



NO
SAINT

A STANDALONE DARK ROMANCE

RIAWILDE

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NO SAINT

A DARK STANDALONE ROMANCE.

RIA WILDE



*This one's for you, the reader.
Without you, these stories would remain inside my head.*

Now go, Gabriel is waiting...

Author note

No Saint is a dark standalone romance intended for mature readers.

This is a dark mafia romance following a forced marriage theme and contains content some readers may find triggering. This includes a captor/captive romance, graphic sexual content, forced marriage, previous childhood abuse, violence and gore, mentions of alcohol and drug use, attempted SA, anxiety and panic attacks.

Please be aware this book is intended for readers 18+



GABRIEL

My fingers curl at my side, the only emotion that'll show on my body. Rain falls heavily from the heavy thick clouds above, the noise of it echoing in the quiet area beside the water. Shipping vessels float idly on the horizon, bringing in container loads of goods, and ahead of me the crane creaks and groans as the chains turn, spinning on the rotator as the first view of the car breaks the surface of the turbulent water.

The black sedan was barely a car anymore, the body crumpled and crushed, water filling the inside and spilling out the broken windows the higher it is lifted from the water.

There were no bodies inside, but I didn't need to see them to know that they were dead. We would be lucky if we even found a corpse. These waters surrounding the city were deep and turbulent in weather like this and the likelihood of his body still being in this area was slim. He was likely somewhere at the bottom if there was even anything left of him.

Shouts and orders come from the crew as they maneuverer the car

towards the yard, lowering it slowly to ease the burden on the already weakened vehicle.

I watch, nails biting into the palms of my hands. The rain has soaked through my suit, wetting the expensive material, and causing it to stick to my damp skin beneath. It runs down my face, over my eyes and mouth but I do not move or seek shelter from the storm.

Footsteps to my right have me turning my head to the visitor, a man, dressed in a long, beige trench coat jogs towards me, a large umbrella sheltering him from the rain though it does nothing for the spray kicking up from his feet to wet his pants.

“Mr Saint,” he greets, drawing in a breath. I note the brown folder clutched in his hand, held to his chest to protect it from the weather.

I hold out my hand without a word. Hesitantly, the investigator hands it across to me, keeping his fingers curled at the edge as if he didn’t want to hand over the information to me.

Interesting.

“Before I hand this to you, Mr Saint, I’m sure you can understand my worry for the family.”

“They are of no concern to you,” I tell him sternly. I don’t yank the folder or snatch it away, he’ll give it to me, “I trust this has everything I requested and the confirmation I asked for.”

“Yes, sir, they are who you suspected them to be.”

“Good.”

He finally lets go and I tuck the folder into my jacket, holding it there with my arm.

“Walk with me, Mr Garrett.”

The investigator swallows but steps with me, keeping stride as we walk towards the edge of the yard where the water crashes against the concrete blocks beneath. White spray leaps into the air, some crashing onto the ground and running across the concrete, merging with the puddles of rain and sea water already on the ground.

The gravel crunches beneath my shoes as I walk silently to the edge, stopping only when my toes touch the lip of the concrete block. Mr Garrett stops besides me.

He fidgets nervously, his grip on the umbrella handle tight enough that the skin across his knuckles has turned white. The man was scared. As he should be.

“Did you discuss the case with anyone but myself?” I ask.

“No, sir.”

I nod, knowing it was a lie. I hated liars.

He swallows, fidgeting.

Behind me, the car has touched ground, the remaining water inside rushing out and flooding beneath my shoes, bringing with it debris from the ocean, soggy seaweed, and a few small fish flapping uselessly in the shallow water around my feet.

“I...” Mr Garrett stutters, “I wish to terminate our arrangement, Mr Saint.”

“Is that right?” I smirk, casually reaching around to the gun tucked into the back of my pants. He doesn’t notice the move, instead choosing to watch the vessels slowly coming into dock.

“Yes, my wife and I would like to retire. Travel some.”

He wanted to run with the money he received for selling the information within the folder. He’d been in my employ for several years now, he knew how it worked, how I knew everything, *saw* everything. He wasn’t the only investigator on my payroll after all.

I silently click the safety off, raising the gun to the side of his head.

“Mr—” he doesn’t get to complete his sentence before I pull the trigger, silencing him. Blood splatters across my face and over my white shirt but I don’t move to wipe it away while I watch his body tumble lifelessly to the ground, thumping into a puddle, the water turning red.

I don’t have to order the clean-up. Two men step up, hooking concrete blocks to the man’s ankles and wrists before they empty his pockets, placing the wallet, keys, and phone into a bag and then they roll the body, the concrete blocks scraping across the floor. They lift them to the edge, kicking them off and forcing the body to follow. There’re a few seconds before he starts to sink but I continue to watch, feeling absolutely nothing as the body of the investigator begins to sink, down, down he goes, being swallowed by the darkness and to never see the light again.

I pull a tissue from inside my pocket, running it over my face. It comes away red.

“Keep searching,” I tell the men around me, “No one rests until his body is found.” I order, referring to the task that brought me to the yard in the first place. It was an impossible quest, I knew that, but that familial tie that tugs at the grief I refuse to show forces the words from my lips.

They nod but they knew it too.
My brother's body would never be found.
But his secrets, they hadn't been buried with him.



GABRIEL

The car rolls out of the shipping yard slowly, the gravel of the lot crunching beneath the tires and I watch as my men continue to wash away the blood staining the ground. Dragging my eyes from the scene, I bring them down to the folder in my lap before opening to the front page.

Two sets of eyes stare back at me, one pair the color of the sky, a blue so vibrant they appear almost neon against the tanned skin of the woman, the other set, hazel in color, were almost too big for the small face they were looking out from.

The child held all the characteristics, the dark hair and hazel eyes, and the grief I refused to let out twinged inside my chest, reminding me of the pain, of the loss.

I close the folder as the driver pulls out of the yard, joining the heavy traffic of the Marina District. The rain doesn't cease or lighten, it pummels the city of Redhill, California, relentlessly, drenching pedestrians risking the rain and flooding the roads. The air was thick with humidity, a storm brewing with heavy, dark clouds tumbling through the sky just as violently as the

water that crashes against the shores that boarder a large portion of the city.

My driver flows us through the traffic, leaving the Marina District to enter central city, the roads busier, smog and smoke rising from the cars and buildings surrounding us.

Redhill had been the home of the Saints for generations. My great great grandfather immigrated from Italy with his wife, setting up the foundation to what was now the ruling family who owned the majority of the city and some surrounding areas. It came at a heavy price. Corruption ran deep, morals were lost as my family before beat and murdered their way to the top, lining their pockets and that of their family until no one would question who was in charge here.

We held the crowns and the people of this city bowed down to us. The throne now belonged to me. The last true Saint whose blood matched the first Saint that stepped foot in Redhill and claimed it as theirs.

Family was all that mattered. We looked after each other, killed for each other. As long as family stayed at our side we would forever remain on the throne. We controlled the money, the drugs, the guns. The corporations and businesses added to our wealth and in return we beefed them up, kept them running and protected. The cops were on our payroll, the government in our pockets. We ruled it all, pulled the strings, them the puppets and us, the masters.

No one had been able to stop us all those years ago and no one would dare try now. I would kill and keep killing for the family, and that body I put in the marina today wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last.

I would not grieve for my only true brother, the older one of the two of us and the previous ruler of Redhill, until I found who was responsible for his death. The scene appeared like an accident, he lost control of his car, plunged it into the water that surrounded the city, and his body was lost to the sea, but until that was proven, it would be investigated as if we had been crossed. And should I find out someone crossed the Saint family, their punishment would be slow. Torturous. I'd make them wish they were never born by the time I was through with them.

We had plenty of enemies, plenty of people wanted what we had and attempts on our lives were common. They often targeted men like Mr Garrett, paying them for information in hopes they'll snag something to use against us. It wasn't common that the men I employ turn, but when they do...

It was why he was dead. He crossed us by selling what was in this folder

to one of those families to use against us, which one, I didn't know yet. But I'd remain one step ahead. I always did.

Pulling out of central Redhill, the driver navigates through the streets, taking me towards the beach front where golden sands stretched out for miles, the sea crashing against the shore as the rain and wind tempered the ocean before climbing the hill. My house sat on a cliffside, overlooking the water on one side and the city on the other. I could see the whole city from my balcony, I could see the kingdom that had been built on blood, sweat and tears.

The car comes to a stop in the circular courtyard in front of the large, mostly glass building, the lights within glowing softly as staff meander through the halls and in the many rooms of the property. I see Atlas, my half-brother waiting in the foyer, his head angled down, reading something on his phone.

It was a difficult relationship between us, including his twin, Asher. Born from my father's infidelity, they had a right to the family business but could never rule. My ancestors had placed rules and laws that only we abided by, children born outside of a marriage from adultery were punished. Given roles but never the crown. Atlas and Asher were destined to simply be pawns for me to use.

There were other rules, passed down to each generation and we all knew them, including my dead brother, yet he kept that secret and ignored those laws that had strengthened this family through the years.

Some of them may be archaic, but they were there for a reason, even if they made no sense to someone on the outside.

Clutching the folder, I climb from the car when my door is opened for me, the driver standing and waiting for me to enter the house before he climbs back in and drives away.

Atlas glances up to me where he lingers, pocketing the phone as his eyes drop to the folder. A crease forms between his brows but he knew what was inside. All the ones closest to me did.

"Take a visit to Mr Garrett's wife," I order, "Find out what she knows and then dispose of her." I don't bother to wait for his obedience, he'll comply and do as I ask.

I find my mother in the kitchen, but my other half-brother was nowhere in sight. She sees the folder, eyes lighting, "And?"

I nod once and she sags in the chair, relief washing through her, "And

Lucas?”

“His car was pulled from the Marina this morning.”

Grief crumbles her features, tears instantly welling to her dark eyes as her hand clutches her chest, “No.”

“His body has yet to be recovered.”

“There’s still hope,” she whispers, her voice thick.

I doubted it. Lucas had been missing for three weeks already, his car only just discovered. He wouldn’t have stayed away, he wouldn’t have ran, and if he had, I’d have to kill him myself.

But Lucas was dead, there was no other alternative.

But I understood her grief and her denial, her eldest child was dead, and she hadn’t said goodbye. I place a hand on her shoulder and lay the folder in front of her. Perhaps this would help bring her closure while I figured out what to do with this new information.

The child in that photo belonged to my brother, he became a father sixteen months ago. He knew about the child and chose to keep it from us, leaving the mother to raise the child alone with the child holding the wrong last name.

The boy belonged to the Saints.

He was the next generation.

And I would have him.



AMELIA

I was running late. I glance at the clock on the dash of my car, I had a little over ten minutes to make it six miles across the city in rush hour traffic. It didn't seem possible.

Not when the cars ahead of me were at a standstill, horns blasting and shouts echoing though the noise which does nothing to move the traffic on. I don't know how I lost track of time, the bar where I worked was busy, busier than usual for a weekday and I'd been rushed off my feet, same as the other girls that worked there. If it hadn't been for Julia practically screaming at me to leave, I'd likely still be there, serving drink and food to the suits that wandered in for dodgy business meetings and backhanded deals. The bar wasn't exactly the most upstanding place in the city and the suits only came during the day in the week.

I ignored it mostly. I was no stranger to the darker side of life and didn't care much whether what they were doing was illegal or not.

The engine of my beat up chevy sputters, blowing out a plume of black smog from the exhaust as the wipers stick halfway up the screen, not able to

clear the water falling against it. It had heavily rained all day, and if I couldn't get these damn wipers to work, it didn't matter if I was late because I wouldn't be able to see where I was going.

I lean over the steering wheel and slam my fist down hard, forcing the wipers to move an inch, I do it twice more and they finally unstick, clearing the window.

I roll my tires forward in the traffic, but I was still stuck, just like everyone else.

I couldn't afford the late pick-up fee the daycare would charge me for this.

"Move!" my voice joins the chorus of other angry and impatient people, not sure what or who I was shouting at but feeling better, nonetheless. Screaming always helped.

I reach across to my phone, dialing the nursery to let them know. I'd have no choice but to pay the fee if I wanted to keep Lincoln there. I'd have to figure out where I would take the money from. Food wasn't an option now my son was eating more than just pureed vegetables, but I guess with summer now upon us, the heating could come off with the days warming up ready for the height of the season. Nights still got a little chilly in the apartment, but I could keep us warm until the temperatures evened out.

Sighing, I tell the nursery I'll be late, holding my tongue when they explain the fees and then hang up, slumping in the chair as the car crawls through the traffic.

Thirty minutes later I pull the car into the lot outside the daycare, jogging through the rain into the building. The young girl at the reception desk smiles and calls back for them to bring my son through.

My whole mood lightens the moment my eyes land on him. He giggles, dimples sinking into his chubby cheeks, hazel eyes bright and innocent. He mumbles and gurgles and the moment he sees me, he thrashes in the woman's arms, trying to get to me. I take him instantly, wrapping my arms around him and placing him on my hip as I pepper his face with kisses. After signing off on the fees to go on the invoice, I leave the daycare.

I was thankful it was my day off tomorrow, today had been stressful and this just added to it, plus, I wanted to spend time with my boy.

Being a single mother was tough. Nothing was ever good enough. There was never enough time.

But I made do.

And I had no regrets with the life I chose to lead.

Sure, I wish things could be different, but wishes are for children and reality was cruel.

I place Lincoln into the car seat in the back, strapping him up. He giggles as I tickle my fingers against his belly, smiling down at his sweet little face until a warning shiver runs down my spine. Stiffening, I finish securing him in and straighten, glancing over my shoulder.

Growing up and having the experiences I had, I wasn't fool enough to ignore my intuition.

Rain wets my hair and soaks my clothes, but I don't move as I scan the area around me, looking down each street I can see and in the lot I'm parked in. I don't see anyone, but that doesn't mean they aren't there.

I had chosen this daycare because it was in a quieter, nicer area of the city. It was more expensive, but it was better than the ones closer to the bar I worked in and where we lived. I didn't care about the distance if it meant my son was cared for and safe.

I don't rush or run to the driver door; I didn't want to draw attention to myself. Starting the car, I hold my breath as the engine ticks, threatening not to start but then it catches and I back out, sliding into the traffic. I keep an eye on my rear-view mirrors, making sure I'm not being followed.

Most would call it paranoia, I call it survival.

It had been months since I last saw anyone from my previous life, but I doubted they'd forget about me. They were cruel, and unforgiving, and spiteful enough to try and fool me into a false sense of security only to come and try and take it from me again.

The last two years have been the only years I've been free in a way. I was no good to them pregnant and after my son was born, I'd finally learned to stand up for myself, telling them no and running from them. I would save my son from them. I wouldn't allow him to grow up in an environment like that.

I drive carefully through the city, towards the city centre where my apartment was on the lower end, close to the Marina District.

It wasn't a well-cared for building, owned by a hideously corrupted landlord who would rather snort his money up his nose over paying for much needed repairs to the building. But it was cheap, and I couldn't afford anything else.

It's growing darker by the time I pull into the lot outside the apartment building, the rain still falling in torrents, the clouds tumbling through the sky.

It was much warmer than it had been, despite the weather, but there would be enough of a chill inside to make living uncomfortable. The windows had blown the seals long before I'd moved in and there had always been a draft though I could never figure out where it was coming from.

Taking Lincoln from the seat, I slide his bag onto my shoulder and start towards the front doors, curling my body over his to protect him from the rain.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as that same inclination of being watched runs over my body. Swallowing, I head inside, taking the stairs quickly. Once inside the apartment, I double lock the door and slide the bolt across for extra measure. The landlord would likely charge me for the extra security I'd placed on the door when I moved out, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Placing Lincoln down in the playpen set up in the living room, I switch on the old TV that was missing pixels and had a crack down one side, disturbing the cartoon playing on the screen. Loud, happy music plays into the living room, distracting Lincoln enough for me to head through to the kitchen.

I glance out the window that looks out into the front of the building. These streets were always busy, cars and people never far and that was no different today. No one stood out.

Sighing, I run a tired hand down my face. I refused to believe it was paranoia.

I wasn't over-reacting.

Shaking my head, I quickly wash up the dishes from the previous night I hadn't managed to get round to this morning and then begin dinner, boiling some pasta on the stove and cooking some chicken in a pesto and cream sauce for Lincoln and me to share.

When that's ready, I pluck Lincoln off the floor and place him in the highchair at the table and take the space next to him.

He's a mess in minutes, pasta and cream in his dark hair and smeared across his face. I didn't expect anything less. I eat in silence watching him use his tiny hands like mini shovels to stuff the food everywhere but in his mouth.

After finishing our food and washing up, I get Lincoln ready for bed and join him on the couch, cradling him to my chest while a rerun of some sitcom plays on the TV. It was dark now, the rain still hammering against the

window. My son curls into me, snuggling his face against my chest as I rock him to sleep.

It had only ever been me and him, he was all I cared about now.

It doesn't take him long to fall asleep against me and while I'd usually place him down now, I choose instead to drag an old blanket from the back of the couch and drape it over us as I make myself comfortable on the sofa, keeping him warm with my body heat and the blanket now that I had to keep the heating off.

He doesn't stir as I shift and get comfortable, telling myself it's only for an hour and then I'll put him down and get some rest myself.

He snores quietly and I feel my eyes getting heavier the longer I stay there, and I'm just drifting off when a loud boom shatters the silence of the apartment.

I bolt upright, waking Lincoln who instantly begins to cry and turn to the door in time to see the locks shatter as someone fires a gun from the other side, shooting out the latches.

A scream gets lodged in my throat, but I don't dare make a noise. I scurry from the living room, rushing to the back of the apartment and the one bedroom in the place. Lincoln cries and I try to soothe him, but fear and panic makes my voice shake and tears sting my eyes.

I should have left the city. I shouldn't have stayed.

I wanted to get enough money together first, but I realize that was a mistake. I should have known they would come for me, that they wouldn't let me go.

My stepfather was an evil man, and I was about to find out just how far I was prepared to go to protect my son.

GABRIEL

I hadn't planned to kill anyone else today but there was little choice in the matter, just like I hadn't planned on taking the boy so soon but with the threat now very obvious to me, he would be leaving with me tonight.

I dispose of the bodies, leaving them behind the building and dialing through for clean up to deal with it. While I didn't give a fuck if someone found them, I knew leaving bodies lying around could draw unwanted attention. All it took was someone outside of my payroll to report to the wrong authorities and I'd have a whole damn case on my hands, and getting my hands dirty with the feds wasn't something I wanted to deal with.

I'd been following her all afternoon, watching her routine, seeing her at the bar, working and then with her son in the daycare parking lot. I'd followed her back to her apartment and sat in my car, watching up at the second story window.

She peered out only moments after returning home, searching the lot. I'd planned on leaving but something in me rooted me to the spot and it had only been a couple of hours later when the hitmen arrived to take her and the boy

out.

The investigator had sold the information on the woman and her son, and my enemies were here to ensure I didn't get hold of the next generation that would keep them beneath my thumb.

They didn't see me coming. My crew confirm people are on the way to deal with the mess as I head through the doors of the building, taking the stairs silently. I would usually send Atlas or Asher to handle it, kill the girl, take the kid, it was easy, but I wasn't going to leave her now and I didn't have the patience to wait for either one of the twin brothers.

I'm silent as I take the stairs to her floor, my gun clutched in my hand and I pause, listening for sounds on the other side.

I hear the TV but nothing else, so I level my gun with the handle, shooting out the lock before I try on the door. It doesn't budge.

The loud cry of a baby sounds a second later.

Scanning the door as I push, I note the door snagging with a lock in the top corner. I level my gun and shoot it out.

The door swings freely open and I get a look inside. It was the small living room I come into first, the TV continuing to play in the dark room that only housed a couch and a playpen filled with children toys, the old TV, cracked down one side sits on top of a metal crate that looks to have been found behind a dumpster.

It was clean at least but I still curl my lip. The wallpaper peels from the walls and the carpet was worn in more places than not. I can see the entire kitchen from where I stand and find it empty, bowls used hours before piled next to the sink.

Slowly, I creep down the only hall, pushing on the first door to see it open to a small empty bathroom leaving only one more room to go into, directly ahead of me. The baby cries, giving away their position though it's calmer now, likely in his mother's arms as she rocks him, trying to convince the child all would be fine.

It would not be, at least not for her.

I raise my weapon, reaching for the handle. I couldn't blindly fire with the risk of harming the baby. My hand moves slow as I turn the knob and push open the final door with a creak.

Darkness greets me right before something – no – *someone* lunges at me with a bat. I duck just in time to avoid a swing to the head, the heavy wooden bat slamming into the wall hard enough to leave a hole.

“Get the fuck out of my apartment,” she screams, “get out!”

She swings with the force of her entire body, which isn't a lot when she's at least half my size. I dodge the blow again and when she raises it to swing once more, I reach out and grab it.

“Who are you!?” She cries, trying to tug the thing back.

I could fire now, shoot her in the stomach and yet I don't. I glare down into her pretty face, seeing those wide blue eyes and mess of dark hair. There was fear etched into every line of her face, of her body but it was nothing in comparison to the fierce protectiveness and anger that keeps her fighting me.

A smarter woman would have gotten on her knees and begged for mercy.

I snatch the bat from her and step into her, forcing her to retreat though she doesn't go far. She allows one step into the room but then she screams and pushes on me, forcing me back one. It was a dance of strength, of mercy, of her protecting her son and me trying to get him.

“Do you truly believe you can win against me?” I ask quietly, her fists pounding into my chest. She pauses, staring up into my face before she suddenly strikes and punches me in the jaw.

My dark chuckle stills her, and her breath gets lodged in her throat. I wipe the small trickle of blood from the corner of my mouth, looking at the bead of crimson on the end of my finger with curiosity.

She made me bleed.

Snapping out of her paralysis, she throws her fist again but misses, and then she turns and runs, slamming the bedroom door in my face before I can follow.

With a sigh, I push it back open, stepping inside and flicking the light on.

I find her in the corner of the room, her body curled around the child, using her own to protect him. The view made me pause.

I'd seen a lot in my life. I'd seen mothers and fathers sacrifice their children to save themselves, seen them sell them for money, betray them for power. In this life, apart from my own family, I don't see true loyalty. I don't see ferocity to protect the lives of those they love. Not like this. She would die for her son, not because I'd already ordered her death, but because it was the only one that would allow me to get him. I would not be able to walk out of here with that child if she still breathed.

“Please,” her voice cracks, “He's my son. Don't hurt him.”

“I'm not here to hurt him, *leonessa*.” Lioness. It was the only word I could use to describe the fiery woman. “Hand him over.”

“Over my dead body,” she spits, forcing the child further behind, despite the wailing coming from the boy.

I cross the space between us, levelling my gun and resting the barrel between her eyes. She sucks in a breath, but it isn't fear that causes her stutter but pure hatred as she glares up at me.

“*La morte non viene per te oggi, Amelia,*” I murmur the words, watching her brow draw down against the gun in confusion at the language. She doesn't stand a chance at reacting before I swing the butt of the gun and land it against her temple, knocking her unconscious. “Death will not come for you today.” I repeat in English, staring down at her body sprawled on the floor before drawing my eyes to the child. He weeps uncontrollably, eyes swollen, face red and wet. Leaning down, I pluck him from the ground, holding him as I scan over his face, seeing all the Saint characteristics in his amber eyes and dark hair. He belonged to me now and the mother... she was mine now too.

I spend a few minutes calming the child, the tiny human cradled in my arms as I gently rock him back and forth. He'd cried enough to make himself tired, but he was wary, unsure, even as small as he is, he understood the dangers of strangers which was reassuring at least. I hadn't much experience with children, but I'd seen them dealt with plenty of times. It was easy really, especially when calmed enough for his eyes to close and for him to relax, falling asleep. I lay him down on the small bed in the centre of the room before I pull out the phone and call Asher. He picks up on the first ring.

“Yeah?”

I rattle off Amelia's address, “Get here now. You've got ten minutes.”

I hang up, not caring whether he was in the middle of something or not. He would be the better option of the two brothers to deal with this mess should the mother wake up. Atlas was a heartless son of a bitch at the best of times.

He was much like me in the sense but where I suppose I had some sense of feeling, my half brother lacked any of it.

I crouch down at the side of the mother, Amelia, and move some of her dark hair from her face. A thin trail of blood rolls down the side of her face where I hit her, but she remains out cold, sprawled across the floor. Gently, I move her limbs and slide her onto her back before stepping away and rummaging through her drawers within the house until I come across duct tape. I bring her wrists around the front of her body before I wrap the tape

around her hands, holding them together on her stomach. I do the same on her ankles.

She wore only a small pair of shorts and a large t-shirt that hid her tiny frame. She was stunning, in a way that drew the eye and held it. Pouty dusty pink lips and olive toned skin, deep brunette locks that fell in waves around her face. There was a light dusting of freckles across her nose, the color of them almost identical to the hue of her skin but this close I could see the varying colors across her face. I gently grip her chin, forcing her head up right and keeping it there so I can study her harder.

Very pretty.

The tips of my fingers push against her bottom lip, pushing into the warm plump flesh before I let my hand trail down the front of her throat. The delicate lines of her contradict the woman I just faced.

Sighing, I drop my hand and do a quick check on the kid before I move to the window, watching for the SUV Asher will come in. It's five minutes later I spot the lights of the vehicle cutting through the rain and pulling to a stop next to my car parked at the back.

He climbs out, jogging across the lot and disappears into the building. I have no need to open the door for him.

"Gabriel?" He calls, his weapon in front of him, aimed at the ground but ready to be used.

"Put it away," I order, coming to face him in front of the door that hides the two sleeping bodies inside. I'd already found her car keys in a bowl in the kitchen so I throw them over to him, "Go out to the chevy and take the car seat from the back, fit it into the back of mine."

"Excuse me?"

I cock a brow, patience slipping, "Is there a problem?"

He lifts his hands in surrender and does as I ask before coming back through, shaking the water from his hair like a dog. I nod and push the door open, showing the kid first, still sleeping on the bed. "Pack a bag of the kid's things, clothes, diapers, whatever you can find."

"Shit, Gabriel," Asher breathes.

"Asher!" I demand.

He jumps into action while I walk over to the bed, glancing down to the woman still unconscious at the side of the bed. When Asher is complete, I grimace at how small the bag is even though I can see the drawers and wardrobe are empty of all belongings. I hand him the child.

He recoils.

I quirk a brow, “It’s a baby not a snake.”

“I’m not scared of snakes.”

I roll my eyes, “Take it.”

Curling his lip and hoisting that bag higher on his shoulder, he takes the child from me, cradling him stiffly, “Where his mo—” his words cut off as I lean down and slip one arm beneath her knees, the other under her waist and haul her from the ground. Her head rolls back, neck bent at an awkward angle that would leave her neck muscles aching in the morning.

He doesn’t question it. Doesn’t ask why she’s coming when that was never the plan. He knew better and I had no idea what the fuck I was going to do with her anyway.

The other residents remain inside their homes, knowing they have no place to intervene here. I take her to the car, waiting as Asher straps the kid into the back and then I hand the woman over. “Place her in the back of the SUV. Make sure she remains restrained, if she wakes, she’ll have your throat.”

He scoffs but I shake my head, part of me hoping he bears witness to a mother’s wrath.

The kid remains asleep while I navigate the car through the dark and now quiet streets of my city, steadily taking it up the hill towards the mansion on the cliffside, Asher following closely behind. The rain has finally eased some, the wind settling though a glance to the left shows the seas still as turbulent as they were before, crashing against the shore and the side of a cliff as if angry with the world.

I bring the car to a stop.

My mother was still here, still obsessing over the folder I’d left her with previously and now I was going to give her something else to ease the pain I knew was eating her alive.

A part of Lucas that still lived.

His son.

GABRIEL

It didn't take long for a room to be set up for the child. I had furniture delivered by the following morning, a crib and mattress, bedding to keep him warm and enough clothes to last him through to his fifth birthday. My mother took control of the necessities, diapers, wipes, medical supplies and having experienced dealing with babies all her life, she took over the care of the child the moment I handed him to her.

He took to her much quicker than he did me, cooing and giggling up at her as she played with him on the living room floor the following morning, watching the clouds start to part to reveal blue skies. I'd instructed our resident doctor to give a sedative to Amelia to keep her out for at least twenty-four hours. I had a damn headache and I wasn't ready to unleash a banshee in my house because I knew it was coming.

I should have killed her.

It was the easier option.

I'd even gone into the room I'd imprisoned her in, rested that gun against her head while she remained out cold, the duct tape I'd restrained her with

replaced with the rope, tying both her arms and legs to the bed.

I held it there for minutes. *Minutes.*

Far longer than it has ever taken me before to pull the trigger. She didn't stir. She didn't move but her lips parted, and she sighed, and I took my finger off the weapon, I put it away and I watched her. I watched her as she slept for two hours, seeing the steady and easy rise and fall of her chest, watching her dark lashes flutter as she dreamed.

Though I doubt they were pleasant.

I sat in that darkened room until my mother came and found me, forcing me to leave the sleeping woman to join her in the kitchen before I took myself to bed rather than sitting in that room again which I wanted to do.

I was drawn to her.

I wanted to witness that fire.

That temper.

I wanted her awake and fighting, I wanted to see it.

I was used to demure women, women who got down on their knees when told and said all the right things. I had a feeling Amelia Doyle was as far from demure and innocent as they could get, and I wanted to taste it. Witness it.



Sleep came and went and when I woke in the morning, the mother was still out cold thanks to the sedative in her system.

That's when I found my mother playing with the child in the living room, an arrangement of plush toys and musical ones scattered around my floor and a half-eaten bowl of porridge discarded on the coffee table.

My mother beams at me when I enter, her hand outstretched while Lincoln plays with her fingers, touching the sparkling diamonds that adorn her hand and the bracelet that hangs from her wrist.

I leave her to it, taking myself out of there and into the kitchen for coffee. It was earlier, the sun cresting the horizon and setting fire to the now much calmer ocean. Boats sail across the water, either heading into the docks or leaving them but the city was waking below, getting ready for another day.

After a few minutes of staring out the window, my resident chef interrupts, "Would you like breakfast, sir?"

I shake my head but then turn to him, “Can you make a full continental?” I ask.

“I can.”

“Make one. And a bowl of fresh fruit. With orange juice.”

“Yes, sir.”

I leave him to making the breakfast while I get in a quick work out and shower before dressing in my suit for the day, straightening every crisp edge and tucking my weapons into the designated places. I never left the house without them.

I smell the breakfast as I exit my bedroom.

Downstairs I find the chef plating up the food onto a tray as I asked, sliding it towards me. I take it before any of the staff can, going up one flight and down the right wing of the house where I’ve left her. Pausing at the door I wait for any sound and when I hear the bed creak, the movement of her body I know she’s either awake or will be any minute now.

I push on the door, opening it.

She lays in the centre of the bed, my staff had already come in and opened the curtains, knowing to ignore whatever they see within these rooms, even poor girls strapped to beds.

I place the tray of food on the dresser, turning to see her bathed in the early morning light of the sun. It touches her skin like a caress, making her glow. With the sun on her I see the different colors in her hair, the deep shades mixed with some dark blondes and those freckles pop in the light. She stirs, trying to move her arms and legs but struggles, and in her half sleeping state can’t figure out why she can’t move.

It was erotic in a way it shouldn’t have been.

Seeing her so restricted, her chest heaving as her breathing increases with her panic, seeing her legs move, thighs pinching together, arms thrashing. I could feel myself getting hard in my pants.

Slowly, I move across the room, stopping at the edge of the bed where I then reach down and allow myself to touch. My hand smooths down her exposed thigh, feeling that silky soft skin, warm and inviting. I keep moving, following the curves of her legs all the way down to her ankle and then back up, feathering my touch over her stomach, between her breasts and up her throat, following the hard, sharp line of her jaw.

If perfection could be personified, I’d have it in front of me.

I didn’t know how I didn’t see it before.

She stirs beneath my fingers and then those sky blue eyes pop open and they find me immediately.

For long seconds, silence fills the space between us, my hand against her cheek and her memories flooding back from the night before. The fight, the struggle...

I'm ready when she swings her head to the side and snaps her teeth towards my hand as if to bite.

"You're a little feral," I tell her, keeping my fingers from her teeth, "But I'm sure you can be tamed."

"Where is my son!?" She screeches, thrashing wildly against her restraints, hard enough that the fibers cut into her skin, causing blood to flow. If it pained her, she doesn't show it. Not as she moves and pulls, trying to free herself.

"Stop," I command, seeing that blood snaking its way across her skin, smearing against her flesh and soaking into the sheets beneath her.

She doesn't. She continues to pull, trying to get free, like a wild animal trapped in a cage.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," She vows.

I had no doubt if she could, she'd serve my balls on a plate and force them down my throat.

"Where is my son!?" She demands, eyes burning with hate and rage.

I cup her chin, keeping my fingers from her teeth, "He is safe."

"Give him back!" She orders, "Right now."

"I can't do that, *leonessa*,"

She curls her lip back, "I am going to kill you."

"I'm sure you'd like to."

"Who are you!?"

