



Dark Wishes (Dark Contract #2)

Author: *Nora Flite*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Never make a contract with the devil.

He wont just take your soul.

Hell own your body, too.

Jamison is lying to me.

His secrets are piling up the longer were together. I have to ignore them, because hes the only one who can help me avenge my best friend.

What I cant ignore

Is how hes creating a fever inside of me.

Now, hes taken me to his house to plan out the hit on the man who ruined my world.

The problem? He only has one bed.

And he wants to share it.

I was worried hed end my lifel still ambut this new problem is a different kind of danger

Authors Note: This is the second part in a series, it ends on a cliffhanger. It contains dark themes but this is still a ROMANCE.

Total Pages (Source): 15

Selena

Black eyes sear into the back of my head. The heat of his gaze is enough to make me tremble. With him watching me, I make a point not to shake—not even a little tremor—because then he’d know how he frightens me. He already knows. But I’m delusional enough to lie to myself to get through this.

It’s my only option.

Jamison... a deadly hit man... has been hovering over me for twenty-four hours.

Has it really only been a day? I wonder. Time is strange. A single cycle and I've watched a man bleed to death, learned I have a new target to kill, hired an assassin to assist me, then spent the night here—in my apartment—with his hands on my body.

I move my thick tongue around the roof of my mouth. Heat settles in my belly when I look at my messy bed, recalling how I lied there, wrists trapped in his huge hand, his agile fingers tracing my breasts.

“Hurry up.” His voice is cold; it cuts through my budding arousal.

Walking around my mattress to my dresser, I drop my charcoal canvas backpack onto the floor. I kneel beside it, digging in the top drawer for some clean clothes. “How much should I bring?” I ask.

“Enough for a few days.”

“Days?” I repeat, shooting him a wary look. Jamison meets my eyes calmly. He's too good at being blasé. “You think it will take that long to kill Caruso?”

“It's possible. Better to be prepared.”

Scooping a few outfits into my bag, I start to snap the flap shut, then pause at the sight of one of the shirts left behind.

The red letters are garish on the white fabric.

Anime West 2022. I never cared for the overpriced souvenir shirts at conventions, but this one is different.

Valoria had bought one for each of us to celebrate our first con together.

She'd dressed as Sailor Mars, I'd gone as Sailor Moon.

Our costumes were terrible but it didn't matter an ounce.

Nothing could tarnish the fun a pair of eighteen-year-olds could have.

We'd eaten enough sugar that we'd stayed up both nights until nearly dawn.

Our bodies were thrashed, but you'd think we were refreshed with how we twirled through the decorated corridors.

I add the shirt into my bag.

Jamison waits for me with one foot in the hall, one inside my apartment. He turns

away, as if he can't bare seeing my home any longer. He doesn't expect to come back here. Or, worse, he doesn't expect me to return.

I linger in the space between my bed and the kitchen. The sun filters through the gaps in my window blinds, casting stripes over the scuffed floor. They stop just before my shoes.

Sliding my foot forward until my toes are in the light, I remember when I moved out here.

I'd slept on Valoria's couch the first week.

That was the first time we'd ever met in person.

We'd video chatted since we were teens, but it was still awkward.

For me, at least; she forced normalcy with constant hugs that cracked my spine.

Valoria helped me find this place. It didn't come with furniture—not shocking for the cheapish rent—so we'd sat on the floor, sunlight dappling our faces, laughing as we painted our toenails while dribbling specks of color onto the crinkled newspapers.

She always chose unique colors; yellow, black, orange. She swore one day she'd make me paint my nails something that wasn't pink.

Now she's gone. And the girl I used to be has left with her.

This place is full of nothing but ghosts.

I shoulder my bag. "I'm ready."

The entire car smells like a taco stand.

You ever see a dog launch itself full-face into a bowl of food?

That's what I'm dreaming of doing when I stare at the plastic bags packed at my feet.

It's almost enough to distract me from the fact we're winding up some of the twistiest streets I've ever encountered.

"This should be a one way," I say. "Can you even fit two cars on this road?"

"The traffic is pretty light." As Jamison says that, he jerks the wheel to make room for a maroon Tesla passing us on our left. "Most of the time."

"You live all the way up here?" I ask.

"This white one, yeah."

This white one, like the two-level house isn't worth millions of dollars. To be fair, that's not strange for houses in Los Angeles. But to call this mini-mansion The White One is plain insulting.

Stone walls flank the closed gate, the dual pillars framing the large ivory door at the end of the winding driveway. The house isn't out of place, the whole neighborhood is expensive home next to expensive home.

The more I look, the more I notice other signs of opulence; fancy cars, perfectly trimmed trees, every gate locked shut to keep solicitors out.

“Huh,” I mumble.

“Why do I get the impression you're confused?”

“I didn’t think you’d live in such a... suburban area.”

“Pictured me in more of a dark dungeon situation?” he asks.

I shrug lightly. “Kind of. Rory’s apartment was more what I expected.”

Jamison turns away, fingers slipping under the lip of the sun visor over his head. He presses something there and the gate blocking the driveway parts open for us. “If you prefer Rory’s style, you ‘ll be satisfied. I keep the curtains shut.”

“Of course you do,” I whisper.

He guides his car along the length of the drive, parking it in the attached garage.

An actual garage. I’ve been forced to street park since I moved out here.

Having a private, secure place to leave your car is a luxury, but this is more than that—the space could fit a second vehicle.

The beige walls are broken up with peg boards holding tools, a few shelves are stacked with black totes. I can’t tell what’s inside those.

I hop out of the car with the bags of food in one hand, my backpack in the other. The scent of pine and sawdust makes my nose tickle. “You do a lot of woodworking in here?”

“Everyone needs a hobby,” he says, following me out of the car.

“I guess.”

He pauses with his hand on the oiled, bronze knob of the door at the top of two short steps. “This is bothering you.”

My mouth opens, then shuts, before I shrug in defeat. “Cute house with a manicured lawn, nice neighbors who probably have Solar Panel stock investments? Tools for your lazy weekend hobby of making—I don’t know, flutes?”

“Flutes?” he laughs.

“Whatever people with too much free time do,” I mumble. “It’s surreal. I’m having a hard time reconciling the you I know with... this.” I gesture broadly.

“I expected you to find this comforting. Other people do.”

“What other people?” I pop back thoughtlessly. And maybe my face is too scrunched up, or my frown too obvious, but the edge of his left eye twitches. “Ah, shit, that came out wrong.”

“No, you said it clearly. Why would a man like me have friends?”

He’s clocked it; that’s exactly what I’ve been thinking.

“It’s just, after you said Rory wasn’t your friend.

..” And I learned you slaughtered your sister along with a room full of people.

.. No, I don’t add the last bit. I really want to.

I also seriously don’t. The comment fills my mouth, as chalky as the sawdust I smell

all around me. “I figured you’re a loner.”

“You’ve missed the point of the nice house, the quaint neighborhood.

The flutes or whatever the fuck you think I’m whittling.

People are stacked edge to edge in this city, Selena.

I encounter them whether I want to or not.

Loners are seen as suspicious.” Jamison twists the door open, like he’s imagining the knob is my throat.

I cringe automatically at the visceral image and put my hand to my neck. He doesn’t linger to hear my response—I don’t have one—he charges through to the other side.

Way to go, Selena, I scold myself, you sounded like a bitch, AND like an idiot.

Of course he hides in plain sight. Jamison, the quiet neighbor with a quirky hobby.

I know who he really is because I had it shoved in my face.

If I’d passed him on the street, would I have guessed he was a skilled killer?

I shuffle after him reluctantly into a short hallway, closing the garage door as I go.

The floor is varnished; smooth as the wood in every wax-polish commercial.

He wasn’t kidding about the curtains. The large bay window in the next room is draped by thick, navy-blue cloth.

Thank god he believes in recessed lighting, or this building would be pitch black.

Across from the window is a staircase with a vague twist, like the designer decided at the last minute to give it some flair. I haven't been inside a proper house in ages. Out here, in LA, my experience has been dubious apartment rentals or staring at celebrity mansions from afar.

"You can put the food in here," he calls out around the corner.

I follow his voice, my eyes wandering across the egg-shell walls to note the number of framed photos.

If you don't inspect close, you'll think they're mementos.

But every picture is something generic, like an ocean cliff, or a bridge, or a chunk of flowers in a field.

Nothing personal. Just enough to avoid bare walls.

Now that I'm looking for it, I see the house for the illusion it is.

Jamison grips the back of a chair that matches the deep mahogany of the table.

There are six empty seats—has he ever filled them all?

Thrown a dinner party? Had people laughing at his jokes?

"What do you want to drink?" he asks.

"Water is fine." Placing the plastic bags on the table, I unshoulder my backpack.

"Where should I..."

“Anywhere. It doesn’t matter.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:41 pm

He sounds curt; probably still annoyed at me for implying he's a hermit.

I loop my bag's strap on the back of the chair nearest me, my eyes wandering the dining area.

It's one big room—the fridge in the corner alongside the stove, the table in front of me, a granite island with a sink built in.

The set up is like my apartment, except not, because this space is triple the size.

Off to one side is another hall. I crane my neck, hoping to get a peek. Is that where the front door is?

“Yes, the exit is that way,” he says. We lock eyes, reading each other's face. “You don't need to figure out an escape plan, Selena. I'm not going to do anything.”

“You mean I'm not trapped here?”

His eyebrows shift an inch upward. “That's a miserable way to look at it. I'm not locking you up, but it would be reckless of me to let you wander around the city. Between the cops wanting to talk to you and your urge to hunt down Caruso—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I huff, “I get it. I'm not going anywhere.” To make my point I drop heavily into the chair I've hung my bag on. “I'm eating these tacos now.”

“Let me bring plates.” He opens the fridge, grabbing out two bottles—one clear, one dark—then snatches some plates off the counter. He sets one in front of me along

with a water.

“Is that beer?” I ask, nodding at his drink.

Jamison sits beside me. He turns his drink side to side, the golden label glittering. “It’s been a long day.”

“I’m not judging you for drinking.”

“I didn’t think you were. I wasn’t justifying anything, just explaining.

” He slips a hand into the inside pocket of his jacket.

I recognize the knife he pulls out. The sight of the curved blade sends my heart to the moon.

Casually, he uses the edge to pry the cap off his bottle, tilting it back to take a long swig. His sigh is one of immense relief.

I swallow. “Hey. Have you cleaned that since you...”

The beer thunks onto the table. He angles the knife in the air, lining it up with his mouth. “I wiped it down with bleach in the hotel room. Did you forget?”

“You did it so fast, guess I missed. I was sort of preoccupied at the time with wondering if you were about to use it on me.”

He lowers the knife; I can see myself in the polished surface. My crinkled nose mirrors my tensed fists. “I carry cleaning tools with me. I never leave evidence at a scene.”

Rory's haunting message clings to my brain. He killed a whole room of people, and no one ever found out it was him.

The Silencer.

"What if the cops find the knife on you?" I ask reluctantly. "Can't they match it to the stab wounds?"

That gets a short laugh out of him. "The point is they would never ask me in the first place."

"Lucky," I sigh, reaching for the bags of tacos. I rip them open, the contents still steaming, leaving droplets of water inside the Styrofoam boxes. "I don't know why they want to talk to me."

"The video cameras."

I shake my head. "That wouldn't be enough, would it? How would they know the pink haired girl in a costume was me, Selena Myers?" Biting down on a chokable-sized piece of taco I chew thoughtfully.

Jamison sets the knife on the table. Picking up a taco, he pops open a mini container of green salsa, pouring it excessively on top. "Someone who knows you must have turned you in."

"Nobody knows me out here."

"Guess I'm not the only one with no friends," he muses.

"I said that came out wrong." The next mouthful of taco doesn't taste as good.

I work it around my teeth slowly as it becomes a gummy paste.

I can't swallow. I grab the water bottle, chugging it to help me get it down.

Jamison stares at me the entire time. "What?" I gasp, wiping my lips with the back of my hand. "What's that look for?"

His fingers slip forward, drawing through my hair where it hangs over my right shoulder. The way my whole body tingles makes me glad I don't have food in my mouth. I'd choke from surprise. "You need to change this."

"My hair?" I ask, grabbing at it defensively.

He leans away, closing his teeth around his taco. The soft tortilla looks like torn paper, the meat glistening red under the green salsa. I sit anxiously, waiting for him to explain. "We don't know what the cops know," he says. "Maybe they're fishing."

"You think the footage they have isn't very good?" I ask hopefully.

"It might show a girl with pink hair, not a high-res face."

"But they knew my name," I remind him. "They got my number and everything." An awful idea occurs to me that makes me want to hurl up the taco. "Are they playing the camera footage on the news? I haven't checked. My face could be plastered everywhere."

He doesn't look bothered at all by my suggestion. "Are you on social media?"

"Barely."

"Did anyone talk to you at the convention? Take any photos of you?"

A cold wave goes up my spine; I hunch over the table, making myself smaller.

“Two girls that I can think of. I didn’t see them snap photos, but maybe when I wasn’t looking.

People do that when they see someone dressed as a character they like but are too shy to ask.

” I gasp sharply. “They could have posted them all over Insta or TikTok or anywhere. Thousands of people might be studying those pictures. Fuck.”

“Selena.” He reaches over, putting a napkin on the table. A second later my taco spills its contents across the napkin in a gory splatter.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t notice it was falling.”

Jamison studies me in that piercing way of his. I’m still not used to it. “All we can do is be proactive.”

“Okay,” I agree, though my tone sounds very not agreeable. “How do we go about this?”

His dark eyes fall on the knife. Lifting it by the short handle, he ticks the razor tip in the air like it’s the hands on a clock.

I shove myself to my feet, hands held high in defense. “We’re not cutting it off!”

“That wasn’t going to be my suggestion,” he chuckles. “Remember what I told you? How I cleaned the blade?”

My heart begins to settle in my chest. “Bleach. You want to strip the color from my

hair.”

“It might be enough to create a seed of doubt when the police talk to you.”

“I could just not talk to them.”

His frown creeps lower. Rising to stand, he tucks his knife into his jacket.

I try to see where it goes, certain my gun is in the same place, but the bastard is too quick.

I wouldn’t be shocked to learn he can do card tricks like a street magician.

“Avoiding them is impossible. We can draw it out, though. They can’t force you into the station without a warrant. ”

“That’s a good point. Then we just have to stay ahead of them until Caruso is dead.”

“At minimum.”

My shrug is cavalier. “After he’s gone, it won’t matter to me what the cops do.” He sneers, not hiding his dislike. I pounce on the moment. “Why does that bother you?” I ask.

Jamison stands as tall as he can, like every bone in his spine has been tugged upward by a string. “It’s reckless.”

I’m sure there’s more, but before I can pry, he turns to walk towards the kitchen sink. Crouching, he digs around, then lifts out a dark brown bottle. “Bleach?” I ask.

He places it on the counter, then peels his jacket off, draping it on a stool beside the

granite island. “Unless you decided cutting it is better.”

I roll my eyes dramatically as I approach him. “Do you want me to cut it off? Got a thing for short haired ladies?”

His smile is thoughtful... enigmatic. His voice matches it. “I almost want to say yes to see how you’ll react.”

“You’d get no reaction. I don’t care what you’re into.”

“Yeah?” He moves fast—I twitch, thinking he’s about to touch me, but his arm stays an inch beyond my waist. Holding up the towel he grabbed from behind me on the counter, he smirks wide. “I suspect you’re a little curious, Selena.”

