can’t be that twisted.

Ronan’s brow creases as he pours himself a glass, downing it in one gulp. “Hold up,

didn't something like that happen a few months back?" he asks, setting the glass down with a clink.

"Yeah, no one bought it then, but they're digging now." The police are scrambling, Harley's bitching, and I'm stuck chasing a ghost while Selene's out there, carving her own bloody path through Ashthorne's guts.

"And your girl?" he presses.

I tell him a lot of things, like the fact that my girl was being questioned tonight. If he truly wanted to dig, he could find out who Selene Banks truly was but it's a mutual trust between us that keeps him from doing that. "She was in the area. Harley's got a thing for her, thought dragging her in for questions would get him a date."

Ronan lets out a loud, barking laugh, his hand slapping the counter. "Jesus, shut that down before you gut him for touching your girl."

I lean back, the chair creaking. "Whatever," I mutter.

Ronan's eyes glint, calling my bluff. "Lock her down, tie her up, do whatever. Drink your whiskey and go home so you can fuck some sleep into Malik. Or maybe let him fuck you and tire him out. He's not sleeping again."

My stomach twists, worry creeping in. "He's not sleeping?" That's never a good sign.

Ronan shakes his head, pouring himself another shot. "Nope. Been chasing one of Phil's short-changers. Some kid gave us nothing but air, so now he's wired, looking for something to choke. Go let him strangle your cock or whatever you two do so he doesn't end up in tomorrow's paper."

I wave a hand, brushing it off, but the concern sticks. Malik's a powder keg, one bad

night from blowing up, and I'm the only one who can pull him back. "Yeah, I hear you," I say, downing the rest of my drink. I stand up, patting the counter as a goodbye but Ronan leans in, his expression suddenly turning serious.

"When you gonna tell her the truth? About you and Harley being brothers?"

A growl tears from my throat before I fix my face, knowing that Ronan is not my enemy. "Stepbrothers," I correct. "And she doesn't need to know. My mom marrying his dad when we're grown doesn't make us family. I don't share shit with him—blood, ties, nothing." Harley and I have never even lived in the same house. I made it to the ceremony, scowled the entire time, and somehow Harley thought that this new connection meant I'd always have his back.

"Sure, sure. But what happens when Harley finds out you've been balls-deep in his girl?"

"She's not his girl."

Ronan laughs, completely unbothered by the fury in my expression. "See? Knew she was yours. I know you, Dante. You claim what you want. You did it with Malik, did it with me, even if we don't screw. Now, go home and fuck Malik. I don't want his creepy ass haunting my bar when I close up."

Ronan's right. I claim what's mine, always have. Selene's mine, her kills, her chaos, her fucking soul, and I'll be damned if Harley or anyone else gets in the way. Malik's mine too, in his own fucked-up way, and I need to find him before he burns himself out. I nod at Ronan, who's already turning back to the bar, and head for the door, the noise of Sinner's Notch fading behind me.

Dante

Pulling into the driveway, I hang my head a little knowing what waits for me inside the house. Either Malik will be his regular unhinged self or he'll be pouring his excitement into something that he probably shouldn't be focusing on. I know for a fact that our basement is empty, that there isn't someone he's actively torturing for information, which means his mind is running a thousand miles a minute with nothing to focus on.

And still, I fucking love the man with all of his idiosyncrasies and psychotic habits. Maybe it makes me sick for being in love with a man who'd so easily as gut someone that looks at me wrong but I wouldn't change it for the world.

He needs my sanity to calm him and I need his chaos to strangle my demons.

The house is dark when I step inside, not a single light on: the kind of darkness that swallows sound and sight. I pause, letting my eyes adjust, when a pair of piercing blue eyes glints from the corner. A presence moves and then there's a ghost of a kiss over my lips, gone before I can grab it. A chuckle bubbles up from my throat as the tension in my shoulders eases. "Hey love," I murmur, voice thick with the whiskey still burning in my gut.

Malik's an odd creature, thriving in this kind of darkness, the kind most people run from. He's a monster, every inch of him trained to break minds, bodies, and souls, all to help Ronan with his bounty hunter gigs. None of it's legal, not the way he plays, twisting confessions out of marks with pain and fear. But it quiets the storm in his head, the chaos that'd eat him alive otherwise. The rest? I fuck it out of him until he's too spent to think. Or I let him fuck me until someone's bleeding, my beautiful, tortured soul standing in front of me finally giving in.

The fact that he's here in the kitchen also means that he's been roaming, and not because of the part-time gig at the clinic down the street, ironic as that is.

Malik steps toward me again, drawing me into another kiss, his tongue licking inside of my mouth, tasting like smoke and sin. Only when he's done does he pull back, grinning at me in the dim light. "Hmmm, I saw the prettiest thing tonight, like moonlight, so pretty when it's bathed in crimson."

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There's only one woman I know who looks like that, a woman who shouldn't be anywhere near someone like Malik. Fuck. Malik's late-night hunts for something interesting to obsess over must've led him to Selene. Why did it have to be tonight, of all nights, when she was probably dumping that kill I pulled her away from. My jaw tightens as I drag him flush against me, a hint of a growl at the edge of my words. "Don't fucking touch her."

Malik tilts his head, blue eyes glinting with amusement, unbothered by my tone. "I didn't," he murmurs, a smirk curling his lips. "Not really. I wanted to."

I grab him by the throat, fingers digging into his skin, and growl into his face again, close enough to feel his breath. "She's mine."

Malik shakes his head, his pulse steady under my grip, like he's enjoying this. He probably is. "You'll have to share my little sparrow," he teases, but there's an edge to it, a hunger I know too well. When he fixates on something or someone, he's impossible to deal with. I know that Selene won't just be mine anymore, but I don't have to tell him that.

I tighten my hold, leaning in until our noses nearly touch. "Don't touch her. I mean it, Malik. Hands off."

Malik doesn't take orders. Not from me, not from anyone. He's an unpredictable storm, and a guy like him would terrify Selene. He'd want to break her, tie her up, play with her head, rebuild her into something he could keep, then kiss it all better. Anything he calls precious, anything he nicknames like that, becomes his next obsession, and I'm not sure Selene could survive it. Not sure I want her to.

I decide to distract him the only way I know how. I crash my mouth against his, kissing him hard, my tongue claiming every inch of him. My hands move fast, undoing his belt, popping the button on his pants, and pulling out his cock, already half-hard in my grip. I give him a few slow strokes, my thumb circling the tip, and he sighs into my mouth, a soft, needy sound that makes my blood heat. “You leave her alone,” I rumble against his lips, my hand working him faster. “Don’t fucking hurt her.”

Malik’s head tips back, his throat bobbing under my grip, but his voice is still light, teasing me as if he’s in control. “I saved her. Kept her from getting caught.” He hums his appreciation of my hand on his cock as he grips my shoulders for purchase. “Who’s Anabella Thatcher?”

My entire body tenses at a name I haven’t heard in almost ten years, a name that shouldn’t be on the lips of my lover. A name that only two people know the true meaning of. The name of a woman I keep at my side and refuse to let see my true feelings.

Selene’s real name.

Knowing that if I interrupt this moment to figure out the truth, I’ll have a problem on my hands. I stroke Malik a little faster, squeezing my hand around his neck a little tighter so he can feel my anger. He starts bucking into my grip, those guttural moans pulling me until he comes fast, hot and messy over my fingers. It’s an obscene picture of desire, those lips parted, his blue eyes bright with need as I lift my hand to his mouth.

“Lick.”

Those eyes sparkle just a little bit as his tongue darts out to clean my hand, the man humming with pleasure as he tastes himself on my skin. He doesn’t stop until he’s

sucked up every last drop, looking to me for approval.

“Good boy,” I murmur, knowing full well that Malik is going to fuck the shit out of me when we go upstairs. Unfortunately, there’s a much more pressing conversation that needs to be had. “How the fuck do you know that name?”

“My little sparrow left me a present. She called it Gertrude. Such a stupid name but I like it because of her.” He rushes to a small bag by the edge of the kitchen, his cock still hanging out of his pants, before he lifts up a hammer I definitely gave Selene all those years ago. It was all I had, something I stole from my father’s garage and then carved our names into it. My name wasn’t Dante then, so it’s a bit easier to pretend to not know who the fuck those people are. Malik will figure it out eventually though. The worst part is that Selene left something at the fucking crime scene. She’s getting too sloppy.

I don’t want Malik anywhere near her, but I have to be glad that he was there tonight.

“Yeah, keep that safe for her. Now, go upstairs and get ready for me so I can fuck you to sleep. Ronan says you haven’t been sleeping again.”

Those are the magic words; an unhinged smile spreading across those delicious lips. “Not tired, Dante,” he taunts, slipping the hammer back into his bag. I’ll steal that later. “Can’t sleep when Sparrow’s out there.”

I stalk up to him, dragging him back toward me, my fingers pinching his chin. “You will be passed out when I’m done with you,” I promise. He needs this, needs me to burn the chaos out of him before he does something I can’t fix. Although, it’s probably going to be my ass hurting if I’m honest with myself.

Malik’s grin widens, his eyes glinting with challenge. “Bring Sparrow to play, and I’ll sleep,” he says, raising a hand like a mock salute. “Scout’s honor.”

“You’re the farthest thing from a scout,” I retort, shoving him toward the stairs. “Maybe I’ll bring her if you’re good. Now, upstairs.”

He cackles again, darting upstairs, my mind reeling with the possibilities of Selene between us. It can’t happen, but that doesn’t mean I won’t imagine it. As much as she’s mine, I wouldn’t mind watching her fall apart at another’s hand. However, then I’d have to fucking gut him, and I kind of like Malik.

The fucker’s already sitting on the edge of the bed, fully naked when I step into my bedroom. That smile of his is nothing less than predatory, promising a night that’ll leave me bruised and spent. I should be trying to take him out of his head but some sick, twisted part of me loves these moments just as well. My cock twitches, already half-hard, because I can see it in his posture and his dark eyes that this is gonna be rough.

I peel off my shirt and then kick off my jeans, sighing as the cool air from the cracked bedroom window hits me. “Just don’t leave any marks people can see, babe,” I muse, tossing my clothes into the corner. “I still got a day job.” Not that I care, but Harley will ask, and I don’t want to have to explain shit to him.

Malik hesitates for a second, no doubt casing my skin for the best place to mark me before he lunges, rustling me onto the bed with a force that knocks the breath from my lungs. His mouth crashes against mine, bruising kisses that taste like smoke and hunger, his teeth nipping my lip until I hiss. He moves down, lips and tongue trailing fire across my jaw, my throat, my chest, sucking my skin into his mouth until the skin starts to bruise. Those marks will mix in with the tattoos, hiding Malik’s raw need. Had it been another night, there’d be knives involved and somehow I’m both disappointed and glad they aren’t.

Malik continues his assault, each pull of his mouth sending a jolt straight to my cock, my hands fisting the sheets as he marks me. His teeth graze my nipple, biting just

hard enough to make me groan, and I feel his smirk against my skin, the bastard knowing exactly what he's doing. I'm rock hard and uncomfortable, anticipation building in my chest on how this night will play out. He'll fuck me until he tires of it or I'll fuck him after, I'm not sure.

He flips me over with a rough shove, my face pressed into the mattress as his teeth sink into my shoulder, drawing blood. The pain explodes through me before turning into pleasure, Malik rutting against my ass, the man grinding with no mercy as his cock slips between my ass cheeks. I grit my teeth, arousal warring with the sting. "If you don't fucking use lube, we're not doing this again. Lube, babe.Lube." I'm all for a little pain, but that is not the type of pain I enjoy.

Malik lets out a wild growl, half-laugh, half-snarl, and leans over to fumble in the nightstand drawer before grabbing the bottle. He then pops the cap open, giggling as he looks down at me. "So demanding," he teases, but there's a hunger in it, a need that matches mine. He slicks his fingers, the cold shock of lube hitting my puckered hole as he presses against me, one finger sliding in. It's pain and pleasure twisted together, a burn that makes me hiss, but my cock throbs, leaking against the sheets. He adds another finger, stretching me with no patience, his jagged movements telling me he's already losing control. I push back against him, needing more, needing him to break me.

"Fuck, Malik," I mutter, voice muffled against the mattress, my hands clawing at the sheets. His dark chuckle rumbles against my back as he presses a kiss to my shoulder blades, his fingers replaced by the blunt press of his cock. It's the softest he's going to be tonight, but I'm okay with that.For now.

He slides in slow at first, and then he's fucking me like a crazy man. As if he's punishing me for something I'm not yet aware of, his hips slamming against my ass. The bed creaks beneath us, the headboard banging against the wall as I reach up to brace myself on the wood. His hands find mine, one curling into the sheets, the other

placed over mine against the headboard as he drives into me, harder, faster, relentlessly.

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Malik's teeth dig into the back of my shoulder blade, a sharp, searing pain that sends me spiraling toward the edge. "Fuck, babe," I gasp, his thrusts growing more erratic now as he chases his own release. He spills inside me, his teeth digging in harder, all of the sensations driving me into a frenzy. I explode across the bed, cum soaking the sheets, my body shaking as the orgasm rips through me. It's been a while since Malik fucked me like that, like the demons were crawling around in his head and begging to get out.

Some part of that has to be finding a new obsession but the other part is something else: something darker, more twisted. Unfortunately, Malik doesn't do heart to hearts, and I'm not really one for all of the emotions. Hence the reason Selene still thinks I'm the overbearing asshole of a childhood sweetheart and not the man who wants to claim her fully, completely, forever.

Malik hums, a low, satisfied sound, and pulls out slowly, the drag making me hiss. He starts to climb off the bed, but I reach out and grab his wrist, yanking him back down beside me. "Not so fast," I muse as I roll over to stare into those deep blue eyes. "I hear you haven't been sleeping, so now it's my turn to fuck you. Maybe you'll pass out."

He chuckles, sprawling back on the bed, his eyes glinting with challenge. "I'm too wired for that. Nothing is going to make me pass out unless you've got someone for me to bleed." Malik huffs out a wild breath, grinning over at me. "Not opposed to you fucking me, though." The fucker shifts down the bed, wedging himself between my thighs, two fingers pushing his cum back into my ass. "Or me fucking you again."

Yeah, that's not happening. I'm already sore. Using my legs to trap him, I maneuver

until he's flat on his stomach and I'm straddling his ass. He immediately goes pliant, my sadistic killer falling apart every time I'm in charge. It's something I'll never get tired of seeing as I lean over his back, lips brushing against his ear. "Don't make me chain you to the bed, because I will, babe," I murmur. "Everyone needs sleep, even the crazy ones."

He wriggles beneath me, silently asking to flip over. I scoot back and let him, his eyes a few shades darker than they were before. "Well, fuck me, gorgeous," he says, voice a sultry rasp. "Fuck me into oblivion."

"You going to tell me what's bothering you first?" I ask as I reach for the lube, slicking up my fingers. I wait for his answer, watching as his expression darkens and then softens, Malik shaking his head. Didn't think so. "Then maybe tomorrow," I purr as I sift my hand between his cheeks, rimming his needy hole. He lets out a small moan wholly uncharacteristic of the beautiful, tortured soul I know. But God, it's mine. He's mine.

Of all the secrets I hold, this is the one I'd want Selene to accept.

So that I can have them both.

Selene

It's just past midnight and I'm bone-tired, my body aching like I've been dragged through hell and back. Taking yet another shower left my skin raw, the scalding water doing nothing to wash away the weight of tonight—the blood, the nails, the fucking texts I got earlier in the night that said my name. I even tried using that new cucumber melon wash but now I just don't feel like me.

My silver hair is damp, clinging to my neck as I stumble into the living room, naked and shivering in the cold of my shithole apartment. Three trash bags sit by the door,

stuffed with bloodied sheets, plastic scraps, and the rags I used to scrub the guest bedroom clean. I should burn them in the fireplace and then discard the ashes, but now I have to find another plan of attack because leaving isn't an option. Not with some bastard out there holding my hammer, my birth name, my fucking life in their hands.

I need a drink, something to drown the panic clawing my chest, but the kitchen's dry, not even a drop of cheap vodka left. The last kill had me on a whole ass bender as I danced around my apartment, singing some bullshit from a band I don't even like. "Fucking perfect," I mutter, grabbing my phone from the counter and checking it again. Nothing from the caller, no new taunts, just silence that feels like a trap.

The problem is that while I'm terrified, I enjoyed the thrill of that moment. The idea that I didn't know who was pressed up against me, the sultry edge to his voice, the hunger in his words. I already know that I'm a sick bastard, but that just drives it home. Some part of me wants him to bend me over and stick me with that cock he had pressed against my ass. To take me and fuck me senseless as he whispered, "Sparrow," in my ears.

"Jesus Christ, Selene. Absolutely not."

It's fantasies like those that get me in trouble because then I go looking for things. A few years ago, I ended up on some kind of kink app and nearly got choked out from an overeager patron that didn't understand "no" or "stop." Nope, all fantasies have to stay locked up unless I can goad Dante into it.

For now, though, I'm getting myself that fucking drink I promised myself, and then I'm going to lose myself in bad decisions. Like a one-night stand with someone who has a cock big enough for me to feel it tomorrow. And then tomorrow, I'll make a real plan—pack, run, start over somewhere far from Ashthorne.

I grab something from the dryer, another tight black dress that's cut low enough to show off my cleavage. One of the dresses that would have Dante growling at me and murmuring 'mine' in my ear as he fucked me into the mattress. He'd kill me for wearing it out, for flaunting what's his, and that makes it all the more thrilling.

Pulling on my boots, I grab both of my phones and head out, ready for a few hours of bliss before I have to return to the crime scene in my apartment. The night air is a welcome relief as I make the few blocks over to Sinner's Notch, the only bar still open at this hour. It's quieter now, past the peak of Ashthorne's depravity, but there'll be enough drunks and losers to buy me drinks, maybe take me home for a quick fuck to dull the edge.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I yank it out, ready to growl at another cryptic text, but it's not my regular phone. It's the burner, the one only clients use. My stomach twists as I slip my phone back into my pocket and pull the other one out. Another job so soon feels wrong, like a setup, but I answer, pressing it to my ear, my voice sharp. "Yeah?"

A voice crackles through, distorted by a changer, low and mechanical. "Need a job done."

I stop walking, the streetlamp casting my shadow long and jagged. This feels like the start of some awful horror movie where I'll need to start looking over my shoulder. "Who?" I snap, my grip tightening on the phone. "Need more details, big guy."

He chuckles, the sound grating in my ears. "Need a guy dead. Heard you're the one for that."

My laugh comes out sharp and bitter, my breath fogging in the cold. "I might be, but I need more information, or I'm hanging up and blocking your number. Since you called me, I'm guessing the police can't or won't help with this."

“You’re good,” he says, a hint of amusement breaking through the distortion.

“No, I just know if you’re calling this number after midnight, it’s not a booty call,” I retort. “Who the fuck is it?” Most people calling me are shy as fuck. Only a handful of them know exactly what they want and have the funds to immediately pay to get the job done. But this asshole sounds like he’s messing with me.

“Philip Smission.”

I go silent because now I know he’s messing with me. Philip Smission is the mayor’s son, a spoiled prick with a rap sheet he’s never answered for. Drugs, assaults, and whispers of worse. Killing him would put a heavier spotlight on The Reaper, a bigger one than is already there and I can’t afford that. “That’s the goddamn mayor’s son. I’m gonna need a damn good reason for that bullshit and it’s gonna cost you a fortune.” All that illegal shit Philip’s been up to is none of my business. I deal with abusers, rapists, piss poor excuses of men that have or will evade the law. Not someone who takes a bit of meth and makes their father, the mayor, look bad.

I know I shouldn’t touch this, shouldn’t even listen, but I’m already in too deep, and part of me wants to hear him out. Because without this outlet, I’m not sure where I’ll end up. This craving to right the wrongs so violently won’t just go away if I disappear from Ashthorne. It’ll just manifest into something else.

The voice hums, considering. “Actually, I was thinking this job’s a tit for tat. I’ll send you a reason he needs to die and you’ll kill him. I’ll pay you after.”

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I scoff, my boots scuffing the pavement as I start walking again, the bar's neon sign glowing in the distance. "That's not how this works."

"It does when I know about a certain black Camry that dropped off a pretty little present today."

He's talking about the courtyard, the body I nailed to the tree, my car parked just out of sight. "Are you the fucker that called me Sparrow?" I snap, my voice shaking with rage and fear.

He laughs, a low, distorted sound. "Who the fuck's calling you Sparrow? No, "killer" or "sweet death" suits you better. Now, do we have a deal?"

So, now there are two fuckers blackmailing me? Great. Just great. "Send me the reason," I growl into the phone before hanging up and marching the last few steps to Sinner's Notch. "Somebody in there better be open to buying me fucking tequila."

Someone, in fact, was very interested in buying me shots, sending them over like water. Some big fucker in the corner with a few of his friends. As long as his cock's fat, I'll head on over in a few minutes and demand he take me home. He doesn't look like he'll be my speed, but if I'm on top, everything will work out just fine.

Knocking back my last shot, I blow out a deep breath and push to my feet, knowing that any more alcohol will render me useless, and that's the last thing I want. The shaved head and leather vest screams trouble as I approach the guy at the back, his hungry gaze raking over my curves. He straightens up when I stop just a few inches from him, his friends whispering and chuckling as he stands to greet me.

“Was wondering if you were going to come on over here, you pretty thing.”

Strike one. Pretty thing? What kind of fucking come on is that?

Still, I'm horny and pissed off and he's the only one in here that looks worth my time... Well, some of it. I let him pull me close; his mouth tastes like cigar butts and disappointment, sour and stale. His tongue is sloppy, pushing too hard, and I gag, shoving at his chest. Strike one thousand. Kisses aren't really my thing with one-night stands but they're absolutely off limits when the guy tastes gross as fuck. “Yeah, this isn't happening.”

He doesn't listen though, his finger digging into my hip, this sorry excuse for a guy thickening against my belly. A few years ago, I would have freaked the fuck out that this man was ignoring my 'no'. Now? I'm equipped with several weapons in this bar that will allow me to get the message across. Letting those nasty kisses trail down my jaw and to my neck gives me the vantage point I need as I reach onto the table and snatch one of the steak knives there.

Then I drive my knee up into the man's cock, taking the moment of shock and pain to send him crashing to the floor. I'm on him in a second, straddling his chest, the blade pressed to his throat, the point biting into his skin. “The drinks don't make you entitled to all of this, you asshole. When I said it wasn't happening, I meant it,” I hiss. My hair falls over my shoulders, obscuring part of my face and I know from experience how terrifying that makes me look with my gray eyes.

Fear swirls in his expression, but it's masked by the booze. No doubt he'd be screaming if he was completely sober or cursing at me, but the knife at his throat is doing a pretty good job of keeping him quiet. Unfortunately, I only have a few seconds before one of his friends tries to jump in. My grin turns feral as I focus on the blade against his flesh, a small trickle of blood pulling free as I dig the metal in just a little bit deeper.

Oh, that's going to scar really pretty, isn't it?

Before I can do something I'd regret, strong arms haul me off him, my feet dangling as I'm carted across the bar. I'm too shocked to struggle, the knife still clutched in my hand. One of the bouncers deals with the burly guy, dragging him up and shoving him toward the door, while another voice barks that they're closing early, shooing the stragglers out.

The bar empties faster than I'd expect at this hour, everyone scrambling to obey orders that don't make a lick of sense. Sure, I had a knife to a man's throat but he fucking deserved that shit. Although, a few more minutes and he'd have become another victim of mine. I'm about to yell at the fucker who's got me pinned to his side, when my feet touch the floor, a rather handsome face staring down at me with more concern than I can handle right now.