"My name is Gabriel Saint."

She blanches.

So, she understood where she was then. Who the father of her son was. Lucas had kept her and the boy a secret and I wanted to know why.

"Explain your relationship with my brother." I demand.

She presses her lips together, scowling.

"I am not a patient man, Amelia." I warn, "I have asked a question, I expect an answer."

"Fuck you." She spits.

I feel my lips tug up into a cruel smile, "There are ways I can force you to

talk,” I tell her, “Though it would be such a shame to cut up all this pretty skin.”

“You think your threats will work on me,” she laughs, “Try again, asshole.”

She really was a little lioness. Beautiful. *Deadly*.

I cock my head and walk across the room to the plate of food I had ordered for her, “I suspect you’re hungry.”

She narrows those pretty blue eyes.

I carry over the bowl of fruit and orange juice.

“Where is my son.” She demands once more.

“Safe.”

“*Where!?*”

“In this house, right now.”

“Bring him to me.”

“No.”

She growls at me.

I smile, that arousal of already watching her thrash against the restraints heightening to almost pain.

“How did you meet my brother?”

It didn’t matter, really, knowing the how and why. He was dead. She was not and his son was playing in my living room downstairs. They weren’t together as far as I could tell though I doubted it would stop me if I acted on impulse and fucked her like my cock begged me to.

I could just imagine how she would scream. How she would moan my name and cry for mercy.

I clear my throat, waiting for her answer.

“A bar.”

“What bar?”

“I don’t know,” she huffs, trying to cross her arms and then realizing she can’t, “one down near the marina.”

I stab the fork into a piece of melon and lift it to her mouth, pressing the fruit to her lips. She doesn’t open.

She jerks her head away, “Bring me my son!”

I grab her chin and press the food to her mouth, “Eat.”

With no other option she opens her mouth and closes her lips around the fruit, taking it from the fork as I bring it back. I nod in praise a moment too soon as she spits it out with force, throwing the fruit from her mouth in my

direction.

It hits me in my face.

I don't have time to think, my body moves before I instruct it to and I have her pinned to the bed, the whole of my body forcing all of hers into the mattress.

“That was a mistake, *leonessa*, a big one.”



AMELIA

All of him presses against all of me as he glares down at my face, rage simmering in his eyes. I doubted he was very used to people talking back to him, especially since he, quite literally, kidnapped me. His hand wraps threateningly around my throat, fingers biting but not cutting off my air supply.

My chest squeezes, heart battering against my ribcage so hard I was sure he would feel my pulse thumping in my neck.

My son was somewhere in this house, with these strangers. Who was watching him? One of his brutes that he employed? I had to figure out a way of getting to him, of getting us out of here.

I knew Lincoln's father was a Saint. I knew it and still slept with him. It was one night and after so long of not getting something I wanted, I decided to take it. He was warm to me, kind even, despite his reputation and the blood on his hands. He didn't force anything or take anything I wasn't willing to give. Then we parted ways and I never saw him again.

I was three months pregnant when I found out I was carrying his child. I

told no one. When people ask about Linc's father I tell them it was a one night hook up and we never exchanged details. The sordid looks were better than telling them who he really was.

There was a reason the Saints were the rulers of Redhill, and they didn't get to their position using the kindness of their hearts. They killed and stole and manipulated their way to their thrones, corrupting everyone in their path.

I didn't want to be a part of that life, and I didn't want my son having it either. So, I never told him. Not that I ever had a chance to, I never saw him again after that one night of sex.

How these people know about Lincoln and me, I don't know. I'd underestimated them and seeing Gabriel last night, even if I didn't recognize the infamous youngest Saint right away, I knew having him there was far worse than my stepfather or any one of his cronies.

I had never anticipated the Saints finding out about Lincoln.

I struggle uselessly beneath Gabriel's weight, the ropes binding me to the bed cutting further into my skin, my flesh already wet and slippery from the blood that already stains my wrists and ankles, soaking into the bedsheets under them.

I didn't want to die, I didn't want my son being raised without his mother but it was the only way these people were going to stop me from getting to him. I will fight. I will kill if I must. They will not keep me from him.

"You keep fighting me, *leonessa*," he growls, tightening his fingers, "do you want to die?"

"You will not keep me from him!" My voice is strained beneath his hand. He could quite easily end me, and my name would just be one of many these hands have wiped out of existence. I was nothing. No one. He wanted my son for the blood he shares with him. "Where is Lucas?" I ask, narrowing my eyes, "Is he the one taking care of *my* son?"

"Do you care for my brother?" He asks instead of answering. He still rests atop me though the weight has shifted slightly, not as heavy as it once was though the reprieve was a contrast to the hand banded around my neck.

"No."

"Is that why you kept his son from him?"

I scoff, "It isn't like he would have cared," I snipe, "but even if I wanted to tell him, I couldn't, we didn't exchange details and I never saw him again. I would have been stupid to go looking for him."

He lets go, releasing me and rising.

“Is that what this is about?” I ask, pulling on the ropes, “he wants me dead because I didn’t tell him about Lincoln?”

“Lucas is dead.”

The breath I was taking gets stuck in my throat.

“What?” I manage to stutter.

“He’s dead and I am claiming what he should have a long time ago. That boy belongs to the Saints, Amelia, you’ve kept him from us for long enough.”

“He is a child, not a possession and you have no right to him!”

“Do you think Lucas didn’t know?” He asks, his mouth twisting harshly. “You think you would have been able to keep him?”

“Then where was he?” I challenge.

“Lucas knew all about Lincoln, had files on you and him, watched you, waited. He would have taken the child eventually, would you have stopped him?”

“I would have killed him,” I lie.

He scoffs, “Is that right, *leonessa*?”

He’d called me that a few times now, though I didn’t know what it meant.

“Please,” I beg, “Please just bring me my son.”

He watches me curiously, eyes moving from my face to my wrists and then back again. He says nothing as he spins and exits, slamming the door behind him.

Tears sting my eyes as silence settles around me. My heart thumps wildly inside my chest, blood roaring in my ears. The first of the tears fall, running down my temples and into my hairline and now the adrenaline is wearing off, I feel the pain in my body, the sting of the cuts at my wrists and the throb in my head from where he hit me.

My thoughts are filled with Lincoln. What if I never see him again?

What if they kill me and he forgets about me? Would they tell him about me? About the mother who tried her best but wasn’t quite good enough. About the woman who tried, *tried* to keep him protected from her past and this way of life.

I wanted to shield him from it but perhaps that was hopeless. I supposed being a Saint wasn’t the worst thing that could happen. He would be looked after. He’d have a bed and warmth and wouldn’t question where his next meal would come from or if someone from my past would come along and rip him away.

Though it still hurt to know he would be raised without me. That I wouldn't see him grow up.

I turn my head quickly when the door opens so they don't see my tears.

Whoever it is pauses there but I keep myself turned away from them, willing myself to stop the tears, stop the pain.

Without a word they cross the space between us, hovering at the edge of the bed before leaning down and untying the rope at my wrist. My head snaps around to find a man next to the bed. He was young but held a wealth of knowledge in those grey eyes of his.

"These look sore," he says to me, eyes bouncing to mine before they track the tears down my face.

"Who are you?"

"Devon Cross," he answers.

"You work for him." I accuse.

"I do."

He opens a case at the side of the bed, holding my wrist steady as he brings out supplies. I snatch my hand away from him, ready to hit him as hard as I can in an attempt to escape, but he holds it tight, painfully, fingers digging into that raw skin around my wrist. He glares at me, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "I may be a doctor, Miss Doyle but these hands have taken as many lives as they have saved. Do not push me."

I freeze, wincing when he flexes his fingers, pushing into my bruised and broken skin.

"I want to see my son." I demand.

He smirks.

"Do you hear me, asshole!?"

"You're quite rude considering I'm the only one here trained to take away your pain."

I scoff, "I don't want your help."

"Well, you're getting it regardless."

He holds me tight while he finishes getting out what he needs and then he places his bag down and sits on the bed, bringing my arm in front of him and in a position so I can't see what he is doing.

I chew the inside of my cheek to stop myself from running my mouth and then hiss through my teeth when he puts something cold and wet against my skin that feels as if he's just placed an open flame there.

He continues as if I didn't make a noise at all, rubbing whatever it is into

the wound around my wrist. He isn't gentle either.

I grit my teeth and keep my mouth shut. He finishes that and I feel him begin to wrap cloth around my wrist that I soon realize is a white bandage, hiding the wounds underneath it.

"I would try and keep still and not fight," the doctor continues.

"Have you ever been tied to a bed and threatened?" I snap.

"Yes."

I shake my head, "And you expect me not to fight every chance I get?"

The side of his mouth tips up before moving onto my next wrist. I don't make a sound this time, keeping my teeth gritted even when the sting becomes unbearable.

"You'll live," Devon says as he packs away the medical supplies.

"For now." I grumble.

"If Gabriel wanted you dead, Miss Doyle, you would be already."

"Then what does he want?"

His eyes do a once over of my body, now restrained back to the damn bed, "Your guess is as good as mine."

"You can't keep my son from me," I hiss.

"We can do just about anything." He starts for the door. "Enjoy your stay, Amelia." His dark chuckle lingers long after he's exited and closed the door behind him.

I lay there in the middle of the bed in complete silence, I hear nothing from the rest of the house, no voices or music or footsteps. I don't hear my sons laugh or the little pitter patter of his feet. My heart was cracking. I could feel it. And being kept from him, knowing he's with them, it was worse than death.

I can't sleep.

Food doesn't interest me.

I needed my son.

GABRIEL

I stand at the door, watching the child in the living room. He waddles around, pulling cushions from seats and launching toys, his giggle echoing in the quiet house.

It was the loudest it had been in years. Footsteps draw my eyes to the stairs to see Devon sauntering down, his bag swinging. He quirks a brow when he sees me.

“Will you explain now why you have the boy’s mother locked in a room?”

I don’t answer, instead choosing to watch the boy again. My nephew and final piece of Lucas.

My mother was ecstatic to have the boy.

“Have you treated her?” I ask.

“I have,” Devon crosses his arms, “Gabriel, you can’t keep her locked up.”

“Why can’t I?” I snap.

He raises his brows, “Is that your plan? For what reason?”

“The boy needs a mother.” I lie.

I had had every intention of killing her and just taking the boy. He would have forgotten about her eventually and we would have raised him. It was quite simple and yet I hadn’t done that at all, and while I lacked basic compassion most of the time, keeping her locked up and away from her son was unnecessarily cruel.

Devon scoffs, “Sure he does.”

“Careful, Cross,” I warn, “I hadn’t asked for your opinion on the matter and quite frankly, I’m lacking the patience to deal with it.”

He holds his hands up and quirks a brow, “It’s your cock on the line,” he shrugs, “Not mine.”

So, she’d shown him her feisty side. Why did that make me feel hot and angry? Of course, she would fight him and anyone else who walked into that room, her ire wasn’t just for me even if I did like to watch her get all riled up.

I had a decision to make.

-

It was dark by the time I ventured back up to that room. My steps are quiet as I move and gently, I push open the door, standing for a moment.

The boy in my arms stirs but settles again a second later.

Amelia’s eyes land on me instantly, red from tears with dark shadows circling beneath from exhaustion.

“Lincoln,” she breathes, ignoring me as she keeps her gaze, never wavering from the sleeping child.

I make my way over to her. She seems to hold her breath as if unsure this is real.

“Hello, *leonessa*,” I say, stopping far enough away that she can’t reach me.

“Is he okay?” She asks.

“He is fine.”

Her eyes bounce to me, and she watches as I place the sleeping child on the mattress. She instantly lunges for him, but the restraints keep her arms above her head and body mostly pinned. She cries out as the bindings dig into the sensitive, wounded skin of her wrists. But she continues to fight, continues to pull, hard enough that she opens old wounds and blood seeps through the white gauze.

Leaving the child where he is, curled up and sleeping, I lunge for Amelia, forcing her back down and stopping her from ripping her wrists apart. I

doubted she'd stop.

She glares at me, fire in her eyes. "I am going to kill you." She vows.

"Now, now, *leonessa*," I whisper, reaching for one of the bindings at her wrist. I unclip it slowly, holding the wrist before moving to the other. She holds my eyes. I unclip that one but keep her restrained beneath my hands, leaning over her so we're nose to nose. The muscles in her jaw jump as she grinds her teeth. She jerks, trying to free herself.

"If you're going to misbehave, I'll just restrain you again," I promise, "And I'll take him." I refer to the kid.

She quietens.

"Good girl."

She grinds her teeth, eyes flaring.

Slowly, I loosen my grip on her, palms damp with her blood but she doesn't immediately go for my throat. I stand back, allowing her the space and she doesn't waste a minute. She goes for the boy, gently lifting him and bringing him to her chest. She holds him close, her face buried against the top of his head. He shifts and fidgets but curls his hands into her, holding her just as closely, even in sleep. She wraps her whole body around him, shielding him from me and using her own body as a barrier.

It was a woman willing to sacrifice everything.

"Leave." She whispers.

I wasn't going to argue.

With my bloodied palms I leave them, and I don't look back and for the first time I am questioning every step I've taken that has led me to this spot.

Bringing in outsiders was risky. We didn't do it. It was family and those that have been working with us for generations. We didn't trust anyone else, and betrayal happens far too often for her to just remain.

It would take one slip up, one secret spilled to the wrong person, and we could lose it all.

But there were ways to stop it.

Two ways to stop her from talking if ever given the chance.

The first I'd proven I was incapable of doing for reasons I wasn't going to evaluate, the second... the second I wasn't ever going to have. Until now.

Rolling my shoulders, I divert to the office rather than my bedroom, opening my laptop to draft the emails I needed to send and get the ball rolling. There was no choice in the matter. No other alternative, and Amelia Doyle was no longer going to be anyone else's problem but mine.



Amelia

I hold Lincoln tightly, inhaling his familiar, warming scent. It was home. My heart. My soul. He snoozes soundly, his light little snores like music and the steady beat of his heart patters against my chest. He was perfectly fine, no injuries, no signs of neglect or abuse which I had been worried about.

How could I trust these people knew how to care for a child they just stole!?

The bleeding at my wrists has stopped but they were sore, I could feel the skin rubbing underneath, the bandages chaffing against the raw flesh. I had to get out of here. I had to take Lincoln and run. Run far, far away so they could never find us again.

I'd never have to worry about the Saints or about my own family.

We could just disappear. Leave the country and start fresh.

I hold Lincoln a little bit tighter, my soul eased now I have him here, but I couldn't wait. We had to leave as soon as possible.

But for now, I sleep. I keep myself curled around my boy, holding him as closely as physically possible. And while my sleep is restless and light, I manage to claw back some of the energy this last twenty-four hours has sucked from me, and if I wanted this escape to be successful, I needed all the rest I could get.

I wake to glorious sunshine beaming through the window, the warmth of the rays breaking a sweat across my brow. Lincoln sits next to me, his grin instant when he sees me wake. He pokes my face, dimples popping into his cheeks as he smiles wider.

"Hi baby," I whisper, bringing him to me. I wasn't stupid enough to believe it would be easy, my life had been a reel of bad things happening but no more.

My stomach growls loudly and I knew Lincoln would need food soon. I couldn't tell what time it was, but it had to be early, and silence surrounded us. Slowly, I climb from the bed, tiptoeing to the door. It was of course locked, but I press my ear to it. Behind it I hear muffled footsteps but no voices.

“Hello?” I call.

Footsteps stop.

“Hello?” I yell again when a minute passes.

Hushed whispers greet me before those footsteps run off, further away from me.

I sag and glance back to Lincoln who plays with a feather that’s fallen out of the pillow.

The door suddenly opens, and I jump back with a yelp, finding the doctor entering.

He glances over me and then to Lincoln. “I thought I told you to stop fighting.”

“As if I’ll listen to you.”

He smirks, “I’ll get the kit, are you hungry?”

“Please,” I nod.

He smiles gently and exits again, locking the door.

I sigh, food, treatment, escape. We could do that.

It isn’t Devon that brings the food, but a woman I assume is employed by Gabriel. She slides a tray of food through the door and promptly closes it before it is once more locked.

I collect it and bring it over to Lincoln, separating the toast and jam to the porridge and passing him the neon green plastic spoon. He scoffs it down, along with the milk while I eat the toast slowly and sip from the orange juice they provided.

It’s after we’ve finished when Devon turns back up, his medical kit in hand.

“Good to see you have an appetite,” he comments, placing the kit at the side of the bed. I don’t speak, not even as he lifts my bandaged wrists and begins to unpeel the gauze. I hiss when the material snags on the skin fused to it, ripping off the scabs that had formed over the cuts.

Devon doesn’t wince or speak, just mops up the trails of blood and cleans them quietly, rubbing ointment and cream into the cuts.

“He’s looking a little flushed.” Devon mentions quietly while working on the other wrist, “Do you mind if I check him?”

My brows tug down, “Excuse me?”

“Your son, his cheeks are red but he’s a little pale,” he continues.

I glance at Lincoln, noticing what he says. With my free hand I reach across and press my palm to his cheek before using the back of my hand to

feel his forehead. His skin was hot to touch. He was fine minutes ago.

“Yes, you can check him.” I place my newly bandaged hands in my lap, watching the doctor move around the bed to where Lincoln is. I stand, kicking the tray holding the now empty plates, an idea springing to mind. The door was ajar slightly, the hall behind it quiet.

With Devon’s back turned to me, I quickly bend and grab the empty plate that had my toast on it.

“Is he okay?” I ask, wandering around to where he stands hovering over my son.

“Might just be a light fever,” Devon says quietly before standing up right and turning. I don’t give him a chance to react. I swing the plate, smashing it around his head.

He goes down hard. I grab Lincoln, hauling him to me as I grab the scissors from inside the medical kit and sprint for the door. The hall is empty, but I don’t stick around, I run, holding Lincoln securely as my legs carry me down the stairs. I get lost somewhere on the bottom floor.

I hear the familiar sounds of a kitchen hard at work, of voices chattering animatedly so I avoid that and turn down another hall and come out into a large foyer, my feet squeaking on the polished marble floors. Ahead of me is a wall of glass, looking out into a round courtyard lined with various expensive looking cars and a lush green lawn. I almost want to stop when I see the view. Endless miles of sea, the sun beaming down to kiss the surface.

The door sits right ahead.

“Stop!” Comes a booming voice, not Gabriel’s I realize. I’d somehow, in the last twenty-four hours become accustomed to his deep baritone. It was the kind of voice you knew instantly, with a slight lilt of an accent, not born from moving here but from hearing it spoken often by those around him I assumed. I couldn’t name where it was from, it wasn’t a strong enough sound to determine the origin.

I don’t stop, my hand curls around the handle of the door and I yank it open, thankful it gives, but a body slams into the side of mine and my first thought is to protect Lincoln.

I curl myself around him as whoever it is manhandles me away from the door.

I fight with what I can, lifting the scissors I stole from Devon and ramming them forward. It slices through flesh, but I can’t see where I’ve hit.

They hiss in pain and let go.

I feel their blood on my hand, but I had no time to check anything. I go for the door.

“Amelia!”

That was Gabriel.

I’m stopped once more, and they hold me tight just as something hard presses into the side of my head. A gun.

“Don’t move.” They say.

I swallow, fear making my heart thump like a beast inside my chest.

“If you’re going to kill me,” I whisper, “Make sure someone catches my son.”

“Move,” they order, pushing the muzzle of the gun into my head hard to spur me on. I turn in time to see Gabriel storming down the stairs, a very pissed off looking Devon, blood dripping down his face from the hit he took, following behind. He glares at me.

I let my eyes slide to the left, spotting a man holding his arm, blood seeping through his fingers. Dark hair, dark eyes but he didn’t look pissed. He looked interested.

“Atlas,” Gabriel orders with a loud, authoritative growl, “Take the gun off her head.”

He only presses it in harder.

“Atlas!”

I feel the man I now know as Atlas step up closer, “Watch your back.” He says it so quietly no one else hears him but the warning rings loud and clear. This man was dangerous. Deadly. I don’t dare move until the gun is removed from my head. When it is, Atlas moves away quickly, giving me his back as he storms to the one I cut.

“I’m good, brother,” he says to Atlas, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Devon,” Gabriel orders, “See to Asher. Atlas, get the fuck out.”

I start to back up, tiptoeing my way towards the door.

“You think you’ll get away?” Gabriel clocks the movement, “You’re surrounded, *leonessa*, nowhere to go. Nowhere to run.”

“I hate you.” I spit.

His mouth kicks up at the side, “I can see that.” His eyes drop to my son.

“Stay the fuck away from him.”

I look to Asher, now without Atlas. He watches curiously, not seeming bothered by the wound I inflicted in his arm. He quirks a brow at me, tipping up his lips to smile. It was unnerving.

He was attractive, devastatingly so, with thick dark hair and brown eyes, skin sun kissed and clean shaven. He had a slight resemblance to Gabriel, subtle but there, telling me they were related somehow.

His eyes slip to something behind me before a hand is placed on my spine, ushering me forward.

“Get off me!” I snap, whirling away only to be grabbed hard on the arm.

“Bruise her with that hand,” Gabriel growls, “And you’ll lose it.” He speaks to whoever holds me. They promptly loosen up but push me forward as Gabriel meets me halfway.

I’m stiff, hot and sweaty and the adrenaline makes my heart beat inside my throat, the blood rushing in my ears. I flinch when he lifts his hand, an instinctive reaction from men raising their hands to me. He pauses, brows furrowing before he continues, and I brace for the pain that never comes.

His finger curls beneath my chin, forcing my head up.

“You can’t run, Amelia.”

“I despise you.”

Someone chuckles but I don’t dare remove my eyes from the fiery hazel ones before me.

Beauty could be disarming and if I let it, Gabriel’s would ruin me. He was built for corrupting just with his looks alone, high cheekbones with deep hollows and a hard jawline that looked sharp enough to cut. Low set brows sitting above hazel eyes that appeared more gold than anything else, like the color of bourbon and framed by thick, black lashes. He had a cruel beauty.

“Then I guess our time together is going to be interesting,” he muses softly, his thumb pressing into my bottom lip. I snatch my face away.

“Take her to her room,” he orders, dropping his hand, “and I meant what I said, mark a single inch of her and you’ll lose a hand.”

Devon waits to the side of the foyer, watching me. I felt a little guilty for the injury I’d caused him but not enough to be sorry about it.

Asher follows me with his eyes, and I feel Gabriel’s burning a hole through my spine.

I keep Lincoln tight to my body, feeling him squirm.

I hadn’t even made it far and I failed.

Though I had my son, and I would never stop trying.



GABRIEL

Everyone knew the new plan, what I had in store for Amelia and the boy. I could tell they weren't happy with the new plan, but I couldn't give two shits about what they thought was best.

My mother guides the seamstress through to the office, a team carrying bags and trunks following quietly behind. A glance at the clock shows it a little past three in the afternoon. I had yet to go and see Amelia or her son, my nephew, but after this morning I doubted a visit would go down too well. Her fight was admirable but as for her future, she'll have to learn some respect.

The conversation between us would happen sooner rather than later considering I planned on actioning it tomorrow. I could see the planners setting up out in the courtyard, the view of the ocean at their backs.

Leaving everyone downstairs, I head up, rolling my neck to relieve the tension that had built there. On the floor with her room, I could hear the child's giggle, its squeal filled with innocent delight and her feminine voice filters between the bursts of joy though it doesn't hold any happiness. I could

hear the weight of it in her tone, the fear, the sadness...

It didn't need to be hard.

She just had to understand.

I don't knock, I just unlock the door and step inside, clicking it closed behind me. Amelia snaps her head around to me, eyes narrowing in my direction and her fingers wrap around a wooden playing block that had been delivered up to her room to keep the child entertained.

"Planning to beat me to death with a child's toy, *leonessa*?"

"It's tempting," She spits, using her free hand to tug Lincoln closer to her.

I cock my head, studying her. She was a beautiful woman. Dark curls and sun kissed skin, curves begging to be explored, flesh to be bitten and reddened by my hand.

She climbs from where she was perched on the floor, bringing Lincoln up with her to cradle him on her hip, that block still gripped in her hand.

I close the space between us. She holds very still, tipping her head to maintain eye contact with me. She puts on a good, strong front but she fears me. She fears us all.

She was smart.

Her eyes bounce between mine as I reach across and pry the block from her hand. She resists for a moment before she lets it go. It thumps as I throw it down onto the carpet, going for the child next.

This time she doesn't let go.

"Do not touch him," she growls, her voice low, her protective motherly instinct forcing every other emotion down until only this one reigns.

"I'm not taking him away, Amelia. I would like you to place him down."

"Why?"

"We have things to discuss."

"There is nothing to discuss," she hisses, "Say what you have to say and leave me alone! The least you could do is get the fuck out of my sight, seeing as you've taken away every other choice of mine."

"And I'm about to take one more," I warn.

"Oh, are you finally getting it over with?" She scoffs, clutching Lincoln harder and looking away.

Giving up on removing the child from her, I curl my finger beneath her chin, bringing her eyes back to me. "You will look at me while we are talking, Amelia."

"You have no right to demand anything from me, Gabriel."

Fuck, my name on her tongue...

I move until I'm cupping her face, fingers biting, just enough for her to feel it, into the soft tissue of her cheeks. Her breath whooshes between her plump parted lips and her nostrils flare but her eyes, they darken a little, her skin pebbling.

Interesting.

Everything about her was interesting and not at all what I had expected.

"From now, *leonessa*, you are mine. No one looks at you. Touches you. Even speaks to you without my permission. Mine. Are we clear?"

Her eyes clear immediately, "Fuck. You."

"I'm sure we'll get there eventually."

I anticipate the strike and catch her hand before she can make contact with my face. The boy remains solidly attached to her.

I grin down at her.

"You make this so fucking easy, *leonessa*, so easy. You think I care what you want? I will take whatever the fuck I please. Including you and your son."

"I will not be *owned*."

"You already are."

Her eyes narrow.

"By this time tomorrow, Amelia, you will be a Saint."

She snatches – or tries to at least – away from me but I keep hold, dragging her back.

"You will walk down the aisle and you'll wear a pretty dress, and you will become *my wife*."

"I will not!"

"You'll be the pretty wife of the don, a good girl who's going to show me respect."

"Over my dead body!"

"That can be arranged, Amelia. This is your only option. You marry me, you get to keep your son and your life. You don't, you die. And your son, he'll never remember who you are."

"I hate you." Tears well in her eyes as she twists her lips into a sneer.

I lean into her, lips almost touching, "Welcome to the family, Amelia."



I hear her before I see her.

Her loud scream echoes through the house and the seamstress nervously looks to me before diverting her eyes. Devon smirks while my mother ushers Lincoln away, hiding him in the den to keep him occupied for the next few hours.

The guard that holds her fights to keep a firm grip but remembering what I said. I will keep my word, and if she so much as has a single mark on her from one of my men, I'll make it slow.

They've been around long enough to know that I don't bluff.

She kicks the second guard in the shin.

I grin.

"Going to have your work cut out for you, Gabe," Devon chuckles.

I grunt, though internally, I was glad she had this amount of fight. At least our life together wouldn't be boring.

"She'll learn," I say, stepping forward to take her from the guard, grabbing both arms to haul her to me. She slams against my chest.

"Best start behaving, *leonessa*," I whisper, mouth at her ear, "Trying on wedding dresses while restrained doesn't seem like it would be all that comfortable."

"I'm not trying on anything."

"You either pick a wedding dress or we get married and you'll wear nothing." My mouth is still close to her ear but I'm far enough away I can see her face, the warring emotions and the flush on her cheeks.

"Call my bluff, Amelia, I dare you."

She swallows, "You can't do this."

My nose presses into her hair as my lips whisper against the shell of her ear, "I can, and I will. No one can stop me. Make a decision."

"Fine."

"That's a good girl, pick something pretty."

"I'll be sure to pick the ugliest one there."

I smirk, knowing damn well she wouldn't find an ugly dress. I'd hand-picked them all and it was only courtesy I was letting her have the final decision.

"Make sure they fit well," I tell the seamstress, "I won't have my future wife flashing our guests."

"But you'd let me wear nothing." Amelia scoffs.

“You’re right, but there would have been no guests to see that, only me.”

“And the priest.” She retorts snidely.

“That’s right, but then I would have killed him for seeing my wife bare.
So not really a problem at all.”

She pales.

“Chop, chop, Amelia, the seamstress doesn’t have all day.”



AMELIA

There were several dresses hanging in the room, all different styles from A line to mermaid and ball gown. All were beautiful and horrendously expensive.

I'd never thought about marriage or whether I would have it, but I assumed I would have a choice in the matter. Clearly, I thought wrong.

The seamstress nervously fidgets while her team remains quiet, stationed around the room. Two of Gabriel's men stand at the door, very obviously armed.

"Ma'am," the seamstress says quietly, "Would you like to look at these?" She motions towards the dresses.

"Not really."

She squeaks, her fear as clear as day on her face. She was terrified to be here, in this house, with these men. With *that* man.

I didn't blame her. Anyone smart enough would realize they'd headed right into the devil's lair.

But that didn't mean I would make it easy on her.

I was being forced into this damn marriage, but I wasn't about to do as I was told.

Marriage's end. It was no big deal. Marrying the devil would change nothing.

My skin still tingles from his touch and that pisses me off more.

It's a normal reaction, I tell myself, he was a *very* attractive man, with his fiery eyes and dark hair, any woman would react to that.

I run my fingers across the dresses, feeling each one under the tips, some lace, some silk or chiffon. All stunning with embroidered flowers and pearls and diamonds. Maybe when I was younger, I had pictured a wedding, with the ballgown and the flowers and pretty flower crown but then I grew up, and people like me, we don't get the happily ever after.

"Any you like, ma'am?" The lady asks.

I peruse the dresses, gaze snagging on a tight silk number but it covered everything, a high neck with long sleeves in a sheer lace style and a sewn in belt to snag in the waist, flowing the skirt over the thighs. The back was high too. It would be perfect for what I had in mind.

I slide it from the rack and hold it out in front of me, picturing what we could do to make it fit what I had in mind.

"You're here to make alterations now, right?" I ask.

She nods.

I glance towards the guards at the door, knowing they'll report straight back to Gabriel, so I needed them out of here.

I begin to strip.

"Ma'am!" The seamstress cries while I hear panicked shuffling from the guards behind me. "Ma'am we've set up a privacy corner for you to change."

"I don't like tight spaces," I lie.

My top hits the floor, leaving me in just my bra. The door opens and closes a second later.

I stifle my smile, shoving off my pants. The seamstress helps me into the dress, it was a little baggy on me, but she was fixing that.

Once it's secured, I glance at the mirror they'd set up. I didn't recognize myself, not with the exhaustion lining my eyes and the serious need to wash my hair, but the dress was stunning.

"Okay, so," I say to the woman, "I want this here opened," I tell her, dragging my finger down the middle of my chest, "Down to the naval in a deep plunge, the sleeves and back are fine. And then with the skirt, cut it on

both sides to the hips.”

Her eyes widen, “This is a twenty-thousand-dollar designer dress!”

“So?”

“Mr Saint was very clear—”

“Well *Mr Saint* isn’t the bride, is he?” I snap, “He doesn’t get to decide what I wear. Can you do it or not?”

“Well of course,” she sputters, “But he said...”

“Forget what he said, this is what I want.”

She nods.

“Thank you.”

I stand for the next few hours as they tug and pull and pin the dress, fitting it to my body, making the markings for the new design on the dress and once they’re done, and I am once again dressed in my own clothes I feel just a tiny bit triumphant even if all else was out of my control.

I was marrying him, and I’d keep my son, but I didn’t need to make his life easy.

I’m ushered out and taken back to my room as the seamstress and her team are leaving, thankful there was no time for her to talk to anyone. She had my dress, hidden because apparently traditions were important, even in forced marriages, and the design. It would be delivered in the morning.

The guards take me to the same floor I’d been staying on but don’t guide me in the same direction, instead, we turn left at the top of the stairs and follow a narrow hall around until suddenly the wall in front of me becomes clear. Glass. Looking directly out over the sea. The sun was setting, the horizon set ablaze in oranges and pinks while sea birds coasted across the top of the water in search of their next meal.

Boats lazily bobbed in the water, some pleasure vessels, others the shipping vessels that dock down at the marina.

My legs carry me numbly to a door which they open for me and then usher me inside, “Your son will be brought up to you soon.” Is all they say before they abruptly shut the door.

The lock is loud as it clicks into place.

One wall of the room, much like that of the one beyond the door, is glass, gracing me with the same view, the other three were simply painted white with subtle pieces of art hanging from them. There were two further doors leading elsewhere.

It was simple luxury, plush white carpet with a deep grey fur rug at the

foot of a large queen sized bed, made up with deep grey silk sheets and pillows. The dressers didn't hold any ornaments or trinkets on top but there was a mirror and some basic toiletries. More than I had in the other room.