“Wrong. A hundred million batillion times wrong,” I snap.

“Batillion? That amount isn’t real.”

“Neither is my curiosity about your taste in women.”

“Bend over the sink.”

Freezing up, I clutch a hand to my chest and back up a step. “Wait, I can bleach my own hair. I don’t need help.”

“I don’t want any chemicals staining my floor. Bleach droplets are the first thing cops would look for.”

“Yeah, if they thought someone had been murdered here!” I laugh rudely. But Jamison doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t smile. My stomach begins to curl around in a hard ball. “Oh my god. Please don’t tell me you... here...”

His palm slaps lightly on the metal basin of the deep sink. “Put your head inside, Selena.”

I don’t budge; the lump in my throat won’t dissolve. “No, tell me first. Have you ever killed anyone in your house?”

Propping his weight onto the hand on the sink, he glares down at me with an unimpressed scowl. “I haven’t had a reason to. Yet.”

Finally choking the lump down, I walk up to the sink. My hands wind uneasily in the front of my shirt, pulling most of it out of the high waist of my skirt. “Fine, I’ll let you do it.”

“Thank you,” he sighs. Turning the silver knobs, he starts the water running, testing it with two fingers. It must be the right temperature because he shoots me an impatient squint.

Following his hint, I grip the edge of the basin and lower my head inside. The echo of the water colliding with the drain rings in my ears; my breathing sounds louder in this space. Metallic... fast paced.

His fingers sweep over the back of my skull, moving my hair into the water. My neck is exposed to him, vulnerable to any attack he chooses. The pad of his thumb rests on my jugular. He could strangle me... break my windpipe... toss me to the floor.

Any of those would be easier to accept than the gentle way he strokes my skin. The little hairs on the nape of my neck rise. They act like flowers in a field, his breath the sun, summoning them to bend towards him.

A fever sparks in my belly; I crush the basin, starting to stand. “You know, um, maybe you should let me do it myself, I’ve done it plenty of times and—”

“Relax.” It’s a command. I hate being told what to do. It’s one of my biggest flaws.

To my own surprise, I don’t push against him. I ease up the muscles in my shoulders and lean back into the sink. But my breathing is not relaxed, despite his demand. My chest presses against the counter rapidly with each nervous inhale through my nose.

Jamison works his fingers through my hair, making sure it’s thoroughly soaked. His hands vanish; I can’t see well, but I hear him digging in the cupboards below the sink. Something that sounds like a plastic garbage bag rustles. “What are you doing?” I ask nervously.

“Gloves.” He says it bluntly. Of course he needs gloves, he’s using bleach. But my mind is racing, wondering what else he keeps gloves around for. Has he used this batch to clean up a crime scene?

His shadow falls across me again, turning the inside of the sink pitch black. His presence is a warm weight just above. I tense, waiting for his hands again. Knowing they’re coming doesn’t keep me from flinching.

His laugh is all grit. “Nervous?” he asks.

“No,” I reply through pressed teeth.

“Keep your eyes shut. You don’t want to go blind.”

I squeeze them closed while he begins working something into my scalp. The scent is strong; bleach, mixed with something else. Dish soap? I focus on the acrid smell, using it to keep me from thinking about how luxurious Jamison’s long fingers feel as they rub through my hair.

His pressure is firm... constant. Every stroke is like he’s massaging my brain. I know

these hands have killed. But right now, they're making me giddy. It's the bleach, I lie to myself. It can't be him. I won't allow it to be him.

Champagne bubbles flit through my blood. I press my knees together, then my thighs, clenching my muscles to try and stop my belly flutters.

"It's working on you," he rasps.

"What is?" I whimper.

He goes quiet, his hands no longer moving, before they rub again. "The bleach. What else would I mean?"

I messed up. He knows he's having an effect on me. Of course he meant the fucking bleach was working on my pink dye. Fuck fuck fuck, why do I say such mindless shit?

Angling the nozzle of the faucet he rinses my hair. "You're very blonde now."

"Well, good," I mumble. "The pink was just a stain, it should wash away clean."

Jamison fists the middle of my hair, winding it, turning my head to one side. I can see him now; his intense eyes, his stiff jaw. I didn't think my heart could pound harder. I was wrong. "It should help," he says softly.

"Yeah?" I angle a brave smile. "Can't recognize me anymore?"

His hand tightens in my hair. "It would be hard to forget your face."

A droplet of water rolls down my cheek. More of them follow, tickling as they go. I taste the tang of bleach on my tongue when I lick. I should say something but... I

can't think. "The bleach is making me woozy," I say.

"You're sure it's the bleach?"

"What else would it be?" This angle is awkward; I want to stand, but his fistful of my wet hair is holding me in the sink. "Let me up, Jamison."

He stares into the depths of my eyes. It's like he's counting the flecks of color in my irises, cataloging them for some purpose I can't grasp. His lips lie in a gentle swoop, the tension in his jaw nowhere to be found.

"Jamison," I repeat in a hush.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

He blinks, breaking eye contact and standing. I can't see his expression now, just the length of his muscular forearm. "You'll drip water everywhere. Let me get that towel."

His fingers leave my neck. My skin feels cold and tingly, more vulnerable than ever. Jamison's hand was like a comfortable blanket, and with it gone, I shiver. Get a hold of yourself. You're acting insane.

He cranks the faucet off, the metal scraping, knobs about to snap.

I don't hear him leave.

I don't hear him return.

The heavy silence permeates the kitchen, my breathing extra loud in the deep metal basin. The towel was right near us, what's the delay?

“Jamison?”

Only my echo responds.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:41 pm

Jamison

It's not too late to pour the bleach into my eyes.

Or maybe it is. Because even if I destroyed my eyesight, my treacherous brain would conjure up this picture of Selena for years to come.

She's bent over my kitchen sink, the tan skirt pulling tight across her ass.

The hem brushes the naked skin behind her knees, and when she shifts nervously, it rises like the sea, taunting me with secret treasures.

She was getting excited when I washed her hair, rubbing her thighs together like it could relieve the ache. How wet is she? Finding out would be easy. I could do it right now.

This is a bad idea.

The entire situation is. Helping bleach her hair?

What the hell was I thinking? My fingers in her silky tresses, feeling her pulse flutter under my thumb.

.. I didn't need to do any of that. Yes, bleach spots on my floor would be suspicious if the police investigate my house, but what I want to do to this woman is the real

concern.

At this rate, I won't have to worry about hypothetical problems.

I'm about to create a real one.

"Jamison?"

God, her voice makes my cock flex. Clutching the white towel in my fist I crush it until my fingertips go numb. She's shifting on her heels—getting anxious. She has no clue I'm right behind her.

I could slip my hand lightly up her inner thigh if I want to.

I do want to.

A vicious tremble shakes me to my core. Rolling my shoulders, I stare at the ceiling, inhaling silently. Calm yourself. Remember the risks.

Remember what you still don't know.

Selena's sigh expands through the sink, echoing from there to my ears to my chest. I bite down, molars creaking, to keep myself from pouncing on her.

But I can't resist the urge to stalk forward until I'm looming over her.

My hand lowers, hovering in the air above her ass.

The veins on the back of my hand wind like snakes.

"You're right behind me, aren't you?" she asks.

I stop dead in my tracks. I'm close enough to see her shoulder blades rising and falling with every one of her breaths. "How did you know?"

"Just a guess."

"Here," I say, dropping the towel on her head.

Selena stands up with the towel wrapped around her hair. She holds it with one hand to keep it in place, glaring at me as she leans on the counter. "You don't have to be this way."

"What way?" I ask.

"This." She waves her free hand at me in short, choppy motions. "First you were acting helpful... almost kind. Then you go and try to terrify me. Quit being erratic, it's super annoying."

My eyes run over the front of her shirt.

Water from the sink has stained the red material darker, making it stick to her collar bone and her breasts.

The hint of her hard nipples ignites my blood.

"Which side of me do you prefer?" My tone is soft.

.. silky... thick with a desire I desperately want to eradicate.

Her body presses against the counter, away from me. "Which do I prefer?"

"The helpful, or the terrifying," I say patiently.

“Neither.” She answers too quickly. Her posture is defensive, especially when she releases the towel, arms crossing over her chest. She's trying to shelter herself from me. It's too late—I can read her.

She wants me. Against all fucking logic she wants me.

This isn't the information I was seeking...

But it's worth investigating.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:41 pm

Selena

How can this huge house suddenly feel too small?

Jamison stands before me in his faded jeans, his black shirt stretching across his shoulders like a sail in the breeze. The way his hands hang by his hips belays casual comfort. Nothing in his stance says he's ready to strike...

But my heart knows.

I push into the counter, the hard tile grinding along my spine. There's nothing to grab for protection—nowhere to run. "Stop looking at me like that," I whisper.

"Like what?" he muses, cocking his head.

"Like you're about to bite me."

His smirk is sharp; my body tenses, preparing to be sliced. "Is that what you imagine? My teeth on you?"

A tremble starts in my knees. I use the counter for balance. "That isn't what I imagine."

"But you do think about me doing something to you," he says darkly. He shifts, a small step in my direction. "Is it something filthy? An act so perverted you're afraid

to say it out loud?”

“No,” I argue.

Another step. His shadow is all that touches me, but I breathe quicker, because it might as well be his hands. “Is it my fingers running through your hair? Or my palm on your throat?”

“That one,” I whimper. His eyes flash—he's electric, all raw heat and energy.

“You imagine...”

“I imagine you choking me.” I scowl, launching off the counter in his direction.

“When I think about you, it's the horrible side that murdered a man.

Someone who can, and has threatened, to kill me!

” I shout the last words, causing the towel to unwind from my hair.

It tumbles to the kitchen floor, my damp, freshly blonde strands dangling against my jawline.

Jamison is poised like a statue; emotionless... steady. When he speaks, his voice is static along the vowels. “You think about my fingers on your neck... but not how I had them brushing against your pussy last night?”

My thighs brace together to control the rush of arousal. His blunt words are intoxicating. “Last night was nothing.”

“Really?” he growls.

“Yes,” I laugh, tossing my wet hair flippantly. “Do you think something like that would affect me? If you hadn’t mentioned it, I’d have forgotten about it.”

There’s a storm brewing in the center of his pupils. “It meant that little to you.”

“It was white noise.”

“I’ll have to do better this time.”

My heart swells until my ribs twinge painfully. “What?”

Jamison moves—this is the speed I saw in that hotel room. Quick as a fired arrow; I’m his target and he hits me like an expert marksman. Both his hands slip through my clumped hair, nails scraping my temples, the vibrations going into my brain.

In a single motion his lips capture mine. My body goes into shock; I’m frozen as his mouth explores mine. Warm lips, hard teeth, he kisses me with intention.

He hated what I said about him being forgettable.

This kiss is to prove a point...

That I’m a fucking liar.

Turning my head, he angles his mouth. His tongue dances over my canines... he nips my bottom lip. “Oh,” I whimper. Hot tingles smother my urge to fight him off. A single kiss has my clit pulsing. I’m in danger—and I don’t want to escape it.

You must, I urge myself. Come to your senses! You’re kissing a killer!

My eyes flutter shut as he traces a hand down my neck, then across my spine.

Jamison slips the tank-top out of my skirt until he can reach beneath to feel my bare skin.

He's pulling me against his body eagerly.

I'm no different; my hips grind against the front of his jeans, bumping his obvious hard-on.

I keep my hands at my sides; touching him will be the end of me. But I can't halt this without shoving him away. I have to act... being passive isn't in my nature. Jamison is stealing the fight from my blood, replacing defiance with arousal.

His palm circles around my hip, lifting the last of my shirt high in the front. Like a fish swimming in a lake his hand travels under the fabric. Cool air brushes over my ribs; he's forced my shirt over the top of my bra, exposing the tops of my breasts.

Jamison jams his shoe between my feet, forcing my legs apart. His knee presses solidly beneath my skirt. The pressure is directly on my panties... on my throbbing pussy... and I moan down his throat.

"There it is," he whispers, breaking the kiss. I start to catch my breath but he dives back in. "That's what I want to hear." Another kiss; he cups my chin, holding me steady, gazing into my eyes. His are darkened by lust. "That's the evidence."

I turn away from him. "Evidence of what?"

"I know you want me, Selena. I know you want this."

His knee grinds on my clit through my soaked underwear. I arch my back, gasping, and he swallows every noise I make. I'm feeding him with my wanton response. His cock is growing fat from feasting on me.

Focus... focus... I beg my useless brain.

“Slow down,” I pant. “We can’t do this.”

“Do what? Kiss? We already have.” His thumb pulls my bottom lip downward. “You think stopping now will change what we’ve done?”

“Yes... I mean—maybe. I don’t know.” I try to lean away, to create space to help me think. When I bend my back, it forces my hips into his again. The thump against my clit makes me see stars. “Fuck,” I whine.

“Sounds like we’re on the same page,” he growls.

“No, wait.” I splay a hand on his chest and give him a nudge. “We have to stop.”

Jamison raises his eyebrows; he sees right through my pathetic argument. But to his credit, he backs away, allowing me more air. I take the chance to breathe oxygen that isn’t mixed with his delirious scent. “You really don’t want this?” he asks dubiously.

I nod my head.

His eyes narrow, his smirk crooked as a one-winged bat in flight. Bracing his hands on the counter on either side of me, he leans close, his lips just above my ear. “Think about this carefully, Selena. If we stop here, it’s over forever.”

“What are you talking about?” My heart is going wild.

“I won’t try to kiss you again... or...” He uses his leg to rub against my pussy.

Each scrape is maddening, the heat rising to a boil.

If he does this much longer I'll come right here.

I won't be able to control it. "Anything else," he continues.

"Just cold, platonic, sanitized, for the rest of our time together."

"That's... fine," I groan through my teeth. Jamison straightens up to stare at me. I hold his gaze, summoning all my ego—what's left of it—to disguise that I'm on the cusp of orgasm.

He slides his leg from under my skirt. The wet spot staining his jeans is as big as the dinner plates we ate off. I blush hotly, catching his smug smile before turning away. "I'm serious," he says.

"So am I," I shoot back. Fixing my shirt, then my skirt, I stomp towards my backpack on the chair by the table. I'm acting as normal as I can, but it's a challenge. "We need a professional relationship. That's all. Okay?"

He leans on the sink with his hands in his pockets, ankles crossed. "I hope you don't regret this."

"I won't," I scoff. Hoisting my backpack to my shoulder I look side to side. "I need to shower."

"Up the stairs, back that way."

Holding my head high, I climb the steps. It's a miracle I don't slip; my legs are quaking. The bathroom is to the right of the landing, and I hurry inside, locking the door behind me.

Holy fucking hell.

Bracing myself on the door I gape at the mirror over the sink. It's my first look at myself since we bleached my hair. The blonde strands are wiry, frazzled, badly in need of some moisturizer. Scrunching my nails in my scalp I focus on how beet-red my face is. My shirt matches the color.

There are wrinkles in the damp parts of the cloth—he caused those when he yanked it out of my skirt.

Shivering, I let go of my hair, flexing my arms at my sides to get the tension out.

He kissed me. I freeze as a lightning bolt of desire spikes in my belly.

He was good at it. Why couldn't he be terrible? Shit.

Telling him to back off was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Jamison's casual threat about me regretting it hangs over my head like a guillotine. No, I scold myself, It's fine. I did the right thing. Having sex with him... of all people... is the worst idea.

What I need to focus on is my ratty hair.

The bleach wasn't kind to it, though it did the job of removing the pink.