I recognize him as the guy who owns the bar, deep hazel eyes always catching everything that happens here. The weird part is that despite his dangerous aura, he's gorgeous. Like, "tall, dark, and handsome" gorgeous. Like a "wicked smile and tattoos that make me want something I shouldn't possibly be focusing on when I need to be planning my exit" gorgeous.

He reaches a hand up to rub the stubble along his jaw, muscles straining beneath his black shirt as he studies me. And then that boyish grin I've seen on his face before makes an appearance as he slips the knife from my hand and sets it on the table near us. "As hard as it gets me with a knife to his throat, he's kinda important, so I couldn't let you kill him here. I also don't like cleaning up messes like that. You gonna be okay to get home?"

"You ruined my chance at a good hard fuck," I retort, brushing my hair back into a ponytail before straightening my dress. Nearly flashed everyone, Selene. Although that might have gotten you a fuck. I just sigh, knowing that my favorite vibrator is

going to get a lot of action tonight.

The bar owner throws out his hand, willing me to take it like we're just two people meeting at a fucking coffee shop. "Ronan. And if you're asking, I'm offering."

I raise an eyebrow as I step closer, my eyes locked on his. "Is this some kind of trap? Does that line work for you? Because I know you own the fucking place and yet you closed an hour early. Seems like an awful expensive play if you close the bar every time you decide you want to get a fuck in" The door says two am and it's barely one.

He doesn't flinch, his hand still outstretched, his gaze raking over me like he's already picturing me under him. "And you're the woman who came in here obviously looking for a bad decision," he replies, an edge to his voice promising me a man who knows how to use his cock. "I'll be the best bad decision you can make tonight or I can be a respectable gentleman and make sure you get home safe. Your choice."

"I've had a pretty fucking shitty day," I say, pressing my chest against his, watching his smile widening even more. "How hard can you fuck me?"

Ronan's grin turns feral, his eyes darkening with hunger. "Would you like me to leave you feeling me for a few days? Because I can do that. String you up, fuck you unconscious, whatever the heart desires. Say the word, sweetheart."

He reaches forward, gently wrapping a hand around the front of my throat. Unlike Dante's fingers, Ronan's aren't as soft, a gruffness to them that tells me he knows he's capable of fucking me as hard as I need him to. "Alright, show me what you got, pretty boy."

Ronan

The bar's empty now, the last of the drunks and degenerates shooed out by my bouncer,

who's locking up as I drag the silver-haired woman through the back hallway of Sinner's Notch. Guiding her to my cramped little office at the back of the bar isn't the best idea I've had in a while, but it's the only place where I can give her my full, undivided attention. I don't give a fuck about the mess of papers on the desk or the half-empty bottles lining the shelf; my attention's locked on her, this wild thing with stormy gray eyes and a fire in her expression that could burn Ashthorne to ash.

I don't mix with patrons, not like this. I stay behind the bar, eavesdropping on deals and betrayals, passing the juicy bits to Malik so he can wade into the chaos with his knives and madness. Bounty hunting's my outlet, not my life. Chasing low lives keeps the blood pumping; but the thrill's faded over the years, the jobs blending into a gray haze.

I'm always searching, though, for someone exciting—someone who can match the darkness I keep leashed. And this woman... fuck, she's it. The way she pinned that bastard to the floor, knife to his throat, her eyes blazing with murder, sent a jolt through me that I haven't felt in ages. Now, with her in my office, making those pretty, desperate sounds, I'm more than happy to stay in this game. I can't wait to rub this in Dante's face. A woman this wild, this vicious, this fucking needy, and all mine for the night.

She smells like floral and ginger as I push her against the small desk, the wood creaking beneath our movements. My hands slide down her dress before rucking it up around her waist, her bare ass staring at me as she bends over my desk. God, it's been too fucking long since I gave into a bad decision. My cock thickens in my pants as I run my palms over her bared flesh and then pull her thong to the side, my fingers brushing her core. She's already wet and I'm not sure what makes me harder—the fact that she's dripping from nearly gutting that guy or the anticipation of the hard fuck she's begging for. Maybe both. She twists around, her gray eyes meeting mine, impatience lurking in her expression. “Pretty boy, if you don't hurry up and fuck me, I'll go find that bastard whose throat I nearly slit and sit on his cock.”

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I frown, my hands stilling on her hips. “Seriously?” I ask, my voice rough with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

“I don’t care how I get my fuck, just that I get it,” she snaps, her eyes flashing. “Stop worshipping my ass and show me what you got.”

A wide smile splits across my face as I undo my pants, not needing to be told twice. I pump my cock a few times, already rock-hard, and flatten her chest against the desk, her hands splaying across the surface for balance. I line up, the head of my cock brushing her entrance, and surge inside, no warning, no gentleness. This is what she wanted, right?

She’s so fucking tight, clenching around me, but I freeze when she lets out a little howl of pain, her body tensing beneath me. My hands grip her hips softly, ready to pull back. “Too much?” This is always an issue when it comes to fucking the random women in my bar. They say they want it rough and then I overestimate what that means.

She pushes back against me, hard, her ass grinding into my pelvis, her pussy trying to strangle my cock. I swear she’s doing that on purpose. “Most of your one-night stands might be soft and pliant,” she growls back at me, “but don’t go easy on me.”

That’s all I need to hear. Well, there’s one more thing. “Safe word?” I ask, because I’m not in the business of pain, not without boundaries, no matter how much I want to wreck her.

An unhinged laugh falls from her lips that makes my cock twitch inside her. “My safe

word is ‘don’t fucking stop,’” she says, her hands bracing harder on the desk, her body arching to take me deeper.

And that’s all I need. I pull back and thrust deep inside of her again, setting a brutal pace, each snap of my hips driving her into the desk. The wood groans, papers sliding to the floor, her moans echoing through the small office as her fingers claw at the surface. Most women I fuck want the softer side of me, the charming bartender who listens and pours. They don’t want the part that hunts, that breaks, that craves the edge of violence. But her? She’s begging for it, pushing back to meet every thrust, her body a perfect mix of resistance and surrender. I lean over, my chest pressing against her back, and bite her shoulder, not hard enough to break skin but enough to make her gasp, her walls tightening around me.

“Fuck, you’re something else,” I growl, my hands sliding up to grip her wrists, pinning them to the desk. I fuck her harder, the room filled with the sounds of skin on skin, her moans, my grunts. However, I need more. I need to hear her scream, to break her open until she’s nothing but pleasure and surrender. I pull out, ignoring her sharp gasp, and flip her around before setting her on the edge of the desk. Then I push against her chest, laying her back down on my desk, her wide stormy eyes watching as I lift her leg until her foot is dangling over my shoulder.

Watching her lips part as I fuck back into her wet heat is everything. She lets out a feral moan, my teeth grazing her calf as I thrust, my free hand finding her clit. I rub it furiously, rough circles that make her buck, her moans turning to cries. Splayed out for me like this, she’s absolutely gorgeous, my hunger for those delicious sounds growing as I drop her leg a little to lean down, teething over her tits through her dress, nipping hard enough to make her gasp, my body contorting to get closer, to drive deeper inside of her.

“Mark me, sweetheart. Show me how much you like this.”

My gaze drops to one of her hands, fingers extending and curling up as if she's unsure of whether or not to touch me. For a moment, I don't think she'll listen. Then her hands fly to my shoulders, nails digging in hard enough to break skin, sting the perfect bite of pain I need. She comes hard and fast, shuddering beneath me, her body convulsing as she rides the wave.

"That's one," I murmur, a smirk curling my lips. "I'm gonna drag another two out of you before I let you go home."

I drop her leg completely, letting it fall to the desk and hover over her, my mouth hovering over hers. She's flushed, sweat glistening on her skin, her eyes half-lidded but defiant. I go for a kiss, needing to taste her, but she turns her head at the last moment. "No kissing."

"And I kiss when I fuck hard," I say, my lips brushing her jaw, teasing the sensitive skin there. "Take it or leave it." She'll either fix her dress and leave or tell me to go fuck myself. I'll give her another orgasm regardless but watching her expressive face is giving me ideas. Terrible ideas.

She glares up at me, this woman I still don't even have a name for, before tilting her chin up, offering herself to me. I instantly claim her mouth, the woman tasting like tequila, ginger, and darkness itself. Her lips move against mine as I kiss her harder, my teeth nipping her bottom lip, drawing a soft moan from her.

Restarting my pace, I build her back up to a second orgasm, one of my hands roaming to find her throat, not squeezing, just resting, her pulse racing beneath my fingers.

I feel her tightening again, her breaths coming faster, her hips rocking to meet my thrusts. I angle deeper, hitting that spot that makes her gasp, and rub her clit again, softer this time, teasing until she's trembling. "Come on, sweetheart," I murmur against her mouth. "Give me another." She's close, her moans turning to whimpers,

her nails digging into my arms, leaving fresh marks. I thrust harder, faster, my own release building, the heat pooling in my gut. She comes again, her cry muffled against my lips, her body arching off the desk, and I'm right there with her, spilling into her with a groan that feels like it's torn from my soul. "Holy shit, you're perfect."

I'm still out of breath as I pull back, watching my cum dribble out of her pretty cunt, but I meant what I said. Three times, no less. She's still trembling, her eyes glassy, but there's a spark in them, a challenge that makes my cock twitch, already stirring again but she's not ready for the night I could give her.

Selene

There's a glint of deviance in Ronan's eyes, something that makes me push up on my hands a little because I have no idea what he's doing. I didn't actually think he was going to make me come that hard, and the way he's staring at my cunt is doing things to me. Before I can ask him what the fuck he's doing, he drops to his knees, his hands spreading my legs wider, and stuffs his face into between them.

A gasp tears from my throat as my fingers tangle in his dark curls, the other slapping over my mouth to keep from screaming. It's so dirty, so fucking filthy, the way his tongue drags inside me, lapping at his own cum, desperate to pull another orgasm from me. My thighs tremble, my pussy clenching around him, pushing his release into his mouth. The sensation's overwhelming—hot, wet, and depraved, like he's claiming every inch of me.

I'm shocked by his enthusiasm, by the way he fucks as hard as he promised, no hesitation, no softness, just raw, unrelenting need. Most men talk a big game, but Ronan's different, a welcome surprise. I'm too sensitive to come again but the pleasure's ramping up again anyway, threatening to drag me over that edge again regardless.

His tongue works me over, swirling over my clit, dipping inside to chase the mix of our releases. My fingers tighten in his hair and he groans against me, the vibration sending sparks up my spine. My other hand slips from my mouth, clawing at the desk, papers crinkling beneath my nails. I'm close again, the oversensitivity making way for another orgasm. His lapping grows more frantic, his fingers bruising my thighs as he digs in a little tighter, holding me open as he devours me. I shatter a third time, a raw, feral cry tearing from my throat as I come, my pussy flooding his mouth with my release and his own cum. He gorges on it, his tongue drawing out every shudder, every pulse, until I'm just a trembling mess trying to catch my breath.

Ronan stands, his face glistening with a mixture of our releases, cheeks puffed out just a little, as he wraps a hand around my neck, pulling me up into a sitting position. His eyes lock on mine, silently asking for my safe word. I know I should use it because I don't know him, don't know the depths of his darkness.

I'm the Reaper, a killer who guts abusers for their hearts, but this man's unraveling me, pushing me into a space I've never been. Some part of me, the twisted, hungry part, wants the filth, the claim, the way he's rewriting my edges. I give a small nod, barely a movement, and then he leans forward to kiss me. His cum and my release dribble into my mouth, spilling down my chin, a salty-sweet mix that's dirty as fuck, like he's marking me inside and out. My pussy clenches again, already aching for more, the taste igniting a new hunger I didn't know I had.

This time when he steps back, the rabid desire in his expression has lessened but he makes no move to clean off his face or mine, leaving us both marked, claimed, ruined. His tongue darts out to lap it up as he helps me to my feet, righting my thong and then my dress like a fucking gentleman.

I run a finger across my chin, staring at the slick mess on my skin, the evidence of what we've done. "What is it with men and marking the shit out of me?"

Ronan chuckles, giving me a few more inches to catch my breath, his jeans still undone, his cock half-hard. “You’re too fucking perfect not to mark,” he says, his eyes raking over me like he’s already planning another round if I’d let him. “That fire in you, the way you reacted, the way you strangled my cock. It’s begging to be claimed.”

He stuffs himself back into his pants, tilting his head a little as I shimmy my dress down a little farther. “You don’t even know me,” I mumble. “But hey, you kept your word, pretty boy. Better than I expected.” My words are absolutely a challenge because I’m not done with him either. I’ll stick him in the little bank of men I would actually want another night with. I drag a hand across my face, grimacing at the slickness now on my hand. It’s fine.

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Ronan laughs at that too, folding his arms across his chest, his dark eyes settling until there's a sort of boyish charm attached to his features. "You good to get home? I've gotta close up the bar, but I can give you a ride in thirty minutes."

Where the fuck did this guy come from? In Ashthorne, people are snakes; dealers, killers, liars, all out for themselves. Sure, there's a few good people, but I haven't met very many. But Ronan? Offering a ride like some knight in a dive bar? "How are you a gentleman?" I snap, my voice edged with suspicion. "No one in Ashthorne is nice."

"I'm not nice," he snorts. "But I know how to treat a woman. There's a difference."

"Lovely," I mutter, brushing past him toward the small sink in the corner. "I'm gonna wash my face and my... well, I guess a whole ass bird bath is needed. Thanks for scratching an itch." I gesture to the desk, papers now all over the floor.

"My pleasure," he muses, his tone warm but laced with a hint of possession. "I'm here every night."

"That's cheesy as fuck. And this was a one-time thing." It won't be, but he doesn't need to know that.

He shrugs, leaning against the desk now, his arms crossed, unfazed by my statement. "Okay."

"I expected some pushback."

"You told me what you wanted, and I accept that, but that doesn't mean I'm not

going to try and find my way to drag you back here again. Maybe next time, I'll be gentlemanly enough to grab us a bed." There's a smirk on his face that both pisses me off and makes me want to ask him if he's got another round in him.

But no.

I need to go home. Plan. Find a way out of the several messes I've gotten myself in and then figure out how I'm going to survive.

None of that includes Ronan's cock stuck in my cunt again.

But hey, maybe tomorrow will have a different agenda.

Selene

Waking up fucked out, my limbs numb and my pussy satisfied, is a good feeling. Between Dante and then Ronan, I'm high over the moon. It's even better holding one of my beautiful glass jars; the one with the little pirate sword down the middle.

It's beautiful, the crimson tendrils floating in the ethanol mixture a mesmerizing thing to lose myself in. A lazy morning on my plush lounge, no responsibilities, no one searching for me as I memorize each ripple along the heart I carved out of a man's chest two months ago. I trail my finger along the glass, memories of the smooth leathery texture sitting in my palm coming back to me. The crimson film covering it spread across my skin, making me wonder what it would be like to be completely coated in this essence.

Would it feel like a membrane or a second skin? Maybe it would just be a chaotic mess as I laughed at the memory of the light dying from his eyes. Vale screamed for his pathetic little life after strangling his daughter and here I am, twirling his heart around in a jar, thinking about covering myself in his juices.

Well, not those juices.

I'm talking about blood. You know what, never mind.

A curse slips from my lips as I fumble the jar onto the coffee table, the burner phone vibrating next to it. Must be the mystery caller who wants the fucking son of the mayor dead. I'm definitely going to hell with this job, but I don't have a choice. He has dirt on me and someone else has my motherfucking hammer.

"Fucking hell," I mutter, snatching the phone up and opening it to a new text. It's a photo of Philip Smission, the mayor's son, balls-deep in some young thing, her legs wrapped around his hips, her face twisted in pleasure. She looks barely legal but it's not enough for the cops, not enough to justify the death this mysterious caller wants.

So, he likes to fuck girls a bit younger than him, so what?

Smission's a silver fox, pushing sixty, with a toned body and a firm ass that'd make most women pause. If he wasn't a target, I might've considered riding him myself, just to see if he's as good as he looks.

He's a cheater. That isn't his wife.

And that's life.

You're a bit of a heartless bitch.

A bitter laugh slips from my lips as I text back.

And I don't kill because someone objects to someone else's morals. Give me something more.

I know that car of yours.

Fucking hell, I hate this guy.

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As you've said. I'm shaking in my boots. Tomorrow, I'll have another car. Tell me why you want this man dead.

The phone rings, the sound slicing through the silence of my apartment, and I sigh, answering with a snap. "Yeah?"

That deep baritone spills through, warped by a voice changer. "I was told this would be easier," he says, irritation seeping through the distortion. "I need Philip Smission out of the way. He's a blight on this city, a corrupt fuck with blood on his hands, and he's got the votes to take over for his father. If he runs unopposed, your sweet little side job's done. His plans for new infrastructure, cameras on every corner, and stricter patrols will sniff you out in weeks."

That's definitely not good news for my livelihood, but I don't know why this fucker cares. "So you want to do this to protect me?"

He chuckles, the sound grating on my nerves. "Don't be so full of yourself. No, I want this for me. Let's just say you and I have very similar professions. Did you like the little present I left? You were supposed to find it."

My pulse spikes, my mind scrambling for answers. No one leaves me presents and definitely not for The Reaper. "What present?"

"The body," he muses, like he's savoring my confusion. "You always stop by that little shop during lunch on Mondays. You didn't that day. Why?"

He's talking about the body dumped back at a crime scene, the one Harley and Dante

mentioned at the station. “I... don’t know,” I stammer, trying to remember back on Monday. It’s all a haze because all of my time kind of bleeds together at this point.

“You messed with my game. I had it all planned—your route, your habits, the way you’d stumble upon my work and know it was a challenge.”

“What game?”

“You’ve been playing the cat for too long, a queen without a chessboard,” he taunts. “It’s time to switch it up, make it interesting, truly delve into something with a little adrenaline. You’re too comfortable, carving up nobodies. I want more.”

“What are you saying?” I snap, my hands shaking, a mix of rage and excitement burning through me.

“I’m saying it’s time to switch roles. You play the mouse, I’ll play the cat. Run, hide, kill, or I’ll find you first.” A cackle follows his words, sending a shiver down my spine. I can’t tell if it’s from excitement, fear, or both.

Unfortunately, my shaky voice gives me away. “What makes you think I won’t just turn you the fuck in?” I challenge.

“The same reason you’re still on the phone, Selene Banks.”

He’s not wrong and I fucking hate it. “What’s the point of this game? Why are we doing this?” I sit up straight on the couch, fiddling with my glass jar, the way the tendrils swim in the fluid making me smile again.

He hums, a deep, delicious sound that despite the distortion has my mind moving in a completely different direction. “Because I want a spark in my life and I haven’t found anything more interesting than you,” he says, his voice thick with hunger. “You’re a

killer, a ghost, a fucking work of art. But I want to up the stakes. Philip's in my way, but my brand doesn't touch people like him. Too messy, too public. The Reaper, though? You could make a nice little example out of him: carve him up, leave him as a warning."

I take a shaky breath, my mind spinning. "And the money?" I ask, clinging to the practical, trying to claw back control.

"Once it's done, I'll have it in your account. Then I'll make my move. Oh, and keep your little detective from sniffing around too much. If the game ends too early, you'll be the one losing, not me. I'll make sure every cop in Ashthorne knows your name. Selene Banks, the Reaper, the girl who gutted her stepfather and never stopped."

How the fuck he knows that is beyond me, but that's a little too close to home. And yet, because he knows all this shit about me and I know nothing about him, I can't outright say no. I also... kind of want to do this, play this game with a player I don't know. The idea of playing in the dark is exhilarating.

"Fine, when's this job due?"

"Let's say by the end of the week?"

I take it back. It's not that exhilarating. This is downright suicide. "Tomorrow's Friday, bitch," I retort, my voice dripping with venom, my free hand clenching into a fist.

"Then you've got today and tomorrow. I'd hate to see what happens if you're late."

"My work takestime," I snap, thinking of the planning, the stalking, the precision it takes to lure a man into my trap. Smission's the mayor's son, a high-profile target, and two days is a fucking joke.

“Not this one. I need him dead, Doe.”

“Now, I’m a fucking deer?”

There’s another chuckle and it’s really starting to piss me off. “With those beautiful gray eyes you’ve got, caught in my trap? Yeah.”

My stomach lurches, and I spin, scanning the living room but there’s no windows in here. “Are you fucking watching me right now?” I demand, my eyes darting to the corners, the ceiling, searching for a camera like I know what to look for. Hint: I don’t.

“You’re a beautiful, fickle little thing,” he sings, his voice thick with amusement, “though I prefer when you’re not wearing any panties.”

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My hand tightens on the phone as I do another twirl in my living room. “You’re the guy from the other night,” I growl out, thinking of the man who had me pressed up against that wall feet away from the courtyard.

“Not a chance. But I will say I was quite jealous of the way he was pressed up against you. Now, Philip Smission. Dead by midnight this Friday. Time’s ticking.”

He hangs up on me which definitely shows how much he’s controlling this game but now I’m just one step closer to digging my own grave. Fitting for someone nicknamed The Reaper. The problem is that I’m torn between excitement and terror. Having someone find out who I am is hard to grasp, but the threat of them going to the police makes all of this exponentially worse.

I stare at the jar on the table and decide to place it back in its home on my glass wall for the time being. There’s a shift later today, and now I’ve got a whole bunch of research to do in order to kill the mayor’s son.

There’s no way this isn’t going to end up in a goddamn shitshow.

Dante

I’m bone-tired, my body aching in all the right ways as I step into the shower, the hot water stinging the hickies littering my chest and the finger imprints bruising my waist. Malik’s still passed out in bed, sprawled across the sheets, his dark hair a mess. The fucker won’t stay asleep long, but for now, he’s down, and I’m grateful for the quiet.

Last night was a storm, his teeth and hands tearing into me, my cock driving him into oblivion until he finally crashed. He fucked me two more times before his body finally gave out and I dragged him into my arms to sleep. Something's messing with him worse than usual, and I need to pry it out of him today, figure out what's got him so unhinged. But first, I've got a murder to solve and Selene to check on. I need to make sure she's not drowning in whatever shit she's stirred up.

I step out of the shower, steam curling around me, and wipe the fog from the mirror, staring at myself. The hickies bloom red and purple, a map of Malik's hunger, and the bruises on my waist are a perfect imprint of his grip. I smirk, tracing one with my thumb, the soreness a reminder of how we fit together: broken, brutal, perfect. Snatching my phone from the nightstand, I wrap a towel around my hips and head to the bedroom. There's a missed call from Harley and then a text from him that makes my gut twist.

The Reaper struck again.

No details, no leads, just that stark fucking sentence. It means Harley's got nothing and Malik's claim about saving Selene's ass in that courtyard, pulling her from a cruiser's sight, might actually hold water. Selene's out there, dancing with death, and I'm stuck playing catch-up.

I dress fast and head downstairs, the house dark and quiet except for the faint hum of the fridge. The kitchen smells like rich ground coffee beans and I stop dead when I see Ronan sitting at the table, smug as fuck, a mug in his hand. He's usually passed out during the day, recovering from whatever bounty-hunting chaos he and Malik get up to, or from the late-night shifts at the bar, so this is weird. I raise an eyebrow, pouring myself a coffee. "I'll bite," I mumble, leaning back against the counter. "What kind of crack did you put in the coffee?"

Ronan grins, his eyes glinting with something wicked, and settles further in his chair.

“No crack, just a good fucking morning,” he chuckles. “Had an absolute goddess in my office at the Notch a few hours ago. Fucked her senseless, Dante. Never had anyone take it like that.”

I sip my coffee, half-listening, until he starts describing her hair: silver, like moonlight, spilling across his desk. There’s no fucking way. “Keep going,” I say, already knowing where this is headed.