My feet sink into the carpet as I make my way through the room, fingers trailing over furniture I'd never even dreamed of affording, before I reach the first door and open it. A closet, mostly empty save for a few dresses, still with tags and a couple of pairs of shoes. I close that door and go to the next, opening it up to find a huge bathroom, complete with a clawfoot tub big enough to seat six and a waterfall shower against one wall. It was all grey and white marble with gold veins that shimmered in the bright lighting. Towels sat in a cubby in the wall and more toiletries had been left on the counter.

I spot a fresh toothbrush and toothpaste and run my tongue across my teeth, cringing at the texture I feel against them. I rip the brush from the packet and begin to scrub, the minty toothpaste burning my tongue, but I do it once more anyway for good measure.

Once that's done, I strip and climb into the shower, the water hot against my skin. It was good to shower, to feel clean after God knows how many days had passed. I thoroughly wash my hair with shampoo that smells like mango, and scrub my skin with soap until my fingers prune before I climb out and wrap myself into a fluffy towel.

For just a minute, *just a minute*, I let myself soak in the opulence I'd never been granted, in the luxury of the towel against my skin, the sweet and yet soft fragrances that fill the bathroom air. I'd never had it before, I was allowed to enjoy it.

I comb out my wet hair before I leave the bathroom, stepping into the bedroom.

The sun was on its last stretch, the sky dusty but the water resembling a raging fire as the sun kisses the surface.

We were on top of the city here. Glancing at the door, I listen out for any sounds of someone approaching before I head to the windows to get a better look.

Below, the sprawling lawn seemed to stretch on, surrounded by a thick boarder of trees. A round courtyard sat to the front of the house, a few shiny and expensive looking cars parked there with a fountain that spat crystal clear water into the sky before it cascades back down into a pool. The drive was long and at the end was at least a ten-foot gate, maybe higher but I couldn't judge it from this distance. And then beyond, seemingly a million miles from

where I stand sits the city where I grew up.

Where I fought and suffered, cried and screamed. Where I met Lucas Saint and had my son. It was right there, right in front of me. The past. The present. The future.

It was everything I'd ever known and all that I hated.

My stepfather was in that city somewhere and the only saving grace being here, is being hidden from him.

I'm so lost in the view and my thoughts that the door suddenly opening startles me. I whip around, seeing Gabriel sauntering in carrying Lincoln. He stops dead when he sees me. I didn't want him to see my back or my arms really, I didn't want anyone to see it. I back up until my spine hits the wall, clutching the towel in my fist. His eyes drop down my towel covered body, darkening with each pass.

"Get out."

His jaw muscle jumps and he cocks his head.

"There are fresh clothes in the drawers." He says, walking further into the room.

I stay pressed to the wall.

He watches me always, even as he places a sleeping Lincoln in the centre of the bed, covering him gently with the blanket. He was sound asleep, the pacifier in his mouth gently moving as he sucks on it.

"Leave."

"I trust you found a dress."

"Yes." I grit out.

He begins to walk towards me, eyes doing another dip. I squirm under that gaze, under the scrutiny of it. I didn't care if he didn't like what he saw but I felt vulnerable in just a towel and nothing underneath.

Water drips from my hair, down my face and shoulders.

He lifts a hand and instinctively, I flinch, which gives him pause but he continues on as if it didn't happen, his thumb swiping a droplet of water at the side of my lips.

He sucks it into his mouth.

I swallow, forcing myself to remain still even as the view of his lips closing around his thumb made my insides knot and thighs ache.

"I will see you in the morning," He says gently, meeting my eyes, "*wife.*"

GABRIEL

I fist my cock in my hand, bracing a hand on the slick tile of the shower wall. The water cascades down over the back of my head as I watch my hand, wrapped tightly around my shaft, pumping the hardness as images of her fill the space behind my eyes.

The mere thought of her naked flesh under that towel was enough to turn me fucking feral. I grunt as I fuck myself with my hand, lips parted and warm water slipping onto my tongue.

Amelia. Amelia. Amelia.

Bellissima. Beautiful.

Allettante. Tempting.

Moglie. Wife.

I pump harder, faster, her name an echo on my tongue, in my head. I could imagine those plump lips parted, eyes rolling back inside her head as I drove into her, again, again, thighs wide, legs spread, cunt dripping for me as my fingers bruised her thighs and my teeth clamped around her nipple. She would moan for me, cry for me, she would beg me, over and over...

My teeth snap together as I come, my grunts loud in the shower, bouncing back to me from the tiled walls. Spent, knees shaking, I press my forehead to the tiles as my cock jerks and twitches between my legs, my release sinking down the drain.

Fuck.

That was unexpected. The sheer ferocity of the arousal and need that came from seeing her in such a vulnerable state. There was no denying the attraction to her but that... that was uncontrollable.

I rinse off and climb from the shower, wrapping a towel around my hips as I move into my bedroom. The lights of the city grace my eyes, twinkling like a sea of stars ahead of me. I could hear the crash of waves tumbling against the side of the cliff and far off, the sound of a vessel blasting its horn filters through my open window.

Tomorrow would be a busy day. There were shipments coming in overnight holding my goods and another expecting to get through to my city without paying their toll. With that, I was marrying Amelia.

That feisty little woman was going to make it hell, I was sure, though I hadn't figured out how she would do it seeing as there would be no way for her to escape from me.

Her challenging me on the dress earlier today, it was only a taste I could imagine living with her was going to be like. But she would respect me.

And she would listen when I told her I don't want other men seeing what is *mine*. It didn't matter who or why, her, her body, everything, it was mine and I do *not* fucking share.

I will fucking brand her if I have to.

My fingers curl into my palm, muscles tense.

All of this for the boy.

I wanted her secrets. I wanted to know why she flinches when one moves too quick, how she learned to defend herself. Where she grew up and how she ended up in that run down, shitty apartment with my nephew.

Her files were extensive to a point, I had her medical history, her education, where she worked, or used to at least, and the information that made her a citizen, but those experiences, those life lessons, they weren't things you would find in a file.

She would give them to me, she would give all of herself to me.

With a sigh, I drop the towel and climb into the bed, letting the sheets cover me.

There was a long road ahead.

I'm awake before everyone else in the house minus a few staff who prepare breakfast in the kitchen. My shoes clip against the marble floors as I make my way through the house, passing the pool room with its sliding glass doors and into the yard where the wedding has been set up. The arch at the end has been braided with pale flowers, the white carpet littered with petals and chairs are sat on each side, enough to sit a hundred.

It was a wedding.

All girls dream of weddings, right? It was the least I could do to give it something special for her because it was the only one she was getting.

There would be no party though. Not yet.

The view of the ocean sits beyond the arch and the sky is clear, a cloudless day.

I drink my coffee there, watching the water while the house wakes and begins to prepare.

Behind me, I hear steps before Atlas joins me at my side.

"Brother," I greet.

"You're marrying the girl." He says.

"I am."

"Why? Lucas didn't."

"Lucas ignored his own son. A Saint. It was wrong for him to do so."

"Perhaps these traditions are outdated."

I glance towards the younger of the twins, born an hour after his brother, Asher. They were the result of infidelity by my father. My mother had never forgiven and hated that they remained and reminded her of his infidelity. The twins knew she despised them, but they remained nonetheless and growing, we had had a good relationship.

"You believe I shouldn't marry the girl."

"I don't care for the girl," he growls, "Or the boy. They were better off where they were."

"That is your nephew."

He scoffs, "Last I checked, family only counts when you're pure."

I sigh. "What is this about, Atlas?"

"It's about forcing people away from the only things they know and for what? They don't gain anything from it."

"You're referencing what happened to you and your brother."

“That was a long time ago, Gabriel. We’ve moved on.”

“When was the last time you saw your mother?”

He remains quiet.

“That’s right,” I say, “She didn’t want you. When my father rocked up when you turned six and took you, she let you go. We saved you.”

“And you think you’re saving her?”

“She wouldn’t let the boy go.”

He scoffs and shakes his head, “This will ruin you, Gabriel.”

My brows draw down, “What do you mean?”

He shakes his head, “Continuing these traditions.”

“These traditions have kept us Saints on top. The traditions are what gave you and your brother a better fucking life, Atlas. My father could have left you to rot in that damn hell hole *she* had you in, but he didn’t.”

“You should have killed her.” He growls under his breath, “because someone else will and I’m sure death by your hand would be far kinder than what any of your enemies would have planned.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know things haven’t been smooth for months, Gabriel. Months. Your brother is missing, likely dead, you’re being hit at every angle. People are trying to force you out. And now you bring in a child and a woman not fit enough to protect herself from anyone.”

“Including you?” I grit, finger twitching towards the weapon tucked beneath my jacket.

Atlas cocks a brow, “She got lucky yesterday with Devon and Asher, but when put to the test, you think she’ll survive?”

“She isn’t your problem.”

“They’re always my fucking problem.”

“Who the fu—”

“Gabriel!” My mother cuts me off, “You have to get ready! It’s almost time!”

“Good luck with your nuptials brother, I’m sure you’ll need it.” Atlas growls under his breath before walking off to his car which he promptly gets in and speeds from the property, tires spitting back gravel and dust.

My mother pays no mind to him. Not that she ever did. Asher stands in the door, eyes following the speeding car. They weren’t my fucking problem today.

I’d purposely planned for the wedding to be high profile. City officials

and high society members. I needed them to see Amelia, see her as my wife and thus making her untouchable. They wouldn't talk to her, question her. She was mine.

A Saint.

As was her son.

I head through to the house, ignoring the caterers and staff that manically file through the halls and rooms before heading to my room to change. Forty-five minutes to go.

Forty-five minutes until she was *permanently* mine.



Devon stands at the side, bearing witness, the rings in his pocket. Atlas was missing but Asher was here, stood just behind Devon.

My mother cradles Lincoln in her lap, sat in the row at the front. Every chair was filled but there were no cameras. I did not permit them.

Music begins to play softly from the speakers set up around the ceremony, hidden by bouquets of flowers wrapped in white ribbon.

My patience. It was thin.

I stare towards the door, waiting for her to arrive. She was late.

But it was only a moment later when I saw her, dressed in white, in a dress I did not select, plucking petals from her bouquet as she walks, dropping them to the floor beneath her feet.

She was stunning of course, with her dark hair curled and pinned, her face glowing with whatever cosmetics they had applied but there was fire in her eyes and a shit ton of skin on show.

She meets my eyes from the end of the aisle. And she grins.



AMELIA

His glare was one for the record books.

Truly it was.

His stare burned into me as he took in the skin I had on show. The slits in the dress on both sides parted as I walked, opening to the hip, and clearly revealing I was wearing no underwear as the openings were too high to get away with. A ballsy move perhaps, but I was in it now and that irritation on his face, well it was worth it. The plunge was altered to the original plan but that was fine, the seamstress did an incredible job, and I wasn't flashing a nipple which would have happened in the previous design. Instead, she'd gave it the plunge to the naval as I had asked and then joined the two sides together with a similar lace mesh to the sleeve, sheer so you still saw it all.

His eyes run down the length of me, following the curves and I swear there's a war within them. A war between desire and anger. I pluck the petals off the flowers as I walk, leaving a trail behind me until I finally reach him, and the flowers are now bare and merely stalks in my hand.

"Aren't you going to tell me I look beautiful?" I sneer.

His jaw muscles jump as he clenches his teeth.

“Where is the rest of the dress?” He hisses.

Behind us, I hear the whisper of voices but don’t tune in enough to make sense of them.

“I made alterations.”

His nostrils flare.

I grin at him, teeth and all.

“Are we ready to begin?” The priest asks.

“Yes,” Gabriel snaps, turning to him.

“Something wrong, Gabriel?” I ask sweetly.

He side eyes me, but ultimately, says nothing. I turn to the priest, my boobs and bare bouquet in full view. His eyes widen and Gabriel just becomes more irritated, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

“Get it over with,” he hisses under his breath.

The man swallows, a sweat breaking out across his brow. He begins the ceremony, a shake in his voice the entire time. There are no vows apart from the ones they provide and when the rings are produced, my heart leaps into my throat.

Gabriel takes the ring from Devon, holding the glittering jewelry between his fingers as he is ordered to repeat the vows. He slides it to the knuckle, his deep baritone washing over me, burrowing under my skin and then he slides it on.

For a second I stare at it. At the rock adorning my finger, the diamond shining so bright and clear. I’m forced out of the trance when a ring is forced into my hand by Devon, his glare enough to rival Gabriel’s. He was still sour about the plate, I got it. I take the ring, but I don’t copy what Gabriel does, I leave it at the end of his finger while I recite the vows and then I shove it down. Hard enough that the edge of the metal scrapes against his skin as it goes until his finger is red and the ring sits where it needs to.

The side of his mouth cocks up, “*Leonessa*,” He drawls, “You tease me.”

The ceremony is over before it really begins. I reluctantly say I do, the only reason the words leave my mouth is the view of my son in the front row, nestled comfortably in an older woman’s lap, giggling at the toy he has in his hands. I was thankful he didn’t really know what was happening here.

“You may kiss the bride...”

Gabriel only stares at me for a moment before he leans in swiftly, grasping my face in his hands and slamming his mouth against mine. It was

vicious and powerful and yet I found my lips parting for him, allowing his tongue to sweep in to caress my own. I swear I feel the vibration of a growl inside my mouth, his thumbs gently circling on my cheeks.

A first kiss.

The only one.

He clutches me tighter when I try to pull away, dominating the act, punishing me with his brutality in a way that looked passionate to everyone else.

And then it was over, and my mouth was swollen from the punishment.

Those jaw muscles pump as he clenches, staring down at me, "*Finche morte non ci separi.*"

"Until death do you part," Someone repeats.

He forces me to turn with him, rotating us until we face the audience applauding what they don't know is a forced marriage. It's when we start to make our way down the aisle that the first shot rings out.

A scream pierces the crowd, overpowering the clapping and music. Everything happens so quickly that I can barely keep up with it. More shots begin to blast through the ceremony, bullets hitting bodies, blood soaking the white ribbons and petals. Gabriel is on me in an instant, he forces me to bend, his chest to my spine as his body curls around mine, using it as a shield from any bullets that may come our way.

Glass shatters and cries echo inside my head.

"Lincoln!" I scream.

"Stay down!" Gabriel orders with an authority he had yet to display, it was dominating and hard to disobey but Lincoln, my son.

"My son!" I cry, fighting him.

He pins me to him as he maneuvers us to a bar set up to the left of the aisle, the champagne glasses and bottles tipped over, some shattered, the golden liquid dripping off the edge of the pop-up bar. He shoves me behind it, his body still wrapped around me, hand cupping the back of my head as he forces my face into his chest.

The carnage was still going on, the shots and screams so loud I was sure you'd hear them all the way at the city.

I push at Gabriel, I shove, and I scratch but he doesn't let go.

"Lincoln," I beg, "Please, Gabriel, my son!"

"Devon has him," he growls, letting me go only to cup my face and force my head to the side, seeing Devon cradling my son while he ushers a woman

through the French doors. They disappear a moment later.

My legs start moving before it registers, going after them. Another shot rings out, Gabriel tugs me back but too late, the bullet slices across the top of my arm. Fire erupts across my skin, the heat of the blood like an inferno and the pain like an explosion.

Gabriel slams a hand across the bloody site, black spots dancing in my vision from the pain.

“Fuck, Amelia,” he hisses angrily, “Hold fucking still.”

I slump against him.

“Stay fucking awake,” He grabs my face just as another bullet hits the bar, the bang loud. Glass rains down onto us but he uses his body to shield me from it.

I turn my face to the doors, my heart thumping inside my chest, the blood roaring in my ears in time to see a mass of black suited bodies storming from the house.

They begin firing immediately in the direction of where the bullets were coming from.

And then it all stops, and silence settles like a weighted blanket around us. Gabriel breathes heavily, blood trickling from a scratch in his cheek where the glass must have nicked him.

“You’re okay,” he murmurs, meeting my eyes, “It’s over.”

I swallow, staring at his cruelly handsome face, my kidnapper, my husband. He holds me still as he looks past the edge of the bar and when he deems it clear, he curls his arms under my body and lifts us both off the ground. My white wedding dress was stained red, splotches of crimson blooms wetting the silk and mesh.

“Devon!” Gabriel yells.

He takes easy, determined steps into the house, leaving the carnage behind, the bodies dying, the crying. He ignores it all like a man who has seen death and calls it friend.

“Put me down,” I push on him.

He glares down at me, eyes moving to the blood seeping through the fingers cupped around the wound on my arm and to the bloodied dress, the droplets of it that sit on the exposed section of my abdomen, across my breasts and ribs.

“Devon!” He yells again.

The man sprints towards us, blood on his face and hands.

“Lincoln!” I cry.

“He’s fine, Amelia,” Devon instantly soothes, “He’s not hurt. It’s not his blood.”

He gently pries my fingers from the wound and a whimper escapes my lips. Gabriel tugs me away from him. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

Devon sighs, “Gabriel, give her to me. I’ll fix it.”

“Let me go!” I hiss at Gabriel, pushing on his chest, “Get your hands off me!”

He stares at me, a softening I didn’t like to see in those fiery eyes. I bare my teeth at him.

He grunts in response before he lets me down, keeping a hold on me until Devon takes over and ushers me away.

I feel his eyes burn into my spine the entire way.



AMELIA

“You’re lucky,” Devon mumbles, his face a mask of concentration as he stitches up my arm, “a few inches over and it would have gone through.”

I take my eyes off Lincoln who plays with some blocks in the middle of the floor, a discarded plate of cookies next to him, “Lucky?” I scoff, “Nothing about this situation is lucky.”

Devon moves his eyes away from the wound. The bullet had grazed my arm, enough to give me a deep gash that required stitches, but it hadn’t gone through, and nothing was damaged. I felt nothing there after Devon had injected the anesthesia though the sensation of him tugging the needle through me wasn’t pleasant.

I was a mess of blood and dirt but other than the arm, I was fine. Lincoln didn’t have a scratch on him thanks to Devon and Gabriel’s mother who I had still yet to meet.

I had no idea what was going on outside of this room though I heard the shouts and the orders, the anger radiating from Gabriel and Asher.

How many had died? How many were injured?

“Don’t think about it,” Devon whispers, placing his tools down.

“What?”

“I see it, Amelia, that look in your eyes, you’re thinking about the dead.”

“How can you not?”

He shrugs, “When you see it, deal it on a near daily basis, it’s just one of those things you learn to live with. Death is inevitable.”

“You’re right,” I agree, “It is, but most would prefer a simple death, not one full of bloodshed and screams. Most of those who died today would have expected to go home tonight.”

“You think any of the guests here today are good people, Amelia?”

“There were city officials here!” I argue.

“And they’re the most corrupt of all!” Devon fights.

“How?”

He closes his mouth, shaking his head. “When Gabriel wants to let you in on how this city runs, he can tell you. Stay out of trouble.” He closes his kit and starts to walk away, “And get changed, Amelia, you’re covered in blood.”

He leaves me alone with Lincoln and I glance down at the ruined dress, the sleeve where the cut is, cut off so he could get to it and the blood on my skin. I’d escaped one misery only to land in another.

I stand and go to Lincoln, plucking him from the floor just as the door opens.

The woman Lincoln was sat with at the ceremony walks in. Gabriel’s mother.

We stare at each other for a few seconds. She was a beautiful woman, dark, almost black hair, streaked with silver and white from age hang in a straight curtain around her face. She had deep brown eyes, creases around them but they hid a wealth of wisdom and some kindness. There was sternness there too, especially around her mouth. She was slim, dressed elegantly in a pale blue dress and white heels, her skin tan.

“Hello Amelia.”

“You must be Camille Saint,” I say.

“I am.”

“Thank you for keeping him safe,” I look to Lincoln.

“I will always keep my grandson safe, Amelia.”

I nod and go to move past her, “Excuse me.”

“Why did you hide him?” She asks before I can escape.

I swallow, “I didn’t hide him, I just didn’t reveal him either.”

“Lucas would have been a good father.”

I shake my head, “No, Camille, he wouldn’t have.”

“Excuse me?”

“How can anyone purposely force this life upon their children?” I look over my shoulder to the older woman. “This violence. Lucas did Lincoln a favor by not coming looking for him, seeing as he knew all about him according to Gabriel.”

“And you didn’t want Lincoln to have a father?” She asks, a slight bite to her tone.

“It wasn’t about having a father. I fell pregnant by accident and when I found out, I knew I didn’t want Lincoln to be a part of this.”

“He could have had a different upbringing so far if you did.”

“Don’t judge me for how I lived.”

“I’m judging you for what you could have given him and didn’t.”

I chuckle, “And if I could do it again, Camille, I’d still choose what I had to this.”

“You’re foolish.”

“Perhaps,” I agree, “But better foolish than dead.”

I leave, feeling her watch me. My dress drags behind me, my heels clipping against the marble. I feel eyes turn to me, I feel them watching as I make my way to the stairs but one set burns harder than the rest. I turn to see Gabriel at the door, the cut on his face cleaned but his suit is covered in blood, his hands too. He looks me over and then dismisses me, turning back to whatever conversation he was having.

Everything within me felt raw, tight. I knew it was only a matter of time before I broke.

I carry Lincoln to my room, cradling and rocking him until he falls asleep and then I lay him down and shut myself in the bathroom. I strip from the dress, leaving it in a puddle of white and red on the floor and begin to scrub my skin at the sink while a bath runs behind me. I scrub the blood off until my skin turns red and claw at my nails but the blood there, it doesn’t come out.

There was a lump in my throat, a burning behind my eyes. It’s only when I’m in the bath, my injured arm elevated to stop it getting wet that I break.

The sob echoes in the bathroom, bouncing back to me from the tiles.

My shoulders heave with each inhale of breath, my cheeks wet with tears

that drop from my chin and into the water around me. Those shots echo inside my head, the screams of the dying like a sick song ringing inside my ears.

How anyone could live like this, how anyone could look at death like it was nothing, they were truly people to fear.

They did not care for the living or the pain of loss. It simply just was.

And that was terrifying. How easy it is for them to brush it away and forget about it.

So, I allow myself to cry because it reminds me that I am not a monster. I am not like them even if I have been forced to endure it.

The tears are still falling by the time I've washed and climbed from the bath, draining it. Wrapping myself in a towel, I step out into the bedroom and stop dead in my tracks.

Gabriel sits in the middle of my bed, Lincoln by his side.

He still wears his bloodied suit, but his hands are clean.

He looks over to me, eyes doing a slow once over of my body before he lands them on my face and a frown tugs on his dark brows.

"You've been crying." He states.

"Wow," I hiss, storming towards the dresser. I pull out the only pair of shorts inside and a cami. "You're observant. Congratulations."

"Why, *Leonessa*?" He asks with genuine curiosity.

"Why what?" I move back to the bathroom to change.

"Why do you cry?"

"Are you truly asking that, Gabriel?"

He cocks his head in a move that screamed predator, it was animalistic, belonging to more beast than man, one who has no clue how normal life should be. "Yes."

I shake my head and refuse to answer, instead locking myself in the bathroom to change. My reflection stares back at me. How had this happened?

I should have left the moment I knew Lincoln existed inside of me, I should have left then.

The cuts around my wrists have scabbed, a little raw and red but of course no one saw these wounds at the ceremony, my dress sleeves had covered them. And of course, I had a new one to go with it now. The pain wasn't too bad with it and I was sure that was because of the shot Devon had given me.

Exiting the bathroom, I find Gabriel still waiting though he stares at my

son.

“You know,” he murmurs, “He looks a lot like Lucas did at this age, but he has your nose.”

I ignore his statement, “I’m tired, Gabriel.”

“You need clothes.” He glances over, taking in my legs, “I will arrange a car for you tomorrow.”

I nod, agreeing and he climbs up from the bed, taking a few steps towards me. I back up quickly, my spine hitting the chest of drawers. “You don’t have to hate me, Amelia.”

“Yes, I do.”

He searches my face, “We will see.”

GABRIEL

My phone rings as the door closes behind me.

“Listening,” I answer, bringing it to my ear.

“You’re needed at the marina.”

“I don’t have time for this, Atlas,” I growl, “I have a fucking massacre to clean up.”

“What happened!?” He demands.

“The house was attacked just after the ceremony, seven dead, four wounded,” I sprout the numbers.

“Asher!?”

“Fine.”

He audibly sighs.

“What’s happening at the Marina?”

Silence.

“Atlas,” I order.

“Your shipment was hit before it docked, the vessel raided, and the crew slaughtered. No one got onto the boat until this afternoon, but everything is

gone.”

“What do you mean, *gone!*?”

“Gone, Gabriel. All of it.”

“How!?” My voice booms, “That’s three million dollars’ worth of goods, Atlas! How does someone take it all!?”

“I don’t know, brother, we are having the surveillance pulled now.”

“I’m on my way.”

I hang up, my anger rising so fast I hear my blood pounding inside my ears. I launch the phone with a bellow, the device hitting the wall hard, shattering the screen as it crashes to the floor. The door behind me swings open.

“What’s going on!?” She panics.

“Get in your room, Amelia,” I warn.

“Gabriel,” She frowns, “What happened?”

“Get back in your room!” I yell.

She stumbles back, eyes widening in fear. When she’s far enough in, I grab the handle and slam it closed, locking it before I take the stairs quickly.

“I want two men stationed at her room at all times,” I order once I reach the foyer. They stare at me, “Now!”

Two men scramble, heading up.

“Devon, Asher, with me.”

They fall in line, following behind as I head out, the sun beating down, “what happened?” Devon asks.

“Someone fucking sold us out,” I growl, “and when I fucking find them, I will rip them apart.”



There was a line of white bags lying on the floor of the dock, the vessel now anchored swarmed with the police and my men. The men in the bags had been dead a day but in this heat, one would think it had been a week. It was a stench I was familiar with but could never get used to.

The chief of police strolls towards me, a dossier and USB drive in hand.

“The vessel cameras picked up a boat following them around one AM this morning. They attacked and boarded the boat at a little past three this morning.”

“So how did it get here?”

“It’s all on the tape.”

“Names?”

“None.”

My teeth grind together painfully. Ahead of me, Atlas speaks with his brother, Devon close by speaking with an officer. Beyond that the vessel bobs in the water, my containers opened and emptied. It should have been impossible to clear it all in a matter of hours.

My enemies were bold, but this? Someone on the inside would have given that information out, given them the coordinates and container numbers for them to strike so precisely.

I take the items and take them back to the car, sliding into the front seat and pulling out my laptop. The drive files open immediately, and I click on the video there, watching as my fucking property is attacked. The men on the vessel didn’t stand a chance against the small army that boarded. For five minutes the darkness is penetrated by the bright bursts of gunfire before it all falls dark once more. But if everyone was dead, who got the vessel to the Marina?

Closing down the laptop, I turn back to the scene. The bodies were being removed now and the boat emptied but for me, this was just the damn start.

It wasn’t the first time I’d had shipments attacked, it wouldn’t be the last but this was the biggest. I wasn’t overly concerned about the three million in losses, but with the how it happened and who.

And this was just the second thing to happen in a day. The massacre at the ceremony was still unsolved, the attackers either dead or escaped. They were smart but I was going to be smarter.

You don’t attack the Saints and live.



“You called for me,” Her voice is harsh, stern. She remains at the door, shoulders tense and deep shadows beneath her eyes from exhaustion.

I felt that same exhaustion in my bones. I hadn’t slept yet, I’d spent the night watching the vessel footage.

I note the guards standing behind her, the ones that had likely forced her to come here after I’d sent for her.

She wore a simple cotton dress, her dark hair pulled up and a cardigan on her shoulders.

“Where is Lincoln?”

Her nostrils flare with irritation, “Your mother took him.”

I suppress my grin. He was to stay here while she was gone anyway and now, I didn’t need to fight her on it. She had reason not to run now her son wasn’t with her.

I look to the two guards behind her, one of them was new, I hadn’t learned his name, I usually didn’t until they didn’t die after the first month, the second was a man named Colt, he’d been working for me for about three years.

“Colt, drive Amelia into the city, take her shopping.”

“Sir?”

“Make sure she gets enough to fill her closet and drawers. Along with more clothes for the boy.”

“I don’t want to go shopping.” Amelia snaps.

“Don’t come back until it’s done.”

“Yes sir,” Colt answers.

“And take the twins, the more of you the better.”

“Yes sir.”

“Gabriel!” Amelia growls.

“And Colt,” I pin the man with my stare, “Protect her. One scratch and I’ll have your head.”

He swallows and nods, “Come, Miss Doyle.”

“Mrs Saint,” I correct.

They all freeze.

“She is my wife, treat her as so.”

I dismiss them, listening to Amelia arguing with Colt. I see the twins join them before they usher her through the door.

Once I hear the car pull away, I hit the button on the video I had paused. The final few moments before the vessel was left at the dock for us to find.

Two figures step out onto the deck, one covered entirely in black, face masked behind a balaclava. The sun was just breaching the darkness of the night, forcing the sky to provide more light and I can make out the face of the captain. He’s forced to the very edge of the boat, facing out to the sea. The man doesn’t hesitate when he pulls the trigger, shooting the captain through the back. He falls overboard, hitting the water.

I pause.

No body had been found in the water.

I hit play again, the man walks to the very end of the vessel, disappearing from view and a few moments later a small speedboat pulls up, collecting the final man from the vessel and leaving the rest of the bodies on board. They'd emptied my containers within around two hours, at least a hundred men had been on hand to steal from me.

They'd moved it all onto a smaller vessel they'd anchored to the larger one. It had taken no time at all and bore no witnesses.

The level of organization to get it done, it could have only ever been an inside job. A man greedy enough to steal or were there deeper motivations?

I loop my fingers beneath my chin, watching the speedboat disappear.



AMELIA

I cross my arms stubbornly, standing in the middle of the sidewalk in front of the mall. The twins stand either side, Colt ahead.

“Mrs Saint,” he tries.

“Call me that one more time, Colt, and I will punch you in the throat.”

He rolls his eyes, “Mr Saint will not let you back in until you shop, so let’s go.”

“Then I won’t go back.”

Colt blanches.

“And you’re son?” Atlas grumbles, “You’d just abandon him?”

My teeth grind painfully.

“I hate all of you.”

I storm into the oversized building, entering the first shop I see. I don’t even bother truly looking, I grab dresses and jeans and skirts in my size, piling them into the arms of the three men forced to follow me. There were no children’s clothes in this store so after they pay, I make my way towards one.

It was easier getting Lincoln's clothes. Easier spending money that wasn't mine when treating my son to new things. He hadn't had something new for a while, and all the clothes that did belong to him had come from goodwill.

I select his items more carefully, ensuring they would fit perfectly, getting him new shoes and cardigans for the summer, all the clothing soft under my fingers and in a variety of vibrant colors. I can hear the men discussing things quietly but whenever I turn, one if not all are watching me.

The twins were unnerving. Atlas had a looming presence, it was hard to miss him, and he held a lot of anger, a lot of *hatred* in his eyes. It was evident in the deep downturn of his mouth, the way his brows furrowed, and eyes simmered. He hadn't said more than a few words to me and with each there was no warmth or even basic humanity.

His brother however, Asher, he had more character, more charm I supposed. He made conversation even if they were awkward.

And Colt, he was just a puppy. He was the type of man to fall easily into friendship with, light, made jokes. If I'd met him anywhere else, I would have liked him.

But he worked for Gabriel Saint and immediately became an enemy.

They all were.

I hand the items to Asher who goes to pay for them.

"Okay, so we're done now," I say, "Take me back to my son."

Colt looks at the bags, "It is not enough, Mrs Saint."

"Not enough!?" I squeal.

He shakes his head.

When Asher returns with the bags for Lincoln, him and Atlas take them back to the car while we wait in the middle of the mall.

I was hot. Too hot and hungry. I didn't want to be here.

"You're very pale," Colt mentions.

I wave him off, pacing but finding myself wobbly on my legs. I grip the edge of a bench to stop myself from falling.

"Mrs Saint," Colt grabs me.

"Stop..." I wheeze, "Stop calling me that."

Why was I out of breath? I place a hand on my head, eyes blurring.

"Amelia," He holds me still, "When did you eat last?"

I shake my head. I couldn't remember.

"Shit."

His arm comes around me to hold me upright and I don't fight him as he

walks me towards the food hall, positioning us both in a booth near the exit. He calls the twins before he orders from the menu. I don't listen to what he gets, not as I place my face in my hands and close my eyes trying to get this dizziness to pass.

"Here," he wraps a hand around my wrist, forcing me to look at him as he passes me a bottle of water. I take it without question, sipping from it.

"I'm fine."

Colt scowls at me. "You'll eat."

"Just take me back to the house, I'll eat there."

"You'll eat here."

It takes twenty minutes for the fogginess to pass, "I'm fine, Colt, can we just go?"

I make to climb from the booth now I've got a little more strength but a hand slaps down against the back of the bench, a body filling the space, blocking my exit.

"Sit down, Amelia," Gabriel growls.

My mouth drops open, "What are you doing here?"

"You think they wouldn't tell me when my *wife* was ill?"

"I am not ill."

"You almost passed out," he counters.

I roll my eyes and shoot a glare to Colt. It was either him or one of the twins that had reported back to him. I cross my arms and sit back down. I didn't have any other option. He slides into the empty space next to me, eyes on the side of my face.