Eyeing the blue ceramic tiles lining the shower, cataloging his selection of toiletries, I sigh, then step back into the hall.

"Jamison," I call, descending the stairs. "I need something."

He's waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. The look he gives me brings me up short. "Need?" he teases. His implication isn't subtle.

"Not like that," I mutter. "I need to get something for my hair. It's damaged from the

bleach. Is there a pharmacy nearby?"

"Can't that wait until the morning?"

"It won't take long."

"It's getting late," he says crisply.

"No it isn't," I laugh, lifting my eyebrows. Pulling out my phone from my skirt pocket I check the time. "Barely after seven." Navigating to my map app I spot a Walgreens three blocks away. "There's one right at the base of the road we took to get here."

Jamison climbs a step, his hand clenching the banister. "It's a steep, twisting road. You complained the whole drive up; you don't want to walk that."

"I could use the fresh air and exercise. I've been stuck in cars and tiny buildings with you for almost two days." As I talk, I catch his eyes narrowing. "Why are you acting weird?" I ask.

His hand falls from the banister, tucking behind his back. Now he looks... guilty. "Fine. I'll go with you."

"There's no need," I say, stepping down until I'm at his eye level on the stair above him. "Your neighborhood is like something out of a Hallmark movie. Unless you're still paranoid I'll vanish into the night? Bring the cops down on you?"

He turns away, walking stiffly around a corner. "Let's get this over with."

I quickly grab my backpack and chase him to the other side of the house.

The front door is a large, solid rectangle with a small device near the hinge; a ring camera.

On both sides of the door are large windows, but the curtains are drawn shut, blocking out the sun. Only the recessed lights are glowing.

Jamison rips a black, leather jacket off a hanger on the wall, similar to the one he left in the kitchen. He shoves his arms in the holes, glaring at me the whole time. “You’re sure this can’t wait until the morning?”

“I don’t know, ask me in a ruder tone and see what I say.” We eye each other, but it’s not a fair standoff, because he won’t tell me why we’re battling. “This not trusting me thing—”

“It’s not that,” he grumbles.

“Then what’s with the mood? Pouting because I said no more kissing?”

Ignoring my question, he crouches down by a small bookshelf near the coat rack. I don’t see what he does, but I think he’s grabbing something. Back on his feet he opens the front door and motions me to go through.

I debate getting the light cardigan out of my own from my backpack, but the weather outside is refreshing in a welcoming way.

The sun hasn’t set yet, just tinged the cloudless sky lavender and orange.

Jamison shuts the door behind us; I hear the lock turn.

“Follow me,” he says, hurrying down the pale grey sidewalk.

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Selena

The path from the front door curves like a snake up to a gate.

It's a mini duplicate of what he drove his car through.

I take the opportunity to scan his front yard; the grass is lush, he must have a gardener because I can't picture him keeping up with the work.

There are a few fig trees lining the property.

Massive hedges rise high enough to block my view of the neighbors on either side.

At the gate, he taps the buttons on a playing-card size digital pad. He holds it open, allowing me onto the sidewalk. "Thanks," I say, sidling around him with as wide of a berth as possible.

The street has a stillness to it. The rows of arched lamps aren't lit yet, but the moment is on the horizon as the hour crawls towards 7.

Every driveway we pass has a gate like Jamison's; there aren't any vehicles parked on the skinny street.

I bet there's a local law against street parking here. Typical rich jerk behavior.

Jamison's eyes flick side to side, surveying everything around. Am I crazy, or is he searching for something? A car honks; he cranes his neck to look. Nope. Not crazy. But what could he be looking for?

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

Jamison focuses on me fully. "Just on the lookout for any cops."

"You think they're actively hunting me?" Unease rolls up my spine as I scan the sidewalks.

"If you're a suspect, then every cop in the city has your photo right now. They don't need a warrant to drag you in, either. Just a petty arrest they can make up on the spot."

My tongue tastes like ash. I wipe it over my lips, drying them out instead of moistening them. "No jaywalking, got it."

He nods in an exaggerated way. His body presses me to the inside of the sidewalk, placing him closest to the street. His hands remain deep in his pockets. To an outsider, we look like a couple on an evening stroll.

"You live here long?" I ask.

"A while."

What a non-answer. Frowning, I gaze down at the crop of buildings coming into view at the base of the hill.

The height we're at creates a lovely view of the distant Getty Villa, as well as the winding mess of highways.

The traffic is light on the hill, but the two-lane row below is glowing with headlights.

“Everyone must be getting home from work.”

“There’s always congestion at this intersection,” he says in an annoyed tone. His shoulders are pushed higher, eyes narrowed; he’s getting more irritated. Why, though? At the base of the street, he ushers me to one side. “Here, this is the pharmacy.”

I let him nudge me through the glass doors as they slide apart. The Walgreens is cool, the AC turned on too high. I’m boiling with nervous heat so I’m thankful.

Jamison tails me through the store. There are too many aisles here, all of them packed with products, but I stay on target. “This should work,” I say, thumbing over the boxes of silver toner. I look up, noticing he’s not paying attention to me—his eyes are focused on the end of the aisle.

I turn, expecting to see... something, but it’s empty.

“You’re done?” he asks gruffly.

“Yeah.” I tap the box in my palm. “Let’s get out of here, you’re making me really paranoid.”

“You should be paranoid.” Jamison flips around, striding up the aisle to the front checkout. Eyeing his broad back, I approach the register. There’s someone already buying something; I glance at the array of candy and other spontaneous purchase items.

Next to the Reeses and KitKats are some tiny packages. Of course, every good pharmacy keeps condoms up front. I make a face at the boxes with their purple and

gold letters. I can't believe how close Jamison and I came to hooking up.

"Next!" The clerk, a young black woman with kind eyes and purple braces, motions me forward. I put the toner on the counter; she flicks her eyes down. "That's all? You don't need anything else?"

"Huh?" I ask stupidly. She's moved on to grinning at Jamison. My face begins to sizzle—she saw me eyeing the condoms. "Oh, no," I babble, "you've got it all wrong!"

She shrugs, ringing me up. "I didn't say anything. I was just making sure you didn't forget anything you might want."

"I don't want that," I say with a stern frown.

Jamison chuckles in the depths of his throat. My heart thumps wilder; I pay for the toner, grabbing it so quick I almost drop it before stuffing it in my backpack. The lady calls out some sort of pleasant farewell, but I'm too focused on getting out of the store to listen.

The doors split apart for me as I cross the welcome mat.

Outside, the sun is gone. Lights from every window of the busy area keep the world easy to see.

I'm expecting Jamison on my tail, but when I turn, he isn't there.

Weird. What's he doing? I start to head back inside, but Jamison half-runs towards me, and I jump back, thinking he might make contact.

"What's that face for?" he asks.

I wave at the glass doors. “What were you doing in there?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You didn’t follow me out.”

“Of course I did. I’m here.” He stares at me like I’m an idiot.

“No,” I scowl, poking his arm, “you were in there longer than me.”

His grin is all teeth. “Counting the seconds we’re apart? And I thought you were getting sick of my hovering.”

Flustered by his teasing, I march up the sidewalk, back towards the steep hill.

Jamison follows at my side, his shadow stretching long across the street.

The top of its shape brushes the yellow painted lines.

Occasionally a car drives past, the headlights erasing his shadow.

But it always returns. Blacker and sharper than before, the rising moon giving it power.

I watch how it sweeps along the asphalt; that’s easier than looking at him. Jamison is too quick with his comebacks... too flirty. Our kitchen encounter has emboldened him.

We’re halfway up the hill when my calves begin to cramp. My pace slows down considerably. Jamison, noticing he’s a few steps ahead, stops to wait. “You alright?” he asks.

“Yeah, of course,” I pant.

His grin boils my blood. “You were the one who said you wanted to get some fresh air.”

“I did. I’m fine,” I insist.

My breathing is heavy; it blocks out the noise around me. The low rumble of the cars at the bottom of the hill vanishes away. All I can do is focus on Jamison’s infuriating smug face as I force my tired legs to reach him. His lips drag down at the corners. The humor in his eyes seeps away.

A warning tickles the base of my skull; I turn, seeing a figure approaching me rapidly from behind. I don’t get a good look at his face, but the switchblade in his fist is as bright as a star in the sky.

“Give me your backpack,” he snarls. “Do it right now, got it?”

My body turns to clay—a hundred thoughts hit at once. I have ten grand in here. I can’t hand that over! Dammit, why didn’t I leave my backpack at the house? I only needed my wallet. Stupid, stupid, stupid! I clutch my backpack protectively. “No, I can’t!”

The man’s face contorts like a balloon deflating, the shape constricting, pinching his features. He adjusts the blade, preparing to lurch at me.

Black leather fills my vision like a massive dragon spreading its wings. Jamison sweeps me against his side; I cling to his arm on impulse. He wraps his fingers around my shoulder, the other arm extending towards the mugger.

The man flinches, his eyes bulging at this new development. The terror in his face is

out of place—Jamison is big, sure, but this guy has a knife. What's he so scared of?

Then I see the metal shimmering under the light pollution of the city.

Jamison has a gun.

Snarling like a jaguar about to rip out the throat of its prey, Jamison aims the weapon at our attacker's forehead. "Turn and run, now. This is your only warning."

Our would-be-mugger lingers where he is.

Maybe out of fear or maybe debating if he can take Jamison down.

Ultimately, he holds up his hands in defeat, backing away with a frustrated scowl.

"Fuck, man! Alright, alright!" After another two steps he twists, sprinting down the sidewalk until I can't see him anymore.

Jamison doesn't lower the handgun. He's motionless, gazing into the distance. He isn't debating shooting the man in the back; our mugger is long gone. No, he's seeing something else... something I don't.

Guarding me like he expects an army to march from the shadows.

Searching the darkness all around, my body tenses, waiting for another attack. But it doesn't come. There's only him, me, and the rolling traffic lights below.

A dog barks inside a house up on the hill. "Jamison?" I whisper.

He drops his arm, tucking the gun inside his jacket. His full attention shifts to me, both his hands cupping my cheeks while he searches my face. "Are you alright?"

There's no doubting the genuine concern in his eyes. Something softens in my chest—a warmth I want to ignore. The easiest way... is to ask the question burning on my tongue. “What happened to your knife?”

He's back to that blank mask he's so fond of. “Why does it matter what I used to defend you?” he asks, releasing my face.

“We were just walking a few blocks.” I'm trying to make sense of what the hell just happened, but my adrenaline is still peaking, my head hot as an oven. “Why would you think you needed a gun? For the cops? Please don't tell me you were planning to shoot one of them if they tried to arrest me.”

Jamison starts up the hill. “Let's go back to my house.”

“I just—I'm trying to understand what just happened!”

“What happened was what I warned you about,” he seethes. “I said this walk was a bad idea. You insisted. Now you want to argue about my methods.”

“No, no, I mean... I haven't seen you with a gun—other than mine, when you took it from me.” What am I arguing for? My head is splitting apart.

In my daze, I let him take my hand. He tugs me across the sidewalk, back the way we came. It's the same path to his house but it feels different now. “I can't believe I almost got mugged,” I blurt, laughing awkwardly.

Jamison glances back at me, then ahead again. “Desperate times make people do desperate things.”

“Thank you for saving me.”

His steps stutter—did he trip on an uneven patch of the sidewalk? “It would be humiliating if someone like that could take me down.”

I look over my shoulder at the lights of the city. Everything appears darker now... more muted, like someone poured a bowl of grease over the world. The adrenaline has faded; my insides still tremble.

That was scary. Really fucking scary.

How naive have I been, to have lived so long thinking I’d know when I was in danger? All this time, egging myself on to face the things that could harm me... blissfully unaware that someone could choose, on their own, to hurt me without a heads up, with nothing but an urge to get some cash.

I’d be dead if Jamison wasn’t here. My fingers wrap tighter in his.

After a moment, he squeezes back.

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Selena

The long-awaited shower is heavenly. If I were staying with anyone but Jamison, I'd be terrified of the water bill I just created. I know he can afford it.

Staring at myself in the foggy mirror, I brush out my freshly toned and moisturized hair. There, no longer a field of parched hay. I've colored my hair multiple times—it comes with the territory if you like Cosplay—but it's in good health. Valoria taught me how to keep from destroying it.

You always knew the coolest things, I think wistfully. Eyeing my reflection, I wonder what she'd say if she saw me now. 'In your PJs at a strange man's house?' Then she'd gasp dramatically and add, 'Scandalous. When can I come to the wedding?'

Blushing at my imaginative banter, I place my hairbrush on the edge of the white porcelain sink. I'm wearing the Anime convention tee she bought me; it hangs to just above my knees, hiding the blue basketball shorts underneath. Don't worry, Valoria. I'm not going to do anything dumb.

The shower makes a sharp squeak that startles me. Whirling, I grip the front of my shirt, my heart thudding through the fabric. Just the pipes. You need to relax, I warn myself. I've been on edge since that mugger assaulted me. It was a quick encounter... but it left me deeply uneasy.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I wander down the hall and into the main bedroom

Jamison pointed out to me when we returned.

He'd said it was where I'd be sleeping. I'd abandoned my backpack with my phone on the large bed.

It's all I expect to find, so when I realize Jamison is standing by the single window, I stop short. "Oh!"

He squints at me suspiciously. "You're very pale. If anything, the shower should have made you glow like a tomato."

I cross my arms with a light frown. "That's a weird way to ask what's wrong."

"Alright. What's wrong?"

Shivering, I clutch my over-sized tee shirt closer. "I can't stop thinking about that guy who tried to rob us."

"It bothered you," he notes calmly.

"Of course it did." I shake my head, getting ready for what he might say and beating him to the punch. "I saw scarier stuff yesterday. This shouldn't upset me, I get that, but it does. With Sanford, I was in control. I had a gun, he had nothing. It's different having someone threaten my life."

"I've threatened you," he says flatly.

My jaw clenches. "That's different. I know you."

He remains silent in the corner of the room.

I rub my upper arms, suddenly self-conscious about what I've admitted.

The gravity in the air is pushing me into the floor the longer this goes on.

"I meant, I know what to expect from you. Kind of. I guess I'm saying, I keep picturing him jumping at me from the darkness.

Now I'm panicking at every little noise in your house. "

"You don't need to worry about anyone breaking in." Jamison moves towards me, lifting a pillow off the bed, holding it like a sign. "I'll sleep beside you."

My jaw pops open. "You'll what?"

His fingers crush the pillow, then drop it to my feet. "I'll be on the floor next to the bed. No one will be able to harm you with me at arm's length."

Air rushes out of me in the form of a nervous laugh. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to," he says seriously.

"But you said you can't sleep on a floor another night in a row. I don't want to make you do this, Jamison."

"You're not making me do anything."

"In a way, I am," I mumble. Fluffing my freshly washed hair, I stare at the pillow on the dove-grey rug. "Okay. Okay. You can say no to this suggestion, but... what if you lie in your bed with me?"

His eyebrows cinch together over his nose. "You want us to sleep together?"

“Don’t put it like that,” I groan. How badly am I blushing? Can he tell? “That bed is pretty huge.”

“A California King,” he agrees.

“Right. Um. There’s enough space that we can keep from touching.”

He’s definitely smiling now. “I suppose.”

Crouching, I pick up the pillow, carrying it to the bed.

“You can lie here.” I place the pillow firmly on the edge of the side closest to the door.

“And I’ll sleep there.” Moving the opposite pillow as far over as I can without it falling off the mattress, I look to him for approval. “Once I pass out, you can leave.”