“Stormy gray eyes, this deviant little smile.” He grins. “Hips that could make a man sin, and she smelled like... fuck, florals and something else, maybe? Took everything I gave and wanted more.”

I growl, dragging a hand down my face, realizing that fate is out to fuck with me. “That’s my fucking girl,” I snap, before hurling the mug against the cabinets. It shatters, ceramic shards scattering across the counter, coffee splattering like blood. I’m not pissed at Ronan but Jesus Christ, I can’t seem to keep one thing for myself. Ronan’s eyes widen, his grin vanishing as he leans forward, hands raised.

“What did I say?” he asks, genuine confusion in his voice. But I’m already pacing, my hands fisting, rage burning in my chest.

“That’s spiced coconut,” I growl out. “Silver hair, eyes all stormy, a deviant little smile, sinful hips. That’s Selene. My fucking girl.”

Ronan’s face falls, his hands dropping to the table. “I didn’t fucking know. She smelled different, not the usual scent I catch from you. I never checked up on who she was because it didn’t matter. Fuck!” He runs a hand through his curls, his jaw tightening. “It was one night, Dante. I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

A sharp, bitter laugh falls from me as I focus on Ronan. “You won’t. It’s never one time with Selene. She gets in your head, under your skin. She’ll wander back,

because she wouldn't have let you fuck her the way I'm sure you did if she thought you were just a one-time thing. I know how you fuck, Ronan. All in, no holding back, everything she's looking for."

He knows I'm right. Selene's a fire, a blade, a fucking addiction, and once she's burned you, you don't walk away. I've known it since we were kids, since I gave her that hammer, since I watched her become the Reaper, blood and all. She's mine, but she's wild and untamed. And now Ronan's just tasted her, felt her claws, heard her screams. He's hooked, same as me, same as Malik, and it's going to be a fucking mess.

There's just one thing I need to know, though. "Why did you fuck her? You don't usually go off the rails like that. Both you and Malik have been a bit off."

Ronan shrugs, leaning back in his chair again. "She was there, Dante, with a knife to some guy's throat who wouldn't take her no. Had to drag her away before she bled him all over my floor. She was looking for a hard fuck, and I was feeling like giving one. She's a piece of work, though. I can see why you like her."

I see the way his eyes glitter, that feral spark that tells me he didn't just fuck her, that he tried some sick, twisted shit, and she loved it, ate it up, begged for more. Selene's like that, a black hole of need and deviance, pulling you in until you're lost in everything that she is. I sigh, dragging a hand through my hair, and glance at the coffee mess, knowing I'll have to clean it up before Malik wakes and loses his shit over the chaos.

"How's Malik?" Ronan asks, his tone shifting, like he's testing the waters.

I smirk, despite the anger still simmering. "My ass hurts, but he's sleeping, so I call it a win." The bruises are a welcome reminder of last night, and I kind of love the pleasurable pain every time I twist a certain way. "And now we've got another dead

body. Apparently, the Reaper struck again, so that's two dead people, no suspects, and a very annoyed Harley."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you weren't really trying to find these guys," he teases, before chugging what's left in his mug. "You used to be at the top of your game, Dante. The best. Now... it's like the Reaper keeps slipping through your fingers."

Yeah, we're not doing that bullshit. Although, Ronan is going to figure it out at some point, probably sooner rather than later since he's now met Selene. "You try finding them, then. Elusive killers who don't want to be found. Go ahead, bounty hunter. Show me how it's done."

His smirk fades, his gaze trying to search my expression for answers he won't find. "I'll keep my eye out." Which means he's already started looking into it. "Go deal with Harley. I got Malik."

"If you try to wake him up right now, he'll have you under him in point-five seconds," I say, picturing Malik's feral grin, his hands pinning Ronan to the bed before he's even fully awake. Watching Ronan when he first moved in with us was fantastic because he definitely got his dick nearly sucked more than once when Malik caught him off guard.

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“I might’ve gotten him a little present in the basement.” Ronan stands, shoving his mug farther onto the table. “I’m not stupid.”

My eyebrows shoot up, a grin tugging at my lips despite the mess of Selene and the Reaper. “Well, in that case,” I say, pushing off the counter, “I’ll be telling Harley I’ll be a little late. I’m not missing one of Malik’s sessions.”

“See, you’re making my point for me. You don’t care about these investigations.”

I shake my head, my grin widening, but there’s a hard edge to it. “Oh, I care. But they won’t be any deader in an hour or two.”

Dante

I have many favorite moments, but this is a special one. This is one where Malik constructs art, similar to the way Selene does. Maybe I have a thing for artists? I’m not sure. Regardless, I find myself leaning against the damp concrete wall in the basement, the air thick with the stench of blood, piss, and fear. The single light bulb is slowly swinging overhead, casting jagged shadows across the scene unfolding before me—Malik circling a guy on his knees, hands strung up in chains bolted to the ceiling.

The little fucker’s screaming, his voice hoarse as he insists he doesn’t know anything, that we’ve got the wrong man. Blood dribbles from shallow cuts on his chest and arms, red rivulets mixing with sweat, pooling on the filthy floor. The smell’s rancid, sharp, but it’s nothing compared to the thrill of watching Malik work. For a moment, I wonder if Ronan fucked up and brought back the wrong guy. He’s never made a

mistake before, but there's a first time for everything. The same way that Selene is slowly losing her edge.

I glance over at Ronan, observing him as he leans against his own section of the wall, eyes locked on the scene. He's as enraptured as I am, his usual smirk gone, replaced by a hunger that mirrors mine. No mistake, then; the guy Malik is currently playing with is just another soul caught in our web.

Turning my attention back to Malik, my cock twitches at the thought of them together, Malik and Selene tearing a man apart, blood and screams and raw, unholy beauty. It'd be heaven on earth, a depraved masterpiece. I drop a hand to the bulge in my pants, massaging slowly, the pressure building as the guy cries out again. Malik has drawn his knife across the man's shoulder, a shallow cut just enough to bloom red, and the guy's tears mix with snot, his face a mess of panic and pain. "Only cowards get to live," Malik purrs.

The guy's head jerks up, eyes wide with terror. "What do you mean?" he chokes out, his voice trembling, chains rattling as he pulls uselessly against them.

Malik tilts his head, his dark hair falling into his eyes, a grin splitting across his face. "You tell us what we need to know, and we set you free," he says, the lie so smooth it's almost believable, his knife glinting under the bulb's flicker.

"I don't know anything!" the guy screams again. "I've got a wife and kids, please!"

A wild, unhinged sound escapes Malik as he drops to his knees in front of the man, before dragging the tip of his knife down the guy's chest, drawing a thin line of blood until he stops just above the man's dick. The guy lets out a raw, animalistic sound, his body jerking backward as piss leaks down his leg, adding to the stench in our basement.

Malik's grin only widens, his eyes blazing with desire. "Oh, the cock's such a precious bargaining piece, isn't it?" he mocks, his knife hovering over the guy's fragile piece of equipment. "Now, let's try this again. You've got a bounty on your head that my dear friend Wolf over there," he nods at Ronan, "should absolutely turn you in for. Yet, you might also have information about why you were in the fucking area. Not a lot of hired killers hang out in Ashthorne."

Whatever was eating at Malik last night, whatever had him fucking me into the mattress with a desperation that left my ass sore and my chest bruised, seems to have taken a backseat to this. The guy is his canvas, his blood the paint, and Malik's painting a fucking masterpiece. My hand moves faster, stroking through my jeans, my cock thickening in my palm at the sight of him. I glance at Ronan again, and he's hard too, his pants straining, and I wonder what his fantasy is in this moment or if the taste of blood is what gets him going.

Either way, we all get off on this shit and I'm not sure there will ever be an easy way to end this lifestyle. I'm not entirely sure I'd want to.

The guy's sobbing now, his voice barely a whisper. "Fine, I'll talk. Just promise me I go free after this."

Malik hums his response, his knife still pressed to the guy's skin. "Yeah, I promise." His voice is soft, almost tender, but I know that tone. It's a lie and the guy's too desperate to see it.

I shift against the wall and pull my hand from my cock before I explode in my pants like a goddamn teenager, just as the guy starts to talk.

"I was hired for one last job before I could retire," he pushes out, desperation filling his words. "It's not really a thing in our business, leaving and all, but they said this last job, no pay, would cover everything. So I took it. I've got a family now. I need

something less dangerous. But the bitch is so fucking slippery, like she knew I was watching her.”

Malik leans forward, still on his knees in front of the guy. I push off the wall and step up. “You got hired to kill someone as a way to get out?” I ask, skeptical because I’ve heard of deals like that from my days running dirty jobs, before I went legit. Well, mostly legit. It’s a trap, always, a way to tie up loose ends by burying the hired gun. They get a sweet deal, think they’re scot-free, and then the public finds them dead somewhere. The man lets out a pained grunt before speaking again.

“Yeah, she’s gorgeous. Stands out too, with that long silver hair.”

Malik lets out a feral growl, his body immediately tensing. Well, shit. “You’re after my sparrow?” he snarls, his eyes flashing with a sudden rage.

The guy’s eyes widen, confusion twisting his bloodied face. “Who the fuck is Sparrow?” he chokes out, chains rattling as he jerks.

I sigh, dragging a hand down my face, realizing this is about to go south really fucking quick. Selene is Malik’s newest obsession and this idiot just admitted to hunting her. Before I can get a word out, Malik’s knife plunges into the guy’s chest, the blade sinking deep into the cavity of his flesh. He slowly twists the blade deeper, eliciting a guttural groan from the man, blood bubbling at his lips. “Sparrow is mine!” Malik screams, before dragging the knife upward, sheer force splitting skin and muscle, blood spraying across his face, his chest, and the floor.

My cock hardens even further at the sight of Malik soaked in blood, lost in his crazed obsession. Ronan shifts beside me, his eyes still locked on the carnage, intrigued. “I’m gonna guess that somehow our resident crazy found Selene?” he says, a hint of amusement cutting through the tension.

“Yeah,” I mutter, my eyes on Malik, who’s hacking away now, the guy long past screaming, just a twitching, bleeding mess. “Apparently, he’s been watching her.” I catch myself before saying more, before admitting Selene’s the Reaper, that Malik’s been trailing her kills. That’s a secret I’ll keep locked tight until it finds its way to the surface.

Ronan just shakes his head, growling at the speck of blood that makes it onto his shoe. “Good thing that bounty’s dead or alive. No idea how I’m gonna explain the meat sack that’s left, but I will say this morning’s already been entertaining.”

The laughter that follows is something between a twisted cackle and downright evil as Malik turns toward us, his grin wild, blood dripping from his teeth, his face a mask of red. “Look at my masterpiece!” he says, his voice bright, almost childlike, gesturing at the corpse like it’s a painting.

I smirk as I step closer. “It’s gorgeous, babe. Let’s get you a full fucking shower.”

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Malik's grin falters, his eyes narrowing, blood-streaked hands still gripping the knife. "No, I need to go check on Sparrow. This man was after her."

Once I'm close enough, I pinch his chin between my fingers, forcing his wild eyes to meet mine. "We'll go check on her right after you shower, put some clean clothes on, and shoes. She won't be okay if you show up like this."

Malik pouts, his lips slick with blood, his expression almost petulant. "She likes blood," he muses. He's not wrong but I can't let him run to her like this.

I growl, pointing to the shower in the corner of the basement, a bathroom hidden down here for moments just like this. "Now."

Ronan chuckles, leaning against the wall, his eyes flicking between us. "How the fuck would Malik know if she likes blood?"

Shit. "How the fuck does he know anything?" I say, turning to Malik, who's reluctantly stripping off his blood-soaked shirt, tossing it into a pile. "I'm taking him with me to check on her, hopefully so he doesn't scare the bejeezus out of her."

"You're worried about her too, aren't you?"

"She can take care of herself but that doesn't mean I'm not just a little worried someone's after her." I leave it at that, gesturing to the meat sack dangling from the chains. "Guess you're on clean up duty."

Ronan groans, pushing off the wall, his arms crossing over his chest. "I'm only not

complaining because I get paid for this shit. Should I put him in some funny position and send the picture in? Maybe have him picking his nose or something?"

"You're a literal child. Tell me, did he really have a family?"

Ronan snorts, moving toward the bloody mess and kicking at it with his foot. "Nah, that was all bullshit. From the research I could pull up, he was trying to get out. No wife, no kids, just a desperate fucker looking for a way to disappear."

"What was the point of the torture, then? You usually only pull them down here to catch bigger fish, and as far as I know, we have no idea who hired him."

"Because he's not the first hired killer to be in this town," he states. "He's just the first one who's been alive long enough to tell us who his target was. What I'm trying to understand is why Selene would be a target, and that strange look on your face tells me you know."

"If I did, I'd tell you." It's a half-truth, and he knows it.

"I can't do my job with you in my way."

He's not entirely wrong but he isn't right either. Working as a bounty hunter, occasionally picking up the riffraff for a sizeable payday doesn't require me to give him the entire picture. However, I'm not really sure why I never told Ronan about Selene, about her pastimes if for no other reason than the fact that we have very different goals. At the end of the day, my job is to protect her. I don't know where he would stand and so I never made it his problem. Now, though, that thought process is working against me.

Because people are after Selene, but why? Who wants her dead? Do they know she's the Reaper, or is it something deeper, something tied to her past, to Anabella, the

name she buried? None of it makes sense and my head's spinning though my is agenda clear: see Harley about the latest Reaper kill, check on Selene, make sure she's not bleeding out or worse, and then find something—anything—to keep my mind from unraveling.

I leave Ronan without an answer and head into the bathroom, the shower's hiss cutting through the silence. Malik's in there, head bowed, water pouring over his dark hair, blood swirling down the drain in crimson spirals. Whatever was eating him last night—whatever had him fucking me raw, leaving hickies and bruises across my chest—is back, sinking its claws right back in. His fickle emotions are terrifying, a wildfire that burns through reason, and he acts on them every time. I shed my clothes and step into the shower, careful not to spook him, the water scalding my skin.

Malik whirls around and pins me against the tiles, his forearm pressing my throat, his wild eyes searching my face. Despite the desire to do something in this position, I focus on the uncertainty in his expression. “Babe, what's going on with you?” I ask, my hands resting on his hips, pulling him a little closer to me. “You're not usually this wired.”

He pauses before stepping back, his hands dropping to his side, water streaming down his blood-streaked face. “I hurt you. I'm not supposed to do that.”

I shake my head, my hand cupping his jaw, forcing him to look at me. “No, you didn't hurt me. But something's wrong. Talk to me.”

Malik's gaze darts away. “Someone's after my sparrow.”

“Hey, yeah, but that's not why you were all messed up yesterday,” I say, searching his face, needing to understand what's driving him to this edge.

He doesn't answer as I turn him around, knowing that it's easier for him to talk when

he isn't facing me. I grab the shampoo from the ledge and start massaging it into his hair, my fingers working through the blood-matted strands, the water turning pink.

"Someone else has been watching her," he says finally, venom dripping from his tone. "From the shadows. I don't like it. She's mine."

That's news to me and probably also Selene. She always gets jittery when she knows she's being watched. She calls me out all the time. Which means she never noticed Malik or the dead guy just a few feet outside the bathroom.

But why now? What's pulling these threads together?

My hand moves of its own accord, slipping to wrap itself around Malik's cock, the man arching back against me. Shampoo-covered fingers stroke him as I massage his head with the others, losing myself to my thoughts, almost as if giving Malik pleasure is a way to calm my own emotions.

I'm torn from my head as I find myself pressed up against the wall again, Malik's hand on both our cocks, roughly stroking us together, using a mixture of water and blood to bring us pleasure. "Shit, babe."

"I need this," he growls out, eyes trained on our cocks, his breath kicking up and matching the excitement swirling in my chest. I brace myself on his shoulders, my hips rocking into his chest before he rips that orgasm from me, using our release to continue stroking.

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He lets out a little groan, still stroking us until he hisses, shampoo stinging his eyes. Fuck. I lean him back to rinse it out under the water, “Sorry,” I mutter, smoothing water over his face to finally reveal the handsome crazy beneath.

“It’s okay,” he teases. “You can apologize when I fuck you later.”

Malik

The scent of cedar body wash clings to my skin, loose linens hanging off my frame as I sit in the driver’s seat of Dante’s truck, twirling a small pocketknife between my fingers. Dante’s inside the precinct, dealing with Harley about the latest Reaper kill, insisting we stop here first before checking on Sparrow.

I’m not sure why we couldn’t have seen Sparrow first.

Just thinking about her has me shifting in my seat, reaching down to stroke my cock through my pants. I fucking need to see her, to see that she’s okay. I also just want her in my sights, want to imagine her covered in blood as I slip inside of her sweet little pussy and hear my name on her tongue. Knowing that Dante has had some part of that doesn’t make me jealous. It just makes me want it that much more.

Dante showed me the text from her an hour ago: a curt, I’m okay, but it’s not enough. Nothing’s enough until I see her, touch her, smell that spiced coconut scent that haunts my dreams.

I spin the knife a bit faster, thinking about little cuts and knicks and where I could put them on her pretty little body. I think about the way she’d scream or the way she’d

ask for more. Her moans. Her whispers and needy whines.

I start bouncing my leg, my pulse kicking up as I continue thinking about my sparrow, my mind pulling me in an uncomfortable direction the longer I sit in this parking lot. It feels like a trap, like the cops are gonna swarm any second, drag me in for the shit I've done. Never done a legal thing in my life, except maybe medical school, and even then, I cut corners, stole cadavers, fudged exams, fucked my way to passing grades.

Dante said to wait, and for once, I'm trying to listen, trying not to let the chaos in my head spill out. But it's so fucking hard when all I can think about is her.

A sharp knock on the window snaps me out of it, and I freeze, the knife pausing mid-twirl. It's Xavier, one of Harley's old partners, a sleazy fuck with a smirk that makes my blood boil. He used to hover around Sparrow, trying to get her attention, and when she shut him down, he'd spit nasty jokes about her, calling her a tease, a slut, worse. I hate him more than Harley, more than anyone, because he looked at her like she was meat, not a goddess. Rolling down the window, I frown up at him, my grip tightening on the knife. "What do you want, Xavi?"

Xavier leans in, his eyes glinting with malice. "I'm surprised you remember my name," he says. "Haven't seen you around lately. Surprised you got let out of your cage. What are you doing here?"

A grin splits across my face as I twirl the knife again. "I'm on a field trip to see my sparrow," I mention.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he snaps, then shakes his head. "Don't answer that. I'm guessing you're here with Dante, which means Harley's doing some crack police work again."

Shrugging, I let my gaze drift to the precinct, the knife spinning faster, my patience thinning. I'm about to tune him out but Xavier keeps talking, his grating voice digging under my skin. "You wouldn't know anything about these murders, would you?"

My eyes snap back to him. "Why, should I?"

He leans closer, his hand resting on the window frame. "Stop the innocent act. We both know you're fucked in the head."

"That isn't something I hide," I laugh. "Is there something you want to accuse me of, officer?"

Xavier pats the window before pulling back. "I'm just having a friendly conversation."

"It doesn't feel friendly," I growl out, my fingers itching to drive the knife into something. His hand, his face, anything. "Excuse me. I have somewhere to be."

Opening the door, I swing it hard, nearly clipping Xavier as he stumbles back farther, his eyes flashing with anger. "If I wasn't sure, I'd think you were trying to hurt me."

"Just trying to get out of the car, officer."

Refusing to catch Xavier's next retort, I slip down the strip of businesses, heading straight for the little boutique. Dante will just have to forgive me. My eyes lock on Selene through the glass as I approach the shop, her silver hair catching the fluorescent lights like a beacon. She's got that fake customer service smile, showing off some product to a middle-aged woman, her high ponytail swinging, her crop top dipping just low enough to tease, earrings glinting with every turn. It's a pretty picture but it's not enough. Hunger claws at my gut, a need for more, for her blood,

her screams, her body under mine. Sparrow, my sparrow, the Reaper who paints with death, is a goddess, and I'm starving for her.

The bell jangles as I step inside. I ignore the lady at the front, growling at her chirpy greeting before refocusing on my goddess. She finishes with the customer and then moves toward the back of the boutique, weaving through the shelves. Slipping to the side, I follow at a distance, staying out of sight every time she glances back.

She's mumbling to herself, words too soft to catch, her fingers trailing over products. Pausing at a display, she picks up a crimson lipstick and leans into a small mirror, swiping it across her lips. The color's perfect: dark and rich like blood, my cock twitching as I imagine those lips on my chest, my shoulders, wrapped around my dick, leaving smears of red. She turns into another aisle and I move to the lipstick display, eyeing the shades but ultimately focusing on the same one she picked up.

I stare in silence for several seconds before someone approaches me. "Can I help you?"

Nodding, I point to the crimson shade. "Wanted to buy this one."

"Crimson Taint?" the woman asks, grabbing the tube. "Definitely our best seller. Come on, I'll ring you up."

Crimson, just like my favorite color, the shade of my sparrow's kills, her fire. My fingers close around the lipstick, the purchase a tether to her, but as I head for the counter, her laugh cuts through the air, pulling me back like a leash.

Can't leave, not yet.

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The woman rings me up, albeit not fast enough, and then I dash back through the aisles, following that cackle that already has me hard. It's coming from the stockroom, a place I know I'm not supposed to be but I can't resist my need to see her up close. Carefully, I push inside, the cramped space shrouded by towering boxes.

It takes me a minute to find my prize but there she is, Selene bent over a few boxes, sorting through some of the products, her crop top riding up and exposing the curve of her waist. I hurry over and press up against her ass, pinning her to the wall of boxes, my body flush with hers as I murmur into her ear. "Sparrow, I had to see you."

She gasps as her body tenses, gearing up to shove me off. "Where the fuck is my hammer?" That's not what I expected her to ask, but she's talking to me and I call that a win.

"It's safe," I purr, my hands sliding to her hips, holding her in place. "I'd never let anyone hurt you. Who's Annabella?"

She grunts, a flash of confusion in her stormy gray eyes as she twists around to try and see me. I curse under my breath, realizing I've slipped, mentioned something I shouldn't know. "Sorry," I murmur, my lips brushing her ear again, my cock hardening against her ass. "I just needed to see you. One day, you'll let me kiss you, taste you."

A huff escapes her, but she doesn't pull away, her body softening just a fraction. My thumb reaches around her to trace her bottom lip, the crimson lipstick smudging against the pad of my finger as her tongue darts out to taste my skin. Then she slowly sucks the digit into her mouth, her lips closing around my thumb, and I groan,

rocking myself against her ass. It's fucked-up, doing this in the stockroom, surrounded by boxes, her coworkers just beyond the door, but the risk only sharpens the need. I want her so fucking bad; I want her blood, her screams, here everything.

Her hips push back, meeting my rhythm, her breath hitching as I grind harder, my free hand sliding under her crop top, fingers grazing her skin. My knife's in my pocket, a temptation to draw it, to nick her skin, mix her blood with the crimson on her lips. But I hold back, my control fraying. My free hand starts to move south, fingers fiddling with the button of her pants.

Her hand grabs my arm, nails digging into my flesh as my thumb falls from her lips. "What the fuck are you doing?" It's like she hits a bout of sudden clarity, realizing that she doesn't actually know the man behind her, but that makes it more fun.

"I want to taste you, Sparrow," I say, before licking up the side of her neck, savoring the mixture of salt and coconut on her skin. She lets out a wanton moan, her head tilting just enough to give me access, but then her voice cuts through the moment.

"I'm really over guys taking what they want from me."

She bucks against my hold, her elbow jabbing hard into my gut. A wild grin splits across my lips as I clutch my stomach, already about to step forward again when a searing pain explodes in my thigh. My eyes drop to the sensation, a small knife lodged in my leg, blood seeping through my pants, a perfect little gift from her. As much as I want to stay and play with her, I can tell that this isn't the time or place.