A waitress drops bowls of food at the table.

"Eat."

"Fuck you."

"Maybe later," Gabriel murmurs low, "eat."

"You're disgusting."

"I'm just going to..." Colt moves quickly, leaving us alone.

"Amelia, you will not leave here until you finish your food."

"What do you care!?"

"I won't have my wife starve to death!"

"Oh, you're really enjoying this aren't you," I snap, grabbing the plate of pasta, "Wife this, wife that, how about you take that word and shove it straight up your ass!"

I shovel a mouthful of pasta into my face, too much to comfortably chew

but I don't care. Let me repulse him enough that he'll stay the fuck away from me.

He smirks as he watches and continues to watch while I eat the entire bowl, my stomach cramping painfully now it has food in it.

He lifts a hand and swipes some sauce off the side of my mouth, licking his finger clean before he slides a bowl of fries my way.

"Absolutely not."

He glares.

"I've had enough!"

"More."

I manage half the fries before I feel like I'm about to burst. "I can't have anymore."

He looks down at the food. There were still two full plates of food that even looking at made me feel sick. Colt had ordered too much.

"You will eat with me everyday from now, Amelia. No questions. And if it is not me, then one of my men and rest assured, they will not let you leave until you've eaten a satisfactory amount. You are my wife, you will take care of yourself."

I scoff, "Whatever, Gabriel, can we go now?"

He cocks a brow, "No fight?"

"I'm tired, I want to see my son," I sigh, "Please can we just go?"

He searches my face and then subtly nods once, climbing from the booth before offering a hand to help me out. I don't take it and climb out by myself. "Did you finish shopping?" He asks.

"I did."

"Did you get enough?"

I shrug, "It's enough."



The house was chaotic when we returned back, the twins and Colt had left the mall long before we did but there were more people here than there had been before. I glance towards the windows, seeing the yard where the ceremony took place the day before and noticing nothing out of the ordinary. No blood stains, no glass, it was like the massacre never happened.

"Where's Lincoln?" I ask.

“In the den with my mother,” Gabriel tells me, pushing me towards the door, “Go. Spend some time in there.”

“What? No cage today?”

“If you would prefer to stay locked away then be my guest, Amelia.”

“And how do you know I won’t run?”

He smirks, “You think you can get passed my men?” He glances around. I steel my spine knowing he was right, there was no chance, “But should you manage it, be sure to know I’ll chase, there will be no escaping me, no place you could hide where I wouldn’t find you.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I sneer.

I turn my back on him, heading across the foyer towards the door leading into the den. Beyond the door I can hear the familiar sound of my sons laughter, this warming, homely sound that instantly eases an ache in my chest I hadn’t realized was there. I wasn’t used to spending so much time apart from Lincoln.

I gently and quietly push the door open, peering in. Camille sits in the middle of the floor surrounded by stuffed animals and building blocks, Lincoln happily giggling, sat before her. It was an odd vision, seeing the elegant Camille Saint slightly disheveled, no doubt from hours spent in here entertaining my son, her grandson.

I melt a little watching them, watching how she cares for him, the patience she has when he tugs on her hair and pokes at her face.

Wanting to now hold my son, I make my presence known at the door, sliding inside. Camille looks over and smiles gently. A truce I supposed for the little boy in front of her.

“How has he been?” I ask, taking a seat on the couch. Lincoln spots me and instantly smiles, tripping over his own feet in his haste to get to me.

“Perfect,” She smiles.

I pluck him from the floor, bringing him onto my lap where I hug him tight.

“He is very much like Lucas when he was that age,” Camille sighs, “Adventurous, playful, always so curious.”

“I am sorry about your son,” I tell her.

“It’s not certain he’s dead,” she whispers, “There’s still hope.”

I couldn’t even begin to imagine her pain. A child, no matter how old should never go before a parent but life was cruel and this life, it was crueler, violent. It didn’t mean she should have expected it to happen nor accept the

fact that her eldest boy is likely dead. I don't say that though. Instead I offer her a sympathetic smile and let the wriggling Lincoln go. He immediately goes to her, plopping himself down on her thighs.

She smiles through her watery eyes, running her fingers through Lincoln's dark hair.

We sit in silence for the remainder of the time, watching my son. There were no words to say between us and she doesn't stop me when I take Lincoln off to be fed and bathed.

It was odd, no one questioned me as I headed through the house, son perched on my hip, they didn't stop me as I entered the kitchen and began rifling through the cupboards in search of food I could feed Lincoln.

I wasn't free in any sense of the word, not with armed men stationed at every door or wandering through the house but other than their presence, they didn't talk to me.

It was still a prison regardless, even if Gabriel believed otherwise.

GABRIEL

I sit at the table in the dining room, the walls on either side of me lined with books, the chandelier in the centre hanging low and casting the room in a warm golden light. The food is spread before me, I didn't know what she liked so I had the chef prepare a number of different meals and sides.

It was time I got to know my wife.

At the other side of the room the door opens and Colt guides Amelia inside who shrugs of his hand and glares at him.

She was feisty and loud, and I liked that about her.

Where most would nod and obey, she fights and rebels. Despite her fear of me, because let's face it, the woman was scared, she didn't let that fear control her. She was protective. Strong. The perfect woman to stand at my side though getting her to stay there would be harder than I had anticipated.

She hated me.

"Hello wife," I greet her.

She turns that glare on me.

Her dark hair is wet from a shower, and she wears a simple pair of leggings that hug her toned thighs and follow the delicious curves of her hips. A hooded sweater covers her top half, oversized, but she looked beautiful regardless.

“Sit.”

“Do you want me to bark for you too?” She snaps, dropping herself into the chair the furthest away from me.

I grin and kick out the chair closest to me, “Sit here.”

“No.”

I cock a brow, a giddy kind of feeling blooming in my gut at her defiance. Fighting with her was becoming a new favorite thing of mine because it meant I could do this.

I stand slowly, keeping my eyes on her. She narrows her gaze but doesn't move.

I grab the back of her chair and yank, hard, pulling it away from the table. She jumps up or tries to at least, I'm quick to force her back down, her body rattling as she hits the chair with a thud.

“Get off me!” She orders. I walk around until I am standing in front of her, close, so close that if she stands, we would be nose to nose.

“Are you wishing to make your own life difficult?”

“No,” she sneers, “I'm trying to make yours.”

I chuckle, “*Leonessa*,” the nickname I'd applied to her rolls off my tongue, “It just makes my life interesting.”

“What, not enough work going around for you that you have to kidnap women and children now? Force them to marry you? If I were you, Gabriel, I'd get another hobby.”

“Why? When this one is so much fun.”

She turns her lip and looks away, crossing her arms.

“Now I would like my wife to sit next to me.”

“Well, your *wife*,” she spits the word, “Wants nothing to do with you.”

I chuckle and lean forward, grabbing the seat of the chair between her legs, “You don't have a choice.”

I yank the chair and she squeals, reaching down to grab the arms of the chair to steady herself as I forcefully drag the chair and her down the table, kicking one out the way to push her in.

“Much better.”

“You're a fucking pig.”

I take my seat, ignoring her for a moment and pick up my whiskey, taking a sip of the amber liquid, “Would you like a drink, Amelia?”

She ignores me.

I pour her a glass of wine, pushing it towards her as I begin to serve her food from every dish. She wants to be stubborn, fine, doesn’t mean she has to starve.

She sighs and plucks up the glass, taking a sip as I place the plate in front of her. “Thank you.” She murmurs.

We eat in silence, Amelia keeping her eyes down on the plate in front of her. I steal glances every few seconds, taking in the silky strands of her hair, the creamy texture of her skin and how her dark lashes frame those stunning blue eyes.

She wasn’t what I had expected.

She stands from the table, plucking up her plate, turning as if to leave.

“Sit down, Amelia.”

“Gabriel, why do you insist we do this? We are not a couple. We are joined through a forced piece of paper and a threat. You have my son. His life. My life. You’re not getting anything else from me. Not now. Not ever. You and me, we’re nothing. You are nothing.”

“We’ll see about that, Amelia,” I stand, stepping close to her. She steps back. I follow. Like a dance she backs up, all the way, fear leaking into her eyes and a gasp escaping her lips as her spine hits the wall. She flattens herself against it.

I raise a hand and watch as she flinches, squeezing her eyes closed and ducking her face to the side. Not the first time this has happened with her, and it makes me question her past. I brush a strand of hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear, her skin soft beneath my fingertips. “I won’t hurt you.”

She breathes through her nose and blows it out of her mouth before she turns to look up at me. Her eyes reveal pain, a lot of it, pain from a past I will uncover, fear but not of me though she was undoubtedly scared of me.

“Who hurt you?” I whisper. I could feel this swelling sense of protection blooming inside my chest, a growing beast that I wasn’t going to tame. I would get her to trust me. We could be something.

“I don’t want this.” She tells me.

“It’s what you have,” I tell her, “The cards that have been dealt.”

I lean into her, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, a sweet, fruity smell that intoxicates me. Turning my face, my lips brush against her cheek.

Her breathing stops and I feel her turn into me, my lips start to tip up into a smile right before she lunges away from me.

“Stay away from me, Gabriel.” She growls, any vulnerability gone.

I cock a brow, watching as she marches across the room, grabs the wine glass and the two bottles, one red, one white that the staff had placed out and storms from the room. I hear her angry steps up the stairs and the slam of a door.

“That went well,” Devon saunters into the room, glancing to the food on the table. He heads to it, swiping a warm bread roll from the basket. I let out a sigh.

“Where is Asher and Atlas?”

“Sweeping the city with a few other men,” he shrugs, “After the shipping vessel incident they wanted to make sure the streets remained clean.”

“These streets will never be clean.” I grab a bottle of whiskey from my shelf, pouring it into my glass, “We’ve still no leads on who stole from me,” I growl, “How?”

Devon shakes his head, “I don’t know. Whoever the fuck they are have inside information and it’s only a matter of time before the next incident.”

“Don’t fucking remind me.”

“Perhaps bringing in the girl now was the wrong move.”

I glare at him, “When would have been the right time?”

On top of all that, any leads and information on my missing brother have dried up. I have connections everywhere, there isn’t a single inch of this city that doesn’t belong to me and mine, so how the fuck is this happening.

I throw back the whiskey and exit the dining room, pausing at the stairs to listen for Amelia. I wouldn’t go up there, my frustrations would only lead to more arguments with the woman and that would only fuel the animosity she has for me.

“Have someone check on her in a few hours,” I tell Devon, “That wine will go to her head.”

Devon nods and I leave him, heading through the house to the study and shutting the door, sliding behind my desk. I open my laptop and pluck a cigar from the box, lighting the end and drawing the smoke in.

I remember the first time I had a cigar. Sixteen years old and given to me by my father. He wanted me in on more of the business now that I was older. Lucas had been running with him for a few years at this point.

We’re unstoppable, my boy, at the very top. It is your job, your brother’s

job to keep us here. This city is going to be yours one day.
He died a year later.



I couldn't remain still. The restless energy and anger found me leaving the house close to midnight, my keys gripped in my hand, biting into my palm. The drive across the city is quiet, refreshing, people stumbling on the sidewalks drunken and cats dipping down darkened alleys.

The car comes to a stop across from the rundown apartment building, shattered glass laying on the pavement and trash overflowing from the community bins. Inside I hear wails and crying, men shouting and TVs blasting but I ignore that and head up the stairs, using the key to unlock the faded red door and step inside. Stale air meets me, the smell of rotting food and stagnant water permeating the space.

Amelia never belonged in a place like this where the walls sweat, and the carpet is threadbare, scratchy and rough. The evidence of her life sits on wonky shelves and across scratched tabletops, pen marks and stains long engrained into the surfaces. Dust lingers in the air, disturbed now by my presence. I wanted to know what made up the girl. What made her who she is.

A file with words only tells a part of a story.

Children's toys lay scattered around the apartment, stuffed bears and building blocks hidden behind cabinets as if they fell there and were forgotten while children's books are piled on the table and windowsill, the covers worn from use. There's a pile of clean laundry on a chair and a dead plant on the shelf. Nothing matches and the couch has patches of various colors where she has mended it over the years.

Money was a problem, but I knew that from the amount of debt she has to her name, debt I've already cleared for her, though she has no idea. I continue through the apartment, opening cabinets and drawers but finding nothing that truly tells who she is, what she likes to do. What were her hobbies? Her interests?

There's a few dog eared books scattered around but once I enter the bedroom, it's the book on the bedside table that catches my attention.

Fashion Design.

I pick it up and a photo falls from within the pages. Looking down at it I see Amelia smiling back at me and in her arms is Lincoln, tiny, a few weeks old if that. He's swaddled in blankets, cradled in her arms. She looks happy, tired but happy, with her teeth on show and a brightness on her skin.

I tuck it back into the book and place it on the bed before crouching and pulling out the box beneath. Opening the lid, I find a stack of sketchbooks and pencils along with aged watercolor paints and pens. I flip through the first book, seeing the countless dresses she's designed, some bright and pretty, others dark, short, the sketched models wearing them drawn with ease and perfection. I flip open the next one, finding lingerie and nightwear and the one after that is shoes. The girl was an artist and an aspiring designer if these were anything to go by.

She had no college education and her file showed she dropped out of school long before graduation but she had untapped talent and potential.

I place it all back into the box along with the book, plucking it up off the floor. I grab the stuffed animal from the crib before I leave, taking it all with me.



AMELIA

I first picked up a pencil when I was four. Growing up, I wasn't allowed to do the normal things other kids did, I didn't even know how to hold a pencil until I went to kindergarten because no one ever showed me. There were no building blocks or toys, no crayons, or pens to draw with. That first day I headed into that public school room, packed full of other children, was the first time I had any experience with things to play with and people to talk to.

People tell me I shouldn't remember it, at least not in the vivid detail that I did, and yet I could remember every minute of that day. The noises, so different from the sounds of choking and coughing, or shouting and crying. The laughing still echoed inside my head from time to time, it was such a strange sound to my little ears, joyous now but then, I had no idea what it meant. At the time, in my innocent little head I assumed the other children that bellowed their glee were in pain. I must have laughed at some point in my very early years, but I didn't then and didn't for a long time after.

I sat in the corner of that room while the other children jumped and bounced and ran and I watched. Other children, there were other children just

like me. But they weren't like me at all. I realize that now.

The only reason I ended up in that room with those teachers and kids from my community, was because my mom ended up getting some city governed cheque that paid for my care. After the first week I became more comfortable.

The teachers, so kind in the face and gentle in touch coaxed me from my hiding place until they managed to sit me at a table with another little girl. She wore glasses and had freckles all over her face. Big blue eyes and pig tails was what I could remember about her. Her name, it was lost to memory now.

They placed a piece of stark white paper in front of us both, planted a pot of crayons in the middle and told us to draw.

The girl in front of me did so immediately, her little hand diving into the pot of colored crayons, pulling out a green and I just stared. I watched her, scratching onto the paper and was mesmerized by the color leaking from what I thought at the time was just a stick in a funny shape. My eyes went to the pot, at the rainbow of colors there and I selected an orange. It felt strange in my hand, like my fingers just couldn't hold it right. It slipped and dropped and rolled off the table more times than I could count but eventually I managed to get a grip on it and finally I put the tip of it to the paper. And I drew. I didn't draw anything but colored lines and odd shapes, but I drew for the first time in my very short four years of life.

It felt good.

I liked it.

And the next day, when my mother dumped me at the door, not even waiting for me to be taken inside, I picked up another crayon and I continued. I carried it on every day I was there until I had a mountain of paper all containing my drawings. I went from drawing lines and shapes to drawing flowers and buildings, all as good as a child could be but I was drawing with the eye, learning, gaining confidence with a pencil, with color and paper.

It felt releasing. Like all the energy within me was being propelled towards this simple white sheet in front of me.

And as I grew, I continued to draw, all through junior and middle school and onto high school where I was able to take art as a study and could perfect my skill beneath others who had immense talent in the art. It's there I found my love for fashion.

I watched program after program on it, documentaries, I read books. I

loved the detail and the style and how it wasn't just drawing, it was a part of you too, it was what you liked, what you perceived and shaped into beautiful dresses and skirts and shoes. I'd wanted to go to college.

Of course, that was only ever a dream. Never a reality for someone like me.

I knew that long before my mother died and long after too, and the bitter disappointment forever stayed on my tongue.

It had been some time now since I'd picked up a pencil and put it to paper. I doubted you could lose your skill but when I looked at my fingers, I couldn't see beautiful creations coming from them. I couldn't imagine ballgowns and lingerie. The last time I had any form of inspiration was when I was still pregnant with Lincoln, after I'd escaped my stepfather and started on my own. I didn't have much but I was free and that was enough. So, I created drawing after drawing, I read and watched people bring their own drawings to life using needles and fabric, and wanted to learn that art next, or even find someone who would do it with me. But then Lincoln was born, and the crushing reality of my life fell back on my shoulders.

I wasn't free.

Never free.

It had taken a week after my son was welcomed onto this earth for my stepfather to show and demand from me again, I fought, and I won that time. But it wasn't the last time it happened. It happened often and each time I fought.

That was my life.

Always fighting and running. I tried to provide for my son while battling a past longing to drag me back, and so that inspiration to create got pushed away and then further more, until it was a speck in a sea of chaos.

I had no time for it. No time for things I enjoyed when I was constantly fighting for survival for both me and my son.

Being a single mother isn't pretty. It isn't cuddles and giggles and happily ever after. It's work, hard work, it's fighting day in and day out trying to put food on the table and heat in your house. I would die for my son but there had been nights, lonely, stormy nights where I wished it never happened.

If that made me an awful mother, then I had to accept that. But those nights always passed, those thoughts ceased to exist the moment I caught the face of my son, saw those big hazel eyes and mop of dark hair and when he smiled, it was like the world stopped spinning around me because it was

spinning in my arms.

I never regretted Lincoln, not one bit but I wished, often, that I could give him more.

He deserved that at the very least.

He stirs in my arms where I lay on the bed, cradling him to me. The movement is enough to bring me from my thoughts, from the memories and the past and back to the present. Slowly, his eyes blink open, sluggishly fanning the big black lashes as he focus's up on my face.

"Hi precious boy," I smile.

Instant dimples sink into his cheeks, and he babbles sleepily.

Most of the day had passed already and it was almost time for his dinner and bath. I shouldn't have let him sleep so late but he was getting so big now, the moments where I could just hold him would become few and far between.

I'll deal with the consequences of this decision when I'm fighting with him to sleep at three AM.

"Should we find some food?" I ask, voice higher but quiet.

No one had disturbed me today. No knocks at the doors or barging right in, no unwanted visits from my *husband*. It was unnerving but not unwelcomed. I had at least expected Camille to demand some time with her grandson but even she left me alone.

The moment his sleepiness dissipates he's wiggling from my arms and crawling across the bed. I catch him before he can take a tumble and then set him on his feet, letting him waddle his way out of the room. There were a few guards stationed along the way but no faces I recognized. I keep close to Lincoln to make sure he doesn't take any turns or tumbles and then lift him to carry him down the stairs.

The house is eerily quiet when I reach the ground floor.

"Hello?" I call out, clutching Lincoln tighter.

"Mrs Saint!" Colt calls from behind, causing me to startle. He jogs towards us.

"Colt?"

"Mr Saint said you'd be appearing around now," he checks his watch, "Wow, he was accurate."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing."

"Where is everyone?"

Colt looks away, not wanting to speak on the matter, and I roll my eyes,

it's not like I truly care anyway, they could keep their secrets.

I turn my back on Colt and head through to the kitchen, hearing his steps follow.

"If you're going to babysit me the least you can do is watch him while I make him dinner."

"There's a chef," Colt frowns.

"I will make him dinner," I tell him, "No one else."

I place Lincoln down by his feet and grab a stuffed toy someone had obviously picked up from the den and left here. He takes it with eager hands. Colt places himself down in a chair besides my son, watching him.

I get to work, grabbing some broccoli and chicken from the fridge and then finding dried egg noodles in the cupboard. I portion out a meal for Lincoln and cook it all up before I pluck him from the floor and sit him in my lap, passing him a spoon so he can feed himself. Well feed himself *and* the floor.

The tense silence in the room presses between us, the only time it's interrupted is when Lincoln squeals or throws his spoon which Colt silently picks up and replaces every time.

"You've been here all day?" I ask eventually, unable to stomach the silence.

"Yes."

"I didn't hear you."

"Mr Saint said you wouldn't want to be disturbed though I was getting worried as you hadn't left your room all day, not even for water."

"You sent drinks up." I accuse.

"I did."

"Thank you."

He nods.

I go back to watching Lincoln, helping him when he needed it and praising when required.

"It isn't so bad." Colt says moments later.

I cast my eyes over to him, narrowing them, "What isn't?"

"Being here."

I scoff, "Don't start, Colt, I've heard it enough."

He sighs and then his phone vibrates so he pulls it from his pocket, reading whatever message has just come through. He tucks it away quietly seconds later and then stands, "Good night, Mrs Saint."

I stare at his back as he retreats. What the fuck was that? It takes another ten minutes for Lincoln to finish his food and after I scrape what I can from the table and floor, I take him back upstairs for a bath. He floods the bathroom with his splashes but it's when I have him wrapped in a towel, tickling his belly that I finally get a visitor.

"Camille," I greet, drying off Lincoln before grabbing a diaper and his pajamas.

"Do you mind if I have him for a few hours?"

"He slept late today," I tell her honestly, "He won't go down for another couple hours."

"That's okay," she smiles.

It throws me off guard, it was a warm smile, one that genuinely reached her eyes and brightened her face.

"I mean, sure, yeah," I nod, "Yeah."

"Thank you, Amelia."

My brows tug down and I lift Lincoln, passing him over to his grandmother.

"Enjoy your evening," she tells me before she exits the room with my son who beams at the older woman with pure love in his eyes. He was infatuated with her.

"You too," I say long after she's rounded the corner and I'm left alone.

Not for long apparently as a second figure graces me with his presence in a matter of minutes. Gabriel stands like a demon sent right from the depths of hell. In his dark suit and with his dark hair, his eyes pop like fiery shards from his face, set off even more so by his olive toned skin and low set dark brows. He cocks his head to the side, eyes roaming over my face and then down my body which I'd only dressed in a pair of leggings and oversized tee which was still wet from the splashes during bath time.

"Wife," he greets.

"Amelia," I correct.

His mouth notches up at the side, "Care to join me for dinner?"

I place a hand on my hip, "Do I have a choice?"

His mouth now widens into a full smile and damn, he had fucking dimples too. "Absolutely not."

My nostrils flare and anger courses through me at his stupidly handsome face. "I'll change first," I tell him through my teeth.

He leans on the door jam and crosses his arms, waiting. The *audacity* of

this devil!

I walk towards him, and that smile drops from his face. He watches, like a predator never losing sight of his prey, eyes on my face, bouncing between my mouth and my eyes. I get close, real close, so close I smell his spice and leather scent and then I reach for the door, shove him and pull it hard, letting it slam in his face.

His chuckle echoes through the wood and sends a shiver tumbling down my spine.

GABRIEL

She steps from the room five minutes later, her dark hair pulled into a bun and now dressed in a pair of loose denim jeans and cropped jumper, her feet bare.

Her eyes don't rise to meet mine as she saunters passed, giving me her back. The short jumper she wears shows off just a small slither of skin at the base of her spine. The rounded curves of her hips and the smooth skin of her back was enough to make my mouth water. There was no denying I was attracted to my wife.

My fingers itched to settle into that soft flesh at her waist, to let them follow the curves down, over the beautiful swell of her ass and across the shapely thighs. As if sensing my eyes, she finally looks back at where I follow. I steal her attention in that moment, capturing her. There's no mistaking the pupil dilation when she looks at me, no missing the way she looks at my body and explores my face. Amelia likes what she sees even if she denies it until she's blue in the face.

She continues to watch me rather than where she is going.

Her foot slips off the top step, I lunge, grabbing her hard and yanking. Her back thumps against my chest and my arms go around her.

“If you weren’t too busy staring, *leonessa*, you would’ve seen you were about to go bouncing down the stairs. I warn you now, they are not forgiving.”

Her warmth presses into me through my clothes, her scent invading my nose. She was soft and warm and so damn inviting, the complete opposite to everything and all that I am. Where I was violence, she was calm. The sunshine after a storm.

Her breath rattles from her chest and just for a second she melts against me, unguarded but that moment is short lived as she’s pulling away and taking the stairs as fast as she can to get away, her hand on the rail to keep her steady.

I follow at a much more leisurely pace. My feet tap on the marble as I casually stroll through to the dining room where our food has already been placed on the table. She sits at the end of the table once again rather than in her rightful place at my side.

I stop at her chair, pressing in close enough that she feels my body heat but not close enough to touch. A warning. A temptation.

With a loud, agitated sigh she gets up from her chair, the legs scratching loudly on the marble floor and stomps like a bratty child to the chair closest to mine.

Oh, what I would give to punish that attitude out of her. How she would scream for me. Her skin reddened by my palm and her moans loud in my ear.

She dumps her ass in the seat and crosses her arms.

I’m slow to take my own and then when I do, I pour a whiskey from the decanter into one of the crystal glasses and offer it to her. Her brows shoot up and only hesitating for a moment, she accepts the drink. I pour one for myself and settle back, staring at her beautiful face while my finger traces my bottom lip in thought. She takes a healthy sip of the whiskey, sighing with the taste.

“Can I serve myself?” She asks.

I nod.

I watch as she leans across and plates some mashed potatoes and beef onto her plate, the meat drowning in a deep red sauce that floods her food. She adds her vegetables and retakes her seat, plucking up her knife and fork.

“Please stop watching me,” she says to her food, “I joined you for dinner as you demanded, the least you can do is give me peace.”

“Peace?” I laugh but give her what she wants, serving myself, “where’s my peace?”

“You chose this life, Gabriel, you live with the consequences,” she tells me, matter of fact, her lips closing around her fork as her eyes dart to me.

“It isn’t my life I seem to be having trouble getting peace from,” I tell her, “It’s you.”

She smiles, “Good. I hope I cause you hell, Gabriel. That you never know a day of peace.”

“Ah, my wife, the kind of feelings you stir may be considered a sin but trust me, my thoughts on you are so far from hell I may as well be in heaven.”

Her mouth drops open.

I let the flavors of my food hit my tongue while she continues to stare. She opens her mouth, closes it and opens again but no words come out and eventually she turns back to the food, cheeks reddening with a beautiful, innocent blush.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her quietly eat the food on her plate, taking tender sips of her drink every so often. She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t acknowledge me but that flush still glows beneath the surface of her creamy skin, like my words have left a permanent mark.

Good.

I hope they stay within that beautiful mind of hers, I hope they haunt her dreams wondering just what I might be thinking, how I may be envisioning her. She wouldn’t hate me forever, I was sure of it but then the woman was stubborn as all hell so I could be wrong.

Once her plate is cleared – something I note with approval – she throws back the rest of her drink and stands to leave.

“Would you wait for a moment, Amelia?” I ask.

She pauses, “why?”

“I have something for you.”

“I don’t want anything from you, Gabriel,” she begins her walk away, “Thank you for dinner.”

“Please,” I call to her retreating form. She pauses, her hand on the dining room door, spine stiff, “Please, Amelia, see what I have for you. If you still don’t want it, then I will remove it from the house.”

She glances over her shoulder, hesitating but then her shoulders drop and she spins, leaning back against the door and crosses her arms. She watches

me carefully as I stand and go to the shelves lining the wall of the room, plucking a box, simply decorated with a red ribbon, from the bottom.

I place it at the end of the table closest to her and step away, "Open it."

With her jaw tight, she comes to the box, pulling the ribbon until it falls apart and lifts off the lid. Her sketchbook is on top which she pulls out first.

"You went through my apartment!?" She seethes.

"I did."

"You had no right!"

"Please keep looking." She angrily throws her sketchbook to the table and tugs out the next item. The sketchbook I'd chosen for her was bound by black leather, the pages thick and ready for anything her hand may create. Beneath that was brand new, top of the range sketching pencils along with pens, paints and pencils for color. She's a lot more gentle with these items, fingers caressing them as she pulls them out one by one, as if doing so unconsciously.

"What is this?"

"It was the only thing I found in that apartment that was personal, Amelia. Something obviously loved."

"But why?"

"There is no reason why you cannot enjoy your time spent here, I thought this might be what you wanted."

"I haven't drawn in a long time."

"You are not required to do anything, it's a gift, one you can enjoy if you want to."

"I want to," she whispers, glancing at me quickly before looking back at the items, "Thank you."

"I would also like to offer to pay for your classes."

"Sorry?"

"You do not have a degree."

"No," she grits.

"I would like to help get you one. You are very talented, Amelia, you should do something with it."

"You don't get to tell me what to do!" Amelia growls at me, shoving the lid of the box back on, "Thank you for the gifts but I cannot accept."

Leaving the box and her old sketchbook where it is, she storms to the door.

"If you change your mind, I will leave them here. Collect them whenever

you want.”

“Good night.”

The door slams hard enough the frames hanging on the wall rattle with the thud.



It was well past midnight but like every night since Amelia has been beneath my roof, I was restless. No amount of alcohol could settle the urge to find her, to look and short of leaving my own house, I was helpless to resist the craving.

My feet are silent as I take the stairs and carry myself down the hall towards her bedroom. A guard stands a few feet from the door, not to keep her inside but to protect. With everything happening in this city, with my family being threatened I would take no chances on the woman or my nephew. Until I found the rat inside my organization, a guard here would remain. He nods once and steps to the side, letting me through. The handle doesn't make a single noise until it releases with a gentle click and then swings silently inwards. The room is bathed in the soft light of a full moon, the curtains still open and I find Amelia in the middle of the bed, facing those windows as if she fell asleep watching the stars and the sea beyond. She breathes evenly, her dark mane of hair fanned out onto the pillow behind her, the lines of her face relaxed, lashes fluttering as she dreams.

My feet carry me closer, eyes moving away from my sleeping wife for just a moment to dip to the child cradled in her arms, sleeping as peacefully as she.

A crib had been set up for the child next to the bed because I doubted she'd ever allow him to sleep separately from her just yet, even if I had prepared a room for him, but eventually she would, I hoped.

Her lips part on a sigh and my fingers itch to reach forward, to press my thumb to that plump bottom lip and feel her breath on my fingertips.

She was a growing obsession, a vice that was easily clamping around my being. I was *aware* of her.

Women, they've come and gone, not one holding my attention like she has and she hated me.

I didn't blame her.

The life I lead is not without its cruelties and with them, I've become the man I am. I take without asking, steal, murder, destroy where I must but with her I didn't want to.

I wanted her to come willingly.

Her disrespect irks me and turns me on all in the same breath, her fight and fire an aphrodisiac that ignites something so primal inside of me it feels as if an animal is about to be unleashed from a cage. Unable to help myself, I lean forward, trailing the very tip of my finger light up her face, a barely there kiss of skin that burns where it meets. I move it around the line of her face, towards her hair that feels like silk and then tuck an errant strand behind her ear, letting my finger follow the curve of her earlobe.

I don't know how long I stay, staring down at the woman but I eventually leave, my muscles tense and spine straight, every step away feeling wrong and abhorrent.

I needed Amelia to be mine.

In every single way imaginable.



AMELIA

I felt eyes on me or maybe it was just a dream. I wasn't sure.

But I sensed them, hazel eyes, lit with a hell fire that both burned and tempted. I knew who they belonged to even without seeing the rest of him. There was only one man on this earth who was as intriguing as he was deadly.

Gabriel Saint was a walking nightmare, and I was stuck with him.

I wake to the sound of the ocean, muffled by the windowpanes but present nonetheless. My room is bathed in a dim silver glow from tonight's full moon. Stars twinkle in the velvet black sky, the lights of the city far enough away to allow them to shine.

I sigh and bring Lincoln's sleeping form closer. Why had I woken?

I'd fallen asleep quickly for the first time since being here and it was peaceful until it wasn't.

I was restless now and my brain was awake, there was no going back to sleep at this current hour even if the city, that seemed so many miles away, slept.

My mind wanders back to the box containing all those supplies.

No one had ever done that for me before. I'd never been given a gift that was just mine. Something carefully picked out because they knew what I liked. Sure, during school I received little trinkets and cards, but this one, with the sketchbook I'd never be able to afford, and all the supplies selected from the top shelf, it was something picked solely for me.

The thought makes my eyes sting. Gabriel didn't know me and yet he knew me better than anyone else. It was sad really.

Guilt sits heavy in my gut at my reaction to his gift. But knowing he'd found it, that he'd solved a single part of my puzzle and wanted to do more, it scared me. I didn't want to think any different of him than I do now.

Him being a monster was the easiest route, the safest one. What he had done was unforgivable. What he had taken from me, there was no redemption to that.

And yes, my life before wasn't glamorous, I didn't have anything and I knew, if I wanted it now, I would get it but taking from him felt like making a deal with the devil.

But it was just a gift, right? Just a little one.

I didn't have to take the classes he was offering, I didn't have to accept the chance at making a future for myself on his money but I could accept a gift. After all, with everything he had taken from me, my freedom, my life, my *name*, it was the least he could do.