He holds up a hand. “I get it. I’ll be your guard dog. I’ll crash on the couch downstairs once I hear you snore.”

“I don’t snore,” I say, leaning on the bed, not sure if I should stand or lie down. This guy throws off my whole perception of how to behave.

He makes a beeline for the light switch. “We should rest. It’s been a long day.”

“Sure. Okay.” Sitting on the bed with him watching me, I pull the covers loose, sliding underneath the silky material. It’s not too warm; his house has central air, which battles with the summer heat.

Once I’m lying flat, he flicks the switch and bathes the room in darkness.

For half a minute I hear nothing but my own breathing. It's loud; my chest is fluttering from nerves. Don't flip out, everything is fine. You're just going to sleep.

Yeah. Just sleeping...

With a murderous hitman who tried to fuck me over his kitchen sink.

Clutching the blankets, I wriggle deeper into the mattress. Jamison hasn't made a sound since turning off the light. I'm still alone in the bed with no clue what he's doing. My nerves are on edge as I strain for any hint he's still in the room.

His bed is better made than my shitty twin I keep on the bare floor of my apartment. When he sits on it, the mattress hardly rocks; I only know he's there because of his presence. That warmed-over cider scent, the burning heat of his body as it enters my airspace.

"You don't need to get so close," I whisper.

His chuckle stirs the tiny hairs on my temple. "I'm not even touching you."

"You nearly are."

"There's a vast difference between nearly and actually, Selena."

Something nudges my ankle—his foot. I hold the air in my chest while he rolls his leg along mine in a gentle sawing motion.

"See?" he goes on, his voice a pool of darkness, "I'd think you'd know this by now."

"What do you mean?" I hush.

I can hear his smirk in his reply. “My hands were wrapped tight in your hair earlier. That was part of the problem, if I remember.” His weight adjusts on the bed, creating a dip that drags me in closer. I roll towards him, our hips colliding, shoulders bumping.

His skin is smooth on my forearm—my heart jolts violently.

He’s not wearing a shirt!

Jamison is topless, making me wonder how naked the rest of him is. I didn’t ask him if he slept nude; should I have? “You’re definitely too close now,” I croak.

“Yes,” he agrees simply. His foot rocks on mine again, tangling on my ankle, his heel pushing my leg into the bed. Heat drills through my bones; he’s trying to start a fire with our limbs.

In the thick darkness of his bedroom every sound... every sensation... is heightened. I turn myself onto my left side, facing away, our legs still locked at the ankles. “Go to sleep,” I hiss.

There’s a small, surprised laugh in his throat. “What do you think I’m doing?”

“I don’t know. Fucking with me.” Hugging my pillow I snap my eyes shut, hoping the extra level of privacy will let me block my awareness of him.

But it’s pointless; his scent is all around us, a constant so strong I could reach out and grip it.

“Do you flirt this hard with every girl you take home?”

Jamison is silent for a beat. “How many girls do you think I bring here?”

“I don’t have a clue. And I don’t really care.”

Right? Of course I don’t.

His ankle stops moving on mine. “If I was flirting, you’d know.”

A new ripple of warmth slides through my belly; I push my thighs together, and Jamison lets out a tiny growl. He noticed. “I told you earlier, we can’t—we won’t do anything.”

“You decided that.”

“I know.”

“Then why remind me?”

I open my mouth, struggling for a reply. It’s good he can’t see my frustrated face.

His gravelly voice scrapes over my brain. “Or are you reminding yourself?” The mattress sways, his chest brushing my back. My shirt is useless at protecting me from his firm muscles. “Let me show you what flirting looks like.”

The material of my old shirt is stiff and boxy. Under the blanket, it’s hiked over my upper thighs. This is where I feel his fingers first; light brushes on top of my blue shorts, following the raised, white piping on the side to where it vanishes under my shirt.

It’s a simple touch—loose circles, lazily moving over the fabric from the bottom edge until he shifts the shirt higher, away from my hips. The blanket creates more gravity, pushing his hand against my skin, trapping it.

No. I'm the one who's trapped.

I grow restless with new desire. This isn't okay, I tell myself. I stopped him earlier for a reason.

What was that reason again?

Jamison explores my bare skin like it's a map. I become a series of long rivers and roads that he travels with his fingertips, never staying for long. Breathing quicker, I draw my knees closer to my belly, struggling to hold still. He's doing almost nothing and his touch is incredible.

Is it because of last night? Thinking about how close he came to fingering me makes my clit swell; I squeeze my thighs and shiver.

Jamison's voice is clipped. "I'd note you've gone quiet, but you haven't really. I can hear how hard you're breathing."

His observation cranks my arousal up another notch. I'm too proud to admit he's having an effect, though. "I'm fine. This is nothing."

He grabs viscerally onto the meat of my thigh. I gasp in shock at his abrupt aggression. "Then you won't mind me continuing."

"Not at all," I say as coldly as I can. Between my tone and the heat in my body, a fucking hurricane should form overhead from the atmospheric pressure.

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He loops his left hand into my right, our knuckles interlocking like the gears on a bike chain.

It's a firm grip—intimate in a way I'm not expecting.

I twitch, breath catching. The last of the air leaves my lungs when he places my own hand over my shorts.

Slowly, insistently, Jamison rubs my fingers—our fingers—over my pussy.

Oh no, oh fuck...

I swallow loudly, my hips jutting backwards as we spoon. The solid bulge of his cock meets the crevice of my ass. I'm trapped between him no matter where I go. With a confidence he shouldn't be allowed, he rolls his pelvis while he puppets my fingers over my clit through my clothing.

It's getting impossible to focus on anything but the heat building between my thighs. "This is how you flirt?" I whimper.

"I'm just getting started."

His breathy reply makes me tremble. No matter how I wriggle, he finds my clit. My shorts, my panties, they don't stall him. He can't see—neither can I—but it's not an issue for him. Jamison targets my body as if he's studied it for years.

At this rate... I'm going to come! Gritting my teeth, I put my knees together, trying to

relieve the pressure inside of me. It's pointless. The electric tingles are rushing to one point, coalescing, preparing for my orgasm. I can't do anything about it.

I don't want to.

At some point I went from trying to avoid this, to welcoming it.

I'm so close... so fucking close... he's going to do it, he's...

Jamison pulls my hand away from my body. I groan in frustration, a sound so feral it muffles his amused chuckle. Not enough that I don't hear it, though. I'm shaking and sweating—he tugs my arm, rolling me onto my back.

“What are you doing?” I ask, exasperated.

He squeezes my fingers. “I showed you what I wanted to, now I'm going to sleep.”

“You're—what?” I fumble on the words. The haze in my brain, my overwhelming lust, have made me slow to react. I can't make sense of why he stopped touching me, or why he's holding my hand between us.

“Sleeping,” he says calmly.

“That's all?”

He laughs in a smoky whisper. “What else is there?”

I have a long list I want to spill. It includes things like Put your hands inside my panties and feel how wet I am. Finger me until I cum. Bury your hard cock inside of me until I pass out.

My voice betrays my annoyance. “Nothing.”

“Wonderful. Goodnight, Selena.”

I tug at my hand—he clutches it tight. “You’re still holding my hand.”

“Of course,” he says, “I promised I’d lie here until you fell asleep. This is how I’ll know if you’re awake or not. I was going to wait for you to start snoring, but you reminded me that you don’t.”

Ah, now I get it. The bastard is still playing with me. Jamison knows he’s turned me on to the point of pain. And if he holds my hand, I can’t do the obvious thing I very much want to—touch myself in secret.

The mother fucking monster. He got me worked up, and now he won’t let me do anything about it. He plans to hold my hand until I fall asleep? The ache in my pussy isn’t going to allow me to sleep! I need release.

Shifting side to side, I run through the options in my head. They’re all messy, the logic blurred by my throbbing clit. Every tiny movement makes my shirt scrape across my hard nipples. I can’t get out of this situation with my pride intact.

But maybe I can salvage it.

He’s not made of ice. He wants this as much as me.

I roll over, but this time, it’s towards him.

My free hand drapes over his chest, running over the broad expanse of his muscles.

Touching him sends a new rush of arousal to my core.

I can't see him, but I remember how he looked in the early morning hours in my apartment; his toned body, his tattoos, all of that is inscribed in my mind.

"Selena?" he pries.

Unsticking my tongue from the roof of my mouth, I drag my fingers down his stomach. The hard path leads to his navel; I brush the top of something cotton. Boxers. He really got into bed with me in nothing but his underwear. "It's my turn to flirt," I whisper.

The growl that erupts from his throat is pure animal. It reverberates in my bone-marrow, flowing down to my pussy like a horn blown before a hunt. Ever so lightly I trace his boxers until I find—quite quickly—the massive tent of his erection. His cock pushes angrily at the front of his underwear.

I reach for the base; he snatches my wrist so I can't keep fondling his dick. "Stop," he rumbles.

"What? Why?" I wish I could see his damn face. I hate this darkness.

His grip tightens. "You said you didn't want this. Or did you forget that?"

I try to pull away, but he doesn't release me. "You've been working me up the entire time we've been lying here! In your bed! You knew what you were doing."

"Of course I did," he says, just as annoyed as me. "You've been fighting how you feel since last night."

"I'm grabbing your dick, I'm clearly done fighting!"

"I don't think you are," he snaps, pulling me up his body.

He presses my hand to his chest, his other arm snaking around my middle, pinning me with our ribs touching, our faces close.

His breath glides over my lips in the dark, eliciting a small whimper.

“You’re not the type that gives up easily.

I know this very, very well, Selena. Once you set your mind to something, trying to change it is as pointless as catching every raindrop before it hits the ground. ”

I shiver while straddling him. Can he feel my heart thudding through my breasts?
“I’m allowed to change things.”

“Like the way you changed our contract?”

My teeth click together in surprise. “Why are you bringing that up now?”

Jamison lifts my hand from his chest. Gently as he can, he places it against his jaw.

The small bristles of hair on his chin are a rough texture.

I see his face the way a blind person uses braille.

My thumb prods his lips—traces his cruel smirk.

His teeth bite down, surprising me, but it doesn’t hurt.

“Because we don’t have a contract for this. ”

“We don’t need one.”

He pauses, chuckling to himself. “You would be better off if we did. I want to do all kinds of things to you. Things we might regret.”

Why would he regret anything?

His lips press on my wrist, then my thumb-pad, my breath quickening when he gets to my knuckles. “I don’t understand anything you’re saying, Jamison.”

Those long fingers of his trail over my ass through my shorts. I gasp, pushing against the touch, chasing another rush of heat. “Tell me how far you’re willing to go,” he groans.

Jamison—the king of outs. He won’t let me leave, fights me on doing things my way, yet he demands my approval before he’ll cross this one boundary. He could take whatever he wants from me. It would be easy.

Men who kill for a living must get bored of easy.

“How far do I want to go?” I repeat. “This much.” I grind myself against his cock. He arches against me, clinging to my ass, the power of his thrust making me shudder. “And this much.” Our kiss is rough—I don’t want to be tender. “You’re getting what you want. You won.”

“I did want this,” he admits. “For a long while.” His fingers graze under the elastic of my shorts, following the curve of my ass cheeks until he’s hovering between my thighs from behind, directly over my twitching cunt.

“Since when is a couple hours a long while?” I groan.

His voice floods every crevice in my ears. “I’m not talking about in my kitchen. I wanted to touch you before that.”

“What?” I squint, trying to focus on what he’s saying. “Last night, in my bed?”

“No.”

I falter. “In the hotel?”

Jamison traces his nails lower, until he’s found the edge of my panties. We’re pressed together—his cock beneath me—and I can’t go anywhere without some part of him rubbing my throbbing body. “Yes.”

“You can’t be serious.” Cold reasoning starts to wake me up from my dizzy desire.

I push up on my hands; he grinds his hips into me, his fingers stroking my drenched slit.

I cry out in delirious pleasure, forgetting how, for a moment, he was telling me he wanted to fuck me minutes after murdering a man.

Wanting this when he’s admitted to something so brutal is...

It's insane.

It’s twisted.

And I’m anything but—

“Ah!” I moan, curving my spine to try and get more of his exploring fingers inside of me. Jamison teases my vulva, spreading me through my panties. His thumb hooks the wet material, yanking it into my crack, making my limbs tremble. “Oh my god. Fuck. Oh my god,” I pant.

“You’re desperate for this,” he notes in a quietly amazed rumble.

“You’ve seen what I can do... what I am.

.. and you’re still soaking yourself at the idea of me fucking you.

How is that possible, Selena?” When I don’t respond, he pulls my panties and shorts down my ass, then buries a single finger an inch deep inside of my slippery pussy.

I squeal, lowering my cheek to his chest. “Answer me,” he demands.

“I don’t know,” I groan. “Fuck, why are you interrogating me right now?”

“Because there’s no better time.” Jamison slides a second finger inside of me; I roll my eyes, seeing stars.

“You’ll never be more honest than this. There’s nowhere to hide, no clever quip.

.. just your raw, genuine reactions. I want the truth.

” His knuckles dig inside of me; I squeal in delight. “How can you desire a monster like me?”

Selena

There aren't many questions about myself that I can't answer.

Favorite color? Green. Food I could eat every day for the rest of my life? Eel sushi. Four books I'd take with me on a desert island? Call of the Wild, Malibu Rising, Valley of the Horses, and Pet Sematary, for the record.

So why don't I have an answer for him?

"Tell me," Jamison insists, wedging his fingers deeper inside of me. I clench wildly around the thickness. "How can you desire a killer?"

"I don't know!" I hiss, thrusting onto his knuckles, chasing the orgasm that's been building for far too long. This is bordering on agony. "I really don't fucking know."

"Of course you do." There's no doubt in his voice. He's certain I'm holding back. Is he right? Do I know, am I choosing not to tell him?

"There's no reason," I whimper.

More fingers—a third—filling me to the brim. "There is. I know there is. I want to understand, and if you don't tell me, I'll end this here."

"You wouldn't," I gasp.

His fingers begin to slip out of me, the tugging of his hard knuckles along my roof, sending my brain into a spiral. I'm a singular hot ball of need.

I'm about to lose the little he's given me. But I can keep it, if I just answer his question. Just say the truth.

But I can't tell him, of all people, the reason.

There's a wet pop as his knuckles escape. My pussy twitches at the awful sensation of being abandoned. "Have it your way," he growls, pushing me off him.

I hit the bed.

I break.

The words bubble up and out and I don't have the strength to contain them.

"Because I wish I was you."

Jamison stops breathing. The hush around us is tainted by my rattled panting.

"Why would you ever want to be me?" he asks.

"Isn't it obvious?" I say miserably. "You're dangerous, confident, unafraid . You're everything I want to be." My laugh comes out shattered. "I'm pathetic."

His silence is suffocating.

I roll onto my side, away from him. "I ruined the mood," I mumble. "Sorry."

A powerful hand clamps around my shoulder, dragging me back on top of him.

He tastes like mint toothpaste; I used the same kind in his bathroom earlier, but I didn't notice it until now.

Jamison kisses me for a length of breath that would make a deep-sea diver jealous.

My lungs scream at me that I need air, but I ignore them.

I'm engrossed in how lightheaded he makes me.

For a second, I forget that I've humiliated myself.

I break away first. The rapid meter of his heart exists alongside my own. "Don't every say that about yourself," he rasps.

"Say what?"

"That you're pathetic. You're not."

"Yes, I am," I laugh bitterly. "And probably a narcissist, right? If I'm attracted to you because I want to become like you?"