Besides, I got what I came for. My sparrow is okay.

Before she can do more damage, I scramble for the back exit, mumbling to myself. "Didn't know my sparrow was so feisty. I like her. Can't wait to play again."

I yank the little knife from my flesh, groaning as the blood trickles down my leg. Medical training tells me I should have left it in but hobbling down the sidewalk with a knife in my leg isn't an option. People will ask questions and then they'll take my sparrow away from me, and that can't happen.

I round the corner, eyes widening as Dante comes into view. "Told you to stay in the fucking car," he snaps, his gaze firmly focused on my face. I hide the knife behind my back and twist just enough so that Dante doesn't see the crimson stain growing across my dark pants. "Look, just go sit in the car. I'll be there in five minutes."

I don't fight him, just nodding as I make a beeline back to Dante's car and slip into the front seat. Blood's soaking my pants now, a pretty stain spreading as I stare at the knife, a memento from my sparrow. I'm gonna treasure it, keep it close, maybe press it to my lips later, taste the blood we share.

Slowly, I lift the knife to my lips and then drag my tongue across the blade, imagining it being her blood I'm tasting, a mixture of copper and coconut. My nostrils flare as I reach down to grab my cock, playing into this fantasy of her moans and screams before I'm edging myself right off the cliff with no return.

In my head, she's writhing beneath me, yelling for more, harder, faster, deeper. And I'm giving it to her as she bleeds so prettily over my white sheets. I'll mark her and make her mine, let her ache and remember just who gave them to her.

A guttural groan tears from my throat as I fall apart, coming in my pants, my head falling back against the headrest. Soon, that will be my cock inside of her. For now, I'll have to be happy with my fantasies.

Selene

Frustration boils in my veins as I step back into the main part of the boutique. I'm

turned on and pissed off at the same time, angry that I wanted more from that fucking guy while also wishing I could drag him back to my apartment and carve him up. Cornering me in the fucking stockroom? Really?

My real problem is not getting caught. It's the fact that my panties are damp because the sick part of me wanted more. The memory of his grin, the way he laughed as he limped out, only makes me hornier, my pussy throbbing with need. Doesn't help that Dante's cryptic text this morning—You okay?—has my head spinning, or that I keep picturing Ronan bending me over a counter, his hands bruising my hips, fucking me until I can't think. I hate when I get like this, drowning my problems in sex, because that's when shit gets sloppy, and sloppy gets you caught.

I let out a heavy breath as I head toward the front, straightening a display and then a few of the foundation blocks along the way. I'm a picture of normalcy, but inside, I'm a mess, horny, pissed, and trapped in a game I didn't start. Aside from the fucker in the stockroom, I now have a new target to worry about and less than twenty-four hours to pull the job off. I could wait until tomorrow, procrastinate, but that's a recipe for disaster.

It's why I dug into him this morning, gathering public records, social media, the works so that I can slip into his life tonight and end it clean. Problem is, he's predictable, a cheater who's loud about it, flaunting his side pieces on that stupid dating app, Catch Me.

His wife's too naive to notice or she doesn't care and it only took a few swipes to find his silver-fox face smirking on my screen. I've been texting him all morning, on and off, playing the flirty bait, and he's eating it up, his messages dripping with sleaze that makes my skin crawl.

I stop by the lipstick display again and grab a new one for the display to redo my lips. The guy smeared it all over my upper lip and chin. I look a mess, wrecked now that I

see it and quickly use the wipes beside the little mirror to clean myself up. Heat races to my core because I look freshly fucked despite nothing happening back there. Jesus Christ, Selene, get it together.

I need my head screwed on straight to weather all of this bullshit.

Of course, when I get to the front, Dante is leaning against one of the displays, Karla eyeing up the man like she's owed something. "Fuck off, Karla," I growl out. Dante isn't mine, per se but that doesn't mean I won't cut a bitch for touching him. God, if he only knew that I'd been around two men since he fucked me last night...

And my traitorous little pussy throbs at the thought of him threatening to kill them or actually going through with it before fucking me over...Nope, not thinking about that. "What the fuck do you want?"

Dante snorts as if he knows what's going on through my head, his gaze raking over me like he's already picturing me naked. "Just checking up on you."

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Narrowing my eyes, I cross my arms, popping my hip out to show authority or whatever this stance does to Dante. It's weird how that guy was here moments ago, pinning me in the stockroom, and now Dante's here, like they're circling, wolves sniffing out blood.

I don't press it, though. There's too many secrets to keep and I'm already juggling too much. "I'm great," I snap, my tone dripping with sarcasm. "Fantastic. Got fucked real hard yesterday and it was glorious. Do you need something?" Conveniently, I leave out the threatening call this morning pushing me to kill the mayor's son. It's got adrenaline pumping through me, a sick pep in my step despite the twisted options. I also skip mentioning my plan to seduce Smission at some point tonight or tomorrow, play the bait, and then find a way to kill him. Just another day as the Reaper.

Dante's eyes darken, his jaw tightening at the mention of yesterday. "Don't need anything. I was just at the precinct following up with Harley. Seems the Reaper struck again yesterday."

My face falls as I try to portray the innocence I definitely don't have. No one's around us to hear Dante's words now that Karla fucked off somewhere and the pop music is just loud enough to cover our conversation. "Two kills in twice as many days? What the fuck?"

He seems to be studying me as if he doesn't truly believe my disbelief. "Harley thinks there might be a connection between the kills even if it's not the same killer. We haven't gotten anything else yet. Dinner tonight?"

Suspicion coils in my gut because Dante doesn't do dinner. He breaks into my

apartment, fucks me until I'm screaming, leaves me bruised and sated, but dinner? That's a game and I'm not falling for it. "You don't ask me to dinner," I say. "You break into my house and fuck me, but you can't do that either tonight. I have a dinner."

His frown deepens as his eyes narrow and I can feel the possessiveness rolling off him. "With who?"

If it was a different night, I'd taunt him, goad him into thinking he's made the choice to come fuck me the way I need him to. But tonight, I really do have plans. "Myself and a bottle of wine. Don't come the fuck over either. That's not an invitation." It's going to be like I'm in school all over again, cramming for an exam that I can only hope not to fail.

The way his gaze hardens, his expression darkening brings back the asshole Dante that I know. The caring one isn't one I'm used to, well not since we were kids, anyway. A smirk crosses his face, that devilish aura coming back in full force. "Princess, we both know I'd come over anyway if that's what I wanted but I'll respect your wishes. Make sure you lock the door."

"Bitch, I'm going to put a fucking deadbolt on it."

"And if you think that the door is the only way to get in, then you're not as smart as I thought."

That just pisses me off as he steals a kiss from me and then stalks back outside. I want to yell at him but that's just what he wants so I decide to do something else that he'd have a fit over.

Taking out my phone, I find a message from the Catch Me app with a phone number and a kissy face next to it. Typical. But using my number is more evidence so I stay

within the app and text him back, dismissing his last message.

Send me a picture.

God, this man isn't even original. And I would send him a picture but that leaves evidence. I didn't even put anything determinate on the app other than a picture of cleavage.

You'll have to dream until you see me, babe

Fuck, I wish I could see you now.

And a woman's gotta work. How about tonight?

The response comes slow and it's not at all what I wanted.

How's tomorrow evening? I'll be working pretty late tonight.

I'm sure that's a lie but I also can't push it. I have until midnight to get this bullshit done so I'll have to work quick. Fortunately for me, it gives me a little more time to plan.

Sounds perfect.

Wear red.

I smirk at that before pocketing my phone because yeah, by the end of that night, I'll definitely be wearing red.

Dante

Selene's words about not coming over echo in my head but it's a siren call, a challenge I'm desperately trying to ignore. She's caught up in a new job, I can tell by the excitement brimming off of her and I don't want to ruin that. She'll know that I know soon enough.

I walk back toward the truck, Malik in the passenger seat looking like a whole fucking snack until I catch his bloody hands and the blissed-out look on his face. His pants are stained crimson, blood covering his lips and chin from the knife he's currently sucking on.

My stomach lurches as I jump into the driver's seat and look around, wondering if anyone's been watching. I've never seen Malik lose his shit like this so there has to be a reason. "What the fuck is going on, babe?" I snatch the knife from him, wondering how deep the cut on his thigh is and if he stabbed himself.

He's got this feral look as his head lolls to the side, eyes glinting with an excitement I haven't seen in years. "My little sparrow got to me," he purrs.

Confusion spreads in my chest because I know for a fact Malik did something stupid, probably cornered her, pushed too far but there's no time to dig into it. He's already leaning over the console, his bloody fingers smearing something across my lips. It takes a second to register that it's lipstick.

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The lipstick's sloppy, streaked over my upper lip, down my chin, Malik dragging me into a full kiss, his lips crashing into mine, licking and nipping, the taste of blood and chemicals from the lipstick mixing together. He pulls back, his grin even more feral than before as I try to gauge whatever the fuck is going on here.

"Babe," I say, wiping at my chin, the lipstick smearing on my fingers, "I know you've got a screw loose, but what the fuck?"

Malik leans back, twirling the lipstick tube between his bloody fingers, his eyes locked on mine. "That's Sparrow's color," he muses. "It's pretty, isn't it? The color of blood. Thought you'd look pretty in it too. You do. Want to mark you up in this color, smother you in it. Want it everywhere."

Holy shit. Selene's gone from an obsession to a downright craving. The fact that he picked up her crimson lipstick and now wants to bathe in it, paint us both in it, is a whole new level of crazy. Problem is, my cock's throbbing, hard as fuck, and I'm into it. It helps that the car already smells like sex and the darkened stain in the crotch of Malik's pants tells me I already missed the obscene fantasy he just played out in his head.

"As much as I'd love to wrap my pretty red lips around you, we're in the police parking lot. I like a lot of risks, but that's not one of them."

"You're no fun."

"Quite the opposite. Now, what happened to your leg?"

Malik leans back in his chair, staring down at the wound before pressing a finger to it, giggling as more blood dribbles out. “She got mad that I touched her,” he sings, like he’s talking about a love tap instead of a fucking stab wound.

A growl rumbles in my chest, my hands tightening on the steering wheel as I start the car. “You touched her without asking?” Selene’s mine but I also know that I can’t keep her to myself. However, I will protect her from Malik if I have to.

He shrugs, unfazed, his grin never faltering. “I forgot to ask. She was right to stab me. But I’ll remember next time.”

“Next time?” My voice rises, disbelief mixing with the anger, my eyes narrowing as I stare over at him.

“You don’t get to keep her anymore. She’s mine too. She’ll want us both.”

He’s right, and that’s the fucking problem. Selene can handle us both. Her fire, her deviance, her hunger for blood and sex make her more than a match for our chaos. She’s just crazy enough to want it, to crave the unhinged danger we bring, but that’s exactly what’s gonna burn her down.

I nearly ask him to tone it down as I peel out of the parking lot and then realize that’s impossible for someone like him. No, I’ll just wait till we get home, let him fuck me for getting shampoo in his eyes earlier and then hopefully figure out how to get Selene’s hammer back in her hands.

Selene

Sitting on the floor, chugging a rose` in black lingerie doesn’t make me feel as sexy as I thought it would. Especially since I look like I’m studying a suspect to a crime rather than a guy who’s going to end up as one of my victims. I have to figure out which jar

I'm going to use for him as well because this kill wasn't planned. Probably the one with the banana or maybe the one that has the hand on it. God, I have no fucking clue.

Gulping another mouthful, the bitter tang burns my throat, matching the heat pooling between my thighs. Across the room, a makeshift cork board of pins, photos, and notes maps out Philip Smission, the mayor's sleazeball son and my target, due dead by midnight tomorrow. He's a dirty old man, no question, but a hot one, all silver hair and sharp jaw, and despite his cringe-worthy lines, he's sent three dick pics today, each one proving he's not lying about his size.

Taking him for a trial run before I kill him doesn't sound half bad. He's a cheater, not a monster, no abuse in his rap sheet, just a wandering cock. Another swig of wine and my phone buzzes on the cushion beside me, the screen lighting up with his name.

I've been goading the fucker all day, teasing him with descriptions of what I'm wearing but not actually sending him a picture. I have to be just enough of a tease that he'll still want me tomorrow but not too much that he shuts down.

Because after dinner tomorrow, it's game on. I need to kill him away from my apartment, somewhere discreet. A seedy motel twenty minutes out, no cameras, no questions, is perfect, and there's a high-end Italian restaurant I've been dying to try. Classy enough to lure him, dark enough to slip away. I type out a flirty replay, cringing at the words.

You're making me hungry, big guy.

Bet I can satisfy that appetite.

I roll my eyes, my pussy clenching despite the disgust, because I'm horny as fuck. He's also not really the only one stoking the fire.

The phone buzzes again but this time it's my mystery suitor, the one that calls me Sparrow. I open the text, knowing I should probably be more wary about all the unknowns around me. It's just one picture but it has me groaning, resisting the urge to slip two fingers into my panties.

There's a red mark on a man's chest, carved abs toward the edge of the pic. I squint to see what the mark truly is, a kiss print in crimson lipstick, the shade I picked up at the boutique. Most guys send dick pics, but this is different, personal, and I should find it creepy, him watching me, stealing my color, but my twisted heart finds it endearing.

It's attention, devotion, and I'm fucked up enough to crave it, to want his lips brushing by my ear again. Playing into his desires might also get me my hammer back.

It's very pretty.

Next time it'll be my sparrow's lips.

When are you giving back my hammer?

When I see you next.

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A sigh escapes as I tip my head back, the wine bottle resting on my thigh, condensation dripping onto my skin. Despite the thrill of the game, I don't really like being in control. At least with Philip, if everything goes right, I'll be able to breathe a little.

Friday evening wraps Ashthorne in a cold, neon haze, and I'm sitting across from Philip Smission in a swanky Italian restaurant, my dark purple dress hugging my curves like a second skin. The fabric's elegant, shimmering under the chandelier light, but it's gonna be ruined by blood and guts before the night's over. Good thing, because I fucking hate purple. I brushed off three calls from Dante earlier, swearing I'm fine, my voice all sugar to keep him at bay, but my nerves are shot, my pussy still tingling now that three men who've touched me in the last 48 hours.

And now I'm here, playing the seductress, ready to drag Smission into the darkness. Every detail's planned. Dinner here, a quick fuck at a seedy motel twenty minutes out, no cameras, no questions, then a knife to his chest where I drag out my prize and send my mysterious caller the proof. I've backups too: a back alley, a deserted lot, even a rundown cabin if shit goes sideways. The caller's been silent, no texts, no threats, so I've kept up appearances, smiling at work, texting Smission's sleazy ass, setting the trap.

I guess the worst part is that Smission is gorgeous. He knows it too and even though he's got nearly twenty years on me, I'd do him in a heartbeat especially with the way he fills out that suit. He's ordered some stupidly expensive wine, the kind that tastes like money and regret, and he's droning on about the stock market or accounting, maybe both. Can't tell, don't care.

My fork pushes two bites of pasta around my plate, a smile plastered on my bright red lips, all happiness and bedroom eyes, but inside, I'm screaming. His face card's the only thing he's got going for him. Open his mouth and he's boring as shit, a walking sedative. I just need him to offer to take me somewhere, anywhere, so the fun can start.

The waiter clears our plates, bringing dessert but it might as well be cardboard for all I taste. My smile's starting to ache, my fingers itching for the knife strapped to my thigh, hidden under the dress. Smission's still talking, something about dividends, and I nod, giggling like he's said something clever, but my mind's elsewhere, replaying the research I did on him.

His last girl, some blonde with a vacant stare, wasn't smart, just pretty, a trophy he paraded around before dumping her. That's when it truly hit me. He doesn't want brains or a challenge. He wants beautiful airheads, arm candy to stroke his ego. I've been playing this all wrong, leaning into flirty and sharp when I should be dumber, softer, a doll for him to play with.

Leaning forward, I let my cleavage spill a little, my earrings catching the light as I twirl a strand of silver hair around my finger. "Wow, Philip, you're so smart," I say, my voice high, breathy, a giggle tacked on for good measure. "Like, I don't get any of this money stuff, but you make it sound so...sexy." The words burn my throat, but his eyes light up, his smirk widening, and I know I've got him.

He chuckles as he leans back, his hand sliding across the table to brush mine. "Oh, sweetheart, don't worry your pretty head about it," he says, his voice dripping with condescension. "Just keep looking gorgeous and I'll handle the rest."

My stomach twists, but I keep the smile, batting my lashes, letting my fingers linger under his. "You're so sweet," I purr, tilting my head. "This place is amazing, but... maybe we could go somewhere more, like, private? Just us?"

The hunger in his eyes is instant, his cock probably already hard under the table. Gag. It's just too fucking easy. He signals for the check, his hand squeezing mine. "Got just the place. A little spot not far from here. You'll love it."

Bingo. My heartbeat kicks up but I keep my expression as clueless and blank as I can. "Oh, I can't wait," I giggle again, my fingers tracing circles on his hand. The motel's twenty minutes out, and if he's thinking what I hope, he'll drive us there, thinking he's getting laid, not dead. My car's already parked a street over with all of my supplies but time's ticking and if we don't hurry, I won't meet the fucking deadline.

I stab my fork around the dessert plate, hoping he'll catch onto what I'm throwing in his face.

"Full, baby?" He asks, squeezing my hand again. "That's alright. We'll get a box to go. Besides, I think it's time to move into something a little more fun, yes?"

Oh, Philip, I thought you'd never ask.

Selene

This is my favorite part, the moments leading up to the kill, the moments when my victim believes he's going to get the best fuck of his life but then dread slowly sets in, the smile slipping off his face. Then the absolute horror. However, this kill isn't going to sit right with me. I didn't get enough time to do my homework and he hasn't abused women or killed them or thrown them around. He's a cheater for sure but needing to be killed?

Wow, am I having feelings?

I snort at that as I stare over at Philip Smission who's out cold beside me, his body limp from the drugged wine I slipped him after our second round of drinks and

snacks. Thank fuck that this motel had a little bar downstairs to order from because saying I had come prepared while pulling out a bottle of wine would have made him suspicious as fuck.

Now that I've got a few moments of silence to myself, though, I take a good look at this shitty hotel room with its peeling wallpaper, the stench of stale cigarettes coating everything. There's a large window just off to the side and a bathroom a few feet from the foot of the king size bed. It's a perfect piece of hell for Philip and just what I need. Especially since I remembered the special bedding that catches all spills and splashes so cleanup will be that much easier later.

Add in the fact that any grunting and screaming this man does will be coded as getting the fuck of his life and this place isn't awful.

Letting out a deep breath, I slip off the bed and start rummaging through my supplies, double-checking the rope coiled on the floor, the chemical concoctions for cleanup, and then my change of clothes for when we leave. My knife's on the nightstand, next to the glass jar I picked out for him. It's got a yellow film with a banana handle and a cute little banana on the lid. It's adorable and makes me smile every time I look at it, knowing it'll hold Smission's heart when I'm done.

I move back toward the bed, groaning as I realize I'll never get to ride that glorious cock of his. I trace a finger along his thigh, tempted to cross the line of decency, but fucking him while he's unconscious would be weird, even for me. And yet...

You're not that crazy, Selene.

Smission stirs, a grunt muffled by the tape hitting my ears as his eyes open. They're wide with panic as he realizes he's bound, naked, and helpless, a feeling I'm sure he's not used to having. But that just makes this moment more delicious as I lean over him, my silver hair spilling over my shoulder. "Hey, no hard feelings, right?"

His muffled scream vibrates through the tape and I decide to rip it off, wanting to hear his words. “No hard feelings? You fucking drugged me! Do you need money or something? Is this for blackmail?”

I burst out laughing as I climb onto the bed, grabbing my knife to twirl in my hand as I focus on him again. “Money? Nah, Philip, this ain’t about cash. You’re just a job, a name on a list.” A predatory smile spread across my face as the excitement of a kill begins to spread through me. I don’t want to kill Philip per se but the killing in general? Yes, please. “But don’t worry, I’ll make it quick. Mostly.” Cutting out someone’s heart is never quick.

His grunts turn desperate as he tries to struggle, realizing that the drug I’ve given him is perfectly crafted to take over his body. I take another few moments to look over his perfectly crafted body, the mussed silver hair, the muscles clenching beneath his abs, that terrified expression on his face that still makes me think a quick fuck wouldn’t be so bad.

You shouldn’t have paralyzed his dick, then.

I chuckle at my own thoughts before deciding to start in on my mission. There aren’t that many hours left before midnight and I’m not that curious to see what the mysterious caller has up his sleeve. I swing a leg over his hips so I’m straddling him, placing a soft hand to his chest to calm him. Then I remember he can’t feel that touch and I am holding a knife in the other hand. “Philip, I don’t need money, but if I said I wasn’t getting paid for this, I’d be lying. This isn’t for blackmail. As I said, you’re just another job for me. Besides, your infidelity is all over the goddamn place. Philip, your dick’s all over Catch Me. No, someone paid me to kill you.”

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His eyes go a bit wider and I'm sure they're going to pop out of his fucking head, the stench of piss meeting my nose. Any lingering desire to fuck him dies right there, my pussy clenching with disgust instead of want. "You wouldn't know anyone who'd want you dead, would you?" I probe, fishing for the mysterious caller's identity.

"I just cheat on my wife sometimes. Look, Selene, I don't..."

I place a finger to his lips, trying to hold in my laughter. "Sometimes? Philip, let's be honest. You've had a different girl in your bed at least once a month. Never the same one either. Probably worked your way through half of Ashthorne's twenty-to-thirty crowd."

"You don't have to kill me. I'll give you whatever you want. I have a family."

Snorting, I tilt my head, settling my ass against his torso as my dress rides up my thighs. "And yet you're fucking every walking pussy within a ten-mile radius. Be a little more creative than using your family as an emotional grab."

"I've made mistakes, yeah, but this is overkill! Out me to my wife, show her all the pictures, make me lose custody of my kids but killing me? I don't deserve that."

He's not wrong but he is a piece of shit, the fact that he's bargaining custody over his kids instead of being killed. Like, Jesus Christ. What an upstanding family man. It's not enough to justify this kill but I'm going to pretend it is and then sleep like a baby tonight.

"You're absolutely right, Philip. I really enjoyed dinner, too. Well, no, I'm lying. I'm

sorry. Bad habit. Thing is, I would have been much happier at a burger joint or that little spaghetti place beside town hall. You should really stop flaunting your wealth and focus on a girl's needs. Not that you'll have the chance anymore," I muse as I drag the tip of my knife down the middle of his chest. Blood beads against the red line I draw, a grin stretching across my face. "And just so you know, I don't really do well with the whole emotion thing. I take what I want, use it, spit it back out. And when things have a more-than-one-time use, I do that too. Unfortunately, you've overstayed your welcome, and I need to get to the killing part."

"Bitch, I'll just scream."

I shrug, reaching over onto the nightstand for a new piece of tape and then place it over his mouth. He starts screaming, the sound muffled as I pick up my phone and find the playlist I prepared for tonight. The tempo is supposedly the best beat to thrust to. I call bullshit but it'll set the mood. "Philip, the fact that you thought someone like me wouldn't have a plan is ridiculous. The fact that you haven't figured out who I am is hilarious. And the look in your eyes as I dig my knife into your chest to get what I came for is going to be my favorite part of the whole night."

I twirl my knife again before making a perfect slice down the middle of his chest. "See, most girls like flowers. Not me. I prefer a heart or two. Sixteen to be exact. You're going to be my Seventeenth. See that jar over there? I picked it out just for you. Right, you're paralyzed, my bad." A giggle forms on my lips as I deepen my cut, my tongue darting out to coat my lips, the thought of tasting him running through my head.