Slowly, I rise from the bed, keeping Lincoln tight and as still as possible against my chest to avoid waking him. My feet pad against the plush carpet as I cross the room and lower him down into the crib. I couldn't leave him in the bed alone in case he hurt himself.

As I gently ease him down, he stirs for a minute but settles down into a restful sleep, suckling on the end of his thumb. Once I'm sure he won't wake, I creep from the room, glancing back at him briefly before meeting a guard on the other side of the door.

"Mrs Saint? Are you okay?" He asks. He had a familiar face, a man I'd seen in the house before. He was mean looking, beefy, built like a brick wall with arms the size of my thigh and a bald head but he had smiled and been kind in the passing moments.

"Fine, just getting some water," I lie.

"Let me," he offers.

"No, it's okay, I can't sleep anyway."

“Okay.” He agrees, “would you like me to escort you?”

“Can you just stay here?” I glance back at the door, “Lincoln is still sleeping.”

He nods once, “Of course.”

It was a strange experience with these men. Granted the majority were grouchy and violent, their eyes judging and their mouth giving away exactly how they felt but these ones, they didn’t fit. Like they had two different personalities, one side being the violent and deadly men they were and the other, more gentle, kind even.

I get to the end of the hall and turn back, “What’s your name?”

He snaps his head to me, brows lowering, “Mine?”

I nod.

“Nate, Mrs Saint,” he says, “My name is Nate.”

“You can call me Amelia,” I tell him.

“Mr Saint wouldn’t agree.”

I smirk, “I don’t give a fuck what Gabriel wants.”

I leave him with a smile and head downstairs, the place dark but I know it isn’t sleeping. There will be more guards where Nate came from but hidden, shrouded in the shadows in the corners or behind closed doors.

My feet slap on the marble floors as I make my way to the dining room and find the box exactly where it was left hours ago except now my son’s favorite stuffed animal sits on top. It was a bunny, with big floppy ears, it’s fur a light purple and I’d picked it up at a yard sale when he was about six months old and he’d slept with it ever since. Gabriel must have snatched it when he decided to rifle through my apartment and the sight of it makes my heart stutter.

I move the stuffed toy out of the way and open the lid again. It had been too long since I’d even looked in my sketchbook and much longer since I’d felt the vibration of a pencil scratching across the surface of a page. I flick through the pages, my heart feeling light as I recognize my own sketches, the familiar folds of the skirts and dresses I’d created and the intricate details I’d applied to the lacy lingerie designs.

My fingers brush the expensive leather of the book Gabriel had purchased.

I needed this.

I wanted to draw again, I wanted to let all these ideas flow, so I pack it all away, lay the bunny on top and lift it from the table, carrying it out of the

dining room and back up to my room.

Nate smiles and opens my door, closing it behind me with a soft click.

I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep again tonight, I was pumped with excitement at the prospect of creating again, of letting all these ideas I've had over the past god knows how long exit my brain.

I switch on the lamp at the side of the bed, glancing to Lincoln to make sure he remains asleep in the sudden light and when he does, I open to the first page on the new sketchbook and select my pencil from the array Gabriel had gifted.

My ideas flow, the image in my head being printed directly onto the paper before me, line after line, I create, carving out a figure and then dressing it in the most stunning dress I've ever created. It's floor length, a deep black in color but set with silver diamonds that hide beneath the sheer lining I manipulate over the main dress. It has a deep, plunging V neckline that stops just above the naval and thin straps that guide it down into a low backline. The skirt of the dress has two slits, almost hidden by the amount of material on the bottom half but I could picture a model walking in it, her legs peeking out from between the carefully placed cuts on the skirt. It would fold between with each step, keeping her protected while teasing at the feminine curves of her thighs.

The colors I select bring out each highlight of the dress, each sparkle of the inset gems, some of which would never be seen at the same time. I draw the dress in different angles, from behind and the side, showing off the delicate and yet remarkable lines of the way it would fall.

By the time I was finished with the initial design the sun was rising, fiery oranges and pinks slashing through the morning sky, wispy clouds forming above a calm sea.

I look down at the gown, my hand aching from use and smile, feeling a little more free than I did the day before. It was a weight lifted from my soul in a way. I'd stifled my passion, pushed it way down and let time pass by. Lincoln would forever be my main focus but in the quiet moments there was no reason why I couldn't enjoy something like this just for me.

It's just as I am packing away the equipment that Lincoln begins to stir, and I don't manage to get it all away before he starts to cry for attention.

I leave it on the bed to attend to my son, taking him through to the ensuite bathroom to give him a wash and get ready for the day. Twenty minutes later I exit only to find Gabriel in the room, staring down at the dress I had

created.

“You have an extraordinary talent, Amelia,” he tells me, not looking away from the dress, “It is wasted if you do not do something with it.”

I sigh, “Thank you for the compliment,” I say, tucking Lincoln a little bit closer.

He brings those hazel eyes to my face.

He looked good today, dressed in a black suit with a simple white shirt, unbuttoned at the top to reveal a peak of a hard muscled chest. His mouth was framed by his well groomed dark beard and his hair styled in a tousled way that made it look like it had been run through with fingers.

I swallow, angry at his cruel beauty.

“Please reconsider my offer, *leonessa*.”

I narrow my eyes, “I’ll make you a deal.”

He smirks, stepping closer to me. I hold Lincoln a little bit tighter but the boy wiggles wanting to get away, squeaking with a warning he’s about to throw a tantrum if I do not put him down. I note the closed door and decide to do so. He crawls away, distracted by the toys left on the floor.

Gabriel watches him before looking back to me, “What kind of deal?”

He’s closer now, so close I can smell his spicy and leathery scent, intoxicating to the senses and a fog on the mind. I tip my head back to keep my eyes on his face, “You tell me what that means,” I breathe, “And I’ll consider your offer.”

He grins, showing off his white teeth. He had a beautiful smile.

Shit. Mentally, I chastise myself for noting such an insignificant point.

He was Gabriel Saint, it didn’t matter that he had a nice damn smile.

He searches my face as if he can read all the thoughts inside my head and I don’t know what divine being I have to thank but I am glad he cannot. He brings his hand to my face and I manage to control my flinch, even if I bite my tongue hard enough to taste blood.

“*Leonessa*,” He repeats the word he’s been calling me since day one. His warm finger tucks a tendril of hair behind my ear, “Lioness.” His hand lingers, “It means Lioness, Amelia.”

“Why are you calling me that?”

“You are bold,” he tells me, closing a little bit more space between us. I feel his heat, that damning scent now filling my air, seeping into my lungs. His hand moves from my ear to my cheek, cupping it, thumb gently circling. It was a steadying pressure, a calming and welcomed sensation. How long

had it been since I'd been touched in any capacity? How long since someone took care of me? "Fearless. Your independence drives you, you empower yourself. And yet, deep within you, you have a gentleness about you, a part of you that dominates, even subconsciously. Your need to nurture and protect the thing that matters most compels your every move."

"You don't know me," I whisper, feeling the tell-tale sting of tears behind my eyes.

"Not yet but I know enough to know that. I knew that the moment I stepped into your apartment."

His thumb presses into my bottom lip, pushing it down just a small amount before he relieves that pressure and instead traces the curve of it. Goose bumps break out across my skin, my stomach knotting and heart rate spiking.

"My reputation precedes me, Amelia, you know of the things I do, what harm I have done. And yet, knowing this, knowing my intentions that day, you still fought. You fought with all you had, and you continue to do so. I've seen men piss themselves in my presence and yet you hold the courage of a thousand."

I sense no deception in his words, only truth spoken from a man who I have no doubt has seen all sorts of people, all sorts of horrors and violence. Frozen in place I stare up at him, his own eyes bouncing between mine.

He was so close, so close I could smell the mint on his breath, see the flecks of gold that speckle his eyes. My toes lift me from the floor, bringing me in as he leans, and then his lips touch mine and sparks go off inside my mind. Warm, soft lips, far too pleasant for a man like him and this kiss, it isn't like the kiss on our wedding day that was all punishment. This one was a question, a request for more.

His hand slides around to the back of my head, fingers threading into my hair and as he goes to deepen the kiss, my lips parting, warning bells ring loudly in my ears.

Wrong. Wrong.

He took your freedom.

He kidnapped you.

Letting him have any part of you is a losing game.

I stumble away from him, breaking the kiss. His head hangs as he sighs loudly and I step round him, going to the opposite side of the room to put distance between us.

“Thank you, I will consider,” I hate myself for how weak my voice sounds, for how much my body burns and lips tingle.

“Amelia—” he starts but gets cut off as the door slams open and Atlas fills the space.

“Gabriel,” he growls, a furious scowl on his face, “We’ve got to go.”

Something passes over Gabriel in that moment, his shoulders square and his jaw goes tight. He looks at me once more before he storms from the room and closes it behind him, leaving me alone with the lingering whisper of his kiss and a riot of thoughts that were threatening to pull me into a deep dark hole I would never come out of.



AMELIA

The car stops at the warehouse and as I climb out the stench of burned flesh and hair hits my nose, the building still smoking and bellowing black smog into the blue sky. Bodies lie on the ground in front of the large building, some covered, others not, their features now unrecognizable beneath the blisters and melted skin. Fire still burns towards one end of the warehouse, but the main section has been extinguished though there wasn't much left of it. The roof has collapsed, the windows shattered and inside there would be more bodies.

“How?”

Atlas passes me the tablet in his hand and taps the screen, playing security footage from around six AM this morning. Three hours ago.

The warehouse sits in the industrial district on the outskirts of the city limits, far enough away that a fire of this size would remain undetected for a few hours before either workers arrived for their shifts, or the smoke was spotted.

There were guards that patrolled the grounds twenty-four seven, some in

my employ, some not but they were all murdered, either shot or stabbed so no one could report the fire before it became uncontrollable.

I watch three men, dressed in that black attire I saw before with the vessel, enter the warehouse, they're only in there for ten minutes and when they exit, one lights a match, throwing it through the open door. Flames instantly ignite and then spread like a wildfire.

"The footage between midnight and six has been erased," Atlas tells me, "It only started rolling again from six."

I keep watching. The man who threw the match turns to the camera, tilts his head and stares directly at it. With his face covered and the flickering of the raging fire, there's no way to tell who it is.

And then he leaves with the rest of them, leaving the warehouse and everyone and everything inside to burn.

Ahead, firefighters battle errant fires while others scour the building for survivors. There would be none.

If the fire didn't kill them then these men would have.

"Fuck!" I bellow.

My city was under attack. This was war but I was battling blind. I knew nothing of the enemy, no clue for the motive and I would lose if I didn't fucking figure it out. First the vessel, now my stock. They were taking it all!

Someone wanted my city for themselves, but they were going to have to kill me first.

The Saint's run Redhill and they have for generations, it wouldn't be in my timeline that we lost it.

"Find out if there's any salvageable stock," I order Atlas, "And triple the security at our other locations. I'm finding who's doing this."

Atlas nods once and heads towards the warehouse and the men coming and going from the building. Anger makes my blood boil, my heart picking up speed. I climb into my car, hands balling into fists atop my thighs as I lean my head back and close my eyes to settle the fire inside me.

Amelia's face flashes behind my eyelids, her soft hair leaving a whisper on my fingers at the memory of my hand weaving through the strands as I cupped the back of her head. The taste of her lips lingers on my mouth, the pillowy softness engrained into my brain.

Remembering the kiss soothes that rising tide. I let the memory take over. I never think clearly angry, who does? And having her controlling this side of me, even in just memory is enough to keep that rage at bay.

The echo of her sigh is like music to my ears, the moment my lips touched hers and she melted against me, letting me in, letting me possess, it was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

I wanted more. I wanted to devour her, I wanted to taste her tongue and bite her lips and sink my fingers into her supple flesh, exploring, teasing...

But then she shut down.

I felt it the moment she did, her body going stiff, her mouth freezing on mine, but I know, if that war was not going on inside that pretty little head of hers, she would submit to me. She would let herself fall into my web and I would have her.

But my wife was too stubborn and afraid. Afraid of me and other things I had yet to find out about. But I would.

There would be no secrets she can hide from me.

But first things first, I needed to get this city safe for her, for us.

Now calmer than I was moments ago, I press the button to start the car and pull away from the smoldering wreck of the building and head across the city. Everything remained as it should, with people going about their daily lives, mingling around the shopping centers and many diners and restaurants dotted throughout Redhill. With the city being close to the sea and the famous landscapes that surround it, tourists were common. They were great for my economy and while they pump money through the many businesses, the Saint's have always supported. No one cares where the money comes from, once it lands in their bank accounts it's a roof over their head and food on the table. It keeps business doors open and traffic flowing. If the money comes from the dead or through less than legal activities, then so be it.

I head down towards the marina, idling in the traffic that clogs the roads, the heavy echo of horns and sirens filling the silent void within the cab of the car. I glance down towards the dock, watching two vessels pull into port. Redhill didn't have a huge port, but it was big enough for suppliers to use from the Far east, Europe and across America. It was built many years ago to help with the congestion at other ports along the West Coast but the moment it was in commission, us Saint's owned it.

Taking a cut for every vessel and container coming in and out of the city and using them to haul our goods across the country, bringing them in from Mexico, Russia and the Far East. No vessel, no matter who owns the shipping line gets away without paying the fee. When I have the government officials sitting inside my pocket it was easy to hold cargo for indefinite amounts of

time, forcing the shippers and the consignees to sweat long enough for them to bend and break beneath my will. The fees were paid, the pockets were loaded, and the cargo was released.

Right now, I could see my men patrolling the docks, a few speaking with officials as envelopes, far too thick to simply be shipping documents are passed between them.

We had our legitimate businesses, of course, the casino that dominated the Festa District of the city, close to South beach, it was a haven for tourists and city folk alike. The biggest gambling hall in the city with a flavor to suit everyone's taste. Live music and poker tables, dark corners where things aren't noticed, and a hotel set above it. It was the Saint's biggest and oldest business that made us the most money, second to the darker side of this lifestyle.

Continuing past the marina I head to that particular part of the city, turning a corner and finding the large glass building sitting right in front of me, blocking the view of South Beach and its sandy shore, the cliffs swooping round and climbing. My house was atop those very cliffs but from here you'd never see it.

Amelia was on those cliffs.

My wife.

I don't stop at the casino, but I smile a little when I see the long, thriving queue spilling from the doors.

This city, it was home. I knew these streets better than the back of my own palm, could tell you how each district smelt from the briny sea air down at Fishermen Quay, and the fresh scent of coffee and pastries on the Plaza at the city centre or how Valley Park smelt like cherry blossoms and lilac in summer and earth and rain during the winter. This city was imprinted in my blood, in my soul. The summers were hot, the winters brutal but it was mine.

Before I take the cliff road home, I pull down a side road, letting my wheels travel slowly down the street. Here the houses became a little more run down with every hundred yards I travel. It didn't matter how much money I pumped through the streets, many of these fuckers pocketed the money and left their buildings – and their tenants – to rot.

It was in a similar street where Amelia used to live, though maybe not as decrepit as this particular area of the city.

While I disliked the image, and hated how these residents were treated, there were very important people here.

My car stops in front of a ramshackle house, the façade crumbling in age and weather worn, the yard overgrown and browned from the sun and lack of water.

An old bike, rusted and falling apart lays half buried in the wild grass, old broken bottles, the glass shards glinting in the light, litter the gravel path that leads to the porch.

I don't have to knock.

The door creaks open the moment the toe of my shoes hits the rotten first step.

"Mr Saint," Talon steps into the sun.

"Walk with me."

Talon was young, just finishing up his last year in Redhill University, the scholarship paid for by myself. I'd found him when he was sixteen, stealing from a local supermarket to feed his family and selling drugs down the back alleys near the casino.

After I took him in, I found out a little more, it had come to my attention that the boy was much smarter than he'd let himself on to be. He was terrified of me at the time, probably is still now, but fear in my employ was good but I tried not to let it rule.

I wanted loyalty more than anything else and loyalty is not born from fear.

Talon had a gift, much like Amelia did with her drawings but Talon was excellent with a computer, and everything that came with it. Systems and programs, the internet and all those dark, seedy places that live within. I had men on my crew that were good but Talon, he was extraordinary.

So I offered him a job and a full ride to college.

He didn't second guess his decision to accept the offer.

I'd offered to pay for new accommodation, a place in the city for his younger by three years sister and elderly mother but he had declined, knowing the women wouldn't go willingly if they found out where the money was coming from.

It is what it is, the Saints had a reputation and most knew who we were. And what we did.

He stayed here, in his broken little house but he had food on the table and paid the bills with plenty left over. It made me wonder why he hadn't gotten the house fixed up, but I didn't question shit.

"As I am sure you have seen, we've been hit several times in the last few

months.”

“It was on the news.”

I grunt in response, “The last two have been the biggest.”

“Two?” He quizzes, bringing his dark brows down, “I only heard about the cargo ship.”

“The warehouse was targeted down at the industrial district, the whole building is gone.”

“Shit,” he hisses. “What do you need?”

“You’re a part of my family now, Talon,” I tell him, “I saw something in you I haven’t seen in a long time.”

He nods.

“Well, what I need from you is going to need to stay between us. No one can know.”

His eyes light up like a damn fourth of July parade, “What is it?”

There was a traitor in my damn city, one giving away my secrets. I had no idea who it could be, and everyone was a damn suspect, even family. I couldn’t ask my own in-house guys without risk, so Talon was my next option though bringing the boy in before he was ready was a risk in and of itself.

“I need access to every camera in this city.” I tell him.

His eyes widen.

“I want to be able to view the last six months of footage and I want you to run checks on my men.”

“Checks?” He swallows.

I nod, my hands buried in the pockets of my suit pants, “Everything on them, I need it. Even if you think it’s miniscule, I want folders on everything they’ve done, money they’ve spent, they’ve earned. Where they’ve been. Can you do that?”

“Well of course, but that won’t be quick.”

“I know,” I agree and pull out an envelope from inside my pocket, handing it over, “This is seventy-five grand. Half of what I will give once the job is complete.”

His eyes bug out of his head. “Mr Saint, I can’t – it’s...” he trails off.

I pat him on the shoulder and turn back the way we came. He follows slowly behind.

“I’ll send you my employee files,” I tell him, “The rest is on you.”

We make it back to the front of his house and I look upon it, shaking my

head. “And Talon, start somewhere fresh in the city. You can afford it now.”

“I – I can’t,” he stutters, “What would I say?”

I shrug, “Not my problem, but those women deserve better and you can provide.”

I leave him outside the house and drive away. Truth was, I liked Talon and I did believe he deserved better. The women he looked after since his father died, deserved better. He was shy in himself right now but he had a powerful mind.

And I would use that, for my own gain but his also.



I glance out the window on the drive back to the house, the sun bouncing off the waves far beneath the cliff top road. Turning back, I continue further up until I’m pulling through the gates leading to the house and further beyond that, Amelia.

It’s not until I’m slowing that I realize the gates were open, that the grounds were too quiet.

I leave the car in the courtyard, the sun beating against the back of my neck but that’s not what makes my skin hot.

In a world as dangerous as mine it was detrimental to learn when and how to trust your instinct. It could mean life or death in any moment and that feeling, the one where you know you are being watched, stalked, it was almost always real. I do not stop but I subtly reach into my jacket, unholstering the weapon at my side, thumb clicking off the safety. When I reach the door, I find it slightly ajar.

Gritting my teeth, I push it open to find a massacre inside.



AMELIA

It was long after Gabriel left that I decided to leave the room with Lincoln. I knew he wasn't here, oddly enough my body was scarily in tune to his presence. My heart beat just that bit quicker, my blood and skin feeling just that little bit warmer.

My lips still burned from the kiss, I could still taste him on my tongue.

With Lincoln in my arms, I carry him to the den, placing him on the floor and surrounding him with toys from a bucket placed next to the arm of the couch. While he's distracted, I help myself to the bar set up next to the large bay windows that look out into the front courtyard. There was a mini fridge and several bottles of expensive looking spirits on the shelf, but I just grab water.

Nate was around here somewhere, I saw him after I'd left the room, but it was Colt who had followed us down and was currently stood at the door, his back to me.

I wondered if I could overpower him, attempt escape again but something stopped that train of thought. I told myself it was because I didn't want

anything bad to happen to Colt. Regardless of who he worked for and how he has been forced to babysit me, I didn't want him to suffer any consequences. Gabriel appeared reasonable – kidnap and imprisonment aside – but there was a reason his name alone could make someone piss their pants.

With Lincoln busy on the floor, I curl up onto the couch, my fashion book on my lap. The offer Gabriel had given was on a constant loop inside my head. I'd told him I'd think about it, I made a deal with him but then I hadn't bargained for what he had said. For what he had called me and seen in me.

Brave? I wasn't brave. I wasn't courageous.

What was courage if I was too afraid to even accept a genuine offer that could *help* me. Maybe it was because it came from him? I don't know.

I was right though. Being near him, accepting things from him, it was a losing game.

There was no way I'd come out a victor.

I sigh and open the book, running my hand over the familiar pages I'd read front to back so many times I'd lost count.

The familiar words and images settle that space inside me, the part of my soul I'd given over to drawing and fashion design all those years ago. The whole thing made my hands itch with the need to pick up my pencil again, to draw some more, even after picking it up for the first time in years only last night.

"Hey Colt?" I call.

He turns to me but almost immediately, his eyes snap to the window behind me and widen, "Get down!" He yells.

He lunges for me, my body going stiff just as a loud *pop* sounds and glass shatters.

Next to me, Lincoln screams just as Colt lands in a heap atop my body. A warm wetness seeps into my t-shirt immediately.

"Colt?" I squeak.

He does not respond.

"Colt!?" I try again, pushing at him. There's a buzzing inside my head, panic and fear driving the need to get him off so I can get to my son. He groans.

"Colt!" I yell, shaking.

I push at his shoulders just as the sound of gravel crunching under foot sounds from outside the broken window.

Slowly, he pushes himself up, eyes not turning to me but to the window

first before they meet my own. He didn't look afraid but angry. Pain crumpled his features, but he didn't react.

"Run," he croaked, "Hide, Amelia."

"What is it?"

I was too afraid to turn around and the moment he managed to sluggishly push himself off, I was moving.

Another *pop* echoes into the den. The bullet lands in the wall, followed by several more. Colt is hit again and this time he screams, the bullet ripping through his thigh.

I curl around Lincoln and then drag us both into the corner of the room, tucking us both behind a bookshelf.

I meet Colt's eyes. I couldn't just leave him. I couldn't...

His blood seeped from his wound, staining the couch but he just stared at me, "Hide."

"Colt..." I breathe, fear holding my voice hostage.

"Go, Amelia."

As he says these words, Nate storms into the room, eyes first finding an injured Colt on the couch before they land on me and Lincoln. "Let's go!" He orders, "Move now!"

I don't move.

I can't move.

"Amelia," he softens, "Come on, let's go."

He suddenly ducks when another shot rings out.

"Go!" He roars.

I somehow manage to get to my feet, falling towards him. He grabs Lincoln from me, holding him in one arm against his hip while his other grabs me, curling me into him, shielding us both with his own body.

He was using himself.

My throat burned with a scream I wanted to unleash, and my head buzzed with both the echoes of the gunfire and Lincoln's cry.

He pushed us through the house, towards Gabriel's office. It felt open in the foyer as we crossed, too quiet, too exposed.

The scream bursts from me the moment I hear a huge crash behind, the front door slamming open and shouts bellowing.

"Run!" Nate yells, forcing Lincoln back into my arms and pushing me. Men run towards me, I recognize their faces, but they don't stop, they flow past, an army heading into battle.

Everything explodes into a chaotic riot of loud bangs and shouts, heavy thuds, and cries of pain.

I run.

I'm not ashamed. I curl my body around Lincoln, my only thought is to get him away from the danger. My feet slam on the marble flooring, my breath sawing from my chest as I burst through the door to Gabriel's office and practically throw both of us beneath the desk, rolling in a way so my body takes the brunt of the fall. My side, just at the bottom of my ribcage slams into the edge, pain bursting through me and stars blooming behind my eyes, but I push it back, push it away, curling myself around Lincoln to protect him.

I flinch with every shot, with every scream, Lincoln still crying in my arms.

"Shh," My voice shakes, "Shh baby, it's okay."

I cradle his head, rocking him in the tiny cramped up space. Memories try to flood in, memories of me being a little girl, hiding in the cupboard beneath the sink while my stepfather screamed and destroyed the place, throwing plates and smashing furniture, searching for me so he had a body to take his anger out on.

It used to be my mother. But she was gone and the next best thing for him was me.

I'd sit in the cupboard for hours, my hand pressed so tight across my mouth I'd be left with a red mark or bruising but that was better than the pain he would cause. I still held many scars caused by him, on my thighs, my back, the tops of my arms.

But I learned to hide, just like I was doing now but this time, I wasn't hiding for me, this went beyond me, this was for my son.

I knew people were dying. I could hear their bodies dropping, their gurgled cries but I stayed for him.

Tears streamed down my face, my heart thumped wildly inside my chest but somehow, somehow, my rocking and cooing settled Lincoln's cries.

I continue that gentle sway back and forth, the back of his head cupped in my hand, his cheek to my chest. My tears are silent, my anguish internal but I feel myself being ripped apart.

Silence falls, like a lead weight it drops onto the house, and I suck in a breath, holding it, my tears burning tracks down my cheeks until they drop into Lincoln's mane of unruly dark curls. He suckles his thumb, his little

aftershocks of the crying rocking his body as he hiccups.

“Where is she?” Someone says.

I swallow.

It was nauseating, having a double dose of fear. Fear of your past, of your memories haunting you and the present, of the now and the very real danger.

They’d kill us both.

By that question alone, they were looking for me.

For my son.

“Find her!” Someone orders.

I can feel a cry bubbling up in my throat so I press my hand over my mouth and nose, stifling the noise.

“Enough!” Someone yells. That voice though, I recognized it. I knew it but in my panic, in my grief and my fear, it was a blurred mess inside my head. But I knew it, oh fuck, I knew but who!? Where did I know it from, “Let’s go.”

“But you wanted her!” Someone else says.

“There’ll be another time,” there was pure conviction in that tone, in that familiar voice, “she won’t escape me.”

I hear boots moving through the house, marching away on those orders. They don’t keep looking for me but I don’t move. I don’t make a peep.

I’d learned long ago that words meant nothing, lies were as easily fed as water from a tap and until I was certain this house was empty of enemies, I would stay right here, where it was safe.

There was a little girl inside of me that still lived. That still feared coming home, feared coming out of her hiding spot. There was a little girl inside of me that saw these people and immediately recognized danger and pain. I like to tell myself I’ve grown, that I’ve conquered these terrors but I was lying.

I was always lying to myself and I was sure I always would.

Put on a hard front and maybe, *maybe*, it would become true.

But I stay beneath that desk, cradling my son, rocking him until he falls asleep against me and then I silently sob. I cry for myself, for my past, for my nightmares and my pain, I cry for the men dead or dying beyond the door and I cry for my freedom. I cry for the freedom I don’t have and never will.

Not because of Gabriel and his forced marriage, not because I was stuck within these walls, I would never be free of the nightmare that was my life, my past and my present.

I was broken.

Consistently haunted by my past abuse, reminded everyday how I was failing, how I couldn't provide.

It's when I'm lost in that turmoil that I hear the door to the office click open.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Gabriel can say how brave I am, how courageous but I didn't want to die. I would do anything to protect my son, but I didn't want to die, there was a difference.

The thump of steps echoes inside my bones, the distinct sound of clothes brushing together, of a ring tapping against metal.

Fingers on a gun.

I close my eyes and think through what I could do.

What could I do?

If they hadn't left, there were so many more of them than there were of me. I had no weapons. Nothing that could fight off a bullet or a knife.

Shifting a little, I try to be as quiet as I possibly can as I move Lincoln to lay on the carpet behind my own body. At least I could be a shield.

I hold myself in a way that keeps him concealed and watch the space in front of me, waiting for the show of legs.

It feels as if my breath is sawing with a loud echo inside my chest, that whoever was in the room with me could hear the wheeze of my lungs.

They come closer.

Closer still. Until their steady footsteps thump to the left of the desk and then round.

Black suit pants. Black leather shoes and a wide stance.

A hand hits the top of the desk as the other falls, a relaxed posture, a gun gripped between strong, deft fingers.

They crouch and a scream builds, ready to tear from me, until his beautiful, cruel face comes into view.

"Gabriel!" I cry.

I don't think before I launch myself.

He doesn't hesitate to catch me, wrapping his thick arms around me, the gun resting against my spine. He buries his face into my hair as I bury mine into his neck, breathing in the now all too familiar scent of him, spice and leather. The smell soothes the terror.

"I've got you, *leonessa*," he soothes, "*leonessa mia*, I've got you."

"Lincoln," I sob into his neck.

He pauses, “He still sleeps.”

I sag against him, letting him bring me further into his chest, following his body as he positions himself to seating and drags me into his lap, cradling me almost in a similar way I held my son. I was curled on his lap, and at some point in the move, he’d dropped the gun to the floor, still within grabbing distance next to his thigh, but he’d let go in favor of pressing his palm to my spine, the other in my hair, holding my face into his shoulder as I cried.

I wasn’t ashamed of taking the comfort, of letting him hold me. I needed it.

After all of that, I needed *him*.

And that thought alone was as terrifying as the ordeal I’d just been through.

GABRIEL

She shakes against me, these deep-rooted tremors that rattle her bones and her body. Her tears had stopped but the sorrow was bone deep.

“*Leonessa mia,*” I whisper into her hair, bringing my hands around from where I’d cradled her until I could cup her face, “You are safe now.”

“They...” She trails off with a hiccup, “They came from nowhere. There was no warning. Colt!” Her voice breaks into a sob, “He was shot! And Nate, I don’t know what happened!”

I press my lips to her forehead, letting her feel me, feel my presence, the safety of myself. The erratic pump of her heart thumps against my own flesh, the view of her terror filled gaze and pale skin enough to haunt me for a lifetime.

“Let’s get moving, okay?” I coax. There was no doubt she was in shock, and I needed Devon to help.

I was no doctor, and I wouldn’t pretend to be, but she was taking comfort and rest in my body, and I would let her.

“Lincoln,” she says.

“I’ll get him,” I tell her, “You just stay here a minute.”

She nods sluggishly.

I help lean her against the side of the desk and she immediately wraps her arms around her legs, bringing her knees to her chest. I reach beneath and lift my nephew from the floor, holding his sleeping form close. She glances to me when I bring him out and then, to my surprise, relaxes further at the view of her son in my arms.

“Let’s go, Amelia,” I hold the boy in one arm while coaxing her up with the other, “Come on.”

I curl her into my frame, my hand still curled around the gun but my arm around her shoulders, and the other holding Lincoln. We take it steady, the shock making Amelia slow. “Turn your face into me,” I order so she doesn’t see the bodies as we come out into the foyer where I can then take her to the stairs.

She doesn’t and it’s as if something snaps.

“Nate!” She cries, spotting a body in the middle of the marbled floor, blood pooling and cooling around his lifeless frame.

“Amelia!” I yell but she breaks away from me to go to him, dropping down next to the body. He was dead. The three shots in his back and the one through his neck made sure of that, but Amelia still tries to wake him, fresh tears spilling down her face.

“Amelia,” I soothe, “It’s okay, come on.”

Her glazed eyes meet mine just as heavy and thundering footsteps thump from behind her.

She goes still, fear twisting her face, but I spot my men, Asher and Atlas, followed by Devon, eyes wide as they take in the carnage. “It’s just Devon,” I tell her, using the doctor over the twins as I felt they scared her more than she admitted.

She doesn’t relax but she does twist her head, taking stock of all the dead in the middle of my home, the blood, the gore. Few men still moved, they groaned, their gurgled, bloody cries warping together to create a symphony of agony.

“Colt,” she lunges to her feet.

“Stop her!” I order, hoping to stop her from seeing more death. Devon makes a move to grab her but she side steps him and bursts into the den, disappearing into the room.

“Devon!” I hear her scream. We all move at once, Devon getting there

first.

“Help him!” I hear her demand, “Now, Devon! Save him!”

“Shh, Amelia,” Devon soothes, “Come away so I can see.”

When I get to the door, I find Amelia cradling Colt’s head. His eyes were closed but he was alive, his breathing rough and wheezing. Blood trickles out the side of his closed mouth and his skin is a deathly shade of grey. He was lucky he wasn’t already dead.



Devon brought in some of his own trusted men to take care of any survivors, getting them stable enough so my men could get them to the hospital. Somehow, Amelia’s bodyguard was still breathing when Asher transported him. Amelia sits in the centre of the bloodstained couch, pale, swaying where she sits. She doesn’t seem to see the blood anymore, the dead that are being cleaned up just outside the door.

Death would come for us all. I’d seen enough of it in my lifetime that the view of it no longer fazed me. But seeing her there, no liveliness, no color, it was worse than seeing any violence. Devon quietly works on her, checking her vitals before passing scans over her body to check for injury. When his hands gently lay her down on a sheet he’s placed behind her back, she goes willingly.