"You're just confused. I know how brave you are, Selena."

"You can't see it right now, but I'm grinning."

He waits a beat. "Is it a happy grin because I'm complimenting you?"

"You don't understand me at all. You're clueless."

"The memory of the mugging from earlier worms into me."

I was shaken to my core... too petrified to act.

How dare he call me brave? He's just buttering me up to stop me from complaining.

Everything he's said reeks of lies. Because that's what he is. .. a liar.

I hang my head with a sigh. "Do me a favor, forget everything I said about wanting to be you."

"That's fine. You shouldn't want to be me."

"Great. Then let's just move on." I need a distraction. I don't want to think about what I've said or what it means or any of it. I kiss his jaw, enjoying how he shivers. "I'm only throwing myself at you because you're the first guy that's touched me in years."

"You've got some fucking stones on you." Jamison clutches my jaw, squeezing until I flinch. His thumb traces my bottom lip—the mild pain becomes a torrent of pleasure. "You make it sound like anyone that touches you could get you desperate to fuck. That's insulting to say to my face."

My heart drops into my feet. "That's not what I meant."

"You do that a lot; say something, then backtrack or apologize." He grabs my waist, flipping me around.

My head spins with vertigo—it takes me a second to realize he's pinned me on my stomach beneath him.

His fingers run down my spine, squeezing my ass when they reach there.

“I did this to you. Me. Not some random guy. I earned the way your pussy is twitching hungrily for something to spread it wide. Understand?”

My moan is guttural; the pillow doesn't dampen it. “Yes.”

“I don't want to hear you making any more excuses. You're not thrusting your body against mine because you're easy. In fact, you might be the most difficult person I've ever met.”

“You're one to talk,” I growl.

“There,” he laughs, his fingers wrapping in my hair. “That's the attitude I expect from you. Bite back. Fight me. Show me the kind of woman who would be crazy enough to get in bed with an assassin.”

“You don't actually want me to fight back.”

His grip wrenches tighter. “I do.”

Oh... he's not joking. “Is that why you wanted another contract? To make sure we don't go too far?”

“Not we,” he says thickly, “just me.” He forces me down into the pillows with his hand on the base of my head. His teeth clip my ear, waking up new wicked parts of my psyche. I'm losing myself in this place. Becoming part of the darkness itself.

He won't go too far. He won't.

Except I can't be sure... because I know what he's capable of.

Jamison pulls my shirt upward, exposing my naked back. He drags a finger down the

groove of my shoulder blades, exhaling as he goes. “I’m tempted to turn the lights on so I can see your body. I’ve fantasized about it more than you realize.”

“Do it. I want to see you, too.”

“No, it’s better this way.”

“How can it be—ah!” His palms clamp down on my ass, squeezing, spreading, and he breathes in deeply—his face is right near my crease. I start to wriggle away, the nearness too intimate for me, but he grips my thighs to keep me where I am.

“Stay,” he says in his deep voice.

“Wait, that’s too much!”

“Are you embarrassed?” he sounds pissed at the idea. Palming my ass cheeks, he pulls them wide, breathing on my pussy from behind—he’s lying flat on the bed between my legs. “I’m dying to inhale the sweet scent of your little cunt. It’s making my dick rock hard.”

I’m on fire in every cell of my body. I grab the pillows, fisting them, holding on to keep from jerking away. “I’m not used to this.”

“I told you, it’s better to do this in the dark,” he says. “You’d fall apart with the lights on.” His nose rubs over my pussy—I jump, but he holds me firmly, preventing my escape. His tongue flattens over my slit, exploring my soaked lips.

All the muscles in my thighs flex at once. “Oh my god,” I sob.

“You’re so close to coming,” he chuckles, the words flowing inside of me. “It must be painful. One delicate press of my tongue and you’ll come all over my face, sweet

girl.”

“Please... Jamison, fuck, please...”

“Please what? Make you come, or please stop?”

“M... M...”

He nuzzles my inner thigh, his voice rumbling through my skin. “Say it.”

I’m shaking from my peaked desire. But the reality of coming on his face is tearing me apart. “Jamison...”

“You shied away the last time. Are you going to do that again?”

He’s talking about the night in my apartment.

.. when I couldn’t get the courage to ask to see his cock.

The shock of his comment silences the unease in my head.

The drums of arrogant pride take over—I hate being a coward.

Wrapping my ankles around his head, digging my heels in, I force his face deeper against my pussy. “Make me come.”

He moans like I’ve uttered the sexiest thing possible.

The way he grips my hips, lapping at my clit, pushing his tongue inside my walls, I’m convinced I did.

The rush of satisfaction is eclipsed by the powerful burst of pleasure.

I don't feel the orgasm arising, it simply exists—it always has.

I shake with waves of desire, becoming a ball of tense heat, a being of pure bliss. “I'm coming! Fuck, oh fuck!”

“Good girl,” he growls, trailing his lips up the outside crease of my pussy. He lifts himself, resting his weight on my back. “Your pussy tastes amazing. I might be addicted to it now.”

My insides clench from aftershocks—I try to roll, to face him, but he keeps me on my belly. “Jamison, that was incredible.”

“We're not done.”

His pelvis lowers, rolling on the top of my ass. His erection is huge; his boxers have vanished. We're skin on skin all around, and I flush from anticipation. But reality surges into my center to cool me down.

“Wait,” I say shakily, “we need a condom. I don't have any.” I should have bought one from that Walgreens after all.

There's rustling as Jamison moves to the other side of the bed, leaning away, the springs bouncing to tell me where he is. I don't know what he's doing—there's more noise, something clinking. “I have one.”

“You do?” My relief is cut off halfway. “Wait. Is that why you were taking so long inside the store?”

His chuckle is deviant; his weight settles on top of me, lips pressing to my cheek,

then my mouth. I'm dizzy when he pulls away, the sound of foil tearing. "Good guess. Spread your legs for me."

I've never obeyed an instruction so fast. I open my knees, my belly clenching with excitement. My lack of vision has made this encounter more tactile than any other. We're nothing but breath, sweat, heat, skin. Urges and hunger. Creatures who want to be satisfied at all costs.

We could be anyone.

But I know who we are.

He rubs the tip of his cock over my slit, the noise liquid and erotic. The latex is perfectly smooth; it helps him enter me.

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I pant with every inch he slides inside. He's relentless, yet slow, taking his time to wedge his cock into me. The patient speed is a good idea—he's thick enough that I have to catch my breath, and when I think I've adjusted, he gets bigger. Impossibly bigger.

"Fuck," I groan.

"Is it too much?" he teases.

His smugness gets under my skin. I slam my hips backwards, sinking the last length of him into my clenching walls. My pussy thrums around him until I see spots of color, but my ego keeps me from crying out. "I'm fine," I grunt. "I can handle it."

"Good." Jamison wraps his hand on my jaw, turning me towards him.

His lips and tongue taste wonderful. "That's what I want to hear.

" His other palm claps onto my left hip, mauling my tender muscles.

It's leverage—he draws his cock out of me until only the tip is inside.

The ridge of his fat cock-head fills my pussy, threatening to exit, making tingles in my blood.

"Scream all you want," he whispers in my ear. "My walls are soundproof."

He slams into me with his full force; the wet thud comes first, my shout comes

second. “Oh my god!” I groan, biting into the pillow. My fingers cramp on the fabric as I try to survive Jamison’s powerful thrusts.

He’s strong—that’s a given. But he’s more than muscles and bone. There’s a precision in how he holds me, an intention in the settling of his weight, the angle of his hips, as if the man was built for the pure act of bringing me pleasure.

Jamison is a murderer...

And a perfect lover.

If demons walk the Earth, he must be one of them.

His hand claps onto my ass with a crack like breaking glass.

I shout in surprise—and in dizzy delight.

“You’re too quiet,” he says in my ear. “Yell more. Scream more. Prove you’re alive, darling girl.

Celebrate life...” He traces the place he spanked, the tender area burning and tingling.

“Not everyone is lucky enough to be breathing.”

I’m too far gone to play philosopher with him. The liquid rolling down my inner thighs forces me to think about how close I am to another orgasm.

I want to come! This time... with him inside of me.

Jamison reaches under, fondling my breasts, tugging my sensitive nipples until I squirm and moan. “I said—”

“Fuck me!” I wail, slamming my hips back onto his cock. “Fuck me, god, make me come. I need to come again!” He wants me to be loud. Fine. I can be loud.

His cock thickens inside of me. Jamison breathes out with his whole chest. “Even like this, you try to find ways to win.” Lifting himself onto his elbows, he uses his whole body to drive into my pussy.

The impact steals the shout from my lips.

A ripple of pleasure as deep as the sea moves from my belly to my thighs.

“You don’t know—really know—the position you’re in. ”

“I’m... under you...” I groan, trying to alleviate the tension from the moment.

He doesn’t take the bait; his voice is sleet on my naked skin. “I could make you beg for hours. I could drive you insane, I could destroy you, all without breaking a sweat.” He wraps his fingers on the base of my neck. “The last thing you’d ever say would be my name.”

This side of him is petrifying. Yet... as frightening as he is.

.. he can’t cool the heat in my body. My clit is throbbing painfully; each stroke of his cock drags me nearer to coming.

I’m there, right fucking there, and none of his cruelty will hold it at bay.

“You said you wouldn’t kill me,” I remind him.

“Did I?” he whispers. His fingers grip harder.

His other hand slinks under my hips, seeking my swollen clit, rubbing it expertly.

I whimper, vibrating with a fresh gush of wetness.

“We only have one contract, sweet Selena.” He rubs faster.

.. pushing me to the peak. Sweat sticks to my throat under his choking hand.

“I only obey that paper. Not your wishes.”

There’s a hard truth to what he says. In a better moment, I’d dissect it, find an argument, a way to counter. But right now, the only thing I can do is come.

“Fuck!” I sob, my toes curling from the blinding shock of my orgasm. My pussy flutters over his length, struggling to contain his cock as it jerks. He pulses through the condom, coming simultaneously with me.

The power in his grip increases—I can’t breathe. For a frightening moment my head goes stuffed and fuzzy. Violet walls close in around my eye sockets. I’m going unconscious...

Jamison releases me, as if the strength has left his bones. I rattle in a choking mouthful of air. He collapses on top of me, face in my hair, arms stretched over the pillow. He’s still twitching... still trembling... a man who’s touched a live wire and lived to tell the tale.

That’s wrong. I’m the one who barely survived, not him.

Yet, he’s the one breathing shakily, and I’m recovering quickly, refreshed, stronger than ever. Somehow, I took the life from him. The concept makes me surge with delusional giddiness. Me? Take him down? The great Silencer himself, brought to his

knees by me.

“Hey,” I whisper.

He stirs, both inside and out. “Are you alright?” he asks.

“Of course. I’m not made of glass.”

Chuckling dryly, Jamison withdraws his still firm cock with a grunt. I wince with the brief pulse of pleasure. Then he’s gone, leaving the bed. He’s moving away in the darkness, and I have no clue what he’s up to.

I roll onto my back in the sticky sweat we’ve created. There’s a ringing in my ears broken up only by the rustling of his movements. “What are you doing?” I call out.

“Cleaning up.”

A singular streak of light parts the black room; he’s entered his Master bathroom. Through the gap I hear something crinkling. Water runs for some seconds. Oh, he’s throwing out the condom.

The thought of something so normal makes me sit up. I search for my clothes, making out vague shapes on the bed thanks to the beam of light from the bathroom. My shorts and panties are in a tangled pile—I yank them over my legs, straightening my shirt over my belly.

Did we really have sex?

It’s weird, but I feel... uncomfortable. What we did in the dark could be associated with two different people. Thinking about the evidence—condom, sweat, sticky thighs, tossed clothes—has shame spiking up my back.

Pushing the covers to my throat I cover my face with a scowl. Oh my god, and I told him I wanted to be like him. Fuck. That's humiliating. He'll never let me live that down. It's the worst blackmail I could come up with.

The bathroom door closes, draining away the fragment of light. My eyes don't adjust to the void, but even if they did, I'd still see nothing. I don't hear him approach, just feel the bed sink from his weight. I tense up, expecting him to reach for me.

He doesn't.

There's no hands... no lips... not a whisper. Even my worst encounters with past partners involved some conversation afterward. I remember wishing one guy would shut up and go to sleep. I didn't want him to spend the night. I itched to be alone.

Jamison's constant silence is far worse.

I crave the comfort of a light touch of our hands. Even a small insult would be better. As my body breaks down, exhaustion slipping into every crevice of my body, I drift off with a singular, but very certain, thought:

He regrets what we've done.

Jamison

In shadow, good and evil share the same face.

I don't mind the dark. It's always been the great equalizer, something I could rely on to keep me safe, or allow me to do my work. Early on, I found killing in the dark was easier on my conscience. Once you see something, your mind never allows you to forget it.

Things done in darkness can be denied.

This time is different. I want the shadows to dissipate, allowing me to gaze on the evidence of last night. The urge to see Selena sprawled beside me is immense—worse than hunger or dehydration.

If I don't look... it will be like it never happened.

That sentence has been comforting to me in the past; a shield to help me pretend that twisted, terrible deeds never occurred. Not by me. Never because of me. But tonight, it makes me restless.

I have to see her.

Selena's breathing is perpetual as the tide.

Each inhale a gentle three count, her exhale a sharp two.

I've been listening to it for an hour. I can't bear the torture anymore.

Rolling to one side, I fish my phone from the pocket of my pants where I discarded them by the bed—the same place I slipped the condom from.

I'll put it on the lowest setting so I don't wake her.

I freeze, noticing a message on my screen from Tusk.

T: Update?

Angling my phone so the blue light cascades across Selena's sleeping face, I take in the glorious sight of her long neck. The blanket is loose around her stomach, her boxy shirt crinkled across her chest, exposing her left breast. The dusky nipple tempts the feral core of my being.

Across her right top-most rib is a black streak, the shape of a capitol letter F if you cut the bottom too short. She has a tattoo? I can't tell what it's supposed to be. I've seen a lot of ink, but this symbol is meaningless. It looks unfinished, as if she gave up minutes into getting the needle.

Glancing at my phone, I read Tusk's message one more time.

The responsible thing would be to tell him what's happened so far.

Rory might have contacted him out of caution—or to gossip, as he loves to do.

Maybe Tusk is just curious. Or nervous, I think solemnly.

He agreed to the contract, but I know how he is.

Selena is sleeping peacefully. She has no clue Tusk would prefer I kill her.

Things done in the dark can be denied.

I power my phone down, bathing the room in black again. The blue screen lingers in my vision like a phantom. I flip over to watch the ceiling; the blue imprint drags in a delayed sway, refusing to go away, Tusk's type-font letters burning with his question.

Even when I don't look at her, I feel her.

Gently, I slide my fingers across the blanket between us. I know where her hand is—I memorized its position like a snapshot in my mind. My fingers curl over hers; she twitches, I brace myself, preparing for her to wake. If she does, I'll yank my hand away and pretend I'm asleep.

Selena's breathing returns to a three count.

Ever so softly I wrap my hand around hers, enjoying the silkiness of her skin, the knobs of her knuckles. They're nothing like mine in shape or texture or deeds. These are innocent hands.

I'll make sure they stay that way.

I'm awake before I open my eyes. The hint of color shines through my lids, the heavy curtains in my bedroom allowing a slip of light around the edges of the window frame.

What time is it? I'd meant to go downstairs to my couch, but I'd passed out instead.