But I don't. I don't have time to play. Instead, I get to work, ignoring his screams and the way the veins in his neck strain and bulge out as I create my masterpiece. Splitting open his chest as I build my flower is the easy part and I lose myself to it as I hunch over him. I'm so in tune with grabbing my treasure that I nearly scream when a firm hand wraps around and grips my hip, another one slipping up to cover my

mouth.

Panic spikes through me, my knife hovering over Philip's bleeding chest, my breath hitching as I feel a man's heat against my back, his breath hot against my ear. "Sparrow," he murmurs, "I told you we'd meet again. Thought you might need this." He removes his hand from my mouth and then my hammer appears at my side, the one he taunted me with a few days earlier.

It's perfect for breaking bone, but I have no idea how this man found me or why he's here. Trying to turn, I strain to see his face. "Who are you?" Unfortunately, most of it's covered by a hoodie and some kind of over-the-top masquerade mask, nothing but a few strands of hair sitting in my peripheral vision.

A rough chuckle comes from him as his hands settle on my waist fully, the man kneeling behind me, between Philip's legs. "I want to play." He presses up against me, his cock sliding between my ass cheeks where my dress has ridden up. "Your lipstick's pretty, but blood's prettier."

Nervous laughter bubbles up in my throat, my body caught between fear and arousal. "I just want to touch my sparrow while she makes art," he growls as his hand slides around my front, dipping beneath my dress, fingers finding my clit through the lace. "You're wet," he murmurs against my ear before sucking the lobe between his lips.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around what the fuck is going on when he's suddenly got the blunt tip of his cock pressed against my pussy, ignoring the lace strip of my thong. His other hand has moved, his arm holding me around my stomach, keeping me firmly in place. "What are you doing?" I snap, my body betraying me, hips twitching toward him even as my mind screams to fight.

It wouldn't take much to fight him off but this has always been one of my darkest fantasies, a moment I've dreamed about since I killed my stepfather. Every kill

afterward made me want to show the man beneath me that he was nothing, that he would never be more than nothing. The man behind me is giving me that chance and as depraved as this is as I stare down at Philip, his chest fileted open, his heart still beating in his chest... I want it.

“Shit, I’m supposed to ask,” the man behind me mumbles.

Like fuck I’m going to be telling him shit. He needs to take. When he doesn’t move, my hips do the work for him, rocking backward to suck his cock into me. That’s all the answer he needs as he thrusts fully into me, his cock stretching me wide when he’s fully seated. Holy fuck, it’s perfect.

I curse myself for wanting this, for liking this. I shouldn’t crave this feeling, and yet it feels like raw power being lorded over someone else. A garbled moan falls from my lips as the man behind me pulls out and then thrusts back in, one of his hands wrapping in my hair and tugging me backward. “Keep cutting, Sparrow. I want to watch.”

“It’s kind of hard to focus with you inside me,” I snap, my pussy squeezing around him, betraying every word. My body’s a traitor, even as my mind screams to fight this desperate, depraved need inside of me. “Didn’t I get you to understand I didn’t want this when I stabbed your fucking leg?”

A cold blade presses against my cheek, and I freeze, my breath catching in my throat. This is why we don’t let strangers fuck us, Selene. Shit.

“With this?” he muses, dragging the very knife I stabbed him with along my cheek. “You gave me a present, Sparrow and it just made me want you all that much more. Can’t wait to make you bleed too.” The next drag draws blood and it’s like a fucking high, the mixture of pain and pleasure swirling through me. Philip starts screaming again and if I don’t hurry up, the drug will wear off and that’s just not an option.

“Tell me you don’t want this, Sparrow and I’ll come back another day. But I can feel you, the way you’re squeezing me, sucking me in. You’re perfect for me.”

I want to fight back against his words but my pussy is already spasming, needing the release I always do after a kill. I struggle to keep myself upright, nowhere to rest my hands since Philip’s chest is kind of... exposed. The man behind me makes a smaller, second cut, blood dribbling down my cheek as he picks a slow, torturous pace.

“I’ll make you come once you get your prize. It’ll be like a reward.”

His teeth sink into my shoulder, the sudden sensation pushing my face forward into Philip’s chest cavity. Blood and organs pump against my face, the scrape of his ribs clawing against my forehead. It’s a fucking mess, something so disgusting I never once imagined it could happen as I made my art. And yet, I don’t have time to dwell on it as the man behind me yanks on my hair again, pushing me to continue my cuts and retrieve my treasure.

Blood’s dripping down my face, the thick scent of copper and death meeting my nose as the man behind me starts fucking into me mercilessly, like a wild animal and yet, still in time with the muscle.

I probably should be appalled that there’s only one thought running through my head right now.

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This really is good thrusting music.

Malik

Selene'ssofuckingprettylike this, my pretty little sparrow, a vision of blood and chaos bent over a dying man in this shithole motel room. Her soft ass jiggles every time I sink my cock into her, the heat of her pussy gripping me and sucking me deeper. Philip Smission's sprawled beneath her, his chest a hacked-open ruin, his groans fading into wet gurgles, muffled by duct tape which just heightens my need to claim this woman. My eyes flick up over her shoulder, catching the glint of her hammer as she smashes through bone, blood painting her hands, her face, and her clothing, a bloody mess that's more beautiful than any crimson lipstick she wears.

Her pussy's strangling my cock so tight it's almost painful. She's close, her breath hitching as she tries to swallow her cries, her body trembling beneath my grip. Licking the bite I left on her shoulder, I taste her sweat and blood, my teeth aching to mark her again.

I fumble around for the knife and then reach around her to drag it down her chest, knowing that it's mixing with the man below. I wish I could see her as I did this, her eyes meeting mine as I made her bleed so prettily. Not that it matters. Fucking her is everything, the playlist in the background a perfect montage to this moment.

She's my sparrow, my goddess, carving a heart while I fuck her and get lost in her. It's like motherfucking Christmas.

Selene mumbles something like 'I got it' and I realize that means she's got the heart,

the one thing keeping me from giving her the orgasm she so desperately needs. I glance over her shoulder to see her fingers wrapped around Smission's heart, tearing it free with a wet rip. Philip immediately goes limp and I grin at the fact that I can now fill my sparrow the way I truly want.

I pull her off to the side, away from Philip and press a hand to the middle of her back before pulling her ass up high in the air. And then I start pounding into her, my cock sinking deep, the heat of her pussy gripping me like a vice.

Her moans disappear into the pillow as I glance over the bloody flower she's left there. She clenches around me as she falls apart and I explode inside her, a feral groan ripping from my throat. I wrap my hand in her hair again, yanking hard, loving the way she squeezes my cock when she does, milking me of every last drop of my release. "I knew it was gonna be everything I dreamed of, Sparrow. Fuck, you're beautiful."

It's then that I realize I need to preserve this, keep this image with me. I lean back and pull out my phone, making sure that it's at an angle to catch her pretty ass and the man beside it.

"What the fuck?" She cries out, trying to sit up and failing. Her hands are holding that heart, giving her no leverage to push me off but it's okay. Tonight, I'm done. I pull out of her, staring at my picture as I climb off the bed and head for the window. When I hear her rustling around, I twist just enough that she only catches the silver mask covering my face. "Sparrow, if you come after me, you'll make a mess. Be careful."

Blood's soaked into my dark clothing and I'm making bloody footprints but this isn't my mess to clean. I never clean up. It's always Ronan and Dante. My pretty sparrow will figure it out but if she comes after me now, it won't be as much fun. She's also going to get caught. As much as I want to stay and play again, I can't.

She lets out a frustrated huff, no doubt working hard to clean up and get to me but I use those moments to leave through the window in the room, the same way I came in.

Dante

An hour ago, I was brooding in my regular spot at Sinner's Notch, trying to figure out why Selene had been dodging my questions all day. Her voice had been all sugar on the phone, swearing she's fine, but I know better. The worst part is that Malik was out all night only to tell me that she looked very pretty dancing around in her living room. And now he's gone AWOL again tonight.

I mean, I guess she's at least safe with him watching her. But I can't trust that he won't do something to terrify her.

And it's why I'm now sitting in my car a street over from a seedy little motel after following Malik's location from his phone. I had set up an alarm on our front door to be alerted whenever Malik left which would give me enough time to follow his ass.

Unfortunately, I haven't seen him. Either he's already inside or he's out in one of the shadows watching into her window. He's the least likely to pull a one-night stand, not because he can't but because he doesn't play well with strangers. I'm his only real lover, the one who gets his unhinged shit, so him being here makes no fucking sense.

My thumb hovers over his number, ready to call his crazy ass, when I spot him waltzing down the sidewalk, his hood up, his grin all teeth and terrifying beneath the streetlight. An amateur wouldn't notice, but I can see that his clothes are soaked in blood. He doesn't usually do public kills, not unless something is bothering him which just sets my alarm bells off. I'm out of the car in seconds, striding toward him. "What the fuck is going on? What did you do?"

That's when I see that godawful dollar store masquerade mask on his face, Malik

slowly pulling it off to reveal his crazed expression. I have to reach down and adjust myself at the thought of Malik fucking me while he wears that or chasing me down until he pins me against the wall and goes to town on my ass. Things to remember for later, I guess.

Malik's grin widens as he stuffs the mask into the pocket of his hoodie, his eyes glinting with that feral spark that's never a good sign. "Sparrow, let me inside," he purrs, obviously still coming down from the high of whatever happened in that room.

As seedy as this place is, someone will eventually notice Malik so I drag him back to the truck and stuff him in the front seat. I don't say anything until I'm behind the wheel again and peeling out of the lot. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Malik doesn't answer and I don't push him until we're miles away and I'm able to pull off onto the side of the road. "Tell me what the fuck is going on."

Malik lets out a little sigh as he pulls down his hood, his fingers stained with blood as well. I'm thinking the worst possible scenario until he turns to me and offers me a smile that doesn't belong on a devil like him. "She had another target. I couldn't stay back anymore. I had to see how she makes her art. And then I had to touch. Told her I wanted to see her art while I fucked her. But I couldn't let her see me so I found a mask. The same color as her hair. It's pretty. She's pretty."

That dreamy expression on his face makes more sense now but fucking Selene while she's killing someone... "Seriously?" I growl out, a mixture of jealousy and anger spreading through my chest. I want to fuck her like that, in the blood of her victims but I also know that Malik sometimes forgets to fucking ask before he takes. "Babe, please tell me you..."

He cuts me off, his eyes lighting up. "She screamed but I asked. She liked it. I made sure. I asked!" His voice rises, his tone defensive, like he's proud of himself for remembering. I can't help the laugh that escapes, because this is Malik. Unhinged,

devoted, and somehow still trying to play by the rules.

I can't even be mad about that. We already know what happens when she doesn't want something. Letting out a heavy sigh as relief replaces the slight terror, I reach across the console and pull his forehead against mine, squeezing the back of his neck in steady pulses. "It's okay, babe. She was okay, though? She's safe?"

Malik nods, reaching for more, his fingers curling into my shirt. "Yeah, she bleeds so prettily." His words are so soft, almost not even there that I have to remember that this is my crazy demon who's talking and not the medical student who sometimes volunteers at the clinic.

The fact that Selene let him cut her means that she's no longer just an obsession. She'll be his new toy to play with, to break, to mend, and to mold.

And here I am, holding Malik against me, cock straining in my jeans at the thought of watching them together the next time this happens. Because it will happen again. It's just a matter of when. I finally pull back, searching those deep blue eyes as they continue to sparkle from his time with her. "What you'd do, Malik? I want to know what happened in that room."

"She was carving him, taunting him and I just had to be inside of her. I only went to give her back her hammer but then I fucked her, Dante. Fucked her while she killed. She came, squeezing me so tight. She bled for me. You're the only other one that's done that for me." His hand brushes his thigh, where her knife stabbed him, the man practically glowing, like the wound is a badge of honor. "While she stole his soul, I filled her and tasted her to make him understand who she belongs to."

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“Wait, who is he?” I sit back farther in my seat, trying to understand this man’s mind. “The guy she was killing?” I also don’t know who she took into that motel room but that’s a question for later.

“Oh no, she’s not his,” he cackles. “That would’ve never happened. I mean the one watching her. Thinks she’s his, but she isn’t. She’s my sparrow. And yours. I don’t know who he is, but I don’t like him. He was watching tonight, too. I think so but it doesn’t matter.”

Malik mentioned someone else before but I wouldn’t even know where to start. However, added with the information someone is out to get her, I’m getting a little more nervous about her wellbeing. Just a little.

Malik pulls away from me completely, digging out his phone and then flipping the screen toward me. “It’s okay. I claimed her. See?”

Desire slams through me as I stare at the photo he took. Selene’s there, her dress rucked up past her ass, bunched around her hips, blood soaking into her side from the dead guy beside her, her long gray hair stained crimson. She’s the perfect vision of depravity. Swiping, I catch a second picture. It’s blurry but it’s clear she’s pissed, probably because she loved it and hates herself for it. I wish I had been there, wish I’d seen her break like that, wish I’d been the one to ruin her. “Fuuuuuuuuck.”

Malik’s eyes dance, his grin never fading as he takes the phone back from me. “She’d be pretty between us,” he purrs and I can tell he’s already fantasizing about how he’d take her apart again. Hell, I’m thinking about it now too.

It takes me a few moments not to do something stupid like dragging Malik's pants down and sucking his cock so that I can gorge myself on their combined deliciousness. By the time I've controlled my breathing and willed my cock to deflate, I head back onto the road toward home. "Selene needs to process and as much as I'd love to watch you go back over and claim her again, the more hands involved in this shit, the more likely it's gonna go south. I'll make sure she's okay, but you stay the fuck home."

Malik cackles as he leans back in his chair, staring down at his hands. "You're just jealous." His lips quirk a little wider before he sucks one of those digits into his mouth, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. I know for a fact that it's not Selene's blood, which means he's imagining that it is. I'm not sure what's worse at this moment.

And I'm still fucking hard for it.

"Yeah, I'm jealous," I push out, forcing myself to focus on the road as he starts cleaning off the next finger. "Been fantasizing about doing that same damn thing for years. But I also know if I show up to help with you in tow, she's gonna rip our throats out. She needs time to process."

"Process what?" he asks.

"Process the way you just consumed her." Because it's true. I know how Malik fucks and he fucks like a wild man, he fucks to devour and to mark. It's a lot for anyone to digest, even for Selene. "I'm not sure how I can keep everything I know from her much longer, either. Harley's getting a little too close and our girl needs to know she's got someone in her corner."

Malik hums as he sucks on the last finger and then licks his palm. "My sparrowisours, isn't she?"

She is and I love it. The hard part will be making her see that. Correction, the hard part will be making her understand that we're not going anywhere. For once in my life, I want to be more than a fuck. I want to be her home base.

Selene

My legs are still shaking as I step out of the motel bathroom, my body thrumming with the sick, electric energy of being fucked over a dying body. Some part of me wanted to stay dirty and bathe in it while fucking myself on my fingers in the shower, recreating the beautiful scene my mysterious stalker gave me.

Just the fantasy of him filling me again, grinding me into the gore until I'm nothing but his, makes me shudder. Dante fucks me like he owns me but that man fucked me like he wanted to break me, and for a moment, I wanted it, wanted to show him the jagged, broken parts of me and see what he'd do.

Then reality crashed in. I let some unknown fucker screw me while I carved out the mayor's son's heart. Got my hammer back, my knife too, but he's got a picture now of me bloody and ruined, and no clue where that'll end up. And yet, still, like a fucking weirdo, I'm running my fingers along the small cut across my cheek, my pussy throbbing and yelling for me.

My phone vibrates on the table by the bathroom, a tight smile forming on my lips.

Gonna dream about you, Sparrow.

And now I'm torn between wanting to hunt him down and wanting to spread my legs for him again.

I shove the phone into my back pocket, the black clothing concealing every inch of skin, my hair pinned on top of my head and hidden beneath my hoodie. The cleanup

is just as important as the rest of this because leaving the wrong clue will lead right back to me. Unfortunately, no matter how good I am, Harley will eventually make the connections.

I'll play innocent, bat my lashes, and lie through my teeth until I can't, then I'll disappear and become someone new. Wrapping Philip in the no-drip bedding was the perfect option and something I should have done with the last guy. No one'll suspect Philip died here while I was getting fucked, his heart smashed in that cute banana jar on the dresser, the glass streaked red because I squeezed it too hard when my mysterious stranger mercilessly pounded me into the mattress.

My gaze trails over to the jar, the heart a mangled lump, and I sigh, hating that I couldn't protect the organ the way I wanted to. Even so, I quickly check the room again, making sure everything is clean and packed, that there are no stray blood marks that will get me caught. It's not perfect, it'll never be perfect but my blacklight doesn't turn up anything specific. Well done, bitch. Should have applied all this hard work to medical school.

I should have but this is way more rewarding. Once Philip is fully wrapped up, I stuff him into the empty duffle bag I brought in before wondering how the fuck I'm supposed to lug him downstairs. There's no cameras to worry about but a person sized duffle bag will stand out. Glancing at the window, my lips twitch into a deviant smile, a reckless thought sparking in my head. "Oh, I so shouldn't do that," I murmur, but the idea's too good.

I lug the duffle to the window and shove it open, before leaning over the windowsill to check what I'd be hurling this body into. There's just a large dirt patch and I know for a fact that there's only a hallway beneath my room which means no windows to see this duffle bag falling through the air.

Perfection. I shove the body out the window, a cackle escaping me as I then shut the

window and grab my bag to ditch this place completely.

There's no good place to drop Philip, nothing that feels right but if I don't dump him soon, the mysterious caller will have my ass. I just need something symbolic enough and that's when I see a park bench as I turn down yet another road in some of the darkest parts of Ashthorne. God, Philip didn't deserve to go out this way but I don't have any other choices. It's 15 minutes to midnight.

I pull up a few feet away, taking a cursory look for cameras and passerby. Nothing comes up so I rush out of the car and into the backseat, undoing the bag and the bedding before carrying this man onto the bench. I lay him down, making it seem like he had died out here, alone and afraid. When he's perched just right, I grab his phone from the passenger seat and quickly delete all traces of me and my texts.

I chuckle, realizing that I wasn't the only one he was texting, a lovely message sent to someone named Helena just as we left the restaurant. He said he'd meet her at the bar around midnight which means I still have a few moments of wiggle room. Chewing on my lip as I search for the best response, I find some horrid excuse and tell her that Philip's schedule is free Saturday evening. Then I slip his phone into his pocket and stare down at the man for a little longer.

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“I’m so sorry, Philip,” I murmur, a flicker of guilt twisting in my chest. “You weren’t on my list.”

I’m not sure why I do it but I reach toward his chest, running my gloved fingers through the blood still pooling there and then write out one little phrase.

I’m sorry.

It’s not my style but it fits this moment and it’ll be a curveball for Harley and the Reaper investigation.

I stay there for a few more minutes before climbing back into my car and discarding the gloves, taking off onto the road to get home and hopefully a good night’s sleep. Unfortunately, my phone’s already ringing five minutes later, my mysterious caller’s name popping up on the dashboard. The problem is that he’s calling my personal cellphone and not the burner.

He knows too much, Selene.

“I know that,” I growl out before pressing answer. “What?”

A low chuckle filters through the earpiece, mocking me. “Doe, that was such a pretty kill but feeling remorse afterward? Not really your style.”

I should have scanned better to see if I could find the man in the shadows because I have no idea how he’s always so close to me. “He wasn’t my choice to kill,” I snap back. “But he’s dead now and everyone’ll mourn him. Now what?”

“Well, now it’s my turn to play,” he muses. “Go home, clean up your last mess. I bet it’s starting to stink in there and I’m gonna enjoy myself. It’s Friday! Live a little.”

“I was living just fucking fine until you,” I hiss.

“Oh, I know. I much prefer you in lingerie than all this black clothing.”

“You’re a sick fuck, you know that?”

“And I thought you liked that. After your other mysterious friend came to your room and fucked the shit out of you. Though, if I had my way, it would’ve been me behind you.”

My gaze darts to the rearview mirror and then out the windows. “Where the fuck are you? Why are you watching me?”

“I told you. I was getting bored and what’s more fun than making a queen bow? Now go home, take that shower I know you want to and settle in. Wait for my present. It’s gonna be an amazing one.”

The line goes dead which is just par for the course as I speed home, kicking off my shoes the moment I step inside and shedding the rest of the clothing so I can grab a shower. The man on the phone wasn’t wrong; that feeling of the heated water cascading over my shoulders is everything after a kill. Well, a good whiskey and a hard fuck, too.

I lose myself in my routine, throwing the clothes in the wash and then starting in on the guest bedroom, doing my best to clean up any evidence of my nighttime activities. I even manage to push Philip’s kill and that glorious fuck out of my mind long enough to focus and order a new mattress. All that concentration is shattered when a sharp knock hits my front door.

“Better not be Dante,” I mutter, stalking into the living room. I’ve only got a robe on, not expecting company but whoever is at the door can deal with me like this. I lean up on my tip toes and look through the peephole, groaning when there’s a very drunk Harley standing on the other side. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

Selene

I take a deep breath and force my face into a softer expression that won’t immediately alert Harley to how annoyed I am with him. And then the fucker starts pounding on my door like whatever he has to say is urgent. I grab a bottle of Febreze and spray it liberally around the room and then rip the door open. Harley stumbles in, his hands reaching forward to cup my face. “Sorry, sorry,” he says, swaying to the right a little. “I still love you, Selene. Won’t try to change you.”

“What the fuck?” I snap, shutting the door behind him to keep whatever this is away from my neighbors. I’m supposed to be the one who never causes any trouble. “You never get drunk. What happened?”

He sways again before catching himself on the wall, his face flushed a deep red. When he speaks, his words slur together telling me he had more than just a few drinks. “Just realized I’m pushing all the good things away in my life. Dante’s been telling me I’m an asshole, and I just...”

My eyes narrow, my mind snagging on Dante’s name, but I focus on everything other than that. Stepping toward the living room to block out anything I forgot to hide, I address the real issue. “And so you come to my house drunk and do what, tell me we need to get back together? That’s not exactly how to get the girl.”

Harley shakes his head, stumbling toward the couch. He falls to one of the cushions and then straightens up, meeting my gaze. His eyes are glassy, his expression full of regret but it’s too late for that. “No, he... kinda gave me a family intervention, and

I...” He trails off, his gaze wandering. Not good, Selene. Get him the fuck out. Wait, what did he say?

“Nope, I’m stopping you right there. Family intervention? What the fuck are you talking about?”

He rubs his face, his words slow, slurred. “He’s my brother, well, stepbrother. It’s complicated. We’re not talking about him. Talking about us.”

Oh, that’s rich and something I’m definitely bringing up with Dante the next time I see him. For now, I need to get Harley’s drunk ass out of my house. Even while inebriated, he’s not stupid and his eyes are already wandering, catching on a small trash bag by the couch, a bloody handkerchief dangling from the rim, a leftover from my last cleanup I forgot to burn. Groaning inwardly, I step in front of it, knowing that it’s now going to be a problem. There’s really only one way to get out of it as I shrug off the shoulder of my robe, giving him a distraction as I fumble for my phone from my pocket.

There’s several missed messages from Harley and a lovely text, ‘we need to talk’ but I dismiss all those and pull up the rideshare app to call him a car. I’m too engrossed in that to notice that he’s suddenly behind me, holding the cloth up to his face. “What is this?”

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

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If he wasn't both my ex and a police officer, he'd be my next victim but people will miss him and they always look to the partner. I let out a little growl of frustration before snatching the cloth from him, blood rushing down my arm as I squeeze it. His eyes bulge a little before I stalk over to the washing machine and throw it inside. "Women bleed every month, Harley. Get over it."