I watch from the door, my arms crossed, Lincoln now handed to my mother who had met me in the courtyard out front, taken the child and asked no questions.

Amelia stares up at the ceiling, breathing steady. Shock, Devon had confirmed, her emotional state was in turmoil and she felt too much. It was a problem because the shock would mask any pain she might be in, hide any injuries she could have sustained from the attack. She looked okay but that didn’t mean she was.

He starts at her legs, checking for visible injuries and then moves to her torso, gently lifting her top to show her abdomen and the blooming black shadows that bruise across the underside of her ribcage.

Anger rises like a vengeful tide inside of me.

I’d controlled it since finding her, controlled the need for vengeance and retribution against those who *dared* to attack *my* home but now, now I felt

nothing but rage. There would be no mercy.

Devon tentatively checks the bruising on her body, “How did this happen, Amelia?” He asks.

My teeth snap together, picturing someone, one of my enemies hitting or kicking her when she was down. Hitting her so hard they left these extreme bruises on her body.

“I,” she swallows dryly, “When I was hiding, I went down too hard.” Amelia explains, “I fell against the desk. I didn’t think it was that hard.”

“I think you’ve fractured a rib,” he says, glancing to me, “this bruising is severe.”

She nods mutely, turning back to the ceiling and ignoring Devon as he continues to check her over. He covers her over before standing and coming to me, “She needs to be monitored. The shock will wear off and her ribs will heal but the psychological effects... I don’t know if she’ll cope.”

“She was okay after the wedding,” I say more to myself. This isn’t the first time an attack has happened.

“She had us at the wedding,” Devon says, “This time she was alone. It would have terrified her.”

“You can stop talking about me like I can’t hear you,” Amelia pushes herself off the sofa, tired eyes meeting mine, “I’ll be fine. I’m going to lie down.”

I stop her as she tries to walk past, my fingers trailing across her cheek before I cup it in my hand. She doesn’t stiffen and she doesn’t lean into it, but her eyes meet mine, a spark of something igniting behind her pain.

“Leonessa mia. La tua forza mi stupisce.”

Her brows twitch in confusion.

My Lioness. Your strength amazes me.

“Gabriel,” Atlas calls and under my hand I feel Amelia flinch at the sound of his voice, her eyes dragging to him where he stands next to a body, still moving, at his feet.

She cocks her head, staring.

I watch her but call to Devon, “Take care of her.”

He nods, ushering Amelia away. I wait until he has her safely upstairs before I move to Atlas. “What is it?”

Something about Amelia’s reaction had warning sirens blaring inside my head. Why had she reacted to Atlas’s voice that way? Looked at him like he had answers to questions she wouldn’t voice.

“Three,” Atlas says, “They’re alive.”

I glance to the man groaning at my feet, noting the tight cable ties around his wrists, blood steadily pulsing from a gunshot wound to the left of his abdomen.

“Take them below,” I order, “all three of them. Keep them alive.”

Atlas nods and moves to give the order, I grab him by the arm though I didn’t know what to say. Something was off here. He glances to my hand holding him, “What is it, brother?”

“*Fratello*,” I repeat in Italian, “We are family, *si?*”

“Yes.”

I let him go, “Don’t let them die. I’m not done with them.”

I leave them to my orders and take the stairs to Amelia’s room, finding her freshly showered with Devon sitting in a chair by the window. He glances at me and nods once before he exits.

Amelia doesn’t say anything as she climbs into the bed, curling up onto her side. I go to her, drawn even in the dire of circumstances. She doesn’t stop me from settling myself next to her, from pulling her to me, and cradling her against my chest, arms curled protectively around her.

She relaxes.

I turn my face to inhale the scent of a mix of her shampoo and simply her scent, willing myself to calm down. She was breathing. Injured but breathing. I wanted the remaining men down below to suffer and if I was too angry, I’d rip them all apart. Tentatively, Amelia curls an arm around my abdomen, curling herself in tighter.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper.

Her nails bite into the flesh at my side, clinging to me, “Gabriel,” she cries on a breath.

“Shh,” I bring her in closer, “I’m here.”

She doesn’t stop, she turns herself until she is staring at me, noses brushing, her other hand curling into the front of my shirt. There are unshed tears glistening in her eyes but fuck, they’re alive, a little wild.

“Amelia...” I try.

Her mouth slams down onto mine in a clash of lips and teeth.

Fuck!

I curl my arms around her, opening to let her in, her tongue finding the invitation and diving into my mouth. I meet her there, adjusting as she moves to straddle my hips, my cock jerking to attention at the roll of her hips against

my groin.

My fingers thread into the hair at the back of her head, holding her to me as she whimpers into my mouth. I press my hips up as she grinds down, finding a rhythm that slowly heats and increases. She felt so fucking good against me, her body perfectly built for mine.

Her breath stutters from her as I roll my aching cock against her centre, pressing in and up, wanting to bury myself to the damn hilt inside her.

Something wet hits my face and then again before I taste the salt on my tongue.

I manage to break away, breathing hard. Amelia moves in once more, trying to seal our mouths but I somehow manage to restrain myself when all I want to do is spread her out and feast on her.

“Amelia!” She turns her face away. “Amelia.”

I pinch her chin, forcing her to look at me, seeing the tears tracking down her face, sliding over her swollen and red lips. I’m careful in the way I handle her, aware of those bruised ribs.

“*Leonessa mia*,” I gently push her off, laying her onto her back. The top half of my body follows until I’m leaning over her, my weight held in the arms positioned on either side of her body, “I want nothing more than this, but not like this.” I swipe a tear from her cheek.

She brings her eyes to meet mine, more tears seeping out to slide into her hairline, “It was a mistake.”

I kiss her softly. “It wasn’t a mistake but you’re not ready.”

“You can’t have me,” She declares weakly.

But I already had her. Her mental state right now might have aided her into giving something she wasn’t ready for in this moment, but she would give herself to me. She wanted to so badly.

I didn’t blame her for trying to take something now, to feel something but when I fuck her, when I devour her, I will have her sure she wants it. Because when I do, she will be mine. Mine to please and fuck, mine to punish and worship.

She’ll belong to me.

GABRIEL

I leave her sleeping.

Closing her door, I leave it unlocked as I make my way back downstairs, steadying my breath in hopes it'll hide the raging hard on I'm currently sporting. Feeling her tight little pussy grinding up against me, no matter the circumstances, it wasn't a memory I would soon forget.

Clean up are currently busy dealing with the gore in the house but I pay them no mind as I head through to the kitchen and towards the door at the back. Silence greets me as I open it and take the steep stairs down into the basement, finding the large metal door ahead of me sealed.

The sound of cries and moans greets my ears when I open it. Atlas stands in front of one of the men, dangling from ropes by his wrists and suspended from a hook hanging from a pole that stretches from one side of the room to the other. The smell of piss hits me a moment before I notice the puddle beneath the man's dangling feet.

"Pissed himself already?" I muse, "And we haven't even got started yet."

Asher stands silently off to one side and my enforcer, a man of few words

who could make you piss yourself with just a look, stands in the shadows of the room. As much of a brother to me as the twins but we share no blood.

“Enzo,” I roll my head lazily towards the man, “I assume the sight of you made our guest empty his bladder.”

I’d asked him to remain unseen for the past couple of weeks, I didn’t want to scare Amelia. Because that’s what Enzo would do, he was the ghost stories people whispered about, the demon made flesh and bone and while we all enjoy a kill, this man lived for it. Breathed for it.

He was menacing.

He steps from the shadows, and I laugh.

When I first met Enzo a lifetime ago, I’d underestimated him. He was a pretty boy, and he took great care in his appearance. Dark blond hair, styled and groomed to perfection and a dark tan with blue eyes and a white smile. He made women drop their panties with a whisper of his fingers, but those same hands have ripped tongues clean out with nothing more than pure strength.

Beneath his pressed and crisp grey suit, I knew hundreds of tattoos inked his skin, and when he wasn’t here working for me, he ruled the underground fighting rings, a champion and God among the revelers that lived for the chaos.

And while some may look at him and see that face, it’s the eyes that hold the menace. The promise of pain, and blood and death.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t smile.

The man dangling goes deathly still at the sight of my enforcer.

“So, you’ve heard of him,” I note with a smile, “Your reputation precedes you, Enzo.”

I step around the urine, turning my nose up in a sneer, “You’ve heard the stories of Enzo, haven’t you? You know what he’ll do to you if you don’t talk. Who sent you?”

His bloodshot eyes bounce around the damp space before landing on the unconscious bodies of his men. Devon had likely sedated them while we pick through them like the worthless rats they are.

The man finally looks back to me and spits. The bloody saliva lands on my cheek. With a sigh, I reach into my jacket and wipe it off with a handkerchief before jerking my head for Enzo to step forward. I drag a chair forward, straddling it as I watch Enzo land a wind knocking punch to the

guys stomach. Spittle flies from his mouth as he grunts, choking to get back air.

He hits him again. Again. Again. Until the man hangs there limply, head dangling between his shoulders and drool leaking from his parted lips.

Enzo rears back, "Wait, Enzo." I order.

He stops and steps back, cocking his head like an animal at the man in front of him. He reaches forward and grabs his chin in a bruising hold, forcing it up so I can see.

"You scared my wife," I tell him. "You caused her pain."

"Good," he spits.

"You know," I pluck a knife from the table of tools, slicing the blade across my finger, only gently but it's enough to separate my skin and let blood well and pour down the digit. "This wouldn't have been quite as bad if you hadn't scared her. For every tear that fell, I will take payment from you."

Enzo smirks, the sick fuck, but I couldn't help but smile too.

"That's my wife." My feet come to a stop in front of his dangling body. "My wife!" I bellow, rage intensifying as I picture that bruise, those tears, and that terror. I react without thought, slicing the blade at an angle down the side of his face and taking off a chunk of flesh and muscle.

He screams. The flesh hits the concrete, landing in the puddle of piss with a wet slap.

"How many tears do you think that was worth?"

Enzo holds up three fingers.

"Only three," I nod.

The man cries, wet, bloody tears dripping through the snot and drool. I lift my hand and press the tips of my fingers into the exposed wound, pressing so hard I feel his teeth pushing back on me.

"Who sent you?" I ask.

His mouth moves but no words come out. I lash forward again, stabbing the knife to the hilt into his abdomen. And then I do it again.

Blood spurts from his mouth, splattering across my face.

"You'll kill him," Atlas says calmly.

I had two others to use so I don't stop. I slam it in again, again, until all I can hear is the wet tear of skin and the constant drip, drip, drip of blood as it leaks from his body and drops from my hand.

"Enough," Asher tells me. But I'm the fucking king and it's enough when I fucking say it's enough. I slam the knife into his temple.

“How about now, Enzo?” I growl, “How many is that worth?”

He grunts in response and moves to take the body down. Once it's clear I look over to the other two bodies in the room and smile when I spot one is already awake and looking over to us with a disgusted, horrified look. Terror was easy to recognize, it shone like a mirror except you couldn't see yourself, but you could see everything that made up a person. And this man was terrified.

“Bring him up,” I order, “Let's see how loose his tongue is.”



It was a set up.

The damn fire at the warehouse was a set up to get me out the house so they could take out a good chunk of my men and Amelia with it. They hadn't succeeded of course but just knowing she had a target on her back was enough to want me to pack her up and ship her off until it was safe. But then I was selfish, and I wanted her with me.

While the warehouse had been used for the ploy, there were motives of course and after I was done with the bastards, Atlas showed me the recovered footage of the men transporting all of my goods out of the warehouse and into waiting lorries.

Thieving fucking assholes.

But these fucking assholes were winning at the moment.

It had long since fallen dark and the weather beyond the windows reflected the storm within. Rain lashes at the glass walls that made up one side of the house and pushing open a window, I listen to it falling and the chaotic crash of waves at the base of the cliff.

I taste the salty air on my tongue and let the rain drizzle against my skin until it cools, wetting the blood that still stains my body. With a heaving sigh, I turn and come face to face with Amelia.

She swallows as she takes in the caked blood on my face, the red crimson staining my hands and shirt. There was more but the black material of my suit hid it.

Her eyes track over every inch of me.

“Amelia.”

“I couldn't sleep,” She whispers, stepping forward but hesitating.

“Nightmares?”

She shakes her head, eyes on the blood, “Who?”

“The men who wanted to hurt you.”

I wasn't sorry.

“Is this what it's like for you all the time?” She finally meets my eyes.

“No.”

“So, it's just now then? Out of the blue circumstances which have seen this house shot at twice now?” She backs up and shakes her head.

“Don't be afraid of me, Amelia.”

She scoffs, “Good night, Gabriel.”



AMELIA

His bloody appearance didn't frighten me.

It should have but it didn't.

But I was running again. Shutting it down, *again*.

This war I was having with myself was by far the hardest I'd ever experienced. Every decision I'd made so far in my life I was sure of, from getting away from my stepfather, to having Lincoln, I was sure but now... I felt as if the walls that I used to keep myself safe were disabled and off balance.

And it was him.

How can a man who could give such comfort when I was terrified, who could kiss like a man filled with so much passion and desire, be the same man standing in front of the windows, a storm at his back while covered in the blood of a man – or men – he had just likely tortured.

He looked like the devil, and he tasted like sin so perhaps it was fitting.

But I had gone searching for him for a reason and I was turning away from it.

I stop on the stairs, feeling his eyes on my spine.

He didn't frighten me as much as he used to, no, what frightened me was how I reacted to his presence. How my body lit up and my heart jumped into my throat. I wanted to taste his lips again but I couldn't, I wanted to feel his desire for me between my legs and chase the pleasure I know he could give.

I was used to not getting what I wanted but I could have something.

After the events of today, of the fear that consumed me and the memories of my past, I deserved to have something that was just mine and if I couldn't allow myself to have *him*, then I could have this.

"Amelia?"

The way my name rolls from his tongue sends a shiver down my spine, that mixed accent setting off a riot of butterflies in my stomach that made me want to press my thighs together.

"I thought about your offer." I keep my back to him so my face doesn't betray me, "I'd like to do it. If it's still available."

"It is," he confirms, "I'll organize it for you."

"Thank you."

I start my walk back up the stairs, feeling the slickness of sweat in my palm.

"*Leonessa*," Gabriel calls once again, stopping me.

I glance over my shoulder, finding him now at the base of the stairs, looking up to me, "I won't forget that kiss."

"You should," I swallow.

He steps up, "I won't."

He looks at me with such passion I feel myself catch on fire, so I do the one thing I'm good at, I run and I don't stop until I'm locked in my room, my back pressed to the door.

Lincoln was with Camille, and it was better that way for tonight. I knew he was safe with her and after today I didn't want him in the house until a discussion had been held about the events that caused so much death.

Too shaken to sleep I switch on the lamp and pull my sketchbook out, refusing to let my mind reel back to the blood and death from hours ago. The shock had worn off, but the fear remained. But it was as always, it wasn't for me, it was for my son.

And that was one of the reasons why I could never give myself to Gabriel.

He was dangerous.

This life was dangerous.

I hadn't escaped my past for this.

My pencil moves swiftly across the blank paper, scratching in a comforting way that settles the riot in my chest. I draw on instinct, lines crossing and features blending as I add a dramatic skirt to a corset styled bodice, the flare of the hem wide and sweeping.

I draw for hours, adding detail and shadow to the woman on the page, it wasn't a design per se but a release. I start on the color next, adding a deep red to the dress that reminded me of the blood splattered across Gabriel's beautiful face.

Shifting on the bed, I wince when the pain in my ribs twinges and causes a flinch that accidentally knocks all my pencils to the floor. "Shit."

With a groan, I climb off, leaving my pad in the centre to crouch to collect them. Sounds of footsteps pauses my hand.

My door opens.

Gabriel stands there, freshly showered, his dark hair still wet and falling across his forehead. I swallow as I take in the hard lines of his abdomen, the ridges of his well-formed muscle. A low hanging pair of slacks sits on his hips, showcasing the deep V and the trail of dark hair that travels from his navel and disappears beneath the band. His white shirt, unbuttoned, is folded to the elbows on the sleeves, ropes of muscle making his forearms pop and the prominent veins stand out from his flesh.

His eyes flare as he looks down at me, the hazel like a burning pit. A half empty glass dangles from the tips of his fingers.

I rise slowly, as if it isn't a man in the room with me, but an animal and one quick movement would set him off. You don't run from a predator and hope to get away. I hadn't realized I'd started to back up until my spine hits the wall.

I can't help but let my eyes drag over him once more, noticing the scars that litter his tanned skin that I hadn't caught when he first showed up in my doorway. He lifts his glass and takes a sip before dropping the glass back to his side again. His muscles ripple and flex, every hard inch of him as menacing as I thought. But beautiful. So fucking beautiful.

"Are you drunk?" I ask, barely above a whisper.

After our meeting previously I didn't know where he'd gone, he'd showered obviously.

He takes a step towards me and while I try to press myself further back

into the wall, as if to melt right into it, I know there is nowhere to go.

There's only so much I can take.

He takes another step, another, until he's right in front of me, those fiery hazel eyes boring down into mine. I smell the whiskey on his breath and watch as he brings that glass back up, tipping the remaining liquid into his mouth. My eyes catch on his throat, watching it bob as he swallows and then gently, so damn gently, as if he wasn't a man built for violence and sin, he places the glass down on the bedside table so it doesn't even make a sound.

"I'm something," He finally answers my question.

"I don't want to fight right now, Gabriel," I was tired and close to breaking point. What happened after I broke? I wasn't ready to find out.

He leans forward a touch, reaching up to snag a length of my hair and then rubs the strands between his fingers, "So soft," he mumbles.

I could smell him, the spice and leather of his body wash, mixed with his own natural scent, a musky, intoxicating scent that was all Gabriel. All this beautiful deadly man.

I swallow, "Please leave."

"*Potresti amarmi, Amelia,*" The words roll off his tongue, his deep baritone and the way the language sounds sending delicious waves down my spine that end up between my legs, making my thighs ache with a need I didn't want to name. It had a profound impact on me, even if I couldn't understand a word he was saying, "You could love me, Amelia." He finally says.

Wait...what? Was that what he had said before?

"If you let go of this hate," he says, keeping eye contact, "You could love me. I could provide for you."

"I don't need you."

"No." He agrees.

His fingers drop my hair, and instinct drives me further back, the unforgiving surface of the wall biting into my shoulder blades as my eyes squeeze shut and fear injects itself into my system as he raises his hand.

It irked me more than anyone could ever understand that a simple movement exposed all my weak points. That a raised hand pushed deeply buried memories right to the surface, forcing me to remember every time it happened, forcing me to relive the pain of every strike from every male that had ever laid a finger on me. There were many. For a long time.

My stepfather made sure of that. I was sure it was some sick game of his,

a pleasure, to see me hurt, to see me knocked down, in pain, bleeding. He did it often and with a smile.

I'd trained myself some, I taught myself to defend myself, but Gabriel was bigger, stronger and ten times more lethal. He made all the men in my past look like bunny rabbits.

I finally open my eyes, swallowing down the bile on the back of my tongue to find Gabriel staring at me intently and curiously.

When I don't cower or move away again, he trails a finger down the edge of my jaw. "You flinched. You flinch a lot. Why?"

I don't answer.

"Why do you fear me so much, Amelia? Why do you deny yourself something that's so very obvious between us. You feel it. I know you do." He leans, his breath fanning across my lips but I quickly turn my head, breaking the contact with his hand and stopping any possibility of that mouth against mine.

He drops his forehead to my temple, "You will love me, Amelia."

There was no threat in the words, no malice or deception. It was a promise and when he pulls away and I slide my eyes back to his, I see the determination set within them, burning as hot as wildfire. It was a vow.

He would take nothing less than my whole heart.

And I feared, more than he would ever know, that giving it over would take no time at all.



GABRIEL

And so it goes.

She tries to avoid me.

Tries.

And fails.

We have dinner every night, she sits close to me, we talk.

I've found her drawing more often than not now, her sketchbook almost filled end to end with beautiful dresses and other pieces. I'd stolen looks inside plenty of times over the past two weeks, snapping images of my favorites so I can keep them.

I'd set up, as promised, her classes so she can start working towards her goal, but they would begin at the start of the next semester, here at the house.

While the city was not yet quiet and I'd lost more stock and men to bloody gun fights and midnight heists, it had quietened down since the attack on the house. I'd reinforced the grounds, employed more men, more cameras, replaced the windows across the side of the house with reinforced glass and heavier security and lock down measures. Amelia would not be unsafe in my

house, in *our* house.

My wife was safe here. With me.

Even if she fought it every damn step of the way.

She hadn't allowed me to get close again, hadn't allowed me to taste her lips, drown in her scent but she would break. I was patient. I would not take what she wasn't ready to give.

But I knew it wasn't a problem with attraction. She wanted me.

I saw it in every stolen glance, in every subtle shift of her body, from when she caught me in the home gym, working out in just my shorts and secretly admired me when she thought I couldn't see. Her thighs pressed together and she watched, stealing her fill.

She tortured herself.

And if anyone knew torture, it was me. She would keep going, for a short while, she'll hold on to that stubborn resolve and withstand the turmoil inside herself. She'll deny herself what she wants and needs because in her head, right in this moment, it was right.

From what I've learned, the girl had fought her entire life. She had seen hardship more than most, handled pain like it was currency and I was still figuring it out.

As a man who had everything, I wanted to earn her secrets and her past.

I lean back in my chair, tipping my wine glass to my lips.

"Now you've had time to settle in, wife," I smirk when her eyes dart to me at the mention of that dreaded word, "How are you finding the house?"

"Fine," she swallows, her eyes latched onto where the glass meets my mouth.

"Are there any changes you'd like made?"

"No – wait," she shakes her head, "Yes actually."

I place the glass down and settle my hands beneath my chin, linking the fingers so I can rest my head while I listen. "Go on."

"The pool."

I nod, picturing the extension off the back of the kitchen that leads to the pool, a glass structure with a sliding ceiling to let in the sun or the stars and looked towards the sea. It was a favorite room of mine.

I hadn't swum in some time but I'd loved doing it growing up and now, the water calming my soul as much as listening to the sea and the violent way it crashes on the cliffs.

The dining room door opens and Asher storms in with heavy, demanding

steps. I hold a hand, ordering him to stop and be silent.

“Gabriel,” he starts.

“While my wife is speaking you will remain quiet.”

“No,” Amelia starts, “It’s fine, I just—”

“It is respect, Amelia. You are my wife, and they will treat you as they would treat me.”

I glare at Asher who opens his mouth as if to argue but he shuts it quick, gritting his teeth and flaring his nostrils with irritation, “Go on, Amelia.”

She glances to Asher momentarily, “The pool, the door doesn’t have a lock.”

“Yes?”

“Lincoln can’t swim.”

“The boy can’t reach the handle,” Asher interrupts.

I glare at him, “I’ll have it sorted.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Asher scoffs.

“Is there a problem, brother?”

“No problem, *brother*,” he bounces his eyes between the two of us, “But I have matters to be addressed.”

“What?” I bite.

“Here?”

“Asher, I will lose my patience with you,” I warn, “What is it?”

“I’m going to go.”

I lunge, grabbing Amelia by the wrist, gently coaxing her to stay, “No you stay, Amelia. You stay. I’ll be back.”

“Gabriel, it’s fine,” she tries, “I’ll just go.”

“That would be best,” Asher says.

She tries to stand, “Sit down, Amelia.”

“Gabriel...”

“I’ll be back.”

I stand, rolling my neck side to side to try dislodge some of the tension. Once beyond the doors I don’t waste a second. My fists go to Asher’s collar, pulling so tight the neckline of his shirt presses into his windpipe, cutting off air, “You disrespect me!” I growl, tone low so Amelia won’t hear, “You disrespect *her*.”

He chokes behind the pressure, words strangled.

I let go abruptly, stepping back so he stumbles forward, barely catching himself. His hand rubs at the raw bruising on his throat, “She hasn’t earned my respect.”

“She is my wife!”

“Not by choice!”

I push him against the wall, “You will respect her, brother, or so fucking help me.”

He shakes his head, “You’ll fucking damn it all.”

My fist collides with his cheek, splitting it. Don’t they fucking know!? Don’t they fucking know what I have given for this damn city. For this damn family. What I have done!? I am the fucking reason they sit in their big homes and drive their shiny cars. I am their bank accounts and their power. I fucking own them.

All of them.

Asher spits blood onto the tile next to our feet, “The casino was attacked.” Asher growls, “Two dead, five injured. Looked like a gamble gone wrong. I thought you should know.”

“Then fucking handle it Asher or get Atlas to.”

I shake him once before I let go. Was this the first time shit had gone down at the casino, of course not. It was a haven for fighting and crime. I didn’t need to get involved.

“They wore masks,” Asher snaps at my back, “I have a recording from the doorman, who’s dead by the way, but they didn’t take his tape.”

I freeze.

Behind me, I hear the rustle of clothing and then a pause before static fills the space.

“*Are you listening, Gabriel?*” the voice says, muffled and staticky, “*I’m coming for your city. For your throne. One piece at a time.*” A gurgled cry joins the sound next, accompanied by the familiar squelch of flesh being torn, “*I will take it all. Your city. Your Power. Your pretty little wife.*” The voice laughs, “*You don’t deserve that seat you sit on. We are just getting started. And as for you, you’ll soon be reunited with your beloved brother. See you soon, Gabriel.*”

Ice fills my veins. The voice was low, purposely so but deep. Something in the back of my head sparked at the familiarity of it but with the static on the radio and the purposeful way they lowered the tone, I couldn’t place it.

“Anything else?” I grit out.

“Is that not enough?” Asher asks, “Your city is under attack and you’re here playing house with a woman who doesn’t want you.”

“I have taken enough of your disrespect for one evening, Asher, I have let it slide because we are blood but one more step out of line and I’ll treat you like I treat everyone else.”

I feel his glare on my back but I walk away, walk away from those words and the hatred I feel radiating from him. The relationship between the twins and me, the twins and everyone who shared the same blood was precarious.

But they were blood and family, they were my brothers. And shit got tough between us frequently, but the Saint’s valued family above all else.

They were taught that as much as I was growing up.

Amelia is standing behind her chair when I return, her thumb nail between her teeth, “I don’t want to get in the way, Gabriel, I’m sure you’re busy.”

I could tell a part of her was genuine in that statement, that she didn’t want to take my time but a big part of her saw it as an excuse to escape me.

“Hai il mio tempo, leonessa, sempre.”

“What?”

“Sit.”

“Gabriel...”

“I said sit.”

She obeys, dropping down into the chair hard, “You can’t just tell me what to do.”

“Your obedience says otherwise.”

“I am not a fucking dog, and I will not be treated like one.”

“If you stopped fighting so hard perhaps, I’d stop with the orders.”

“I don’t have to put up with your shit. Don or not, you don’t own me.”

As she lifts and spins to leave, I grasp her wrist, tugging her hard. She turns in time for her hands to land on my chest, but too late, her body was already falling, and she collides fully against me. I move quick to stop her escape, pinning her with hands and pressing her back against the table.

Her breath saws from her chest and her eyes widen, lips parting, “What are you doing!?”

“Stop fighting me.”

Her eyes bounce between mine with a mixture of dread and desire, I see it in the flush of her cheeks, in the flick of her tongue against her bottom lip and how, however subconscious it is, she’s widened her thighs and pressed her

sweet cunt right up against my hardening cock.

I feel the warmth of her through the thin leggings she wears, feel it as if it's a brand on my skin.

I wanted her. There was no denying it.

I wanted to bury myself in her pussy and feel her squeeze me, feel her nails score my skin and her teeth bite. I wanted her moans and her screams, her sighs and her pleas.

I dip my head and capture her mouth, growling with approval when her lips part to let me in further. Her tongue meets mine and her fingers curl into my shirt, holding me closer.

"*Magia*," I rasp against her mouth, "Magic."

"Gabriel," She breathes, pressing her mouth to mine gently.

"We could make magic, Amelia."

She whimpers. "I can't."

"You infuriating, stubborn, beautiful woman," I whisper into her mouth, licking her bottom lip, "*leonessa mia. Mondo mia.*"

She kisses me again, sweeter, softer, a parting...

"Give yourself to me, Amelia," I whisper, "Let me have you."

"But me, this," she sighs, "it's all I've got."

I don't stop her when she tries to leave and long after the door has clicked closed, I stand there, the whisper of her touch and her kiss on my skin and the roaring words of Asher filling my head.



AMELIA

My restless legs carry me down the darkened hallway, towards the one light piercing the darkness of the now quietened house. I was under no illusions that I was alone, but I couldn't see them, and no one stopped me. Not the guard posted outside the room, the vision of the unfamiliar face sending a wash of unexpected grief through me at the memory of Nate's death and Colt's ongoing recovery in the city hospital.

I knew he'd remain posted there, with Lincoln still sleeping on the other side.

I couldn't tell you what had me slipping from the bed while the moon sat heavy and round above the calm seas beyond the windows. I'd grabbed the baby monitor, now gripped in my sweating palms and headed this way.

Towards that light at the end of the hall and the growing sound of water running from a shower.

Gabriel's kiss from dinner still heated my lips, the feel of his hardness between my legs and his plea for me to give in to him. To give myself to him. The words echoed in my head.

But me, this. It's all I've got.

And those words were true.

And perhaps it was the flashbacks of my past, of my childhood, of wanting and never getting, of going to bed hungry and being left out at school because I wasn't like the others. Perhaps it was the lonely little girl controlling me right now, the same girl who wanted, so bad, to feel something. To be wanted. Needed.

To feel the touch of a hand because it is what I allowed, not because someone forced me. To feel a caress instead of a smack. I wanted my breath stolen from me with a passionate kiss, not because my head was being held beneath the dirtied water of a pool long since forgotten in the back yard.

Those memories, all of them, they could be pushed down with new ones. Ones where someone wanted me, needed me, *craved* me.

I could give it over and forget it all.

So perhaps it was that, that made me explore something I'd wanted for a while and denied myself.

The door to the bathroom is ajar, the warm light spilling out of the crack and the water is louder, but I don't hear Gabriel in there, not until a long groan sends a delicious, erotic tremor down my spine.

That sound, a deep growl of pleasure was unmistakable but intrusive thoughts still my hand before I can peek. What if it was another woman? Did Gabriel have a mistress?

We were married but I'd made it clear I hadn't wanted anything from him so I couldn't blame him, could I?

The thought doesn't help as an acidic ball of jealousy coils tight in the pit of my stomach.

Unwelcomed images of Gabriel tangled with a beautiful woman invade my mind, of his mouth, the mouth that kissed with passion and skill, who touched in ways that would tease but never give, touching someone else. I had no doubt he would be a skillful lover and the idea of him giving that to someone who wasn't me made my teeth snap together.

Blowing out a breath quietly, I push the door, just a little, just enough to see right through to the shower stall that had a glass door.

I just needed to know.

I mean it would make my life easier right? If Gabriel had someone else, I could get over this damn ache he'd left in me since that kiss back in the bedroom weeks ago.

But there wasn't a woman in the shower with him.

It was just Gabriel, every glorious, *naked* inch of him.

My mouth waters at the sight of such a powerful man, back curved forward with one hand resting on the tiles of the bathroom, the other wrapped around...

Holy shit.

I swallow at the size of his cock, hard and proud in his fist, being jerked roughly while he watches. His muscles bunch and flex as he fucks himself, ropes and ropes of muscle that the water seems to worship as it slides in rivers over his tanned skin. Dark hair, slick, falls down in front of his forehead and droplets of water sit at the corners of his mouth.

He lets out another long moan, as the fingers on the hand resting against the tiles curl in as if trying to claw at the wall, the pleasure he is inflicting on himself tensing all his muscles.

Fuck.

Fuck.

My breath saws chaotically from my chest and wetness pools between my legs, my pussy throbbing with need.

He slows his strokes, almost gently caressing over the veins up the length of his shaft and then his thumb across the swollen crown. He had the most beautiful cock I think I've ever seen.

I hadn't realized I'd started forward, not until my thigh bumps into the door, forcing it to swing and knock against the wall.

Gabriel's head snaps to me.

I freeze.

His hand continues to move in those slow strokes while his eyes drop down my body, taking in the thin long-sleeved shirt that stretches over my breasts and reveals my hardened nipples, down to the little shorts I was wearing. The look sears me to the bone and that ache pulses harder, more demanding between my thighs.

"Amelia," he growls out my name, his voice roughened with pleasure and breathlessness, "Amelia."

I wasn't proud of the little whimper I let out in that moment. At the very obvious way I press my thighs together and squirm if just to add a little bit of pressure to my clit. I was so fucking turned on I was worried just the sight of him right now would set me off.

His mouth cocks up in the corner with a knowing smirk. I should leave. I should feel embarrassed that I was very clearly ogling the man while he

serviced himself in the shower, yet I don't, if anything, I want to touch myself. I want to watch him fuck himself while I soothe the ache between my legs.

"You can," He rasps, turning more as if to show me more of him. "Touch yourself, Amelia."

A breathless sound escapes my lips and I lift my hand, sliding it across the soft mound of my belly to where my shorts sit at my hips. He tracks the move like a predator seeking his prey, his lip caught between his teeth.