I've never been this drained in—I can't recall.

I'm a light sleeper by habit. Crashing hard with business left unfinished is new.

I twist onto my elbow, expecting to see Selena, but finding a wrinkled section of empty bed.

Jerking upwards I throw my covers aside. "Selena?" I say out loud. There's no response from the master bathroom—the door is cracked wide; I see the shower and toilet and no sign of her.

Where the fuck did she go?

A taste like battery acid rises along my throat and tongue. In just my boxers I march out of my bedroom, striding with purpose down the hall, the stairs, searching every room for Selena.

Each square foot I explore increases my heartrate. The pit in my guts is sucking my hope away, building my panic until I'm running through the halls.

It happened. I knew it could happen.

Ever since that day, I knew this was possible.

I snatch a knife off the butcher block in the kitchen.

It's not my preferred weapon, but I left the bedroom so hastily I didn't grab my normal blade.

The gun from last night is under my pillow upstairs.

Her gun is still in my jacket on the granite island—an option, but I don't know that weapon well enough to trust it.

I have to check the front door.

My eyes scrape over the entrance for evidence of forced entry; it's still bolted. If anyone came in, they did it through a window. Someone going that far would mean—

A voice rumbles through the wall. The garage? On the balls of my feet, I creep to the backdoor, pressing my ear to the wood. Someone is talking inside. I recognize the lilt of Selena's voice, the way she laughs.

She doesn't sound petrified. That's a good sign.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Nothing is wrong, or she wouldn't sound like that.

I need to know for sure—not just that she's alright, but what she's doing in my garage.

Turning the knob enough to make a gap, I peek inside.

Selena is sitting on the bottom of the two steps with her back to me.

Her head is blocking her phone, the glow of it bouncing off her cheeks and ears.

She tilts the device, revealing a face—someone speaking to her.

She's on a video call?

The distressed paranoia about her safety warps into barbed vines.

They coil around my heart, my chest getting hotter, tighter.

She was honest about the cops, I remind myself.

Then a second later, I amend with, After I caught her.

After I put her on the spot. She only stopped lying when her life was in danger.

Who is she speaking with in secret? Was she telling me the truth to hide something worse? How deep has she played me? The knife in my hand is slick with sweat; I shift it around, clutch the handle, adjusting the angle. I can't kill her. I won't kill her. Not unless there's a reason.

You let your guard down before... remember what happened then?

I swallow the dryness lodged in my throat. Selena shakes her head, hair rustling, laughing softly like she doesn't want to be heard.

This isn't the same as back then.

But thanks to that time, I'm here, doing things that make no damn sense. That wretched memory is the whole reason Selena is under my wing. Without it, she'd have had her standoff with Sanford in that fetid hotel room, and I would never—

"I know, I know," she groans. Flipping her fingers through her blonde hair, she moves it out of the way. I get my first clear look at the screen; an older woman is smiling fondly, her short, pale-straw hair cropped tight to her jawline. "I've watched

that movie like ten times, Mom.”

I lower the knife to my hip. That’s her Mom?

Relief pours through my limbs, making them heavy, as if the joints have become lead.

Ever so carefully I crouch down, setting the knife on the rough cement of the garage floor, making sure it’s lined up in the corner where the wood meets the house.

No one will notice it unless they know where to look.

It would be simple to slip back inside without her seeing me. Instead, I straighten up, grab the door, then give it a rough jiggle to make a puff of wind blow over her neck. Selena slaps a hand to the back of her head as she spins, openly gawking up at me. “Jamison!”

My eyes flick to her phone—she lowers it to her chest, eyes darting guiltily. The older woman on the other side calls out, “Selena? Are you okay?”

Selena is motionless. She’s wearing the same shirt as last night, but a new pair of jeans. She draws her knees to her chest and clutches the phone protectively. “I... hang on, Mom,” she mutters. “Jamison—”

I hold up my hand to quiet her. “I’m going to make some coffee. Finish your conversation.”

The fear is still in her eyes when I shut the door behind me.

Like I told her, I head into the kitchen to make coffee. It’s more to have something to do than because I want any. Listening to the appliance bubble, I lean on the counter

and stare at the wall. Beyond it is the garage. The place Selena chose to hide.

Yes, hiding from me, I think grimly. She panicked when she realized I was there. She didn't want to be seen talking to her mother. Why?

The coffee is finished long before Selena enters the kitchen. Her eyes stab at me, then to the white mugs on the counter. "Do you have any creamer?" Her voice is flat as old soda.

Wordlessly I open my fridge, putting the small container of half and half beside the mugs. Selena pours herself a cup of coffee, adding the creamer, stirring it until the rich brown becomes a pale tan. The spoon clinks on the edge of the ceramic in an endless cycle.

The noise ends abruptly. "I should explain," she says.

"If you think there's anything that has to be explained," I reply.

Sighing, she sits at the kitchen table, coffee cradled in her hands. The steam floats around her forehead—she inhales it, like it's giving her strength. "My mother always calls me on Monday mornings at 7, she's very punctual since we're only allowed an hour to talk."

I glance at the clock blinking on my coffee pot. "But it's 9:00 now."

"Yeah. She lives in Alaska."

My brain twinges instantly. "That's why you keep your phone's time set behind." I'd wondered about that little mystery since she caught me with her phone. None of the possible reasons were this.

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Selena takes a small sip of her coffee. I top my mug off, moving closer to the table, but not joining her there. “I wasn’t trying to be sneaky,” she says. “I really wasn’t. You were still sleeping, I figured I’d take the call without bothering you.”

“It’s fine.” I think about how I prowled my house with a kitchen knife—my voice remains tempered. “You don’t need to tell me everything.”

“I guess not,” she agrees, giving me a coy smile. “That wasn’t in the contract.” Her smile fades immediately; she can’t maintain it. “My mom is fragile. If I miss her call, she panics, and then her aid has to calm her down, it’s a huge mess.”

“Her aid?” I ask curiously.

“She’s in an assisted living facility.” Selena shifts in her chair, twisting the coffee mug. Her unease is plain as day.

There’s a twitch in my heart. “You don’t have to feel embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed. I’m angry.”

I reel back with my brow furrowed. “About what?”

“The reason she’s there in the first place,” she says with a miserable laugh. Shaking her head, she sweeps her hair back with her fingers. “My mom is one of the sweetest, kindest people I’ve ever known. There was no reason for my dad to hurt her the way he did.”

Her dad... I keep my voice cautious. “What did he do?”

That pained smile is back. “He abandoned her.”

She stares at her hands, not speaking, not drinking, but I know she isn’t finished. The crackle around her is electric—she's gathering herself, picking the right words.

My temptation to sit at the table grows. I resist. The distance is safer.

The fury in her pupils shrinks them to nothingness.

“My dad,” she says, “is a very rich man. When we were a family, we never wanted for anything. He insisted Mom not have a job, and of course she didn’t argue.

I was lucky to spend my days with her doing all kinds of fun things. It was genuinely perfect.”

This deluge of information is picked apart bit by bit. I don’t utter a word—I wait, I listen, for what comes next.

Selena tilts her head slightly, her blonde hair trailing over her left shoulder. “Dad loves perfect things. He told Mom she was perfect constantly . He wasn’t lying; I believed every word, and so did she. He didn’t treat her different until she broke.”

“Broke?” I repeat warily.

“That was his word, for the record. I didn’t think she was broken.

Dementia changed her, but she was still my mother.

She was still his wife.” Her faint smile cuts a ragged hole in my chest. “Until she

wasn't, I guess.

She could barely make sense of the divorce papers.

I had to help her. I took over entirely at that point.

I was just turning 18 when Dad moved out of the house, putting it up for sale without telling us.

The fucking coward couldn't bear to be under the same roof as her.

Couldn't find the balls to ask her to leave to her face—careful! You're coffee!"

The cup has tilted away from me; my muscles are tense, quivering. Instead of crushing the cup, I gently set it on the counter and cross my arms, turning myself into a straitjacket. It's all I can do to keep the cresting rage under wraps. "That's awful," I snarl. "What a piece of shit."

Selena looks at me—really looks at me. She's reading my expression, making sure I mean what I say.

"Yeah," she agrees, "He is. The only good news was Dad didn't cut me off from his money.

I think he was worried about losing me in the divorce.

I was pissed and planned to avoid him, but I'm not above pretending everything was fine.

Perfect daughters get flush bank accounts.

How else was I going to pay for Mom's care givers?"

That's how she got the money for my contract, I realize. Another puzzle piece fits into place. That's two now to help me solve the picture of Selena... possibly three, but I can't confirm the last. "Does he know you're funding your mother's care?" I ask.

"Of course not," she snorts. "Dad would be furious that I made him feel like he abandoned her—which he did—and certainly stop giving me a monthly allowance. The deal was I leave Alaska, go to college, or no more money."

"He wouldn't let you stay near your mother?" I ask in angry disbelief.

"He values independence and education," she says bitterly.

"But why move this far away?"

She pulls her bottom lip into her mouth, sorrow turning her eyes wet. "This was where Valoria lived. She was all I had."

It's like someone is dissecting my soul—the pain intense enough I double over. "I'm sorry I joked about you having no friends."

"What?" Her eyes widen, then clarity returns to them.

I don't deserve her kind smile. "Oh, stop it. I was the one who made that comment to you first. Anyway, my dad must suspect I'm lying by now—three years out here and I haven't sent him anything about my grades?"

But he's too chicken-shit to confirm it. Works for me either way."

"He's never visited you?"

“I’m happy he hasn’t, I don’t need him in my life. Even if I wanted him to come see me, he’s always ‘too busy’ with work.” She rolls her eyes in her skull. “As if he isn’t rich enough to retire twice over.”

I tap my cheek lightly. “I’m curious what he does for a living.”

“Runs a law firm that handles oil contracts. That’s how he got such a tidy divorce in his favor; being a multi-millionaire is a privilege, but having a million powerful connections? That’s the real ticket.”

That’s something I can agree with. Money gives you access to many things, but people in high places will always be worth more. “I’m guessing this means he doesn’t know anything about your friend’s death. Does your mother know?”

Her eyes gloss over with pain. “Mom asks about Valoria like she’s still alive. I told her three different times about the suicide, then I just quit putting us both through the torture. She gets to think Valoria is alive and well. I’m envious.”

“Selena...” The urge to go to her... to wrap her in my arms, to hug her close and give her a space to release the tears building in her eyes... is immense. Last night we were closer than ever. I held her, tasted her lips, felt the echo of her voice. It was intimacy like none other.

I should be able to touch her.

I should be able to soothe the tension in her bunched neck.

Instead, I remain where I am, clutching my arms like they’re her body.

She sits up, downing her coffee, exhaling in an exaggerated way. “If you’re going to bring up Valoria, then let’s get to it. Take me to the bank so I can pay the rest of your

fee and we can start figuring out how we'll kill Caruso.”

It fascinates me how quick she is to put her armor back on. But she's got the right idea—I don't know what to say to her in these moments of vulnerability. I'm not built for therapy.

I'm built to kill.

A single night with this woman in my tangled sheets won't change that.

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Selena

This bank isn't one I've been to before.

Jamison picked it, declaring that any branch would work.

In a rare occurrence, I believe him. There's no tactical reason to keep me from showing up on my usual bank's camera twice; the transactions will be embossed in time via some computer data center.

The cops can reference it with a basic warrant.

Do they have a warrant yet? Probably not, or they'd call and tell me. It's easier to threaten someone to turn themselves in than hunt them down. They don't have a warrant because they don't have anything. They're chasing whispers with no substance.

I bend over the ATM and scoop up the chunk of bills.

My account is essentially drained, though I have a little in my savings.

If Dad doesn't give me the predictable monthly deposit of 3 grand on the fifteenth—just five days away—I'll be in trouble. Mom's bills cost over half of that 3 thousand bucks each month.

If I miss a payment, the facility will give me some wiggle room, but. ..

I pause in the middle of stuffing my backpack. Jamison knows about my mom and dad now. The only person who knew my situation was Valoria.

She'd been sympathetic, avoiding bringing up my dad; better than that, she'd fawned over my mother.

On video calls the two of them could chat forever.

Valoria wasn't faking interest, oh no. She would sit wide-eyed and invested in every story Mom told.

Even if it was just repeating the plot of a movie for the fifth time, Valoria was locked in.

What does Jamison think about all this?

I don't need his pity. But... it's nice to not have to hide my secret. Slipping off to the garage to make the phone call was stressful. I'm jittery at the mere memory of him standing behind me. How long was he there for? A minute? The whole call?

Gathering myself, I jog towards his car where he parked it down the block. He watches me approach, his eyes the usual impenetrable onyx glacier. I thought I'd be able to read him better after last night. What a naive thing to imagine.

"Well?" he asks the second I climb inside the car.

I unzip my bag, showing him the money inside. "I've got it."

Jamison reaches out; I slap his hand away, clicking my tongue like he's a naughty

cat. His wide eyes are satisfying. “Tell me that we’re going after Caruso today.”

“There’s no reason to be hasty.”

“Yes, there definitely is.”

“We need a solid plan first.”

“Okay, let’s make one then. Here. Now.”

Jamison sends a scathing look that would debilitate most people. It makes my knees shake, but I’m sitting, so he can’t tell. My faux confidence is enough to get him to slump back in his seat, a hand over his closed eyes. “You’re impossible.”

“It’s not like this should come as some big shock to you. I’ve been repeating that I want to do this since we met.”

His hand droops lower, revealing one eye squinting miserably at me. “Do you have a plan? Even the barest framework of one?”

My grin causes him to squint harder. “A pretty good one, in fact. Caruso owns that gross studio. All I’ve got to do is show up pretending to be a girl ready to audition for his sick videos, then bam!” I point my finger to mimic a gun. “Actual bam, because I’ll blow a hole in his head.”

Jamison blows out air through his nose, throwing a long arm over the back of the driver’s seat. “Does his studio allow walks-ins?”

I cringe and say, “I’m sure they must.”

“Are they even doing auditions?”

“Uh, well, why wouldn’t they be?”

“Rory said there'd be intense security.”

I start to squirm. “It’s not an airport.”

“What happens if you do get inside? You shoot him, then what? Get caught? Fight your way out? Go to prison? Get killed by cops or an overzealous guard?”

“I don’t know!” I yell, my voice echoing through the car. Seeing his patient frown, I glare down at my feet, which are less irritating. “I don’t fucking know, and I don’t really care if they catch or kill me. As long as Caruso dies...”

“And your mother?”

Anger and shock steeps in my guts. “What about her?”

“If you die, who takes care of her?”

My heavy body holds me in place in my seat. I barely have the strength to push my hair from my eyes. “Telling you about my family was a mistake.”

“Your Mom—”

“Is my concern,” I snap, “not yours.”

“She relies on you, Selena. Unless you have some siblings I don’t know about?”

“Do you?” I rasp, scrutinizing him closely.

Jamison is an empty vessel. I hadn’t planned to ask him this—not here, maybe not

ever—but the moment rose like a humpback whale and I climbed on without thinking.

Without a single line creasing his face, he says, “I don’t.”

The recent pillar of trust we’d begun to build crumbles. “Neither do I.”

He nods slowly, glancing at the backpack in my lap. “Your plan isn’t a bad start. It’s just missing a crucial piece.”

“And that is?”

“Me.” His smile is warm, like spiced cider; it makes my heart somersault. “I’m a tool. A rather useful one, in fact. Use me, Selena. I’ll get you close to Caruso, and you’ll still escape with your life.”