"No, no that's not it. You've got a cut on your face, too. What's in the bag?"

I can't with this man right now. "I'm doing some extra cleaning. I use trash bags because I'm not some suburban mom with a wicker hamper. You're reading too much into it because you're wasted and desperate to play hero." I reach around him to drag the trash bag toward the washing machine before tying the top plastic in a pretty bow.

"That's... that's a lot of blood, though, Selene."

"You don't get to play detective with me," I growl at him. "We dated, it didn't work, and now you're trying to worm your way back, goad me into another date, but it'll be the same shit. You'll swear I'm perfect, give me god-awful sex, then try to mold me into some woman your mom would've loved. I'm not that girl, Harley. Never was."

I turn away from him, checking to see how close the rideshare is when my mysterious caller starts sending me texts.

Had another idea for a gift, but I could make your ex the next chess piece if you like.

Don't touch the fucking police.

A hint of feelings? Just joking. I would never. But maybe hide that banana jar.

I frown, my gaze snapping over to the kitchen and realizing that it's sitting on the counter. I could have sworn that I placed it on my shelf in the backroom but it's just out here, on display. Fuck.

Get rid of him, Doe. Wouldn't want our game to end so soon. If he finds out, I'll have to kill him.

I clear the messages from my notifications just as Harley leans over my back and swipes my phone from my hands. I have no idea what he's doing until he hands it back to me, the rideshare updates gone. "Did you cancel the fucking car?"

"I don't need it. You're fucking lying to me, Selene. I have no idea why or what it's about but I'm not leaving until I get some answers."

I stand frozen in my living room, confused and a little terrified of Harley in this state. There were many obvious reasons we didn't work out, but this was one of the lesser known ones. Everything was an investigation to him when it came down to it. There was always a right or wrong, black and white. Never any gray area with this man.

My phone vibrates again and I look down, realizing that Harley's life is in my hands.

You've got an hour to get rid of him.

Shit.

I pull up Dante's chat with me and text him the only thing I know that will have him running.

Come get your fucking brother.

Harley sways forward and grabs my arms, a snarl turning up his lip. Jesus Christ, I'll never forgive him for this. "Harley, let go and sit the fuck down. Stop acting like I'm on trial. You're drunk and you're seeing things that aren't there."

His hands ease just enough for me to guide him back to the couch but I'm not off the hook. "I know you weren't telling the truth at the precinct," he slurs, his eyes dipping to my bloody arm. "And I feel like there's other things I should know. Did someone hurt you, Selene?"

"What are you talking about? You're not making sense."

He leans forward, clasping his hands over his spread knees. "I know you get impulsive sometimes and I get it, but... that blood, the way you're acting. Did something happen? Did someone threaten you?"

"Are you asking how I'm doing or are you accusing me of something? Because this bullshit sounds like you're building a case, Harley. This is why we didn't work. You'd get some idea in your head, then dig through every detail to prove yourself right. This isn't a courtroom and I'm not your suspect. You came into my home, drunk, mumbling nonsense, and now you're grilling me like I'm hiding a body."

"You're getting defensive, Selene. What am I supposed to think?"

"Of course I am!" I snap, stepping closer as I prop my hands up on my hips, my robe slipping just a little more off my shoulders. "I have to be, because you can't get it through your thick skull that I'm not into you. I haven't been for a while. You're not my knight in shining armor and I don't need saving."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say as he shoots to his feet, his hands suddenly on my shoulders. "You don't need to lie to me." His gaze dips to the raw bite in my skin but doesn't address it, although his expression hardens. "Babe, tell me

what's going on. I can help you."

I shuffle backward, disgusted by this man's touch. "Harley, I didn't see anything. I'm stressed, I'm tired. I dropped out of medical school to pay bills. I've got no family who gives a shit and I live in this rundown apartment, smiling at customers while telling them aquatic blue looks great when it's hideous. I'm done with this... this thing you do, thinking we can start again. I'm not going to dinner with you. I'm not dating you. We can be friends, but that's it."

"You're still fucking lying."

I've killed men and placed their bodies around Ashthorne. Never once was I terrified of getting caught or being found out. And yet, in this moment, I'm just a little terrified that Dante won't save me from Harley's need to dig.

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In one moment, my entire life could crumble because even if Dante shows up but chooses not to save me, I'm done for.

Mysterious Caller

Ifuckinglovethefact that my little doe called reinforcements to get that asshole out of her apartment. I would have loved it more if she hadn't so I could get my hands around his throat and wring his neck. Maybe stab him a little too. Selene likes the carnage. I'm nowhere as artistic but I'm sure she could do something with it.

I told her that I was going to have fun tonight. That 'live a little' comment was definitely for me because I caught Harley yelling about ruining his life over an hour ago at the bar. He's thoroughly plastered and now it's going to be a family reunion and a confrontation all in one.

I swallow down the urge to storm in there and save her myself. My little doe doesn't actually need saving. She never has. That doesn't mean Harley isn't on my list now that his hands have touched her pretty skin. Hewilldie. Just not tonight.

Maybe.

No, no, I promised my sweet girl.

And I always keep my promises.

Dante

I lean against the bar at Sinner's Notch, my whiskey glass sweating in my hand. Malik's sitting beside me, staring at the same tequila shot for the last fifteen minutes, a faint grin curling his lips. He's a little less crazy looking now, after a thorough shower, and normal clothes that don't involve a hoodie but his vibe screams trouble, like he's replaying every second of fucking her mid-kill. Ronan's behind the bar, wiping off a glass as his eyes flick to Malik, then to me, his brow furrowing. "What the fuck is wrong with him?"

I take a sip of whiskey, the burn down the back of my throat bringing me back to the present. I glance over at Malik, who's oblivious to the conversation, his fingers twitching near his knife. "He fucked his obsession tonight."

Ronan pauses as he raises an eyebrow. "She still alive?"

A fair question with Malik's unhinged ass. "Yeah, which is why he's so fucking obsessed."

Ronan frowns, his eyes narrowing as he sets the glass down. "Wait, his obsession's Sparrow, right? Selene?"

I smirk, leaning back on the stool. "Glad you put that together. Congratulations. Would you like a gold star?"

He throws me a middle finger before lunging across the counter and grabbing Malik by the neck. "Did you fucking hurt her, you sick prick?" he growls, his voice loud enough to turn a few heads.

Malik squeals, his hand darting to his knife, the blade flashing as he presses it against Ronan's throat. A feral grin spreads across his face, his teeth bared in an expression I'd never want turned on myself. "I'd never hurt my sparrow," he hisses. "She liked it. I asked first. She was very pretty when she bled. I have a picture."

He fumbles for his phone with his free hand, and my eyes widen at the thought of him showing that in a bar like this. “I told you to delete that bullshit,” I snap, reaching for his arm, but he pulls away, the knife still at Ronan’s neck. Ronan lets go and steps back, raising his hands in surrender.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ronan asks, glancing between us.

I rub a hand down my face, the whiskey souring in my gut. “I’m a little worried for Selene,” I admit, keeping my voice low enough so that the surrounding patrons won’t hear us. “We checked on her earlier and Malik tried some shit then. She stabbed him.”

Ronan’s jaw drops, his gaze flicking to Malik, who’s back to staring at his tequila. “How is any of that consensual?”

I knock back the rest of my whiskey, the glass hitting the bar with a thud. “I’m pretty sure you did some freaky shit with her when you fucked her too,” I say, pointing at him. “Selene likes it. She’d let you know if she didn’t. Trust me, she’s not shy.”

Ronan shakes his head, muttering something about crazy, and pours me another shot as my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, my heart dropping into my stomach at Selene’s text.

Come get your fucking brother.

Frowning, I look up at Ronan. “Was Harley here earlier?”

“Yeah, he was sobbing over something, drunk as hell. Why?”

I curse under my breath and pocket the phone. “Because I think Selene just found out Harley’s my brother. How else would she know that unless he said something?” Jesus

Christ, a drunk Harley is never a good one and he's been talking nonstop about making Selene see that they have something together. And while I know she can handle herself, I know for a fact that cleaning up a kill is no easy feat.

If Harley sees something...

"Yeah, I think we have some place to be."

Ronan snorts, pointing to Malik. "You're really going to take his crazy ass over there?"

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“I can either leave him with you or take him with me. If I leave him at home, he’s going to find something to break, possibly a person. Or, you can have him.”

Ronan shakes his head furiously, grabbing another glass to wipe off. “Yeah, fuck that. He terrifies my customers. Go check on your girl.”

“Our girl,” Malik corrects as he slides off the stool and heads toward the entrance. I just nod, not wanting to get into that. There’s no doubt in my mind that Ronan is going to end up being a regular in her bed. It might take a little more time because he’s an actual gentleman when it comes to women, but it’s going to happen, nonetheless.

The ride to Selene’s house is silent but the moment we pull into the apartment complex’s parking lot, Malik is out the door. I was going to tell him to stay in the fucking car but I can see now that he needs to see she’s okay. Rushing up the stairs, I get there just in enough time to keep him from knocking and press a hand to his chest, ready to berate him.

“If Harley hurt my sparrow...”

“Back off, Malik,” I growl, pushing him a step away from Selene’s door. “Harley’s a police officer. We don’t hurt them, we don’t taunt them, we don’t torture them.” He tries to struggle forward so I roughly grab his chin and pull him close, our lips a breath apart, his breath hot against my face. “Listen to me, babe. Harley’s not the target, today or ever. Selene’s the one you protect, your pretty sparrow, right? All I want is for you to protect her. I’ve got Harley.”

His eyes soften as he nods, the angelic expression on his face weirding me out. “I can do that. I’ll always protect her.”

I press a soft kiss to his lips. “I know you will, babe.” Releasing him, I pull my lockpick from my pocket and work the door, the tumblers clicking as Malik hovers beside me. When the door swings open, I see Selene, pressed against the wall, her robe loose around her shoulders, Harley looming over her as he shouts in her face.

It takes him a few minutes to realize her attention has shifted and then he turns, spotting me and Malik. “Why the fuck would you call him?”

“Because you wouldn’t leave,” I say, stepping inside and shutting the door behind me after Malik pushes past. “And I’m the only other person you listen to.”

Selene’s eyes dart between me and Malik, my woman trying to understand why I’m as calm as I am. When I offer her a small smile, it’s like she just understands that I know. I’m not sure how but her eyes widen with the realization. Malik moves toward them and pulls Selene away from the wall. He drags her into the kitchen, a snarl on his pretty lips before he cradles Selene’s cheek in his hand. “I got you, Sparrow,” he murmurs. “He can’t hurt you.”

And now she knows that connection too.

She throws me a murderous look but that’s the least of my problems.

Harley growls in frustration as I step up to him. “She didn’t need to fucking call you,” he slurs, his breath reeking of bourbon. “I was just asking questions, because things don’t make sense.”

“And cornering her while you’re drunk is the way to do it? Harley, you’ve been trying to get in her pants since you split, but that doesn’t give you the right to be an

asshole.”

He swings at me, a sloppy punch aimed at my jaw, and I easily dodge, grabbing his wrist and twisting it behind his back. “Well, this is going to be fun.” I shove him toward the couch, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to sit him down, but he’s already struggling, his cop instincts kicking in despite the booze.

Malik

Standing in the kitchen, I tighten my grip on Selene’s waist, my heart racing because she’s not pulling away, her warmth seeping into me like a drug. My sparrow, my obsession is right here, pressed against me, the scent of fresh coconut filling my nose from her shower. I press a soft kiss to her head, unable to resist even as she tenses against me. Fuck, I messed up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t ask,” I murmur. “Dante does that to calm me.”

She frowns, her eyes flicking to the living room where Dante and Harley are brawling, a lamp crashing to the floor. They’re fighting like schoolboys over a girl but we all know who’s going to win. It’s taking all my strength not to step in between them and give Harley a piece of my mind. However, Dante said I couldn’t do that and if Selene goes...

No, no. She can’t go either.

“Let them do that. It’s been brewing for a while.”

Selene cracks a smile just as Harley’s drunken voice cuts through the moment. “I knew you were fucking sleeping with her! What happened to bro code?”

Dante laughs as he dodges a swing. He’s definitely taunting Harley and I absolutely love watching. “Harley, our parents got married, but we’re adults here. What I do

with my cock is no business of yours.”

There’s more scuffling, the coffee table scraping across the carpet, and something else crashing before Selene pulls away from me. I turn my attention back to her as she hops up onto the counter, her legs dangling over the side. “You both know, don’t you?” She doesn’t let me answer, already knowing the truth before I say anything. “Why the fuck did Dante never say anything?”

I shrug. “Probably for the same reason I didn’t. To protect you.”

She scoffs, a bitter edge to her words. “You taunted me with my fucking hammer.”

“I wanted you to think about me,” I purr, stepping closer, my eyes locked on hers. “And you did, didn’t you?”

“This is all really fucked up, and now my ex and his brother are fighting in my goddamn living room while there’s a…” She trails off, her eyes darting to the side, and I follow her gaze, my grin widening at the beautiful treasure she retrieved from this evening.

I reach around her and pull the banana jar from the counter, the heart inside swirling in preservative, a dark, beautiful lump with tendrils floating around it. “I’ve always wondered what you did with them,” I say, holding it up so that the kitchen light illuminates the organ inside. “Never imagined it would be so fucking beautiful.”

Terror is the main emotion in her expression but there’s a hint of intrigue and desire. I take my chances as I step closer, slowly parting her knees before setting the jar back onto the counter and pushing it back so that it can’t be seen. Then I reach up to run my thumb across the cut on her cheek, her lips parting despite the chaos in the living room. “Your craftsmanship is everything, Sparrow, but after this evening, I can’t stop thinking about the way you bleed.”

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I take my other hand and caress her cheek, running my thumb across her lips before pressing the tip just inside her mouth. Her tongue licks it, a shudder running down my spine at the visceral need to have this woman. Selene leans forward just the slightest bit, giving me the invitation but I'm ripped away before I can do anything, Harley pressing a hand to my chest as he pushes me up against the opposite counter.

“What the fuck are you doing to her?”

Dante yanks Harley off of me, saving the police officer a stab to the neck. “I get that you're fucking angry but whatever high horse you're on is bullshit. How dare you fucking touch Malik?”

Harley spits out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Are you fucking him too? That's rich. This is the man you chose, Selene? A man who lies to you and—”

Selene raises a hand and cuts him off, Dante resting against the counter beside her. She threads her fingers into his hair and yanks his head back hard. A grin spreads across my lips because I know the pain's for him hiding that he knew her secret. It's also a show of domination and I'm here for it. Dante winces, but his eyes stay on her, my cock twitching in my pants at the control she has over my man right now.

“The difference between Dante and you,” Selene pushes out, “is that I asked him to come over. I'd say get out or I'd call the police, but I've got one better. Get the fuck out, or I'm filing a restraining order, tanking your career, and making you truly hate who I've become.”

Harley looks like he wants to fight but I'll be right there before he touches my

sparrow. He thinks better of it, stomping toward the door but not without the last word as he yells that Selene will be summoned to the station first thing Monday morning. Only when the door closes behind him does Selene say anything.

She turns her attention fully on Dante, those gray eyes darker than a torrential storm. “I have beef with you,” she snarls.

I watch, intrigued on which way this will go. She’s already stabbed me for being too forward, but I want to see her take Dante down a peg or two before I step in. He lets out a heavy sigh, twisting himself out of her grip. “Selene, I didn’t say anything because you were very adamant about doing everything alone. You’re the Reaper and I respect that. I kept it quiet to keep you safe.”

“Safe? You let me think I was alone, Dante. You let me carry this, not knowing you knew, not knowing you were watching. That’s not protection. That’s control.”

Selene

I jump off the kitchen counter, snagging the banana jar and then whirl on Dante as I hold it up. “How the fuck could you not tell me you knew? What happened to being an asshole, all that bullshit after we were childhood sweethearts? Fuck, Dante, how much do you know?”

Dante leans against the corner, folding his arms across his chest, his expression strangely unbothered. “Why the fuck was Harley here?” he asks, ignoring me. “You’re more than capable of dealing with people. You couldn’t call him a car?”

I glare at him, disbelief burning through me. “Seriously? I did call him a car,” I snap, setting the jar down again. “He canceled it, said we needed to talk after he found a bloody washcloth. I didn’t expect him to show up, berating me about possibly being blackmailed, saying I need to tell him if someone’s threatening me. I don’t know

what he thinks I know, and I don't care, but this is a new low for him."

My eyes flick to Malik, who's staring at my side. I follow his gaze to my bloody arm, the red streaking from my palm where I squeezed the cloth dripping onto the floor. "Did he hurt my sparrow?"

"No one hurt me," I say, wiping my hand on my robe. "I just grabbed a bloody cloth. Look, I'd really like to decompress and none of this is helping."

Dante snorts as he pushes off the counter, laughing at me. "Seriously? That's what we're going with? Malik fucked you over a dead body and you want to throw me some bullshit about needing to decompress? Princess, I know you better than that." He pauses, his tongue darting out to wet his lips as his gaze moves down my body. "Let's get it out of the way. Yes, I know you're the Reaper. This fucker over here has been watching you, gathering your shit like I have, so you don't get caught, because you've been getting sloppy."

"Thanks, for that," I mumble, not really sure what else to say to that. "But why would you keep any of that a secret?"

Dante steps close enough to touch but he doesn't reach for me, doesn't shove me against the wall, does nothing else than meet my gaze. "I've always been in love with you, Selene. That's never changed. But how I love you has. When your stepfather died, you didn't need someone to lean on. You needed somewhere to channel your rage. At first, I was angry when I found out you killed him."

"Why? Is this where you get on your high horse and tell me you thought you could change me?"

He reaches forward, his hand wrapping around the front of my neck as his thumb digs into my chin and pushes upward. "No, I'd never change you," he purrs. "I was angry

because I wanted to get my hands on that fucker myself.”

“I don’t need saving.”

He chuckles, leaning down so that his lips are a breath away from mine. “And that’s why I love you, princess.” And then he kisses me. I moan into it, whiskey meeting my tongue as his possessive ass pulls me under with a hunger that matches my own. My hands fist his shirt until I come back to my senses and push him back. “No, we’re not fucking doing this.”

He hums, tugging me toward him again as if I’m going to give in that easily. Feeling his cock pressed up against my belly makes me melt, the growl to his words shattering my resolve. “Tell me you don’t want me to help you decompress, and we’ll leave right now. Or you can let me fuck you the way you need to be fucked.”

My body betrays me as a moan slips out but I swallow the end of it. “I don’t…”

“Let’s stop the lying, alright?” he muses. “You’re forgetting I know. Kitten, I’ve been a profiler for years. I know you. After every goddamn kill, you had me on speed dial, finding some way to draw me here so I could fuck you into oblivion. I can still be that for you.”

“This is just business,” I spit out, not even sure why I’m pushing back, why I’m lying when I’m wet between the thighs and the idea of a good hard fuck sounds like heaven.

“It’s never been about business, but whatever you’d like to call it.” He glances over at Malik, who’s watching us with a deviant smile, the bulge between his thighs obscene. “Now, is Malik invited?”

I swallow again, my gaze flicking to Malik as well. The memory of him pounding me

into the mattress while I clutched Philip's heart comes back and my body betrays me again, this time as a whimper slips through my lips. "He can stay," I whisper.

"And his knives? He's a little pent up right now, needs to blow off some steam too." Dante reaches forward to drag his thumb over the cut on my cheek before dipping to run his fingers across the bite on my shoulder. He's not disgusted. In fact, he's intrigued. And then I remember the few times Dante was around long enough to give me a full view of his chest and all the little nicks and cuts.

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Shock fills my expression as I start thinking about the dynamics. “I’d have never guessed you were with a man. Who fucks who?”

“It changes,” Malik says, moving behind me, his breath warm on my ear. “He fucks me when I need out of my head. And sometimes I fuck him when the demons are just too fucking loud.”

I swallow nervously, my body tensing as Malik’s hands find my robe and then peels it off, leaving me bare between them, the kitchen air cool against my skin. “I don’t understand how you guys are okay with this,” I continue, knowing I could just shut up, let them fuck me and then do damage control tomorrow. But no, I’ve got to be rational. “You work for the police, and Malik, you...”

Malik’s lips brush my ear, his tongue casing the edge. “I volunteer at the clinic sometimes, but mostly I use my skills making art, like you do. Yours is prettier, though.”

Dante steps closer, pressing me between them, his chest against mine, Malik’s heat at my back. “I’ve always imagined the both of you making art together, Selene. And now, the possibilities are endless. You know that I know. And I just... God, it’s everything.” I’m about to say something but he just shakes his head, slotting his lips over mine to silence my protests. “We’ll figure all this bullshit out tomorrow. For tonight, stop thinking.”

Malik licks a stripe up my neck, his voice a breathy whisper filled with need. “Sparrow, no more thinking. Just us.”

“Fine. Just tonight. And make sure to rein in Malik’s ass before he bleeds me to death.”

I should be kicking them out and grabbing a bottle of whiskey before dancing around in my room until I fall asleep. But onegoodfuck never hurt anybody, right?

Dante

Malik’s made a detour, cackling over Selene’s wall of jars, mumbling about how he never gets to keep any treasures because it’s against the rules. What he isn’t saying is that the men he’s usually killing in the basement have a bounty on their head and while they can be dead as a doornail, all body parts have to be present to get paid.

Selene glares at me but I just mouth ‘it’s complicated.’

“I’m picking out the next jar, Sparrow.”

He turns toward Selene as I move to stand up against her back, her body going tense. “There is no next jar, Malik.”

There’s no way that’s true. No way that she’d quit cold turkey. I wrap an arm around her waist, my free hand slipping between her thighs, feeling the wetness there. She gasps as she clings to me, my fingers slipping inside of her. “Tell me again you aren’t going to leave a grotesque piece of expression out there next week or the week after. It’s one of your many outlets. Just like this one.”

She lets out a little moan, her head falling back against my shoulder as Malik scrambles closer and yanks my fingers from her pussy. He drops to his knees and sucks them into his mouth, groaning at the sweet taste of her on his tongue. “I’ve been dreaming of this and I always knew she’d be sweet. I’m going to taste you now, Sparrow.”

Selene shudders in my arms, her breath hitching as Malik presses a kiss to her pussy. “Fuck,” she whispers, her hips shifting toward Malik’s mouth.

“Let him have this,” I murmur, my fingers trailing up her stomach, teasing her nipple. “He needs it, and so do you.”

Malik’s tongue works her over, his hands on her thighs as he spreads her wider, her nails digging into my arm. I help her leg over Malik’s shoulder, opening her wider for him, Selene trembling between us. My lips stay on her neck, spilling truths I’ve held for years. “I don’t know what you’re running from, princess but watching you transform into this pretty little monster has been fantastic. I’ve dreamt so fucking long about the day I could tell you I knew everything, for you to know I don’t see you any differently—if not even more precious than you used to be.”

Unable to wait any longer, I reach between us and undo my pants, before guiding my cock slowly into her dripping cunt right alongside Malik’s tongue. She lets out another whimper, her hips bucking forward as we both fill her. “You guys are both bastards.”

I grin against her neck, pulling out and then thrusting deeper. “Keep talking like that and I won’t let you come.”

She tries to wriggle away, but I hold her firm as Malik stuffs two fingers inside of her next to my cock, stretching her further. She gasps, her pussy clenching around us as Malik grins up at us, a predatory grin on those pretty lips. “She gets to come. She’s been a good girl. You told me the good ones get to come,” he rambles as he slides his knife from his pocket, “but I can make it hurt a little?”

Selene tenses in my hold even if I can feel her strangling my cock.

“I’m right here to rein him back in.” Malik won’t intentionally hurt her but that

doesn't mean he won't lose sight of himself. "Safe word, princess."

"I don't care, just finish fucking me."