"That's it," he praises when my hand dips beneath the band and the first swipe of my fingers against the sensitive bud makes my legs shake. I reach out to steady myself with my free hand, dropping the baby monitor to the side, and lift my eyes back to him.

"Fuck yourself," he orders softly, "Fuck yourself watching me. Imagine all the things I want to do to you, how I want to make you scream. You'll scream, won't you, *leonessa*."

I circle my clit with the tips of my fingers, already feeling myself tightening, priming for a climax.

"You dirty fucking girl," he growls, "You're going to come, aren't you? Already."

He jerks his cock harshly before he lets it go and slams his hand down on the shower button, switching off the water. And then the powerhouse of a man, skin radiating heat from the shower and eyes darkened with lust is coming for me.

"Tell me I can." He asks, "I need to hear your yes."

He crowds me against the vanity unit, the mirror at my back.

His wet, hard cock presses into my lower stomach, trapping my hand between us and still against my pussy. A sweat has broken out across my skin, sticking the material of my clothes to my body and I could feel the wetness of my arousal seeping down my inner thighs.

"Yes."

He groans as he drops his face to my neck, pressing in harder. "Fuck, Amelia. Fuck."

"I just..." My words trail off as his teeth sink into my neck, not hard, enough to feel a bite on my skin that sends an embarrassing amount of wetness to my pussy, soaking my fingers still pressed, unmoving against my clit.

He rolls his hips, pressing his dick into me more as his hands slide up my

waist and cup both breasts, rolling the nipples beneath his thumbs.

I cry out.

I was soaked from his skin, his hair dripping on me but I needed *more*. I pull my hand out of my shorts and brush my fingers on the underside of his huge cock, feeling it jerk against me.

“*Dio*,” He rasps, “*Cazzo*, Amelia.”

He suddenly takes my mouth, forcing his tongue past my lips and pushing me back until I have no choice but to jerk my arms up and back to steady myself. He grips my face in his big hands, holding me, tilting my face so he can get in deeper, harder. Teeth and tongue, biting and licking.

He growls his approval and when he jerks away, I’m left breathless, reaching for him.

His hands tug at the band of my shorts, lifting my ass up until – *riiiippppp* – he tears the material with his bare hands, right down the middle, exposing me and my naked flesh.

I can’t utter a single word as his arms hook beneath my thighs and he bends, burying his face into my pussy.

My arms give out, I slam back against the mirror while he lashes at me with his tongue, punching it, once, twice, into the entrance before sliding the flat edge of it all the way up to the apex and sucking my clit into his mouth.

My fingers curl into his hair, nails biting his scalp.

I was too tight, too close that when he swirls his tongue, holding me so tightly to his face, I can’t stop the orgasm that *devastates* me.

I grip his hair painfully, rolling my hips as I ride the wave of my climax, grinding against his face as he continues and one orgasm rolls into two, him drawing from me, drinking each one.

“Gabriel!” I cry.

He grumbles something against me, fingers biting into the tops of my thighs and then when I stop pulsing and contracting against him, he licks up the seam of me, making me jerk as he caresses all the sensitive nerves with his tongue.

He tilts his face up to mine, his hazel eyes alive with fire and smoke and mouth covered in me, “You taste exactly as I imagined,” His voice is thick, the accent more pronounced and rough.

“Like what?” I breathe, steadying myself.

“*Il mia*,” He kisses the inside of my thigh, “Like you’re mine.”

GABRIEL

My city was falling apart. My men dying. A traitor within my walls, but right now, nothing fucking mattered.

Not the blood or the death, not the threats or the war. Just this. Just her.

I slide back up her body, not bothering to wipe her from my chin and lips so she can taste just how much she belongs to me. Fuck.

Seeing her in the doorway, lips parted, breasts heaving with her labored breaths, I'd almost come on the spot. And when I saw those hardened nipples and her thighs quivering, I knew I needed her immediately.

No more games. No more teasing.

She was giving herself to me.

Her whispered yes was all I needed.

And I'd wanted to have her cunt on my tongue from the moment we said I do.

She kisses me as greedily as I kiss her, her desire not yet satisfied. Good.

I'd keep her wanting, I'd have her begging.

I lift her from the counter with hands beneath her ass and force her legs

around my waist. My cock presses dangerously close to the heat of her but I won't take her here. I wanted her in my bed, against the wall, bent over with her ass in the air this first night, after that though, I'll take her everywhere I can.

She reaches back suddenly when I go to move and grabs the small radio looking thing she'd dropped previously. A quick glance tells me it's the monitor for Lincoln.

I knew my men would have vacated this area the moment they saw her advances which was why I didn't worry about her exposed body being seen and my room was only down the hall. I kick the door open, her mouth on mine, her breasts, still covered by that damn material crushed to my chest.

Naked. I needed her completely bare.

I wanted to see all of her.

It was dark in the room but when I go to flick the light, she tears her mouth from mine, "no lights."

I pause, "What?"

"No lights, please."

"Amelia, I just had my fucking tongue in your cunt and you're what? Self-conscious?"

"Please," She rolls her hips and kisses me, but her voice shook, the plea desperate so I oblige, leaving the light off. There was light coming in from the wall of windows to the left of the bed, shining a silver glow across the sheets but it was never going to be bright enough for me to see all of her.

The disappointment sat on my tongue until her sweet taste invaded my mouth once more, hands sliding into my hair. I carry her to the bed, leaning until her back hits the mattress.

"I need you," She whispers, clinging to my shoulders.

I groan at the words. How long I'd waited for her to say them. Holding my weight on my elbows I kiss her and then her cheek, her jaw, grazing my teeth across the edge and then down her throat, pushing her top up until she lifts her arms stiffly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Gabriel, nothing," she tells me quietly. But I knew there was, and she was hiding it. "Please."

"You're begging for me," I whisper my hands down her stomach and then back up, trailing my fingers under her breasts. I wanted to see her, see her body and her face, see how it would twist in pleasure.

“Yes,” She hisses through her teeth as I take a nipple between my fingers, rolling the stiffened peak.

“You fought for so long, *leonessa*,” I dip and take the same nipple between my teeth, “but you’re mine now.”

“Gabriel,” she gasps, widening her legs for me as I settle between them, the head of my aching cock nudging her open. “Shit, you’re huge.”

“You’ll take me, *leonessa*,” I lick her chest, “You can take it.”

“Fuck,” she wheezes.

“Are you sure?” I ask, unable to let go of her keeping secrets. “Once I have you, I’m not giving you back. Once will not be enough. I will fuck you and I will claim you and you will be mine, *si*?”

I had to be sure her reluctance for the lights to be on, and her stiffness wasn’t because she no longer wanted this. I’d walk away. I’d fucking hate it but I would stop.

“I’m sure,” Though I cannot see clearly I know she’s staring up at me, spread out and open for me, “I’m sure Gabriel.”

“I’m not letting you go,” I remind her. “You’re mine.”

“Okay,” she breathes, “I’m yours. Your wife.”

“*Cazzo*,” I groan. Fuck. My Wife. “*Moglie mia*.”

How much she was saying because she knew I wanted to hear it or because she meant it, I didn’t know but I wanted her. Fuck I wanted her.

I wanted to consume her.

I inch in, taking it slow, stretching her, her wetness helping me to slide in with ease. “Okay?”

She grabs the back of my head and forces me into a kiss, locking her legs around me until the heels of her feet dig into my ass. I slam forward. She screams. I capture the taste of it on my tongue, capture the moment she becomes mine fucking completely. I rock into her slowly at first, gently working her, filling her, using my pelvic bone to add a little friction to her oversensitive clit. She was so fucking wet for me, dripping all over my cock and balls, soaking the sheets beneath her ass.

“You’ve been aching for me, haven’t you?” I whisper on her lips, “You’re so fucking wet, Amelia, but you can’t deny me anymore. You are made for me.”

“*Please*,” she begs.

“Mm,” I pump into her harder, “Hearing you beg for me, wife, it’s the sweetest music.”

“Oh God,” she breathes.

Pausing, I drop down until my mouth is at her ear, “*marito*, husband, Gabriel, call me as it is Amelia. It’s me here, not God. Your husband.”

And with that, I flip her abruptly, grabbing her by the hips to bring her ass up and back before I impale her on my cock. She screams loud and long, but I don’t stop, I rut into her, fucking her hard, the slap of our skin loud. My hands cover her waist, yanking her onto me and pushing her off, letting her tight cunt work up and down my shaft.

“Fuck, Gabriel, yes!”

“That’s it, *leonessa*, scream for me.”

“I’m gonna come,” she cries, “Shit, I can’t.”

She squirms beneath me but I don’t let her get away, instead I anchor one foot to the bed and drive into her hard, hitting that sweet little spot inside and reach around to circle her swollen clit with my fingers.

“Yes, yes, yes,” She chants.

“Come on my cock, Amelia. Let me feel that tight pussy coming for me.”

She moans loud, nails scratching at the sheets and then she’s coming, hard and violently, her climax soaking my cock and groin, dripping onto my thighs as I power through it. But I was going to come and while I knew she was on birth control, I didn’t want to come inside without her permission.

I pump myself, feeling the aftershocks of her orgasm spasming her inner walls and wait right to the last minute before I abruptly pull out and come up her back, the hot jets hitting her skin as I roar my release.

She slumps limply down onto the bed, and I barely hold myself up, keeping myself steady above her, one hand on the bed, the other on my cock as I rub the last of my orgasm over her back.

Catching my breath, I steady myself and reach forward, smearing my come into her skin.

“Gabriel,” she tries.

“Shh,” I order, rubbing it into her skin as if it were lotion. I feel bumps, like scars on her flesh. Stretchmarks, I assume from her pregnancy and rub it in harder, kneading her flesh and using my climax as oil.

“Gabriel,” she says again.

I drop down onto her and hook my hand around her throat, tugging her head back. She gasps and with her mouth open I place my fingers on her tongue, “Lick them clean, Amelia, taste what you do to me.”

She wraps her lips around them and sucks as I drop my face into her and

inhale.

“I’m not done with you, wife,” I whisper my promise against her hair,
“Not by a long shot.”

GABRIEL

I fuck her until the sun crests the horizon and bleeds bright orange light across the waves beyond the cliffs, I fuck her until we both lay limp and breathless, sweat and come making our skin sticky and tight. She lays beside me now silently, her chest falling steadily after just passing out exhausted, unable to move even to shower. I knew she would regret that though, so I gently rouse her, tucking a still sweat damp tendril of hair behind her ear.

She had a beautiful flush to her skin and she was buried to the neck beneath the sheets. I start to move them off her, wanting to touch, to feel but she wakes suddenly and grips the sheet, eyes wide as she stares at me with a mixture of shock and horror.

“What are you doing?” She rasps, voice sore from her cries and rough with sleep.

“Amelia?”

She shakes her head, “No you can’t.”

My brows tug down, “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t see me!” She shrieks. Gone was the desire filled woman and

in her place was someone with too much fear in her eyes. Her knuckles are white with the grip she holds onto the sheets, keeping the sheets over her completely.

I hold my hands up, confused, “Okay. Okay, you’re okay.”

She swallows.

Slowly, as if not to spook her, I climb from the bed and go to my drawers, withdrawing a long sleeved shirt from the top. I hand it over.

She takes it gently and then stares, waiting, “You want me to turn around?”

She nods.

I’d just fucked the woman six ways to Sunday but I turn, giving her that space. I hear the rustle of bedding and her clothing before she says, “Okay.”

I turn to see her sitting, the sheets pooled in her lap and her thumbnail between her teeth, “I’m sorry.”

I soften with a sigh, crossing the space. She doesn’t stop me from sitting next to her or reaching forward to cup her cheek in my hand. She leans into the embrace, closing her eyes. “I just wanted to wake you for a shower before we slept. We need to clean you.”

“I uh, I can’t sleep,” she opens her eyes, turning her face into my hand to kiss my palm. The movement makes my heart twinge, “I need to get back to Lincoln. I’ll shower back in my room.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of in front of me, Amelia,” I run my thumb on her lip, “You’re beautiful.”

She pulls away, “I’m okay, I’m just going to go.”

“Amelia.”

“I’m fine, Gabriel.”

“Why are you hiding from me?”

“I’m not!” She snaps.



She locks herself away from me. I don’t push.

I work the tension off in the gym until Atlas informs me, they caught two men sneaking through the marina this morning, wearing the signature black outfits and masks of the men who have been attacking my city these past few weeks.

The casino incident was still in my mind, the message and that familiar voice at the forefront.

I shove a t-shirt over my head and follow my brother down to the basement, finding them strung up, the blood from my previous prisoners still staining the floor.

There was no Enzo today but that was fine. I had other methods.

“Hello boys,” I smile my greeting.

Their masks had been removed and I stared into the faces of two of my own men. Newly recruited and young.

Atlas stands at my back, arms folded. They stare at him, pleading.

Interesting.

Suspicious had started to form inside my head, but I was a leader, and I wouldn't blindly accuse without proof or witnesses.

I would take prisoners on every occasion, one of them will talk and while I'd been raised on the family rules, some people don't take them as seriously.

The twins could very well be the very people making me an enemy.

And if that were true, I'd destroy them, brothers or not.

“I understand you're young, you're new, maybe you haven't understood it completely.” I sit on a chair and prop my ankle on my knee, “Do you understand what I do to traitors?”

“Fuck you.”

“I can promise you now, whoever you're working with, they're nothing compared to me.”

The one on the left flicks his eyes to Atlas and then back to me, “We're not working with anyone.”

I smile. “You believe me stupid?”

They remain silent. I lean across to the table and pluck a small knife from the top, pressing the very tip of it on my finger, not hard enough to break the skin.

“I'll make you a deal,” I tell them, “You give me a name and I'll let *one* of you live.”

“I'm not a rat,” the one on the left snaps, spitting. It lands at my feet.

I don't give him a chance to scream as I lunge forward and bury the knife into his throat. His eyes go wide and blood pours over my hand as I hold the knife there, digging it in. The one next to him cries out, lashing against the restraints that keep him hanging.

I delight in the life draining from the traitors' eyes and only when his

head rolls forward and his chest goes still do I yank the knife from his throat and slowly take a step over, standing directly in front of the other.

His face is pale, eyes wide and he tries to hide his fear behind a snarl, but it falls as flat as the tough guy act he puts on.

“Open wide,” I order.

“Fuck you!”

But that was his mistake, opening that big fucking mouth. I shove the knife into it, pressing the blade down onto his tongue and letting him taste his friend’s blood.

I’m careful so I don’t accidentally hack off his tongue, I still need him to talk after all. He cries out against the blade and then when I yank it out, he vomits all over the floor, blood, saliva and the contents of his stomach hitting the concrete with a splash.

“I don’t think you got a good taste,” I tell him, stepping over the mess to his dead friend. “Atlas, do me a favor and turn his head my way.”

Atlas silently steps up and jerks the guys face my way, forcing him to watch as I slowly insert the blade into the dead mans still bleeding throat. The sound of flesh and muscle squelching mixes with his retching and whimpers.

“The thing is,” I say nonchalantly, wiggling the blade around and coating the steel, “Us, as a human race, believe ourselves indestructible. Nothing can happen to us, but you see how soft this flesh is? You see how easy it is to cut deep and true?”

I hear him thrashing against Atlas’ hold.

I bring the knife out and turn, finding Atlas already holding the guys mouth open. I slide it in slowly, letting him taste it, feel that blood coating the soft flesh inside his mouth. Giving him a flavor of what happens to people who turn on the fucking Saint’s. We are the kings that sit on the throne, the family that rule and those against us will suffer.

Except, I don’t expect him to actually want to die. No one does. It’s inevitable and just as before where we believe ourselves indestructible, we try to skirt death, pretending the end isn’t coming for us all. That’s why I don’t anticipate him using every last bit of his strength to shove away from Atlas and to impale the back of his throat on the knife.

I’m not quick enough to remove it before the damage is done.

He gurgles and chokes, blood pouring from his mouth.

“No! *Cazzo!*” I yell, reaching for the straps. “Get Devon!”

Atlas bolts from the room as I yank the guy down and lay him on the

floor, but I don't know what to fucking do and I needed the fucking information! Shit.

“*Merda!*” Blood freely pours, drowning the guy. It runs out of his mouth, down his cheeks but his eyes, they smile like he's won. “*Stonzo!*”

Devon rushes in besides Atlas, takes one look and scoffs. “He's dead.”

“Then fucking save him! I need a fucking name!”

“He severed his windpipe, I can't repair that.”

My rage sees me lashing out. I bring my fist down hard onto the guys face, one punch, two, turning his bloodied face into pulp. The men just stand and watch as I roar my anger before kicking the body and storming from the cellar. I don't bother washing the blood off as I hit the gym once more. My fist flies into the bag, the blood there smearing across the leather and pain bursts across my knuckles. I'd split them on his face and the punch had opened them up more.

I let the pain and the anger consume, let it explode.

My knuckles burst open further with each blow, blood running rivulets down my hands and arms, dropping onto the wooden floor and being smeared by the soles of my shoes.

“Gabriel?”

I freeze at her voice before I turn the anger on her.

“Amelia,” I storm towards her and her face twists in fear, taking in the blood, the mess of my hand and likely my face too. She stumbles back. “Oh, still scared of me, huh?” I laugh without humor, “Shame you didn't keep hold of it when I fucked you last night.”

Her brows turn down, “What happened?”

“You want to know, Amelia?” I stop an inch from her, breathing hard and heavy, enough to move the tendrils of hair that frame her face, “I just killed a man and made his friend drink his blood.”

She swallows, eyes widening.

“I took a knife and I stabbed him in the throat.”

“Oh my god.”

“My pretty wife doesn't like that?” I growl, “Are you going to run again? Run away from it all just like you're good at.”

Her nostrils flare.

“Come on, Amelia, get angry. Show me that fucking *leonessa* in you.”

“Fuck you, Gabriel.”

“I wouldn't mind fucking you right now, either. Sink right into that tight

cunt of yours. You wouldn't fight me would you, you're so fucking desperate for it. You pretend you're fucking strong. A protective mother who would do anything for her son but you're desperate for my attention, even if you don't fucking believe it yourself. I see it." I crowd her, pushing our chests together. "So, let's fuck, Amelia, lets give you that attention you so heavily crave."

She hits me.

Hard. My cheek alights with the pain and my head twists to the side with the force of it. Blood trickles onto my tongue from where my teeth cut into my cheek.

But it's enough. It's enough for the rage to recede and my rational thought to slide back into place. It's enough to recognize the pain on her face, no longer fear.

"Amelia," I start.

"Fuck you. *Fuck you*, Gabriel Saint. Go to fucking hell!" She pushes away from me and runs from the room.

"Amelia!" I roar after her, chasing. "Amelia wait!"

She stops at the base of the stairs and spins to me, "You will never touch me again, Gabriel. You will *never*. I hate you."

"Amelia, I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? *Sorry?*" She laughs, "Me too, Gabriel. I'm sorry I ever fucking let myself think you were anything other than the monster you are. You can have my freedom. My life. But me? You haven't got me."

I let her go and hang my head, closing my eyes at the heavy weight of disappointment that lands in my chest.

Everything was going to shit. My whole fucking world was crumbling at my feet.

It was self-destruction.

I was combusting from the inside out, with her, this city, my dead brother...



AMELIA

When I was in the third or fourth grade my teacher said something I hadn't remembered until right now. It wasn't addressed to me but to the class as a whole after some kids were caught slinging insults at each other, each one getting nastier as they went on until one of the kids became so upset by it, their parents were called to the school.

Now, we all get it, don't we? Kids can be cruel. School is harsh but I guess in a way, it sets you up for the reality that will soon smack you in the face. There's this big dream that when we grow up our lives magically become better, we have freedom and independence, resilience, and these big fucking dreams. Nothing could affect us like it did when we were children.

But that wasn't right.

Things as an adult just got worse.

But she spoke to the class, explaining something we thought would go away once we grew.

Words have as much power on a person as actions. They cut just as deep and twice as hard. A physical trauma hurts the flesh, but words, they hurt the

soul.

I'd tuned out at this point in the speech because no one spoke to me at school. Always the outcast because of my situation and not even deemed worthy enough of a bully. I guess after all I didn't have much else to lose and they couldn't affect me.

I hadn't realized I'd retained that conversation until now. But I was that kid and that adult now who believed my life was better. I believed I was strong and resilient, free and independent but I wasn't.

And it only took Gabriel hammering that home for me to realize.

I was so attention starved that I'd gone to the man who had kidnapped me and then forced me to marry him and for why? Because he'd shown me attention no one else had?

I'd had men, fuck I'd slept with his brother but none were as attentive as the man himself.

And his words, they cut deep.

So, let's give you the attention you so deeply crave.

I wouldn't cry. I'd done enough of that but after last night, I thought it was different. I gave him what he wanted, and he threw that in my face just like the crusts on a sandwich Lincoln doesn't like to eat.

But he wasn't wrong, was he?

I craved attention. I was starved for it.

I'd grown having none and now I had it, I wanted more of it. More of him.

That's why I'd gone searching for him. I wanted to repair whatever damage had been done, explain to him why I didn't want him to see.

My scars made me feel ugly and he looked at me with so much passion and desire I thought if he saw them that feeling would fade. I was prepared to tell him as much until I found him covered in another mans blood, pounding a punching bag as if it had physically wronged him.

I wasn't a particularly likeable person, I knew this, but I tried with the right people.

I wanted to try with Gabriel. But he saw me, and he saw a vulnerability and then used it as if wielding a sword on the battlefield. I didn't want to be his enemy but that's what he made it feel like.

Opposing sides, constantly at war with each other. There was one moment of truce, a moment of peace where we collided but as soon as the sun rose and reality swept it, the colors became clear.

I was so damn stupid.

But I wanted to be better, bigger, stronger. I wanted to take those words and process them and once that was done, I wanted to move on. Lord knows I have enough trauma to handle without the need to add more to it.

But fuck they hurt.

I press my fingers to my forehead, rubbing out the tension building there, at the ache behind my eyes. He had looked genuinely sorry. When his anger cleared and he'd chased me, he had remorse in those blazing eyes of his, but this was why I remained alone.

I had my son, that's all I needed.

I didn't need the people close to me hurting me. I've done this before, I trusted people before and it left me scarred, used and broken.

I wouldn't end up back in that place again.

Forgiving Gabriel for his words would be easy enough, and I could do it but I refused to open myself to further pain from people I wanted to trust and love. There was no escaping Gabriel Saint, I couldn't just run away, after all we were married – I scoff to myself at that – and there was no doubt half this damn city would know who I was.

Could I up and leave the city, move states or even countries? Perhaps. But I also knew it would be always running and never staying in one place too long. *Are you going to run away again?*

Motherfucker hit some deep, aching spot inside my chest that stayed sore hours later.

I'm yours. Your wife.

My eyes close at the memories from the night before, at the pleasure he wrung from my body, at the sensation that tingled across my skin long after I'd left his room this morning. I still felt him between my legs, a soreness that made me ache in the most delicious way. I could taste him on my tongue.

I groan as I lean my head back, thumping it on the wall. No man had ever made me feel the way he made me feel last night. I was wanted, desired, he craved me as much as I craved him and when he got that hit it still wasn't enough. He wanted me every way, couldn't go without for more than a few minutes. Caressing and kissing, whispering of fingers and penetrating touches.

Even angry at him, the memories alone were enough to leave an ache and a need.

And I was angry at myself for still wanting him.

I wouldn't lie anymore and say he was nothing, I wouldn't lie and say I didn't want him because it was untrue.

Gabriel Saint would be my undoing.

My absolute ruin.

The problem was, there wasn't much of me left to break so when that happens and I shatter into nothing more than shards of a person, there wouldn't be anything left to put back together.

You'll take me, leonessa.

I breathe through my nose, pushing those thoughts away.

I'd long since showered and washed away the evidence but the phantom feeling of his marking, of his claiming, it made my skin tingle.

I couldn't think about it any longer, I needed something else. I needed *anything* else right now. So, I choose to remember him, like the mafia don he is, covered in blood, rage engulfing his eyes and venom spitting from his lips. He'd killed someone today. He'd worn their blood.

He'd become so angry at the world he'd torn his hand to shreds and smiled.

And yet, even as I think these things and remember him that way, the two memories merge together, becoming one erotic, blurred image. I should be disgusted with myself that seeing him that way did not repulse me. If I was truthful, I'd felt a warmth within my core that could only be one thing. I was attracted to it.

His dominance and power. His complete disregard for law and righteousness. He was exactly who he was meant to be. And he owned it.

Lincoln whimpering from his bed shakes me from the thoughts and drags me back to the present. I'd come straight to him, finding him with Camille.

Gabriel's mother and me had developed a sort of weird relationship in the weeks I had been here. She was an unexpected comfort, even when we just sat in a room silently together. We spoke often enough, mostly about Lincoln and she broached on subjects outside of the current situation but never to a point I became uncomfortable. And she had told me about Gabriel and Lucas as children. I suppose her narrative of her boys as children and then teenagers had allowed me to see them in a different light.

They were still human with human emotion and human weaknesses, even if that's not what everyone saw. And I see that now. I saw it the night I met Lucas, when he had shown kindness and pretended to be something he wasn't, and I see it in Gabriel. I see how he tries.

But I see the weight too.

I see it crushing him, pressing down onto the strong shoulders of him but even a king could be crushed.

I didn't know what was happening in this city, with his rule but I could assume that these attacks, the shooting on the house and at the wedding weren't an everyday occurrence.

I'd grown up knowing the Saint's as the infamous, self-declared rulers but the city didn't suffer for that. As with every city, town, state, crime happened, no one person, government or family would stop it but it never seemed quite as bad as it did now.

I'd taken Lincoln from Camille with those thoughts in my head, swirling with the version of Gabriel I'd just seen and I'd disappeared to my room. She didn't ask questions and once I'd got here, I'd fell onto the bed and held him tight, rocking him as he slowly began to drift into his nap.

I held him for a while before I'd placed him in his bed and taken up residence on the floor opposite.

But now he was awake, I move back to him, lifting him to eye level. I see so much *Saint* in him now I'm here. In his dark hair and hazel eyes, in the tanned complexion of his skin.

He looked like Lucas and Gabriel.

This was his family.

"Oh baby boy," I whisper into his hair, "I'll do better, okay?" His little fingers squeeze my shoulders, lips smacking together, "I'll do better. I'll be better."

GABRIEL

“Are you well?”

Amelia sits next to me at the dinner table one week later. Our nightly meals had remained in place but she’d kept herself closed off from me. She didn’t speak unless I spoke to her and when she was finished, she excused herself and went to her room.

I’d been in there every night, long after she’d gone to sleep and watched her. I’d flipped through the pages of her sketchbook and documented every new design and a time or two I let myself feel a strand of her hair between my fingers, the silky length soft on my roughened hands.

“I am,” she nods with a fake smile.

Since that day, since those words, she had been nothing but courteous. There was no vitriol or arguments. No hostility. Just this quiet calm.

It was like she wasn’t even present.

“I was thinking we could head into the city tomorrow,” I say.

I didn’t want to. Not really. There had been two more attacks in the week, small in comparison to the previous ones but there nonetheless and while

there were no more bodies to be buried it would only be a matter of time.

“Okay.”

“Amelia,” I drop my fork, pressing my forehead into my hands, “I don’t know how to make it better, okay? I’ve never done this.”

“It’s okay, Gabriel.” She lifts her wine and takes a sip, “There’s nothing to fix.”

“But there is,” I push, “This, *us*. I want to take but I can’t, and I don’t want to steal something you’re not willing to give.”

“I made myself clear.”

“Amelia, what can I do?”

At this point, I was willing to get on my knees.

She looks at me then, her blue clashing with my hazel and I see loneliness, pain, *longing*, but she masks that quick enough making me believe I might have misread it. “I’m tired. Can I be excused?”

“*Non dire cazzate!*” I growl.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Amelia.” I grab her wrist when she rises, “I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to fix it, but I want you. *Cazzo*, Amelia, I want you. And I can’t forget that night.”

She closes her eyes, “Please, Gabriel, this is for the best.”

“Is it?”

“It is.” She says with determination, “This way you get what you want.”

“What I want?”

“An heir.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t think that really matters anymore.”

She pulls her arm from my grip gently, “I don’t hate you, Gabriel. I know I said it, but I don’t. I’m not sure I could anymore but what happened, it won’t happen again.”

“I hurt you.”

She nods, “I’ll admit that.”

“They were just words, Amelia.”

She smiles softly, a real smile but not one that spoke of happiness, “Words are sharper than knives.”



She shuts down. Emotionally. Physically.

It's like something within her has been hardwired into removing herself from a situation to stop herself from being hurt.

And I didn't blame her.

I hurt her. I hurt my wife.

I fucked up.

I didn't lie in my words, but they were said in the wrong way. The woman needed attention, not because she was an attention seeker but because, for some reason, she had been denied it. Her past was a secret even I couldn't dig up.

We all need attention.

We strive for it.

And she had been starved.

I pause outside her bedroom door and knock twice, a gentle tap of my still healing knuckles.

It doesn't take her long to open it and step out, wearing a sweet little summer dress and a cardigan over the top, covering her arms and back. The dress was blue, covered in a floral print and sat just above the knee. With her long, dark hair down and a light covering of make-up, she didn't look like the tired woman I had at my table the night before.

We walk down silently and out to my waiting car. There would be no men with us, no brothers or bodyguards. The city needed to see us together anyway, but I needed her alone.

I open her door and she slides into the passenger seat, turning her face away from me and to the window.

"Lincoln go off okay?" I ask.

"Your mother is good with him," is all she says in return.

The barriers were up in full force.

The gravel of the drive crunches under tires and the smooth drive into the shopping district is uneventful. It's a busy weekday, tourists and citizens alike crowding the popular streets. Vendors line the sidewalk, selling street food and coffee while boutiques and designer outlets herd traffic through the door. It was a busy place in the city that made me question my decision to leave us both unguarded.

I was armed, of course, but I was one man and if we were attacked, I'd stand little chance at protecting her.

I park beneath the mall, heading round to Amelia's side. She was out of the car before I could do anything.

"Stay close to me," I order softly, "That's not a request."

"Okay."

She lets me link her arm with mine and we walk to street level, joining the buzzing crowd above ground. The smells of the vendors and coffee assault my senses immediately and I watch as Amelia softens a touch at the familiarity. I knew the place she worked at before was in the district over, so I had no doubt she visited here often enough to know these streets.

"Amelia!" Someone shouts the moment we start passing the vendors set up like market stalls, "Amelia!"

She turns her head towards the feminine voice, "Julia."

"Where have you been!?" The young girl stops breathlessly ahead of us, "They said you quit!"

She glances towards me and narrows her eyes, "That's right."

"Without a goodbye?" Julia frowns.

She shrugs, feigning that nonchalant mask, "It happened quickly, Julia."

"Yeah," she agrees, "Yeah." And then her eyes slide to me as if only just noticing me on her arm, "Hey, you're Gabriel Saint."

I nod.

"His reputation precedes him," Amelia says this with a smile that does not reach her eyes,

"Are you...?" She trails off, not voicing the last part of her question.

"N—" Amelia starts before I cut in.

"She is my wife."

Julia's eyes go saucer wide, "You got married!? To *him*!?"

"It's a long story." Amelia defends.

"It's not really," I smile at the girl, "I swept her off her feet, we fell in love, we got married."

"I didn't even know you were seeing someone." Julia glances to me, that healthy dose of fear and curiosity mixing together. The infamous youngest Saint.

"It was nice seeing you," Amelia dismisses the girl, "maybe we can catch up later."

"Actually yeah, I'd like that. You have my number."

"I do."

"Was nice meeting you, Julia," I smile at the girl who blushes and

scurries off.

“Unbelievable.”

“What?”

“Is there no one who doesn’t kiss the ground you walk on?”

“Oh plenty, *leonessa*,” I agree, pulling her towards a food stall at the end that served the best churros. I’d been coming here since I was old enough to chew. “But not many.”

She scoffs, “No wonder your ego is so *large*.”

I smirk, “There’s plenty about me that is large, Amelia. You know that.”

Her cheeks flame red and she shakes her head, fighting a smile but the corners of her pretty lips tip up, unable to keep them from doing so.

I order the churros from the vendor, coating mine in cinnamon sugar, and chocolate sauce for Amelia. She scrunches her nose as I take a bite.

“What?”

“Only a crazy person likes cinnamon.”

I burst out in laughter, taking a large bite of the deep fried dessert, the cinnamon sugar alighting on my tongue. She shakes her head but now she smiles freely, matching my step as we head through the busy streets of the shopping district. I say my greetings to all that speak with me, the faces familiar and stories well versed in my head.

“They all know you?”

I nod.

“Why? I thought you liked keeping to yourself.”

“This city has belonged to the Saint’s for generations,” I say, holding out my arm for her to take as we merge into a busier section, she takes it, “It’s not just about power, Amelia. We care about the people that make Redhill their home, including businesses. Most of these clerks have come to us at one time or another for loans, for help or protection.”

“And then they owe you a debt?”