He sounds genuine. What a tragedy that he lies effortlessly.

Drumming my fingers on my bag, I hum pensively. “Our contract says I get to end his life. Me, not you. Can you really promise to make that happen while still getting me out of there alive?”

A sorrow I can’t find a source for flits through his face. “I won’t let you die.”

“Why?” I blurt.

His jaw clenches, the line of his jugular swelling, flexing, the way he would if he were chewing.

Before he speaks, I say, “It would be easier for you if I died in there. Am I wrong?”

The full body shudder that assaults him fascinates me. “I don’t need you dead.”

“But if I was, the Sanford problem gets easier. I’m a loose thread.”

“You’re a thorn in my side is what you are,” he growls. He puts his hand out, palm up, clearly trying to appease me. “I take my duties seriously. You’re my client, I’ll fulfill our contract while keeping my reputation in good shape.”

“You mean it.”

“Yes,” he sighs in exasperation, “I mean it.”

I try to read his mind. It’s foolish, but it’s also the only way to learn what he really plans for me. I’m greeted with my own spiraling thoughts and not a sudden talent in telekinesis.

Will he keep me safe? Is this a ruse? What reason could he have for keeping me safe, because it can’t be just his pride. That’s not enough.

If he’d told me the truth about his sister—not what happened, just acknowledging her existence—I could have convinced myself there was a chance his heart wasn’t black as coal. That he wasn’t praying for a way to get rid of me...

That last night was more than a passionate mistake.

Jamison flinches when I slap the stack of bills into his open palm. “Alright,” I say, shrugging as casually as I’m able. “Tell me your plan.”

A double cheeseburger tastes extra good when you’re plotting revenge.

It's even better with the cooling breeze skirting off the Pacific Ocean just yards away.

The burger shack off Malibu is tucked away from the main tourist spots.

The parking lot is coated in layers of sand that hide the faded lines, but it can't fit more than four cars, and one of those had better be a compact.

It doesn't matter because today, the lot is empty. We have the singular picnic table to ourselves. I've staked out the bench that lets me face the ocean, while Jamison sits across from me, slightly to my left, to not block my view.

"This is really delicious," I say around a mouthful of cheese and sesame seeds. "Have you been here before?"

Jamison tips his straw from his lips. The ice inside his coke rattles as it melts in the soda; he's already downed half and we haven't been here for more than ten minutes. "Enough times to know when it's quiet."

I nod in understanding. No cameras, no bystanders. Perfect place to discuss a murder. Wiping a napkin over my lips I drink some of my lemonade, letting out a satisfied gasp. "I might have to get a second order of fries. I'm starving from skipping breakfast."

"There's a great place to get fresh pasta further to the south, but they don't open until six. We can go if you'd like."

My eyes narrow pointedly on his overt calm tone. "If you're trying to make me choose fancy pasta over Caruso, forget it."

"I'd never try to change your mind."

“Please,” I snort. “You’ve done it already.” And I still don’t know why. “We’re here, let’s talk shop.”

Jamison twirls the ice in his drink, then sets it aside. Am I crazy, or is he just leaking waves of resignation? “We need to either wait outside his studio to catch him off guard, or we need to get inside.”

“Your plan sounds exactly like mine.”

“Hardly. You’re not going in there alone, Selena.”

“Of course I am! I won’t get a second glance, but you think they won’t wonder who the hell you are?”

“Why would I stick out more than you?”

“Because I’ll look like every other smoking hot girl they lure into their den.”

He draws himself up on the bench, neck bunching, frown becoming a wretched shape. “Really.”

“Yeah, it’s the easiest, most direct method.” I chew more of my burger, waiting for him to say something. When he just sits there brooding I slow my chewing. “Wait,” I say, swallowing. “You don’t like the idea of me showing off my boobs to get close to Caruso.”

His eyebrows draw together tightly. “I couldn’t care less.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, unconvinced. “Whatever. Even if it did bother you—”

“It doesn’t.”

“I’m still doing it. The issue is making sure Caruso will meet with me alone.

Just showing up looking sexy doesn’t mean they won’t shoo me off or have someone else talk to me about making videos.

I can lie pretty well, but the longer we chat, the more chances they’ll figure out I’m not who I say I am. ”

“Yes, that part is a problem,” he agrees.

“Is it safe to check their website for how to like, audition or whatever?”

“Not on our phones.”

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Picking a shred of lettuce off my wrapper, I crush it in my fingers. “Ugh. A visit to Rory again.”

“You don’t sound happy about that,” he notes.

“I’m not.” Rory told me awful things about Jamison. He’s just a messenger, but... if I didn’t know, everything would be easier, I think resentfully.

Jamison sets his elbows on the picnic table, his lips quirked in a mild grin. “So you weren’t a fan of his dungeon.”

Initially I’m lost, but then it clicks. “Is that what you thought when I talked about your house? God, no, I was relieved it wasn’t like his creepy little den.”

He seems a little pleased. “There’s someone else we can go to for basic, public facing info. They can’t get us the kind of back-door details Rory does, but it should be plenty.”

“Who’s that?” I ask eagerly.

Jamison rises, tossing his trash into the rusted, black cannister next to the fence that separates us from falling over the rocks to the waves below. “Finish your burger, we have more driving to do.”

The trip through congested traffic is broken up by us taking turns flipping through music on my phone. Jamison tolerates my alt rock, but visibly grimaces at any anime soundtrack I pop on. A shame, because a few are real bangers.

I'm more than a little surprised when we park outside the familiar tattoo shop.

"Here?" I ask.

"The computer at the front is on a secure VPN." He exits the car, talking as he goes; I hurry to follow him. "We employ a very trustworthy someone for this type of web search." When we enter the shop, the raven-haired woman lifts her head. "Iris."

"Whoa, were you talking about me a minute ago?" she asks warily. "My ears were burning."

"You have good intuition," I say.

Her smile creates a dimple on one cheek. "Nah, it's just that Jamison always has me do leg work for him that he could do on his own."

"I'll be doing it myself today," he says.

"No, you won't, because he is going to want to talk to you."

Jamison glances at the door in the corner. The person inside must be watching us on the cameras, because it swings outward without anyone knocking. "Jamison, get your ass in here."

He remains where he is; I get the impression he's deciding if we can retreat.

"Tusk has been in a bad mood all day," Iris whispers.

So that's his name, I think, tuning in to not miss any new bits of info. Jamison has been trying to keep me out of the loop about his companions, but Iris is more casual. I watch him for his reaction—he gives no hint he's concerned.

Iris pulls her long hair back from her face. “Did you piss him off somehow?”

“Probably.” Jamison looks at me thoughtfully. “You know what we’re here for, Selena. Let her use the computer, Iris, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine.” With her agreement, he faces the door and marches inside, leaving Iris and I alone. She leans on her desk with a sigh. “Tusk is going yell at him, but that’s all. I think.”

“This Tusk guy, is he Jamison’s boss?” I ask.

“Oh no,” she says, her eyes widening. She giggles like I made a surprising joke. “They just work together.”

“Then why does Jamison have to crawl in there like a beaten dog?” I curl my lip, eyeing the door, wishing I had laser vision.

“Is that how he looked to you?” she asks softly.

The subtle judgement in her voice gives me pause. “How else would you describe it?”

Iris tugs at a piece of her hair, pulling it straight. “Jamison isn’t afraid of Tusk. If anything, I suspect Tusk is scared shitless of him.”

Now I’m super lost. “I don’t get it.”

“Tusk is maybe the only person Jamison listens to. They’re not friends, not in the typical sense.”

“Then they aren’t close.”

Iris stares at me as if I said something strange. She releases the piece of hair, sending it coiling back into place. “They’d kill for each other. What’s closer than that?”

Little claws scratch up my throat. I wipe at my neck uneasily. “I wonder how Jamison upset him.”

“Probably just ignored his texts. Tusk is needy.” She claps her palms together, motioning at her desk. “What are you searching for, by the way?”

I’m not sure I should tell her about my plan. Waffling, I move to stand behind the desk and sit in the chair as she makes room. The laptop is small, expensive looking. “I’m trying to find out more about the man I want dead.”

“Got it.” She isn’t bothered—why would she be? This is what she does every day. “The browser is in the top left, click away, do as you will. In the unlikely event the cops raid this place, that laptop won’t retain a search history.”

I let out a little whistle. “That’s nice.”

Iris stands opposite me, giving me the courtesy of privacy. “This guy you’re after, can I ask... you know, why?”

I look up through my eyelashes at her. “Do you ask every one of Jamison’s clients that?”

She lifts her shoulders innocently. “Nah, I just read the contracts and file them away.”

My fingers hesitate on the keyboard. “All of them?”

“Of course. I need them to funnel the money from point A to point B.”

I flick my eyes away from her, my voice as friendly, bored, as I can make it. “You get a lot of contracts?”

“In general, or for Jamison?”

I type up Caruso’s studio name, acting uninterested in her answer. “Just in general.”

“You’re curious about him, huh?” she asks with a smirk.

“It’s hard not to be.”

“Fair, fair,” she laughs in a friendly way. “I’ll say this, you’re his first contract in probably four months.”

My lips screw together like I bit into a lemon. “That can’t be right. What about Sanford?”

“What about who?” She tilts her head with her brow in a knot.

I’m not touching the keyboard anymore, but if I was, I wouldn’t feel it; my limbs have gone numb. “Sanford Grecko?”

Her stare goes from curious, to confused. “I’ve never heard that name. You must be mixing him up with someone else.”

Ice crystallizes in my veins until I’m sure my skin will burst open. I try to focus on the laptop screen, but my vision is blurry. What does she mean? He killed Sanford, I saw it up close.

Maybe he was given the contract months ago, and she just forgot the name?

But no. No way it would take a killer like Jamison months to hunt down Sanford.

He wasn't trying to hide, he was an easy target.

I can't make sense of this.

Not even a little.

"How is it going?" Iris prods. "Find what you were after?"

In a daze, I force myself to look at the website in front of me.

Sparks Entertainment employs a simple design—white background, stark green letters, and a stripe of photos along the top.

The grinning women are heavily filtered to have glossy skin with pearly straight teeth.

Not a single blemish. They're more digital than human.

There's a link to submit for auditions, I click it and say, "Mmhm. Going great."

"That's nice to hear," Jamison says behind me. He shuts the door and walks to hover over my shoulder. His presence hangs above me like a massive oak tree, his strong limbs and steady energy blanketing me. He gives me a quick smile, as if to reassure me his meeting with Tusk went well.

But I don't care. Not even slightly.

Why did he kill Sanford?

No...

Why was he at that hotel at all?

“How bad did Tusk ream you out?” Iris asks him.

“No blood was shed.”

“Cryptic,” she chuckles.

With my head down, I don’t see her face, but I watch his in the smudged reflection of the glass of water Iris left beside her computer. There are no features, hardly any detail; Jamison is a blob of shadow smeared with an array of colors. This is easier than facing him.

His warped reflection wavers. “Show me what you found.”

“Here,” I say, pointing at the screen. His presence grows when he leans close to my shoulder to read the website.

Jamison inhales a half-breath, then lets it go. “I have an idea, but we’re going to need more help than I thought.”

“Help from who?” Iris asks defensively, “I already let you use my laptop.”

I jump to my feet, nearly bumping into Jamison. “Right, sorry,” I mumble. “Thanks for that.” Jamison reaches out to steady me—I skip sideways out of reach, spotting the buckle in his smile.

Why was he THERE?

He drops his hands to his sides and puts his neutral mask back on. “You’ve done plenty, Iris. Thanks. We’ll be going now.”

Feeling her eyes on me, I lift my chin to meet her stare. I’m as even as a seesaw but I force a smile. “See you later.”

“I hope you get him.”

I’d started to turn for the door—I freeze where I am. She’s forcing me into her bubble, my ability to disassociate fading away with the ease of her kind smile. “I didn’t even tell you what he did.”

“Doesn’t matter. I saw the look on your face when you were in here the other day. The way you scrambled for that contract... you’re serious about killing him. This isn’t a flippant thing for you.”

“No,” I agree.

“Then he deserves it.” She flashes me a compassionate smile. “Goodluck.”

Her well-wishes take the wind out of me.

Jamison steps between us, gently guiding me by my shoulder towards the door.

I don’t shake him off. Iris has, with just a few words, reminded me what matters.

She didn’t need to pry into my history to come to her conclusion.

Her acceptance, given so freely, is like a shot of honey to my sleepy brain.

Asking Jamison about Sanford risks delaying my mission. It’s better to play dumb,

just leave it alone, until I get what I came for.

I won't let Valoria's revenge wait another minute.

"Thank you," I call out to Iris.

I've never meant it more in my life.

Selena

Turning the pistol in my hands, rediscovering the weight of it, I let out a low breath.

The last time I held my gun, Jamison snatched it away without effort.

I'm shocked he's given it back; I take it as a sign he does trust me.

Running away is one thing, giving me an opportunity to shoot him in the back is another.

"Weird, it's lighter than last time."

"It hasn't changed," Jamison says.

No. It's me who has.

"How about this?" I ask, sticking the gun down the front of my dress, straight into my cleavage. I don't normally have cleavage, but the push-up bra combined with the low-cut fuchsia dress is doing amazing things.

Jamison narrows his eyes at my chest. Quick as a cobra he grabs the hilt of the pistol, yanking it out while I squeak. "Do you want to shoot yourself that badly?"

"I'll keep the safety on," I argue.

“That will slow you down.” He sounds annoyed with me. He’s been acting like this since we drove towards Sparks Entertainment. “Lift up your dress.”

I balk, gripping the hem protectively. “What?”

“You need to strap it inside your thigh. It won’t be noticed, and you can pull it out easily when the time comes.”

“How the hell do I attach it?” I ask, frustration tinging every word. I hate that he hates my ideas. People hide guns down the front of their clothes in movies all the time. It’s a perfectly good idea; he’s just being difficult.

He motions at me with his chin. “Lean back in your seat.”

We’re tucked inside his car in a tight alley, no more than a block away from Caruso’s studio. There are no cameras plastered on the outside of the dog grooming salon across the street or the bakery to our left. We know this thanks to the help Jamison called in two hours ago.

This time, when we went to see Rory, I remained in the car. Jamison went up to discuss our plans without me. He didn’t insist I go inside Rory’s apartment, though he could have. I appreciated how understanding Jamison was.

It would be great if he showed more of that side of him now.

Cringing at his serious stare, I push myself back against the passenger seat. “Tell me what you’re going to do.”

“We don’t have time to go over pointless details,” he growls. There it is again—why is he so upset? “Lift your dress or I’ll do it for you.”

He isn't joking. Swallowing uncomfortably, I hook my dress up my thighs until it's bunched on my hips. Jamison pops open the center console, digging inside, rustling papers and other things. "Hold still," he instructs me.

My body wants to do the opposite, but I make myself remain motionless. Jamison dangles a thin black strap between his fingers. It has Velcro ends, and a loop along one side. Bending close to me, he wraps it around my right thigh.

All my nerve endings wake up. "I can do it myself."

"Just let me." He tightens the strap, his palm cupping my knee.

It's exactly how he touched me when we had sex.

The tiny twitches going through my body make my leg tremble; he hesitates, locking his eyes on mine. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," I hush, licking my lips. "About going in there and killing Caruso, I mean."

Jamison frowns thoughtfully, then wraps the Velcro into place. "You don't have to do this."

"We both know that's not true."