And that's a recipe for disaster. "That bullshit works with me, but not Malik. Safe word, please."

Her laugh comes out a little nervous, this time as she stares down at Malik. "Heart," she mumbles. "Heart is my safe word."

A gleeful cackle falls from Malik's lips as he dives back in and I pick up my pace. Tonight's going to be bloody for several different reasons and I have to be a sick bastard to enjoy the idea of Selene staining her sheets red.

Selene

Caughtbetweenthese men is like ecstasy on crack with Dante thrusting into me and Malik stuffing me fuller with his fingers and his tongue. I gasp at the sudden sting on my thigh and I look down to see Malik's blade slicing a shallow line, the burn followed by his tongue, tracing the cut up to my pussy and then lapping at my clit.

My body moves between them in this erotic rhythm, Dante's fingers digging into my hips as he sucks on my neck, Malik's mouth relentlessly trying to pull an orgasm from me.

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And just like that, I'm spiraling, the pain and pleasure a twisted dance that feels like home.

I come hard, Dante's groan vibrating through me as he spills inside, my body sagging back against him as Malik pulls me off of Dante with surprising gentleness despite the knife in his hand, his eyes crazed but focused.

He carries me to the bed, laying me down on the cool sheets before stripping off his pants and filling me with one thrust, tearing a groan from us both. His eyes are unfocused, his mind caught in the haze of whatever he's lost to, something between desire and obsession.

Hooking my legs around his waist, I reach up to grab his throat and yank him down so he can truly see me. "If you hurt me, Malik, I won't just stab you."

"I'll make you feel good, Sparrow. My beautiful sparrow." He lays the knife against my breast, the cold steel pressing just over my nipple and then he makes a small cut, a thin line of blood welling up on my flesh. He watches with raptured attention, following the trickle of crimson before diving in to suck it into his mouth, fucking me with the same rhythm.

My back bows off the bed, my head dangerously close to the opposite edge as I squeeze his neck a little tighter. Seeing his crazed expression is a thousand times better, especially when Dante rounds the bed and yanks me closer to the edge, Malik letting out a grunt of frustration as he moves closer. "I don't think we've had this much fun in a long time," Dante grins as he reaches toward my bloody tit and starts smearing the crimson across my other one. "You look so fucking depraved like this,"

he murmurs as he dangles his cock just over my lips. “Can you take more, princess?”

I glare up at him as he tweaks my nipple, Malik still fucking me like it’s a contest, the moan ripping from my throat betraying the retort I wanted to throw at him. My lips part as his tip comes in contact with my tongue, realizing that this is perfect. It’s exactly what I’ve needed.

“I’m going to stuff you full, kitten. Fuck your throat and watch how prettily Malik makes you bleed. And then I’m going to fuck you again until you’re screaming between us. There are so many things I’ve wanted to do to you. God, I’m not sure we’ll have the time.”

And then he surges forward, his cock filling my mouth completely. I should pull away. Tell them to leave. Tell them that this isn’t what I want but I’ve got to stop denying myself.

Because in the end, this is exactly what I want.

And when Malik makes another small cut along my shoulder, the only thing I can do is moan.

I wake to my body rocking forward, a rhythmic pull that drags me from sleep. It takes me a few seconds to recognize the wet heat sucking hard on my tit, pulling at the cut made earlier. A shudder rips through me, my pussy clenching as I come and now, I’m fully awake, unsure of when I fell asleep. Malik’s in front of me, his mouth on my breast, his grin wicked in the dim morning light filtering through the bedroom’s black curtains. Which means Dante’s behind me.

His fingers are digging into my hips as he groans, filling me with his release before pressing a kiss to the bite on my shoulder. It’s been a damn long time since Dante’s slept over, longer since I woke with him inside me, and the shock of the raw

intimacy, makes my head spin.

My body's still trembling from the orgasm as I groan, Malik pulling back to look up at me. His lips are painted red, just like my favorite lipstick, but with my blood. "I told Dante it would be more fun with you," he says, his smile almost maniacally wide. "We're missing something, though."

Dante laughs, his chest pressed against my back as he pulls me tighter against him, his cock softening inside of me. "Babe, tone it down for just a few seconds." The words are for Malik, softer than Dante usually speaks but they're edged with warning.

I twist around to meet Dante's eyes, trying to understand how the fuck Malik's amorningperson. "What's wrong with him?"

Dante's hand slides up my side, moving up and down to calm me from a panic that he knows is blooming in my chest. "He doesn't sleep, not well anyway. You have a reason for your kills. He doesn't. He just likes it."

I'm not scared of Malik but the sudden notion of being in this domestic moment, Malik brushing his thumb across my tit and Dante kissing my ear is too much. "Well, thanks for all of this," I say, pushing up on my elbows, "but it's time we had that conversation, right? Like the one where you explain why you stuck around all these years without saying a word."

Malik leans in, his lips aiming for the cut again but I shove him back, my hand firm on his chest. "Heart." It's not that I don't want to. But my head's a whirlwind of chaos and I need to be able to wrap my head around all of this fuckery.

Dante reacts instantly, pulling out of me, his arms rolling me over with him before setting me on my feet beside the bed. I stumble forward, shocked that he listened and

reacted so fast. I turn around, my brows furrowed in confusion.

“Selene, we might be some sick fucks but that doesn’t mean we have to ignore your comfort.”

I stare down at myself, a mess of cum and blood covering my tits and stomach, the ick of the moment starting to seep in. Maybe I’m not as depraved as I think I am. Or maybe I am but don’t want to believe it. “Right, yeah. Showers and clothes. Then we talk.”

Neither of them fights me on that, Malik cuddling into Dante’s side but his eyes still on me. That intense gaze is starting to make me feel things but I quickly disappear into the bathroom and step into the shower, trying to ignore all that sexy testosterone outside the door. Fifteen minutes later, I’m fully dressed, standing across Dante and Malik. They’re inches away from my front door and I’m at the edge of the hallway, arms folded across my chest, trying to keep the stern look on my face.

It's slowly slipping.

“Where does all of this leave us?”

Dante leans against the doorframe, his gaze walking all over my body despite the conversation. “Why does anything have to change?”

I scoff, throwing my hands up in the air. “Seriously? You work for the goddamn police, Dante, which I mentioned last night. Everything I’m doing is one hundred percent against everything you’re supposed to believe in.”

Dante lets out a dark chuckle as Malik steps forward, that deviant smile filling his face. “You don’t know him, do you?”

Dante shakes his head, reaching to pull Malik back but just misses him. “Babe, don’t.”

“No, Sparrow deserves to know. You said no lies.” He steps even closer but doesn’t touch me. “Dante likes puzzles and games. He likes figuring things out.”

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I have absolutely no idea what that has to do with anything as Dante just sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. “It’s never about serving the country or protecting citizens, Selene. I told you we’ve all got our heads screwed on weird. I like the chase, finding someone, putting a puzzle together. It’s why I worked as a profiler, not a detective.” He points at Malik. “Selene, if you haven’t already realized, I kind of like the darkness.”

Wonderful. “I need some time to figure out all this bullshit. We’ll see each other Monday and you can save me from Harley.” Dante’s expression softens and I know I can’t deal with whatever apology he’s about to spin. It also doesn’t matter. “I’m not mad, Dante. I just don’t know how to feel. You said you were dreaming of this moment, but you weren’t the only one. I’ve wondered every goddamn day how you’d react when you found out I’m the Reaper, but you’ve already known. And I just... it’s like a fantasy that’s supposed to stay there, locked away, but somehow it became reality. It’s a lot to wrap my head around.”

Dante closes the distance between us, dragging me into a passionate kiss, his fingers stringing into my damp hair before letting me go. “Know that I want you, princess and however I can get you, I’ll bask in that opportunity.” His voice deepens, a hint of honey edging his words. “And I’ll still fuck you just as hard as you need me to, regardless of where this leaves us.”

He chuckles as he kisses me again, Malik stealing me for one of his own. It’s a lot more tender than anything that happened last night, the both of them leaving me in a silence I don’t know what to do with.

“Coffee, Selene. We need coffee,” I tell myself, throwing myself into the task of

running the coffee pot until I have a steaming pot of mud in my hands. By the time I get back to my bedroom to hide from the world, I'm once again interrupted by my mysterious caller.

You look freshly fucked. I will admit that they make a good team.

Fucking hell.

You watching me is fucking creepy.

Even Malik asks for permission. I reach up and caress my tit, running my finger over the bandaged cut beneath my shirt. I really shouldn't have liked that as much as I did.

I think you kind of get off on it, Doe. Don't bullshit me.

Heat creeps up the back of my neck as I remember last night and then again this morning. The thrill of being exposed was like a hit of a drug that I'm now craving.

Do you need something?

I chew on my bottom lip, parking my ass on the edge of the bed before typing another reply.

I feel like I should be giving you a time limit or something on your next move.

You could, but I wouldn't follow it. I'm the cat, remember?

Now, go check your mailbox. I left something for you.

What is it?

It would ruin the surprise. Be a good girl and go get it. I'm sure you'll love it. Have a great Saturday.

God, this man gets on my nerves. I stalk toward my front door and yank it open, leaning out to rustle through the little box hanging on the wall, my hand closing around something hard, rough. It's a rock with a single "A" carved into it. I turn it over, frowning because it's nothing special.

I can't get back to my room fast enough to text him.

What the fuck is this for?

I'm hurt that you don't remember.

I call him but it goes straight to voicemail. Figures that the man fucking me over would be playing on his rules, not mine. The problem is that I don't like his brand of crazy. Malik is unpredictable but fun. This guy has rules I don't understand and does things that don't make sense.

Because every serial killer dreams of getting a rock from their mysterious stalker.

Not.

Ronan

Sprawledoutinmyoffice chair, I try to put all the pieces together because there's too many parts and not enough answers. Years ago, I told Dante I didn't give a shit about his mystery woman, the one who consumed his every thought, the one I've been secretly in love with as he described her from head to toe. He gave me abstract descriptions, never giving me the color of her eyes or her hair. I knew about her snark and sass.

For years, she was just spiced coconut to me and I could live with that fantasy.

But now she's real and it's fucking with my work because I have questions and no answers.

I pulled two other fuckers down into the basement last night because one of them actually said Selene's name. That's the closest we've gotten to an answer but he didn't end up talking before I shot him in the face. He started describing all of the vile things he'd do to her before and after he'd kill her and I couldn't be bothered. The other hasn't said a word so I left him down there, hoping that a few hours in the darkness would make him more talkative.

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Some part of me knows that I'm way deeper into all of this bullshit than I'm supposed to be and that my feelings for Selene don't make sense.

We fucked once and yet it feels like I know her. When Dante and Malik left last night to check in with her, I almost texted them for an update. But I'm not supposed to care. She isn't mine.

I snort, shaking my head, remembering Dante's words. He said I'd be obsessed, that Selene was never meant to be a one hit kind of a girl.

"Focus," I push out through gritted teeth, staring at the board I constructed over the last few hours. Every man connected to this bullshit, along with Selene, the name Anabella, The Reaper, and this new killer in town are on my board. Newspaper clippings of murders and strange incidents litter the extra spaces, red string connecting what little I've been able to drum up.

The problem is that the longer I stare at this, the more things are starting to connect. Things that would reveal something that shouldn't be possible.

Because that would be crazy.

The sound of the front door draws my attention and I wait for Dante and Malik to step in here, mostly because it's the only room with a light on. Dante finds one of the armchairs, Malik moving to stand beside me, his eyes darting all across my board. "Are you obsessed with my sparrow too? She's up here a lot."

"She's right here, yes," I say, tapping the old picture I grabbed from her social

profile.

Malik laughs as he steps closer to the board, his finger jabbing at crime scene photos, Anabella, and a few of the newspaper clippings. “No, you have her everywhere. Here, here, here. I really liked that one.”

My stomach drops as the pieces come together, the lines I didn’t want to draw being done for me. I twist to glare over at Dante, realizing that whatever shit I thought I was in, it’s so much worse. “Let me get this straight. Dante’s childhood sweetheart Anabella is Selene and also The Reaper? The fuck?”

Dante just grins up at me, crossing one leg over the other. He looks freshly fucked, as does Malik, both of them settled in a way that’s been missing for a while. “Don’t school me on morals, you dipshit. She’s also mine and I’ll protect her.”

“We’re not hurting my sparrow!” Malik screams, whirling on me with a crazed look that shows me just how obsessed he is with her.

“No one is hurting anyone, Malik. I’m just saying that this is way more complicated than I thought. If anyone finds out who she is...”

Dante pushes out of his seat, moving toward my board. “Why the fuck do you think I stayed on so long? It wasn’t out of some obligation or the fact that I couldn’t leave the crime world behind. Selene’s good. She’s fantastic at what she does but she’s not perfect. I make sure that Harley and the other detectives look the other way, running after trails that don’t exist.”

God, this man is in fucking love with her. And I can’t blame him. She’s a walking wet dream of sass, snark, and deadly ambition. I just feel a little left out, now knowing the plan. Her existence goes against everything I’m supposed to be doing which means I need to know what my next steps are. “Let me in on the fucking plan,

because whatever she's doing is digging her a grave. People keep showing up here wanting her dead. The last guy had her name in his mouth. Don't worry, the fucker is dead."

Malik hums as he sits on the corner of my desk, pulling out a small knife to twirl in his eyes. "Why do you care about my sparrow? You don't know her."

"But I do. Even if I only fucked her sweet cunt once, I know her because Dante talked about her all the time. I was jealous of the way she made him feel, the look on his face, the pure bliss he'd come back with after being with her. And then I had her and it was eye opening. I told Dante it'd only be the one time but I can't stop thinking about her. If she's anything like the stories Dante's told me, I want her safe."

Malik pipes up, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "So, you can fuck her again?"

"So, I can peel back the curtain that is Selene Banks. I want to know what makes her tick, what makes her move, what truly makes her kill. Sure, she's only putting down men who've abused, hurt, or killed women. But the way she kills sings a different song and I want to know the melody. The problem is that I think someone else wants to know too. They want to know Selene."

Dante's eyes narrow as he searches my board, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down before he speaks. "If I knew who could possibly want Selene dead, the guy would already have been dealt with. Unfortunately, I have absolutely no idea who else knows about her. Well, that guy who watches her."

I tilt my head, confused as I study Dante. "There's some other creep watching her? No offense, Malik."

"None taken but he wouldn't hurt her. He's like me in some ways. We like watching my sparrow, but she's mine. He can't have her."

I rub a hand down my face, frustrated that I don't have more to work with. "What are we supposed to do in the meantime? Tell her to be careful, protect her? She doesn't even know that the three of us are connected."

Dante hums his agreement. "She'll find out soon enough that we're connected and as much as I'd love to keep that woman at our side, she'd make it a living hell. She's also not stupid."

That's when it clicks. Dante and Malik didn't just go over last night to rescue her from Harley and then fuck her into oblivion. They had to have told her that they knew. It's the only reason for that smug grin Malik's trying to hide and the fully sated expression on Dante's face.

"You lucky bastards," I muse, a bit jealous that Selene accepted their darkness. Granted, they had already accepted hers but it's few and far between that men or women take us up on our depraved needs. "I'll keep an eye out for anything I can. I've got another fucker in the basement if Malik's up to the task."

Malik jumps from his perch on my desk, making some asinine swipe through the air with his blade like he's jousting. God, he's so adorably weird. "Up and ready, sir!" He makes a mock salute and rushes out into the hallway, no doubt to inspect what's down there.

Dante's expression darkens as he pulls out his phone and stares at the message that just popped. "Guess that's my cue to leave. They just found the mayor's son."

"Why the fuck would she go off and kill Philip Smission?"

Dante shrugs. "Your guess is as good as mine. That didn't really come up in all of our conversations yesterday. Excuse me while I go lie my ass off like usual."

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He disappears into the hallway and makes a sharp turn toward the front door while I head for the basement. Malik's already brandishing one of his scalpels, grinning at the way it glints in the dim light. The fucker who's still alive is chained up to the wall, rather than strung up. I didn't want him to die before the night ended and I could at least try to get a few words out.

Unfortunately, I'm a little too impulsive. I needed Malik's brand of crazy for this moment. Hopefully, a little torture will get me what I need.

Malik steps forward, eyes locked on the man as he kicks his foot. The man stirs with a groan, his eyes suddenly clear as he leans back against the wall. It's not an expression I'm used to seeing but Malik has this covered. "I hear you were trying to hurt my sparrow," he purrs, a predatory edge to his tone.

There's no fear in this man's eyes and it worries me. "They warned me about you. The Carver. That's what they call you."

Malik pauses, cocking his head to the side as he lets out a little hum. "I have a name?" He taps the scalpel against his chin, his brows furrowing in disappointment. "It's not a very cool one."

The man laughs, the chains around his wrists rattling with the sound. "Everyone has a name and it doesn't always originate where you think. Ronan's is Wolf. There's a whole list of who everyone is. It's why bringing me in only slows down the process but doesn't end it. Selene will never be safe so long as that list is out there."

"What the fuck is this list? What's it for, and why's it the first time I'm hearing about

it?” I’ve been in this business for too fucking long to not have heard of this before.

The guy shrugs. “If I knew all that, I wouldn’t be taking jobs for a quick few bucks. We’re given a name, an amount for the job, and no other parameters. I’ve learned not to ask questions.”

“Who else is on the list?” Malik asks, dropping to his knees in front of the man. “If we have a name, are we on the list?”

The guy shrugs again, a little too nonchalant for the position he’s in. “I guess? I’ve never seen the list. I just know it exists. If you’re problematic, you get put on the list. Selene’s a problem that hasn’t been caged so, someone’s trying to rectify that. Look, I know what happens now. You do a little torture, try to drag out more information, then give up and turn me in. That’s how this goes.”

Malik’s grin fades as he twists to look over at me. “I don’t like him. I thought I was going to, but I don’t anymore.”

I think about reining him in and then realize, I don’t care. The guy has already given us more information than anyone else and it’s at least something to start with. He already said he didn’t know who was on the list or who was in charge of it so he’s not wholly useful anymore.

A howl echoes through the basement as Malik sinks his scalpel into the man’s chest, inches away from his heart. I’m not a doctor but that looks pretty damn close to a deadly stab.

As if Malik can read my mind, he sits back on his calves, admiring his work. “He’ll stay alive so long as I don’t pull that out but it will be agony.” He lets out a shuddering, appreciative breath before leaning a little closer, his whispered words echoing in this darkened space. “You might be versed in torture, but you’ve never

had me playing your body. I can't wait to hear you scream. The only thing I'm missing is my pretty sparrow watching me."

The man gasps, his eyes widening as Malik leaves to grab another scalpel. Then Malik returns, poking around the man's stomach before sinking that blade into his flesh as well. "I'm going to make you a pretty pin cushion and then play Russian Roulette by pulling them all out and wondering which one ends your life."

"You can't save someone once they're on the list, you asshole. If you stay under the radar, then you're just small fry but that girl is at the top of the list. Someone really wants her dead."

Malik lets out a little cackle as he lays out an entire case of blades beside him. "That's funny because you're at the top of my list. Now, pick. Arm or leg?"

"What?"

"Wrong answer."

Malik chooses the leg, the man howling in pain. "I'll give you a choice again. Thigh or shoulder?"

"What are you-"

"Wrong answer!" Malik screams, grabbing another blade and slamming it down into the man's dick. "I told you the rules. You have to pick one of the choices!"

Well, this is going to be delightful to watch. I shoot Dante a text about the list, to see if he knows anything and then return my attention to Malik's pin cushion. He's right, the guy will make a pretty pin cushion. All I hope is that Malik lets me play the Russian Roulette part.

Even if we don't get any other information, I'll at least have another jolt past my morning coffee.

Dante

I've been idling for the last hour, sitting in the parking lot as I try to find the right words to throw at Harley. And now with Ronan's text about a goddamn hit list, I have absolutely no idea what direction to steer this investigation in. I liked it better when all of this shit was simple.

I stumble in through the main doors, heading toward Harley's office, trying to keep a blank expression on my face. We haven't said shit to each other since I kicked him out of Selene's house so whatever is about to happen is going to be awkward.

I'm not ready for the genuine smile Harley flashes at me as I enter, the man waving for me to sit in the chair across from his desk. He's got a beautiful black eye and a split lip from our scuffle but he wears it like a badge of honor rather than a notice not to fuck up again. "Mom called. Said she'd love to have dinner tonight."

I glare at him, resentment coiling in my chest. Harley's always taken to my mother like she's his, something that's always been a bit strange to me. "That's great. If my mother wants dinner, she can text me herself." Harley just shrugs, leaning back in his chair like he doesn't have anything to atone for. "I get that you've got a lot of bullshit going on, but if you ever treat Selene like that again, I'm going to make it hurt."

"Yeah, I called to apologize but I think her phone's off."

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A sharp bitter laugh falls from me. “No, she’s just not answering you. You barged into her house and then your drunken ass interrogated her, you dipshit.”

“But sheknowssomething and I just... when did you and her become a thing?”

I know I shouldn’t, but the smug tilt of his mouth, the way he thinks he’s got her figured out makes my blood boil. I need to wipe that look off his face and knock him down a peg or two. Leaning forward, I meet his gaze, letting one of my more deadly smiles spill over my lips. “I’ve known her since we were kids. I was surprised when she ended up here, but things just kinda rekindled.”

“Even when we were dating?”

“Nope, she pushed me to the side but ran right back after she left you. Look, this is about how you fucked up. Don’t do it again.” I told him yesterday that it doesn’t matter who I stick my dick in or frankly who sticks their dick in me and I meant it. “Now, tell me about Philip Smission. You said he’s dead but that the kill was weird.”

Harley looks like he wants to argue, but he sighs and changes the conversation. “Yeah, he was left on a park bench with the words ‘I’m sorry’ written in blood on the wood. Not a typical kill for The Reaper, but it’s definitely their work.”

A body on a bench with a scrawled apology? That’s not her. It’s too quiet, a sinking feeling in my gut that whoever is after her has already gotten into her head. “Anything else?”

“We got a letter. It’s with the forensics team, but essentially, the guy who left the

body on Monday wants to play with The Reaper.”

“Did he give himself some awful name, too?”

Harley shakes his head, his shoulders deflating in defeat. “No, he’s just an unknown. That’s why I’ve been allowed to officially extend you an offer as a consultant on this case. We can’t afford any more bodies. The press already has wind that Philip’s dead. This is going to send people into a frenzy so I need a profiler who knows his shit. Which is you.”

I think I hesitate a little too long with the way Harley’s face scrunches up.

“Just promise me that if Selene knows something, you bring it to me.”

“What do you think she knows, Harley? Be so fucking for real, right now.”

He shifts uncomfortably in his chair, his gaze darting around his office before falling back on me. “I don’t know. I just know that something doesn’t add up.”

“Well, you’ve got that meeting with her on Monday. Ask then. Make your deductions and then move on. She’s not your enemy, Harley.” I stand and head to the entrance of his office. “Let me think on your offer. It’s been fun not having to play by the rules. Filling out an actual contract, regardless of who it helps, isn’t really part of my plan.” Those words don’t make him happy but I don’t care.

He’s testing me. If I take him up on the offer, he’ll believe that I don’t know anything, I’ll also have unfettered access to everything that comes across his desk. And if I don’t...

Selene

It tried sleeping and then also fucking my fingers but that left me wholly unsatisfied after having Malik and Dante stuffed inside me. So, now I'm wandering around my favorite trinket shop, looking for a new jar to stash on my wall. A low melody peels from my throat as I weave through the aisles, my fingers brushing chipped teacups and tarnished brass figurines.