His stare grows more intense. With one hand still resting on my knee, he pushes the gun into the loop. I jump when he grabs the hem of my dress, but instead of lifting it higher, he shoves it over the weapon to hide it. "The safety is off. Remember that."

"Is it really safer there than down my bra?"

"If it goes off, you might lose a few toes, but you won't put a hole in your stomach."

Cringing at the mental visual, I look out the windshield. “I’m ready.”

“Selena.” I face him when he says my name; his eyebrows scrunch. “You’re not ready if you’re answering to that.”

My cheeks burn red at his admonishment. “Not fair. I’m not in character yet.”

“There’s no fairness in this brutal game. You make a single mistake, and at best, they’re calling the police on you. At worst—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Sitting up taller I roll my shoulders, then flip my hair to shake it loose. “Go again. I’m ready now.”

“Selena?” he draws the name out.

Cocking my head with a coy smile, I let out a bird-chirp of a laugh. “Sorry, wrong person. I’m Malory, the girl you called in to audition at 6.”

His blank face hides if he’s satisfied by my act. “You’re sure you can keep the lie going, even under pressure?”

“I lured Sanford back to my room under a fake name,” I remind him.

His jaw is tight. At this rate, he’ll grind his teeth into a fine powder. “That didn’t resolve the way you expected.”

What Iris told me about his last contract coils around my brain. I tell myself it’s irrelevant, but I can’t shake off the uneasy vibe. “What, are you going to break through a window here, too?” I ask coolly.

“If something goes wrong, yes.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong. In less than half an hour, Caruso will be dead at my feet. I’ll run out the fire exit and back to the car. Be ready to get us out of here.”

“I’ll be listening in,” he reminds me, tapping the bluetooth device on his left ear. “Keep that burner phone in your purse on silent.”

Tired of being lectured about the details we’ve gone over multiple times, I reach for the door handle. “I know.”

“Selena.” He grabs my wrist, stopping me from exiting the car. “If you’re in danger, say Alphabet. I’ll come help.”

Why do I have the sudden urge to let him pull me back into the car? We could drive away... go to that place he mentioned for pasta. It would be easy.

Sunlight dazzles through the window. It creates bands of yellow over my lap, the stripes similar to the ones on my apartment floor years ago. I can hear Valoria giggle... smell the nail polish, see the flecks of pink on the newspaper.

I’d never forgive myself for running away.

I eyeball Jamison’s hand; he releases me. “The only thing you’ll hear is a gunshot, and me saying that’s for my best friend.”

Opening the car door, I step out onto the hot pavement.

My mauve heels shimmer in the midday sun.

Everything I’m wearing looks expensive, because it is.

The shoes, dress, the silver purse—Jamison bought all of it at a boutique shop in

Hollywood after we visited Rory.

I gave him my sizes, he shopped efficiently.

I'd been tempted to go into the store with him, but the possibility he'd ask me to try on the clothing in front of him... it was too much. We need more time apart, not together. Another memory about our night in his bed flashes behind my eyes.

No, not now. Time to get into character. Filling my chest with air, I strut along the sidewalk towards the studio. I know I'm doing a good job at playing up the Wannabe-Celeb by the number of gross wolf-whistles I get from passing cars.

It's not the kind of attention I enjoy, but I'll suffer it for my purpose.

I wonder if Jamison finds this sexy?

The intrusive thought causes my heel to catch on the cement, throwing me off a beat.

Don't start caring what he thinks, I scold myself.

I recover what dignity I can and continue my walk.

It takes all my control not to look back to see if I can spot Jamison peering at me through the window of his car.

I'm hyper aware of the gun on the inside of my thigh; each step causes the muzzle to grind along my skin. It's as distracting as Jamison was when he fixed it into place.

Spark's Entertainment has large windows framing the front door. The glass is tinted dark enough that I can't see beyond. There could be ten security guards, or there could be none. Thanks to Rory, I know the answer is three.

One of them opens the door as I climb the six slate-gray stairs.

He's wearing a long-sleeve white shirt and simple black pants.

His jacket is too heavy for the weather, but when I get closer, the brisk whiff of AC blasts me in the face.

"Hi there," I chirp pleasantly, bracing myself for a pat down and an interrogation.

He nods and waves me through. I hesitate, thrown off by this turn of events. Rory had insisted the security was intense here. I'd had a whole story planned to get inside, as well as a maneuver to keep anyone from finding my weapon. But this guy doesn't ask who I am or why I'm here.

He probably knows why, I think. One look at my outfit is as good as a declaration. Bet he sees girls like me come through here like ants returning to their nest. And girls like us? We're not threats, we're the reward.

Inside, the main waiting area is lit up by multiple fish-bowl sized lights hanging from the ceiling. There's a curved desk, much larger than the one Iris uses at the parlor. But the woman sitting there with black hair looks so much like her that I falter.

Her smile is big and dazzling and bored, just like the women on their website. "Welcome to Spark's Entertainment. Are you here for an interview?"

"That's right!" I giggle. "Malory Temple, I'm meeting Mr. Caruso at 6."

She scans her laptop, the screen bouncing off her bright blue eyes. "Huh, that's late for our normal interviews."

I hold my smile steady. "Is it?" Hacking into a calendar to insert an interview that

didn't exist before is beyond me, but for Rory? It's a walk in the park. If he took walks, that is. I don't think he likes the sun.

"Let's see... ah! There you are. Have a seat and I'll let him know you're here."

I wait a beat, expecting her to ask for some proof I am who I say I am. She smiles patiently—I spin around before the moment gets weird. No one in here cares.

A horrible thing occurs to me as I sit on the stiff, square couch. If they don't check ID, how do they make sure the girls who come here are at least 18? I bristle at the thought.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:41 pm

I start to cross my legs, then stop when I nudge the gun. As naturally as I can I put my hands on my knees and look around the room. I can't use the burner phone—Jamison is using it to listen—which means I'm left to fidget with my thoughts.

Sanford told me that Caruso hired him to get Valoria's videos. How many other women... or girls... has this happened to? Spark's Entertainment looks legit on the outside, no one could guess how cruel they are.

"Malory?" a husky voice asks.

From his brutal haircut, to his forehead, his short nose, his thick legs... he's one massive block. His hand, which he extends to me as he gets close, looks like you could use it as a meat mallet. "Mr. Caruso?" I ask sheepishly, playing up my ignorance.

His grin widens as he grazes me with his eyes. It's like being rubbed with grease. "Uh oh, I knew you'd be pretty, but I didn't think you'd be this pretty. I'll try to behave myself."

The urge to barf rises. "Thanks," I giggle, trying to look shy instead of disgusted. Rising, I adjust my dress, offering him my hand.

He laces his fingers around mine to pull me close. "Let's go up to my office," he says in my ear, his breath the scalding scent of mouth wash. "We can discuss your future stardom."

Is that what you told Valoria? Or did you not even speak to her, was it all arranged

through Sanford? The rage bubbles up in me. It would be so fucking satisfying to shoot him right here, right now. Would I be caught and go to prison? Definitely.

But it would be worth it to see the grin wiped off his nasty face.

“That sounds great,” I say sweetly. He releases my hand, but my relief is brief, because he swoops it around my waist. “Um—”

“Right this way, babe.” He forces me past the receptionist. She doesn’t look at me, her eyes remain pointedly on her laptop. She knows what he plans to do when we’re alone. She’s been through this many times.

Everyone who works here is complicit. They turn a blind eye to keep cashing their paychecks.

Money is a poison to this world. It brings out the cruel side of everyone.

I learned that from watching my dad cut my mother off from his accounts, choosing to let her suffer when he could easily afford her healthcare.

Men like him and Caruso and Sanford... they’re all grown in the same field.

What a thrill it will be to burn it to the ground.

“Through here,” Caruso tells me, his fingers groping my hip.

“Down this big hallway? To the left?” I ask, narrating where we go. Jamison is listening —if things go sideways, he needs to know where I am.

A large room, similar to the reception, waits at the end of the hall. There's a single door with a brassy name plate printed with Caruso Oakley.

Every hair on my body stands on end as I allow him to nudge me past the door. “This is your office?” I ask, staring around quickly. “Do you share it with anybody?”

“Nope. All mine. This whole half of the building is just for me.” His chuckle is crunchy, like sand under a shoe. “When I started Sparks, I said my one requirement was that I had a quiet place to myself. I need privacy to do my work, you know?”

Another wave of disgusts blasts toxins through my veins. “Totally.”

“A lot of girls come to me and want to show off their skills,” he says, finally releasing me.

I rub my hip like I can wipe away his touch. “You mean you let them audition in here?”

“Let them? I demand it.” Caruso closes the door, then he drops heavily into a large, black leather couch along the wall.

Nearby is a glass table with a silver laptop that’s closed shut.

Against the other wall is a mini fridge and bar stocked with bottles of alcohol.

This place reeks of cheap bragging, nothing about it says high-end recording studio.

He looks me up and down again; he can’t get enough of ogling me. It’s time to lock in and get serious. I cock my hip and flash a smile. “I’m used to guys demanding things.”

“Bet you are,” he chuckles. “Tell me about yourself, Malory.”

“Well, I grew up in Arizona. Always wanted to be a singer.”

“You on TikTok?”

“I was, but a creepy ex-boyfriend got on me about it, said my videos were too sexy, made me delete the account.”

Caruso visibly deflates—he wishes he could see those videos. They don’t exist, but in his mind, they’re scandalous. “How do I know you’ve got what it takes to make it in Hollywood?”

“I can give you a sample,” I say, chewing my bottom lip.

“Yeah?” he asks coyly.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “How soundproof are these walls?”

Caruso glances around with a shrug. “Never got me in trouble before, and I’ve had some... loud sessions.” He actually winks at me.

God, what a sicko. My hand drifts down my dress, pausing on my thigh. I trace the gun hidden beneath and he watches, the knob in his wide throat rolling as he swallows. “You mean I can be as loud as I want, and no one will interrupt us?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Babe.” He spreads his legs, hands splayed on his knees. He stares up at me as I approach; I can see my smiling face in his putrid yellow eyes. “God, you’re fucking beautiful. You know that? I can make us both a lot of money.”

“How much money?” I ask, buying time as I plan out my movements. Removing the gun has to be quick. If I hesitate, or get tangled in my dress, he could overpower me. I refuse to mess this up. It won’t be like Sanford.

Caruso half-shuts his eyes dreamily—he’s staring down at my cleavage. “What’s a

big pay day to you, Malory?”

“Um,” I drift off, unsure how to reply. “I dunno.”

“Pick a number. Any number.”

I have my nails brushing the hilt of the gun. It's all I can focus on, my voice tight, distracted, losing my ditzy character. “A lot, to put up with this job.”

“Excuse me?”

Pausing as what I said sinks in, I offer him a crooked smile. “Oh, um, whoops. I just meant that this job is probably going to be really hard.”

Caruso's lazy expression morphs to one of annoyance. “You think my girls don't like working for me?”

“That's not what I said!”

“It sounds like you need some convincing,” he grumbles. I tense up when he reaches into his pocket; he pulls out an iPhone, typing something before I can react. “There. That should do it.”

“Who did you just text?” I ask warily.

“One of my recent hires, she'll tell you how awesome it is to work with me.”

He said awesome, like he's a 20-something instead of a fifty-something. I cringe mentally. This guy has never had someone tell him how gross or pathetic he is. Money isn't just poison, it's armor. “I don't need to meet anyone,” I insist in a panic, “call her back, tell her it's fine!”

There's a crisp knock. "Too late," he says, looking at the door.

I twist around, unsure what to expect. The knob jiggles, before the door opens, revealing a tall woman in a flowing white skirt and black crop top with matching wedge-boots.

Her blonde hair is like mine, except short and tight against her skull.

She looks like the kind of girl that'd be too cool to be my friend.

Shit, we have company. Did I just mess everything up?

The woman blinks at me curiously. Her eyes are a very clear grey. "When you told me to get in here, I thought you'd be alone," she says in a southern drawl.

Caruso laughs heartily. "Chalay, meet Malory. She's thinking of signing with my company, but she needs an extra push."

"That's not..." I say, fading off.

Chalay tilts her chin up, staring at me down the cute nub of her nose. "Malory? That's you?"

"Yup," I say quickly. "Nice to meet you."

"Malory," she says again. There's a smokiness to her voice, her eyes going from curious to narrowed. Did I upset her somehow? She leans on the door, shutting it. I swear I hear an extra click, like the lock has been engaged.

She swings her hips as she moves towards us—she's got the movement tailored. My attempts earlier were closer to a limping duck when compared.

Reluctantly, I move my hands away from my gun, linking them behind my back with a bright smile. “You’re one of Mr. Caruso’s clients?” I ask.

She doesn’t look at him, she hasn’t stopped watching me. “Not exactly. I work for someone who pays much better.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Caruso laughs. “Is that supposed to be a joke? I didn’t know you had a sense of humor, Chalay.”

My pulse beats faster from the off-putting intensity in her stare. “Um, I think he just wanted you to reassure me that a contract with him would be worth my time.”

“It would be a waste for both of you, actually,” she says.

“The fuck?” Caruso huffs. “Chalay, what’s gotten into you? Hey! Stop ignoring me, what the hell is this?”

Chalay smiles at me with her blood red lips. “How strange to run into you here. I almost didn’t recognize you.” She takes another step.

I back up, but there’s nowhere to go in the office—my hip bumps the mini bar, jingling the glass bottles. “I don’t understand. Do I know you?”

“Oh, sweetie, of course not. That’s the point. If you saw your killer coming, you’d have a chance to escape.”

A bottle of scotch rocks off the mini bar and topples to the floor, shattering in a cascade of glass and bronze liquid.

I scramble to my left, away from Caruso, away from Chalay, hoping I can get to the door.

The back of my throat bubbles with sour terror.

I'd heard that fight or flight gives you strength—lift a car, sprint a mile, those kind of feats.

The fear doesn't make me faster.

“Hey!” I scream when Chalay wraps her hand in my hair, wrenching me around with such force I slam to the floor. Glass cuts my arm, scotch soaking into my dress. Caruso yells something; I'm too busy trying to crawl away from my attacker to hear.

“Whoa whoa, slow down,” Chalay chuckles, her southern drawl long gone.

She kicks a black heeled boot into my shoulder, shoving me to my side.

I grunt in pain, gawking up at her as she stalks closer.

The joy in her face is manic. “I thought I'd have to keep searching for you through this damn city.

What are the chances you'd walk right into my path?

You're really helping me out, Selena. Thanks for that. ”

She knows my name? I reach under my dress for my gun—she kneels on my wrist until a scream rattles out of my mouth. My voice breaks from the pitch; she doesn't try to muffle it. Whoever she is, she doesn't care if I yell until I'm hoarse. She knows the walls are soundproof.

“Easy easy,” she croons once my scream fades into a low groan.

“It's going to be okay.” From the inside of her boot, she slips out a gun smaller than

my own.

The barrel glows a pretty silver in the office lights.

It's cold on my temple. Like a snowstorm.

I haven't felt that kind of weather since I left Alaska. "It'll all be over soon."

"Alph—" I utter, then I wheeze; Chalay has clamped her hand to my throat, strangling me, cutting off my airway. Alphabet, I think in a panic. Spots of color swim in my vision.

Alphabet alphabet alphabet.

I can barely keep my eyes open from the pressure building in my skull. Chalay watches closely; a cat playing with its prey, aware it can snuff out its life anytime it wants.

Please... not like this... not when I'm so close.

This woman is a stranger. But I'm sure of one thing.

She's going to kill me.

End of Part 2