The aisle toward the back is my siren call, my eyes already scanning the options. One's heavy with brass but just a little too gaudy; another shimmers with iridescent scales, but I've got a mermaid jar already. My gaze lands on one with a heart etched in the glass and I pluck it from the shelf before tucking it in my little basket. Another catches my eye; a witch's hat, black and pointed, and I grab that too, a smile tugging at my lips.

There aren't many jars I haven't seen before which doesn't shock me but I'm also disappointed, knowing that I'll run out of choices soon. My phone vibrates in my pocket, interrupting my quest for the perfect jar.

Of course, it's him. I place the phone to my ear, waiting to hear his voice.

"Did you like my present?"

I whirl around, searching for wherever the fuck this guy must be but there's no one here save for the old shop owner at the front. It takes me a minute to remember what he was talking about and realize it's about the rock he left me. "I love it," I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Every girl just wants a bunch of fucking rocks."

"But you're not every girl, Doe. I'm getting ready to make my move, but I wanted to make sure you were still thinking of me. By the way, there's a beautiful jar in the back, third row. I think it'll be perfect for my heart."

He's been here too? Of course, he has. He's somehow everywhere else. I shuffle a

few of the jars out of the way, reaching the one he must be talking about. It's got a diamond crusted skull on the front of thin black glass, brass bones sticking out of the handle and along the top. It really is a perfect jar. "What makes you think you'd end up on my wall?" I'm not even going to think about why or how he knows about the wall.

"Because I know you. That wall is your strength, an extension of your own heart. It gives you life. Having me there would be a triumph, a relief, a conquest of epic proportions."

"Bold assumption," I grumble, snatching the jar and putting it in my basket.

"Now, excuse me while I put the finishing touches on my move. It's going to be glorious, Bella. So glorious."

The line goes dead, the coffee souring in my gut at the new name he just gave me. No one calls me Bella. I always hated my real name. Everyone knew it growing up. They either called me Ana or picked something else. Bella does something to me, nightmares pulling the edge of my mind, threatening to pull me under.

I force myself to focus, paying for the jars and hurrying up to put them away. However, it's embarrassingly obvious that someone's been in here. The coffee table is askew and so is the couch. Horror sets in as I start running through my apartment, checking everything and realizing that while nothing has been taken, something has been left here.

Many things.

I start piling each little rock on the coffee table, cringing as I realize each one has a letter on it. I'm not even sure if it spells something because I'm too terrified that my mysterious caller has gotten to the one place he's not supposed to be.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!" I scream as I take off to my bedroom to see my wall of jars out on display. Was this his glorious move because I'm beyond pissed and terrified. No one has ever infiltrated themselves into my life like this and I have no idea what to do.

My gaze creeps along each jar before falling on a rock situated toward the back, blood dripping off the side. I grab it, turning it over to see an A printed on it. "The fuck?" I pull out my phone and dial the mysterious caller, needing answers. "What the fuck is this?"

"I thought you might call. Turn on the TV. I told you my move would be glorious."

I search for a remote, frantically changing the channel to our local news station, eyes wide as some anchor drones on about a new murder so soon after Philip's. The headline reads: Businessman Brutally Beaten in Courtyard.

There's a blurry picture of the same courtyard I was in a few days ago but this kill is grotesque. Nothing about this is art. But then the anchor mentions a name: Richard Hensley, a gasp tearing from my throat as I continue to watch. Hensley was a predator I chased months ago but never got my hands on. He moved up my list when he caught my ass at one of those uppity functions Ashthorne sometimes has but I

haven't been able to do anything.

However, a kill this close to mine and everyone is going to know that we're playing a game, that this man on the phone is challenging me.

"I found out he touched you," the man purrs through the earpiece, "and that just can't happen."

"You can't go around killing all the people that fuck around with me!" I snap, my hand waving the rock around as blood flies across my room. Something about blunt force trauma on the TV tells me that I'm holding the murder weapon and am now covered in Hensley's blood. Great. "Especially not someone as big as that! There has to be a good reason and touching me isn't one."

"No, it's not a good reason but I did it anyway. Hensley was a piece of shit human and you know it. He was eventually going to be one of your targets but I sped up the timeline. Besides, I don't mind your recent conquests. In fact, I really like them. It's nice that they're all bundled up in the same place."

Confusion splits through the anger. "What are you talking about?"

"They haven't told you yet that they all live together?" he teases just as a heavy knock hits my front door. "That's probably them, coming to make sure you're okay. Ask them how they know the Wolf. I want to see your face when Dante tries to explain."

The bastard has to have cameras in here because how else can he see everything? That's beside the point. I quickly hang up, just in time for my front door to slam open, Dante stalking down the hall toward me.

"Fuck, I thought something might have happened to you."

“What? Why?” As far as I know, nothing has changed in the last several hours. I search his expression for answers, hoping he won’t give me some bullshit.

“Because we came across a bit of information that might explain what’s going on. There’s a lot of shit to wade through but you’re being targeted specifically and—”

My mysterious caller doesn’t fit that profile, not with the freaked out look on Dante’s face. I decide to test my luck and ask about something I shouldn’t know. Maybe Dante will lie to me or maybe he’ll tell me the truth. All I know is that I’m really fucking confused right now. “Who’s the Wolf?”

Silence meets my question as Malik and Ronan step up to the edge of my room, Dante glancing back at them and then at me. “How do you know Ronan’s name?”

Fucking hell. Of course, I’d somehow stumble on three bastards who are absolutely perfect for me. “And you, uh, live together?”

I don’t get an immediate answer for that either, Dante’s eyes roaming all over me until they land on the bloody rock in my hand. “How would you know that? Princess, what the fuck are you holding?”

“It’s complicated, okay? But I’m beginning to see that all of this is just part of a much, much bigger picture.”

Ronan steps forward, an indecisive look on his face. “See, what I would like to know is that the media already has wind of this kill and they keep mentioning something about a rock missing from the original formation at the courtyard. Which looks to be currently in your hands. I don’t think you did it, Selene but I’m pretty sure you might have a clue as to who it is.”

My shoulders deflate as I push past all three of them and head down the hall. “I’m not

having a heart to heart in my bedroom. Make yourselves comfortable on the couch. I need a fucking drink.”

Ronan

I watch as Selene takes a second shot of cheap tequila before placing the glass on the coffee table across from me. There's a pile of rocks settled in the middle and I can't tell if it's décor or something more sinister. Either way, she's curled up in the corner of the couch, glaring at Malik who's slowly inching closer oblivious to her silent warning.

It's almost comical, his puppy-like devotion clashing with her bared teeth, until she yanks a knife from her pocket and rears it back, ready to strike. I snatch her off the couch and pull her into my side before there's a blood-fueled sex fest right in front of my eyes. As fun as that would be, we don't have the time and I can see in her eyes that she doesn't have the energy.

“Easy,” I push out, watching as Dante slides onto the couch and clamps an arm around Malik's shoulders to hold him in place. Only when Malik settles do I let Selene go, the glare she gives me chilling my soul. “So, what's with the rocks, sweetheart?”

If looks could kill, I'd be filleted like one of her victims. Using sweetheart in this instance probably wasn't the best choice of words. She lets out a little grunt of frustration before nodding to the pile of rocks on the table.

“I was going to handle this bullshit by myself,” she sighs, “but yes, whoever killed that other guy on the strip and now Hansley has been in my ear. He threatened to out me and I kinda liked the chase a little bit before it got weird. And then he sent me a rock as a present.” She points to a small one. “And then the rest were in here when I came back from the store. I only noticed because he fucking touched all my furniture.

I killed the mayor's son for him."

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Dante hums as he tilts his head to the side, studying her. “Is that why you wrote ‘I’m sorry’?”

“Yes, because he wasn’t mine to kill. He cheated. A lot. So goddamn much. But he didn’t abuse anyone and that death wasn’t made for him.”

“Princess, I would have protected you,” Dante sighs as he rakes a hand through his hair, his eyes searching hers.

She lets out a sharp laugh, her hand slamming down on the table. “I didn’t fucking know that you knew, about me or who Malik was until recently!” A lesser woman would break down right now. She’d be in tears, terrified of what’s going to happen but Selene just looks pissed. She’s literally vibrating from anger, watching as Malik slides off the couch and starts rearranging the rocks.

“Sparrow, it’s you. It spells Anabella.”

Suddenly, Dante’s more alert, kneeling beside Malik, his brows furrowed with a mixture of confusion and rage. “Jesus Christ. Selene, what does this guy call you?” Selene doesn’t answer and he growls at her, his hands fisting on the coffee table. “Does he call you Doe or Bella?”

“How the fuck do you know that?” she asks.

I brace myself for Dante or even Malik to fly off the handle, but neither one happens. Dante falls back against the edge of the couch, dragging a hand down his face. “Do you not remember the kid we grew up with? The one who called you Bella, followed

you around. Told you that you were his forever love?”

Selene’s face contorts with the memories she’s dredging up, a mixture of anger, disgust, and then horror. “Do you mean Blaze? That weird kid down the street?”

This is all because of some childhood game? That seems like a stretch. “So, some weirdass childhood vendetta or a game that never ended? That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

Dante shakes his head, his shoulders falling in defeat. “I wish but he’s like Malik turned up to an eleven. We weren’t even ten or twelve. But he was a nightmare.” He pauses, his gaze falling on Selene beside me. “Selene, I’m surprised you don’t...”

She cuts him off, her hand slashing in the air to silence him. “I don’t remember a lot from that time. Forgive me if Blaze wasn’t my first idea of whoever the mysterious caller might end up being.”

I look at each of them sitting around me, mulling over all of the information I pulled together this morning. “But how does this relate to the list?” Selene glares at me and I wonder how much she knows, if anything at all. I guess Dante didn’t let her in on it. “There’s been people showing up here for weeks, hitmen with one mission. I only recently found out they were here for you. It’s some goddamn list that’s circulating.”

She barks out a laugh. “That’s stupid. This isn’t the movies.”

“Says the girl who kills people for a living,” I throw back. “Look, all I know is that you’re near the top or at the top of that list but this Blaze guy is a completely different dynamic, an added one. I don’t know what he wants with you other than just to play, which seems like a load of bullshit.” It doesn’t add up. Blaze’s reasoning—at least what Selene gave us to work with—is shoddy at best.

Malik shimmies away from Dante, moving to sit beside Selene. “Well, we can’t leave my sparrow here. It’s not safe.”

Dante hums his agreement. “Can you pack a bag? You can stay with us as we figure all this bullshit out.”

“I don’t need protection,” Selene pushes out as she stands up. “Besides, all my shit is here.” I know she’s talking about her trophies but in this moment, I’m leaning more toward Dante and Malik than Selene’s stubbornness. She lets out a little growl when Dante opens his mouth. “No, none of you are staying here either. I’ve been taking care of myself for this long. No one’s going to take me out like a goddamn hitman.”

I’ve seen worse. I’ve seen people hunted. Hell, I hunt people.

“Selene, don’t argue with me, not now. I get that you can take care of yourself and that you’ve been on your own for far longer than you should have had to. But this isn’t a world you understand. This is my world, Ronan and Malik’s world and I can tell you that it’s far darker than you could imagine. Just this once, don’t fight me, okay?”

Selene sinks back down, narrowing her gaze at Dante and then just shrugs. “Sure. Whatever. Fine.”

It was not fine.

Selene lasted a few hours at the house before saying she needed a drink. Then she dragged Malik to the bar after Dante pleaded with her to take someone as he disappeared to the precinct. It was fine for a while and then it wasn’t when she started slamming back shots, taunting some of the regulars with her flirtatious grins and tight ass shirt and painted on jeans that showed off every last curve she had.

And now, I'm just watching her tease them and myself while I stand behind the bar, trying not to crack the glass I'm currently cleaning. She's a loose cannon, like Malik when his moods hit, all chaos and no leash. My instincts are screaming at me to drag her out and save her from herself, this wild outburst something that both makes sense and doesn't.

Malik's perched on Dante's regular stool, sipping a glass of water as he watches the chaos unfold. However, I have no idea why the fucker is smiling. "Why the fuck are you smiling like that?"

Malik's grin widens as he turns his attention to me. "Watching you break is fun. You're going to save her, aren't you?"

I snort, rubbing my hand across my jaw, the stubble rough under my fingers. "She can handle herself but she's not being smart. I don't know what Dante said to tick her off but I can't see this as the same woman who..." I trail off, not wanting to say those words aloud in case someone overhears.

"That's the fun part. She's so dynamic."

"That's such a strange way to put it," I mutter, my eyes narrowing as Selene slaps a regular's chest, her grin challenging him to do more than look. I can't even blame my savior complex on wanting to pull her away. No, this is all desire and jealousy, the need to claim a woman that's not even mine. Worse, I can't tell if this is some psychotic break or if she's just acting out because she can. "Fuck it," I grumble, leaving my spot and stalking over to her.

I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest, reminding me of the first time we met. She twists around, a sloppy grin on her lips. "Oh hey! It's the wolf. Nice to have you join us. I was just hanging with these lovely men. Well, Nicolai said he'd take me home."

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“If you need to be fucked,” I purr in her ear so that only she can hear me, “you have three guys who can deliver that so much better than any of the riffraff in this bar.”

And that’s when I realize this was all a ploy to drag me out of the shadows.

“Prove it.”

“You’ve been fucked more times in the last several days than people usually do in weeks. Aren’t you tired?”

She shimmies out of my arms, wiggling her ass a little more than necessary. “If you aren’t game, I have several men lined up for the taking.”

Yeah, that does it. I roughly reach around to grab her chin, pulling her face to face with me, her lips a breath from mine. “None of them are touching you, sweetheart. Office. Now.”

Her grin widens as she leans forward to steal a kiss before heading down the back hallway, Malik following a second later. God, this woman is going to fucking ruin me.

Selene

It’s been three days since Blaze went silent after leaving all those rocks in my house. I’ve been splitting my time between Dante’s place and the boutique, researching with what little time I have in Ronan’s office. Ronan’s mind is a fucking marvel, all of the red string connecting dots I would have never picked up. This truly is a different,

darker world than I'm used to, especially when Malik described in detail one of the men he plucked the eyes from and fed to another. I'm not sadistic. I make art. And it's always for a reason.

I try to make sense of what I'm staring at, even as I shift in the oversized chair I'm stuffed in. My pussy is sore and my ass throbs from the thorough spanking Ronan gave me at the bar a few days ago. It didn't help that Dante saw it yesterday and decided to recreate it until I was screaming through one of the strongest orgasms I had ever had.

Fuck all these men for knowing what breaks me.

Ronan had to save me shortly after, Malik getting a little too feral. One of his cuts was just a bit too deep, the man licking his knife as he fucked me into oblivion. Ronan's made a rule that no one is allowed to touch me until Friday and while I appreciate it, my whore self needs dick. Stat.

At least, in the meantime I can focus on this investigation and ignore the moments when Harley tried to interrogate me on Monday. I lied my way through that until another detective saved me and said that I was free to go, which was great, except for the fact that Harley won't stop calling. I wish it were Blaze instead of him and that's saying something.

A small noise tears me from my thoughts as I turn my attention to Ronan sitting behind his desk, poring over a file. He's different than the other two. He watches me, his eyes tracking me as I grab a coffee mug in the kitchen, as I sling my bag over my shoulder to say goodnight, but he hasn't touched me since the bar. I see the hunger in his eyes, but he holds back for some reason and I'm too curious for my own good to let it just lie.

I also am too intrigued by this strange dynamic I've fallen into, trying to understand

this hit list and Blaze's intentions. We haven't found anything yet, and that's why I decided to distract myself.

With Ronan.

Just be blunt, Selene. Straight to the point.

I push to my feet and move toward him, Ronan looking up the moment I'm in his space. "Why won't you fuck me?"

Ronan snorts, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands on the desk. "You're not exactly lacking for attention, Selene," he muses, his gaze flicking to a bandage on my shoulder and then back to my face.

"That wasn't the question and you know it."

"Because I want more than that. A one-night stand, sure. A regular fucking, I'd be glad to, but we both know that's not what this is. Sweetheart, you say you don't do feelings or whatever bullshit you keep spouting. Dante's told me all about it, but it's not hard to see you're craving more than just touch."

"Is this your version of an intervention? Because it's a horrible one. I'm just doing this until I get the one guy I came for."

Ronan laughs, the sound rumbling through his chest as he pushes away from the desk and then drags me onto his lap. I'm not used to this, the way he so tenderly holds me against his chest, tucking my head beneath his chin. "You keep telling that to yourself," he says as one of his hands sift into my hair, pulling it from the ponytail, "but this is who you are. I'm not judging you. I'm telling you it's a high you keep chasing and it's impossible to leave behind. I should know. I've tried to get out so many fucking times. Hell, look at Dante. We don't ever really leave. Tell me, when

you find him and gut him, what happens next? Settle down, get married, have kids? Travel the world? What's next, Selene? That's what terrifies me with you, because there's no end, and we're a lot, but protecting you is impossible."

"You don't even fucking know me," I say, sitting up in his lap. "Why would you protect me? I know why Dante would and Malik's just crazy. But you? We're jeopardizing your career, Dante's, everything. What's in it for you?"

Ronan's expression softens, his hand moving to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing across my jaw. "I care about you," he murmurs. "I had no idea who you were when I fucked you in my office the first time, but I've been hearing about you through Dante's eyes for years. Spiced Coconut, I called you. I fell in love with you before I even saw your face, a fantasy of a woman I never met, didn't even know your name or what you looked like."

"You're a lot sweeter than I thought you'd be."

He snorts again as he tugs on my hair a little, dragging a gasp from me. "Sweetheart, I'm not sweet. I think I've told you that before."

And yet, I know that there's a sweet version of him, the one he shows me in moments like this or when Malik gets to be a little too much. Other times, he's rough and he'll fuck me hard and fast like I need. The duality of a man I could fall in love with.

Cut that shit out, Selene. We don't do feelings.

I struggle to sit up a little further when Ronan starts checking my bandage, grunting at the state it's in. I'm not telling him that Malik fucked me in the bathroom an hour ago because he doesn't need to know. However, even with a full shower and a new bandage, it's pretty obvious to tell.

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“I wish you wouldn’t have done that.”

“Maybe if you were fucking me instead, I wouldn’t find the crazy one to scratch the itch.” I almost feel bad for taunting Ronan and just as I’m about to say as much, my ass starts buzzing like crazy. It’s most likely Harley, asking for me to come down to the station again so we can talk so I’m mildly surprised when it’s Blaze.

Fucking finally.

“Hey,Blaze.Is there a point to this game or did you just want me to remember the weird little kid down the street?” I probably should have toned that down a bit but I don’t like getting jerked around.

“It was about time you figured it out, Doe but you don’t get a reward for that. You had help. However, I do have a present for you. Well, I guess another move. I should have let you go first, but I was too excited.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I switch to speaker so that Ronan can listen in.

“I have a name that you’ve been searching for,” he teases. “A name for a name. I suspect you know what to do with it and then I’ll give you something in return. If you think you’re going to get out of this with those men hovering around you, you’re wrong. I took out a little insurance policy. Enjoy yourself, Doe.”

The line goes dead, a text popping up on my screen.

Victor Crane

Blaze wants me to kill a fucking councilman. He's planning something with all of these kills and while I could say no, outing my identity to the public would ruin me. Having Ronan, Dante, and Malik at my side will do jack shit at that point. Another text comes in and it's just an emoji.

A lonely beating heart.

And then another one.

And then another one until my screen is filled with them.

His insurance policy is my hearts, the extension of my soul. "Ronan, he's..." I don't finish that sentence as I rush toward the front door, grabbing my keys, Ronan on my heels. There's no words said as I rush toward my apartment, tears gathering in my eyes. He couldn't have taken my babies, my precious treasures. Fuck, this is bad.

I burst through my apartment door and make a beeline for my bedroom, my heart in my throat as I come to an empty wall, one lone jar sitting on the middle shelf. It's the one I bought for Blaze, the one he picked out himself but everything else is empty.

"He took them all. All of them!" I scream, yanking my phone out and calling him back. "Give me back my hearts!" I see red, immediately searching for something to stab this motherfucker with. I don't even know where he is but he stole from me. I won't let that happen.

"Now, now, take a deep breath, Bella," he muses. "Watch the TV. That's not all I'm giving you."

A growl of frustration rips through me as Ronan comes to stand up behind me, gently

massaging my shoulders. He places a kiss on the side of my head as my gaze falls on the TV. I turned it off before I left so it's on a news channel I don't usually watch, Blaze setting up all this bullshit for me to find.

The rolling headline at the bottom of the screen is announcing Ashthorne's new mayor. I knew they would, the current Smission stepping down after his son died like he did. Smission starts making some kind of speech but I'm more focused on my missing hearts. "Cut the bullshit, you bastard. Give me back my shit. What is even the point?"

"Because I like games where you have to submit, Doe. Besides, someone wants you dead, and I'm trying to make sure that doesn't happen."

"By having me kill all your opponents or whoever is standing in your way? This is a dumb game. I could just turn you in, Blaze." He's a fucking asshole if he thinks I'm just going to let him jerk me around. It was one thing when it was just directing a kill but taking from me is unacceptable.

There's a cackle through the earpiece, my entire body shaking with rage. "Bella, Bella, you don't even remember who I am! You think you do but I'm much more than the weird kid from Aven Lane. Now, let's see. For Victor, I want him dead before 7pm tomorrow evening."

"But..."

"Because I have a certain dinner I'd like to invite you to. It's very important that you show up. After all, a queen needs her king. I told you when we were kids that you were mine, and I'd have you at my side. I always keep my promises, Doe. Always."

The line goes dead, Smission's speech ending as he turns to welcome someone on stage. My eyes widen at the man stepping forward, my entire childhood rushing back

at me all at once. Horror curls in my gut at the white-blond haired man, a color that's almost as silver as mine, clear eyes turning to face the public through the screen. A smirk curls on his lips as he winks at the camera and then starts giving his address, saying that he's honored with this appointment.

Ronan tightens his grip on me. "I'm going to assume by your reaction that that's Blaze and he just became the fucking mayor."

I'm about to confirm that when Blaze's speech turns into an invitation to the state dinner he just required me to show up to.

"I would like to really show everyone that I'm for the people, that I'm going to fix up Ashthorne and to really bring an end to the darkness here. It's why I came here and why I'm going to start this new step with my girlfriend, Anabella Montaugh, at my side." He throws a smile at the screen, one that an amateur would think is genuine but I see that he did more than just play his next move.

He trapped me from making mine.

Because not only does he have my lifeline, he just gave every last person here a key to my past.

Blaze

There's only a few hours before the state dinner, my pretty little doe running out of time to finish her move. I know she'll make it and then she'll show up at my side, gorgeous as ever, hanging off of my side. I have picked out the perfect suit and delivered one to her apartment as well so that we match. After all, we're a team. The best team. A team that can't be broken.

My attention turns to the treasures I now have, the ones that will keep her tethered to me for as long as I decide to play the game.

I'm laid out across my couch, grinning at the gorgeous display of glass Selene has collected over the years. It truly is art and I've erected a wall just for it, the dim light in this room playing off the bloody tendrils encased in a memory. Her stepfather's jar sits dead center, alongside the empty one for her abuser. A man I have a name for but have no idea who he is.

He's a ghost, an entity without a face that has haunted every corner of my life because he took what was most precious to me.

My Anabella, my little doe, my queen.

I want to gift her that heart and lay it at her feet before she inevitably takes me so that I can be forever with her. The man's a whisper in the wind.

I'll find him.

And then I'll butcher him.

Until then, I'll help my pretty little doe remember just who she is and what we shared all those years ago. I miss everything about her, her silver hair, her fire, the girl who laughed with me as kids, who ran through the streets, my Bella, my forever love.

It hurt that she didn't remember me at first but she will soon enough. And then she'll run to me, her king, her home.

Because I always keep my promises.

And she promised to be mine.