“Would a bank provide a loan out of the goodness of their own heart?”

“Of course not!” She scoffs, “But a bank won’t torture you or your family because you can’t pay it back.”

“You’ve watched too many movies.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not saying every family like ours rules the same way and in some cases, depending on the situations, we will use extreme methods but if someone can’t pay back what we have given, they are offered extensions or a

chance to work it off. If I tortured or killed every person who owed me money, then half this city will be empty.”

She goes quiet.

“There’s time to learn, Amelia, it’s new, and it’s a lot.”

She nods but remains silent beside me, her arm relaxed within mine.

I guide her towards the small boutique on the corner and open the door for her, guiding her into the cool, air-conditioned unit.

“Sierra,” I call out to her, smiling a little at all the new clothing she has on the mannequins and racks. “An example of working off what they owe,” I whisper to Amelia, “Sierra came to me when her business was struggling, she didn’t have enough to keep it afloat and pay off her debt. We loaned her half a million and for the first year, she continued to struggle so we offered her a trade. She didn’t pay us back and in return, she became our bespoke clothing seamstress.”

“She did my wedding dress?”

I scoff, “No, she refused. Didn’t think it was right.”

“I like her already.”

“You will. She’s fiery like you. Her debt has long since been cleared but we have a good relationship with her and her family and so she continues to work with us.”

“Gabriel!?” I hear her voice, the lilt of her accent deepening her tone and then she pops her head round the corner and beams brightly. She was a beautiful woman, with her dark skin and onyx eyes. Petite but full of life. She thrived in this shop and with her work and when she wasn’t here, I knew she often worked in her mama’s kitchen down near the marina, serving the sailors that came into port and feeding them the hearty, and warming home cooked recipes they were so famous for.

“Si, Sierra,” I welcome her hug and kiss both cheeks before she checks me over, quirking a brow at the healing wounds on my hand. She tuts loudly and rolls her eyes, “Always a new scar when I see you, Gabriel.”

“Hazard of the job.”

She purses her lips before she turns her deep eyes to Amelia, “You must be his new wife. I’m sorry.”

Amelia bursts out laughing, a sweet tinkle of sound that hits me right in the chest. She didn’t laugh enough, not when the sound was as glorious as that. I hadn’t realized I was staring until Amelia catches me and promptly stops, turning her attention back to Sierra. “I’m Amelia.”

She turns her attention to me, “Much too pretty for you, Gabriel.”

I stand shocked while Sierra plucks Amelia from my arm and takes her on a tour around the boutique, showing off the clothes she had designed and made herself. Amelia fawns over every single item, admiring the designs and intricacy of Sierra’s work. She selects a few items from the shelf, keeping a hold of them.

“Should we get to it then?” Sierra asks after I pay for the items Amelia selected from the shop, silently approving of the tight white summer dress that had boning in the corset, Amelia would be beautiful in it.

I nod, “Please, Sierra.”

“What are we doing?” Amelia asks.

Sierra beams at her, smiling so bright with eyes that express so much warmth. Sierra had become a close family friend, and with it, her family. They were bright, and loud and the opposite to all that the Saints were, that when they visit every few months, the house transforms to something new. Something warm. Her mama would cook, along with her brother, taking over the kitchen and my house would smell of spice and homecooked food for days.

“I am in awe of your skill, Amelia,” Sierra tells her, guiding her towards the back room, “You have an incredible talent.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t told her,” Sierra accuses with a glare.

“A surprise, Sierra,” I tell her.

She nods, “Well, I hope I have done this justice, Amelia.”

“I have no idea what’s happening.”

I follow the girls into the back room, finding bundles and bundles of various materials in every color, some patterned, with ribbons and buttons and zips overflowing from buckets set up around the room. In the centre was Sierra’s workspace, her machines and laptop set up and the reason I brought Amelia here in the first place, placed on a mannequin close to the desk.

Amelia stops dead, a gasp escaping her lips.

Sierra continues though, going to the dress on the mannequin, “It isn’t quite finished yet, we have the detail to add to the corset and that lovely hidden sparkle in the skirt.”

“That’s mine.” Amelia whispers.

I go to Amelia’s side, “I’ll admit I have been taking pictures of your designs for weeks, Amelia, this one though, it stood out the most. I could

only ever picture you in such a magnificent dress.”

The design was from the first night I had given her the sketchbook, the long, floor length gown with the plunging neckline and hidden sparkle in the skirts that were split on both sides right to the hip.

“Gabriel commissioned the piece weeks ago,” Sierra explains, “It’s beautiful.”

Amelia steps up to the garment, running her hands over the material while her eyes shine, “I’ve never seen one of my designs in real life before.”

“It’s perfect.” I say.

“You did this?” She asks Sierra.

“I’ve been working on it for weeks for you,” Sierra smiles kindly, “Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

“We have a few more adjustments but I think I could have it completed in a week and then we’ll just need to make the adjustments to fit.”

“Wait, it’s actually *for* me?”

“Yes, *leonessa*.”

“There’s some other pieces,” Sierra continues, “Gabriel provided your sizes so they should fit.”

She watches while Sierra pulls out two lingerie pieces taken directly from her book, a red lace body suit with ribbons that wrapped around the waist and then up between the breasts to secure around the neck, the lace completely sheer and covering nothing.

Amelia glances to me and then back, fingering the material while Sierra pulls out the second, a three piece set that includes a bra, thong and garter belt. It was lace like the one before but fuller and more concealing and was white.

“These are stunning, you did these too?”

“I did,” Sierra beams, “but the talent is yours.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, turning to both of us, “Really, thank you.”

“Would you like to try them on?” Sierra asks.

“I can?”

Sierra laughs, “Of course, they are yours.”

My fists tighten at the thought of seeing Amelia in these pieces of lace.

“Gabriel can wait here,” Sierra glances to me with a smirk, “I’ll take you through.”

And the fantasy of seeing her in nothing but these little pieces of lace gets

shattered. I grumble as I leave, taking a seat on the bench close to the front of the shop while the girls do their thing in the back.

Just knowing she was back there with no clothing, and I couldn't get to witness it, was frustrating. But she hadn't forgiven me yet.

She would.

Soon. She would.



AMELIA

The lace slides across my skin as I pull it into place and secure the ribbon around my neck. I'd never dared wearing such a thing before, but I wanted to so bad.

But it revealed too much, all the scars on my arms were on show and the scarring on my abdomen could be seen through the lace. I knew it would be the same on my back.

I couldn't hide them like this.

The curtain to the changing room suddenly swings open and Sierra stops dead, eyes going to those scars.

"Sierra!" I yell.

"What happened?" She rushes over, examining those marks.

"No, stop," I plead, louder than I intend as she lifts her hand to touch, "Please."

"Amelia?" Gabriel's voice brings a cold sweat to my skin, "Amelia is everything okay?"

"Sierra please, I don't want him to see." Her eyes widen. "I'm fine

Gabriel!”

“Amelia?” Sierra hisses, “How has he never seen?”

“Please, Sierra.”

“Are you sure? I heard you shout.”

“I’m fine!” I beg Sierra with my eyes, watching her take in every angry scar, the slashes, and burns that mottled my skin., the small and the big. My back was the worst of it, the way my skin was raised, angry, like someone had dripped candle wax onto my skin and left it to dry. I had hoped as I grew, and they aged that they would become less noticeable but that hadn’t happened.

“Amelia,” she softens on a whisper, “What happened to you?”

“It’s nothing,” I tell her, eyes bouncing to the mere curtain that separates me from Gabriel. I didn’t believe he would just barge in, he had these gentlemanly tendencies that I didn’t hate but I wouldn’t put it passed him if he thought I was in trouble.

“It doesn’t look like nothing, Amelia. It looks like someone hurt you.”

“Just drop it, Sierra.”

“He doesn’t know, does he?”

I sigh but then shake my head, “I don’t want him to.”

“But—”

“No, please,” I beg, “Just please don’t say anything.”

Her eyes soften as she takes me in once more. In the short hour or so I’d been here, I’d immediately liked Sierra, with her quick wit and fearless attitude, she had an easy relationship with Gabriel that I feel would have made me jealous if it wasn’t for her character. I had no right, of course, but it didn’t, not with her.

She was the type I’d have been friends with before, one I might have trusted.

“Okay,” she agrees with a sympathetic smile.

“I’m coming in!” Gabriel growls.

Sierra immediately jumps into action, yanking the curtain across almost violently, “She doesn’t want you to see her.”

“She’s my wife!” Gabriel growls fiercely.

“Well maybe she wants it to be a surprise!”

Silence follows. With everything happening between us right now I wasn’t sure he would believe it.

“Don’t lie to me, Sierra.”

“Gabriel, give the girl space!” She snaps, “You can’t fucking blame her for wanting it!”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, Gabriel.”

“Amelia!?” He calls.

“Gabriel, she’s telling the truth, I’m fine.”

I hear his sigh and then the stomps of his footsteps.

“You have to speak with him,” Sierra says softly.

I shake my head, “We may be married but we are not a couple, Sierra. We never will be.”



Gabriel hands me the bags from the boutique, the dresses I had purchased and then the lingerie and hesitates.

“Everything okay?”

“Join me for dinner?”

“I always do.”

He looks down before looking back up, “I mean really join me, Amelia.”

“Gabriel,” I start.

“Just think about it,” he interrupts, “I hurt you, let me make it better.”

I nod, thinking about what he had done for me, what he had been doing for me.

And so I go to my room with the bags and the lingerie, the image of that perfect dress in my head and I think.

Lincoln is returned to me just before dinner, a happy, cheerful little boy with bundles of new clothes, courtesy of his grandmother and red cheeks from his smiles. I hold him tight for a few moments before venturing downstairs.

It was surprising to find no guards posted outside my room, no men loitering in the halls pretending not to watch me, but I was grateful. For once I was clear in my thoughts, truly alone with them.

I place Lincoln on the floor in the den, the next room over from the kitchen with toys to play with and head through to the other room to prepare his dinner. It’s almost robotic as I move through the large space, plucking out ingredients and prepping them, lost in the thoughts spiraling out of control

inside my head.

Gabriel was front and centre, as he always seemed to be. But he was proving to be an enigma. Just when I think I know, he changes it.

I was under no disillusion that the man was dangerous, he had killed, tortured, and hurt people. He does shady business and controls the city and everything in it, but he wasn't the monster I believed him to be.

Shaking my head, I pinch the bridge of my nose, loosing a sigh.

After I place the vegetables onto boil and the chicken in the oven, I move back to the den to check on Lincoln.

Only he isn't there.

"Lincoln?" I frantically search the den, trying to find him but when I don't, I sprint into the kitchen, searching in there but he wasn't there either.

My heart drops into my stomach the moment I step out into the hall and look towards the end, finding the door to the pool room open.

"Lincoln!" I scream. My legs are moving before I have time to process, feet heavy on the tiles as I rush to the room, heart stopping at the view of my little boy in the water. He thrashes but he's submerged, hands barely breaching the surface.

"Lincoln!" I cry, not pausing to think about what I do next. It didn't matter that I couldn't swim, that I'd had a fear of pools longer than I could remember. None of that mattered as I jumped into the pool, the water rushing into my open mouth and over my head.

I thrash, kicking until my hands hit his body, and then I grip him, pushing up as much as I could. I didn't know how to swim but I understood what to do and the panic of saving Lincoln overpowers the fear of the water. I manage to get him to the surface, my own face popping out as I inhale the air, sucking it into my lungs.

Lincoln coughs, crying out but that was good! He was breathing. Thank *god* he was breathing.

I kick wildly, holding him above the surface with one arm as I frantically try to push us to the edge of the pool. I couldn't feel the bottom with my feet, and it seemed so far away but after pushing and fighting, I manage to get there.

My slippery fingers grab the lip of the pool, clinging on, "Help!" I scream, coughing, "Someone help!"

Lincoln thrashes, his fingernails clawing at me. I cry out as I use what I can to push him up, up, up until I shove him over the top and onto solid

ground where he promptly lets out a scream.

I sigh, he was safe.

I take a moment to catch my breath, keeping a tight grip on the edge until I have enough energy. Just a minute, I just needed a minute. I hear footsteps thundering towards the pool room and relief floods through me. I turn to see who but before I can, something heavy and hard slams into the side of my head.

I let go of the edge as my head swims with fog and I can't even panic as I slip back beneath the surface of the water.

Internally, I am screaming, crying, lashing out but I know my body isn't moving, it's simply sinking as the blackness consumes my head. I glance up to the surface, seeing a dark, blurry shape looking down but then it all goes black, and I sink to the bottom of the pool.

GABRIEL

The scream chills me through.

I've heard screams of pain, or fear but this, this was different. It hit me in the soul and buried itself beneath my bones, chilling me all over.

A child's scream.

Behind that scream I hear a voice, a voice screaming for help.

Amelia.

I move quickly, withdrawing my weapon as I thunder through the house. I'd been holding a meeting to discuss the shit going on with the city, I thought she'd be safe for half an hour. I was wrong.

The child's scream continues but her voice, it has gone silent.

"Amelia!" I roar, following the sound of the scream. My blood runs cold at the view of the pool door open and I can just make out a small, wet hand on the tiles. Lincoln. Behind me I hear my men, ready for war.

I come to a screeching halt, finding Lincoln drenched and crying but then my eyes go to the pool, at the blood in the water and the dark shape of Amelia beneath the surface.

“Amelia!” I dive into the pool, swimming down to her where she sinks, unconscious, her dark hair wrapped around her face and a steady stream of blood coming from her head. She didn’t look alive.

I grip her, bringing her to me before I use the bottom of the pool as leverage to get to the surface, breaking it and instantly moving her hair out of the way.

My first thought was that she’s been shot.

Not my Amelia. Not my wife.

When I see it’s a gash and not a bullet wound, I relax a little, “Amelia!” I shake her. “She’s not breathing!”

My mother enters the room last as I am swimming to the side, Amelia limp and lifeless. No. No. No.

She can’t die.

My chest was caving in, the feel of her lifeless body in my arms breaking my soul in half.

“Get Devon!” I roar. “Now!”

Pulling her out of the water, I push her wet hair away from her face, the blood streaming down her too pale skin.

“*Mondo mia*,” I whisper, “Amelia.”

Her chest doesn’t move, there’s no life.

“Come on, baby,” I plead, starting CPR, “Come on.”

Her small body seems too fragile to take the powerful thrusts against her chest and I know I’m going to break something, but I can’t lose her. “You can’t leave me yet, please.” I beg.

I keep with the CPR and rescue breaths until suddenly she coughs up water, vomiting it over herself. I help her onto her side while she continues to hack, bringing more and more up. “That’s it baby, breathe for me. Come on.”

She falls still, eyes closing while she battles to stay awake, “Where is Devon!?”

“He left,” someone informs me, “We have it on the security check that he signed out ten minutes ago.”

FUCK!

I gather Amelia into my arms, cradling her wet body to my chest and search for her son, finding him being soothed by my mother. Her head rolls, falling back. I cup the back of her skull, “Stay awake, *mondo mia*, stay awake for me.”

Her lashes flutter but do not open.

People move out of my way as I barge through them, carrying her against me, curling my body to protect her and then I'm in my car, her curled up in the passenger seat.

"Amelia..." I reach across, feeling how cold her skin is, "*leonessa*."

"Gabriel," she whimpers in a hoarse voice.

"I'm here, Amelia. Stay awake for me."

"I'm so tired," she complains.

"I know baby, I know." I grip her clammy hand and squeeze, hard enough for it to cause her an ounce of pain which she reacts to just as I want her to. The small cry of pain cuts deep but it means she's still with me. "I just need you to stay with me, okay, *leonessa*, a little while longer."

She sucks in wheezing breaths, the sound rattling wetly inside her chest.

"Gabriel, I'm..." she pauses, sighing, sagging a little.

"No, Amelia, stay awake!" I squeeze until her knuckles roll inside my fist.

"I'm sorry."

"No."

There's my *leonessa*. Her pretty blue eyes, somewhat puffy and swollen open enough to feel the weight of her glare, "No?"

"No. I don't accept it. Stay awake and when you're better, we can talk."

"Gabriel."

"No, Amelia," I snap, "Stay the fuck awake. Stay awake for Lincoln."

A tear rolls down her cheek.

"Stay awake for me."

Her small hand tightens a little around mine and I glance over, finding her eyes, drooping and tired, looking at me.

"I've got you." I tell her, "I will always have you."



She slips back into unconsciousness moments before I hit the hospital, her breathing becoming worryingly slow and shallow.

"You don't get to fucking leave me," I growl to her, gently removing her from the car to place her in my arms, "I only just found you, *leonessa*," My mouth drops to her hair, "Please, I only just found you."

She doesn't respond, not that I expect her to and rush into the emergency

room, “Help me!” I roar, “Someone help me!”

It takes barely any time at all for a gurney to arrive and an army of nurses and doctors, hands grabbing, touching, dragging her limp body, and placing it onto a bed. Tubes and tools block my vision, hands grabbing at her clothing, at her flesh.

“Mr Saint!” Someone yells.

There’s a collective pause before things seem to go into overdrive, people moving more frantically.

An older woman touches my arm.

“What!?” I growl, my body and eyes following my wife.

“I need you to explain what happened.”

“Can’t you see! She drowned!”

“I understand, Mr Saint, but I need more detail, I need to know so we can give her the best treatment.”

So, I explain it, I tell her how I found my wife, how she was bleeding from her head and how she wasn’t breathing when I first discovered her in the pool.

“She can’t swim?”

“I thought she could,” I didn’t feel like the ruler at this point, I felt small, worthless. I felt like nothing was in my control. “She didn’t tell me.”

“Okay, Mr Saint, we will do all we can.”

And then she disappears, along with the team of medical professionals and the body of my wife.

I follow until they refuse to let me go any further. I use threats of violence, of bribery but they don’t let me through. The hospitals and medical centers were always the ones hardest to break.

So, I wait. I sit in those sterile halls of the city hospital, my clothes stiff and drying against my skin while machines beep and wail all around me, waiting for news.

Three hours pass, three hours of phone calls and messages, three hours of endless silence until finally – fucking finally – the same nurse who spoke with me first grips my shoulder. “Mr Saint?”

I stand abruptly, throwing off her touch, “Where is she?”

“Resting.”

“She’s okay?”

“She is,” she nods, “Needed stitches on her wound on her head and some attention on the water in her lungs but she’ll be okay.”

“What room number?” I demand.

“Sir, I have to be frank here,” the nurse says, “That wound was caused by a blunt force trauma, a boot or tool of some kind.” She pauses as if contemplating saying something else.

“Yes?” My teeth grind.

“I am in the right mind here to refuse you access.”

“You think *I* did this?”

“Mr Saint, with all due respect –”

“*Prendi il cazzo a modo mia*” I growl at her, “Get the fuck out my way, before I remove you.”

“Mr Saint.”

“Move.”

Her face blanches at my tone.

“What room?”

“Seventy-three.”

She doesn’t stop me from storming past her and when I enter her room, I find only one nurse tending to the drip attached to her arm.

“Mr Saint!?”

“Is she okay?”

“Stable.”

“Then leave.”

“But –”

“Does she require treatment right now?”

“Well no, she is stable and set up.”

“Then leave.”

The nurse pales and scurries from the room while I take the seat on the right side of Amelia’s sleeping form. My hand gently rests atop of hers.

“I’m sorry, *mondo mia*. I failed.”

Amelia doesn’t respond, not that I expect her to. Her eyes are closed but her lashes flutter softly on the apples of her cheeks, skin too pale and a white gauze across the gash on her brow. The machine beside her beeps steadily, hooked up by wires that disappear beneath the blue blankets on her bed.

I’d seen my fair share of hospitals, walked these halls, witnessed death but this was the first time I truly felt uneasy in this place.

The sky bleeds from blue to pink and then to black, the city lights illuminating the skyline beyond the windows.

I don’t know how long I sit there in silence but a knock on the door snaps

my head around. Devon walks in, clicking it closed behind him.

“Where the fuck have you been?” I’m out of my chair before I can think, gripping the collar of his shirt and shoving him back until his spine thuds on the wall. He glares up at me, “You did this?” I question.

“What!?” He growls.

“You don’t think it odd how she was knocked out cold seconds before you ran from the fucking house!?”

“I was called in to the hospital!” He shouts back, “remember!? I am an actual fucking doctor here, not just yours!”

I shove him again, “She almost fucking died!”

“Gabriel!” Devon yells, “I’m not your fucking enemy! If I had known, I wouldn’t have fucking left!”

Deep down I knew it wasn’t him. I trusted Devon more than my own brothers and slowly, I release him. He straightens his jacket before shooting me one final glare and crosses the room to her bed, plucking her chart from the folder hooked to the end.

He flicks through the pages, reading each one before going round and checking her wires, her pulse and blood pressure.

“I installed locks.” I slump down into the chair, “Like she asked. Because Lincoln can’t swim but neither can she.”

“How do you know?”

“A hunch.”

“So someone unlocked the door, and what? Threw the boy in.”

“It wouldn’t take much to coax a kid into the pool room.”

Devon nods, contemplating.

“I’m not leaving here without her,” I pin Devon with my stare, “I need you to stay at the house.”

A jerk of his chin shows his agreement, “She was lucky.”

“Never again, Devon.” I curl my hand around Amelia’s much smaller one, covering it fully, “And when I find out who did this to her, to her son, I will tear out their heart.”



AMELIA

Everything feels tight, like my skin is two sizes too small and my bones too large. There's an ache across the side of my face and a scratchiness to my throat that wasn't there yesterday. I try to move but it feels as if a whole body of weight is pressing into mine.

And then the memories hit. Like violent waves in a storm, they flash inside my mind like a horror movie. Lincoln in the pool, me jumping in after him, saving him...

Then the man, the one who I yelled for to help me, but he didn't help me, did he? He hit me.

It was foggy. I wasn't sure. It felt like he hit me or maybe I just went under? Or I hit my head on the edge of the pool in my feeble attempt to get out.

I couldn't remember but one memory swamps the rest. Me sinking, eyes open, staring up at the surface of the water, a dark shape looming just out of reach.

Was I dead? Was this hell?

My attempt at moving this time goes better but there were things attached to me. I force my eyes to open, my lids heavy, eyes sore and when they finally do, my vision blurs, shapes moving and blurring all the same. Beside me the beep of a machine increases.

“Amelia?”

That voice.

That deep, accented voice, the baritone and timbre washing an eerie sense of calm through me.

“*Mondo mia*,” Gabriel leans over me, “You’re awake.”

“Am I dead?”

His mouth quirks a little and it’s like my eyes just home into that one expression, the smile enough to sink a single dimple into his cheek, “No, *leonessa*, you live.”

“What happened? Where’s Lincoln!?”

A darkness creeps across his face, banishing the smile, “You were in the pool. He’s safe, with my mother.”

I nod, relief flooding through me and that incessant beeping at my side slows. Lincoln was safe but his words affirm my memory, “I was.”

“You can’t swim, can you?”

I don’t bother to lie, “No.”

He sighs heavily through his nose.

“Did I hit my head?”

His expression turns thundery and he’s silent for a moment before he grits out one word, “Yes.” But there was more to it than that, something he wasn’t telling me. I open my mouth to ask more but the door opens and Atlas walks in.

His eyes clash with mine as he stills in the door.

“Atlas,” Gabriel growls, “what is it?”

I tune out their words, stuck in this vortex of panic that begins to well inside of my stomach. I didn’t just hit my head. I didn’t. Someone struck me.

They tried to kill me. Drown me.

The pain doesn’t register as I snap up, breath rapidly sawing from my chest, “They – he – they tried to kill me!”

Gabriel grabs my shoulders, trying to halt the thrashing but I’m not looking at him, I’m looking at his brother. I never saw them, I can’t even confirm *who*.

“Amelia,” Gabriel grips my chin, forcing me to look at him, “You

remember who?”

I shake my head frantically, “I can’t – I didn’t see!”

“That’s okay, it’s okay,” he soothes.

“Amelia,” Atlas says from the door, “Are you sure you can’t remember? It all happened quickly, maybe you did just hit your head.”

“Atlas,” Gabriel warns.

“Brother, we cannot blindly accuse our men of treachery based on the words of someone who can’t even remember what happened. It was a tense and dangerous situation, the mind can play tricks.”

When Gabriel goes to move, I lunge for his wrist, “Don’t.”

He stiffens but looks back to his brother, “My men. My city. *MY FUCKING WIFE.*”

His roar echoes within the room.

“Where were you when she was in the pool, Atlas?” He asks calmly.

Atlas scoffs and shakes his head, “I’m fucking done with you, *brother.*” He turns.

“Don’t you turn your back on me, Atlas.”

Atlas pauses and turns back to Gabriel while I sit silently, swallowing down the bile that rises in my throat. His eyes bounce to me, his expression changing, just a small amount but enough to notice. It wasn’t aggression I saw but something else, something I couldn’t name but it goes cold just as quick.

“Of course not,” he mocks a bow, “wouldn’t want to offend.”

“Get out,” Gabriel orders, “But we’re not finished here.”

Atlas storms from the room.

“Amelia, I need you to try and remember, okay?”

“I can’t Gabriel, but there was someone, I know it.”

“I believe you,” He soothes, “I believe you, okay?”



I stay in the hospital for another day before they discharge me and not once does Gabriel leave. He remains in the chair besides the bed, sleeping when I did and when it came to leaving, he would not let me go. I refused a wheelchair, I didn’t need that. The dizziness was occasional, a symptom of the head trauma according to the female nurse assigned to me but they weren’t too worried and had sent me on my way.

I think the only reason Gabriel allowed it was because he had his own doctor at the house.

“Careful!” Gabriel snaps when we reach the reception area of the hospital, the target of his ire a sweet looking nurse who had been rushing.

“Gabriel, I am fine, stop it.”

He glares down at me and grips me harder, curling himself around me as if every person within view was an enemy.

They give him a wide berth as we leave, and a car is waiting out front for us. I slide in after Gabriel opens the door, noting a man I didn’t recognize behind the wheel.

“The house,” Gabriel orders.

The driver nods and when he moves, his jacket slides open, showing a gun at his hip.

I study him a little longer, blond haired and big, really fucking big. With tattoos that peak from the collar of his shirt.

He meets my eyes in the mirror and grins.

My heart just about stops.

He was fucking terrifying.

“Amelia, this is Enzo.”

The man grunts. *Grunts.*

“He doesn’t talk much,” Gabriel shrugs, leaning back in his seat, “For the next while, I’ve asked him to watch you.”

“Watch me?” I squeak.

Enzo suppresses a laugh while I glower at Gabriel, “What do you mean?”

“Until I catch whoever is doing this,” his eyes flick to the stitches on my head, “I don’t want you alone and I can’t trust those employed right now.”

“But you trust Enzo?”

The man seemed more beast than human. Jesus Christ.

“Yes. I can’t be around all the time so when I am not, Enzo has agreed to be your bodyguard.”

“Bodyguard. Enzo.”

Maybe my head wasn’t working properly yet because I couldn’t have heard him right.

“Yes.”

“Why do I need a bodyguard!?”

“Do we really need to discuss that, *leonessa?*”

“But –”

“You can fight me later,” Gabriel lifts my hand, running his thumb over the small bruise on top where they’d hooked the lines. And then he shocks me by bringing the injury to his lips, kissing it gently. “I was scared.”

Suddenly the partition starts to lift between the front and back seats, blocking out Enzo. Gabriel smiles a little.

“Bastard has a thing against affection,” He jokes.

“Gabriel...”

Gabriel lifts his fire eyes to meet mine, “I thought I lost you before I even had you, Amelia.”

“I’m okay.”

He sighs heavily, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, I forgive you,” I rush out.

“I’m supposed to protect you!” He drops his brow to my hand before placing another kiss on the top. He then turns it, running his nose along the thin skin on my wrist, following the thin blue lines of my veins, “I failed.”

“Gabriel,” I start.

“I want you, Amelia. I *want* you. I’ve had you once and it wasn’t enough. I need more of you. And then I found you in the pool, and you were bleeding...”

“You’ve seen people hurt, Gabriel, I was fine.”

“I’ve seen a lot of shit, Amelia. I never want to see you hurt again.”

He presses his lips to my skin.

“Gabriel,” I thread my fingers into his hair, “You have me.”

GABRIEL

Amelia sleeps but not in the same bed she was used to. Instead, I'd set her up with me, coaxed her into my own and now she rests beneath the heavy blankets, her body small and drowning in the pillows and sheets.

I take a step towards the bed only to stop in my tracks at the sound of a child's cry. Lincoln was home.

I had very little experience with children, but I knew Amelia needed her rest, so for the first time since she was injured, I leave her.

I find my mother in the den, trying, and failing, to soothe a very upset Lincoln. He thrashes and screams in her arms, lashing out.

"What's going on?" I demand.

"He needs his mother," my mother says, soothing the boy as best she could. My mother was the best there was with children, having raised me, my brother and then the twins after my father took them. She helped with my men's kids, treating them like family, their mothers too. She was a family type through and through so when I finally look at her, see the exhaustion, the loss of fight, I know she's been trying to keep Lincoln happy far longer than healthy. The boy needed his mother, and no amount of coddling right

now would fix it.

Amelia was a fantastic mother, anyone could see it and witnessing Lincoln's unease to be without her, it cemented the fact, the fact I'd known right from the start, that she was the best person for my nephew, the best mother.

"Give him to me," I demand but my mother hesitates.

A small pang of hurt radiates in my chest at her distrust. I'd never hurt the boy, I wouldn't but deep down she didn't believe that. My own mother.

"He needs his mother."

"And I will take him to her."

"Maybe I should," My mother says.

I'd lived my life in a shadow of doubt. Doubt I'd run the city, doubt I'd produce an heir or do it right.

We all had weaknesses, more than one, and anyone to claim different was a liar.

I was forever having to prove myself.

This was no different.

"Give him to me."

She fought internally but eventually she passed the boy over, holding on until the last second. I don't wait, I take the boy and I exit.

He needed his mother and I had to hope the sight of her would be enough.

No one follows and the child, he clings to me, his tiny fingers gripping my clothes like a lifeline.

Amelia still sleeps soundly when I enter, curled up beneath my blankets but Lincoln cries.

"She's here," I tell the boy, "See, right there." I angle him to show her sleeping face and yet he still cries.

I'd had very little involvement with her son since they arrived, but it felt invasive to have anyone but me and Devon, her doctor, inside this room.

"She's okay." I whisper to the child. "*sta bene.*"

Big hazel eyes turn to me, glassy with tears and mouth turned down. There was so much expression, so much emotion, I couldn't figure out how to process it. But I knew it was late, I knew he should be sleeping based on Amelia's routine, so I try my best to recreate.

I gently position him until he's cradled in my arms, seeing all the similarities to Amelia in the shape of his nose, his mouth and I begin to rock back and forth as I'd seen be done before.

He sniffs and whimpers, but the tears slow. I glance to Amelia, checking the child hadn't woken her and when she remains sleeping, I carry the child to the windows, looking out at the view of the ocean.

Lincoln cries again.

"Shh, shh," I hush, rocking.

He was fighting sleep, so I start to sing, keeping my voice low. I didn't know any other nursery rhyme other than Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, so that's what I use. My voice is barely above a whisper but it's enough to snag the boys attention. He quietens, staring up at me as I say each word. I sing and I rock him until he gently drifts off to a sleep and so I sit in the chair with him, watching the waves while he sleeps on my chest.

At some point I must have drifted off to sleep myself, holding the boy tight to my chest.



Amelia

It was an odd sensation, one warming my chest and tightening my stomach.

I was careful not to move too much, to keep my breathing steady as I look to where Gabriel stands rocking my son back and forth in his arms. He sings so softly to him and my son, he stares up at the man like he hung the moon, little fingers tangled into his shirt, eyes droopy with fatigue. He doesn't stop until he's asleep and I watch the entire time, seeing how gentle he was with him, how attentive.

It filled me with warmth.

And then he sits, keeping Lincoln on his chest, letting him use his body as a bed, chest as a pillow and Gabriel keeps a tight hold on him, even as I watch, besotted by the view, as Gabriel himself drifts off.

It's when he's asleep, head lolled to the side using the back of the chair as a rest, that I sit up. It was dark out, I'd been sleeping on and off since we got back from the hospital, but I felt good, much better than before. Slowly, I climb from the bed, my feet sinking into the plush carpet of Gabriel's room and cross over to them, letting my hand stroke Lincoln's head before my hand finds the side of Gabriel's face. A small touch of my fingers to his skin

brands me through.

How I had ever denied him when he made me feel so much was a mystery. I gently begin to lift Lincoln only Gabriel snaps awake, dragging him back and getting defensive, ready to defend my son. He stops as soon as he realizes it's me but there's a flash of hurt in his eyes when he notices I'm taking my son.

I smile gently at him as he releases him and I cradle Lincoln with one arm, using the other to reach out for Gabriel. He frowns but takes my hand, letting me lead him back to the bed. I gently place Lincoln on my side and turn to Gabriel, pressing up onto my toes so I can taste his mouth. His hands stay at his side, but they ball into tight fists as if he's restraining himself from touching me.

It's while I kiss him that I begin to remove his clothes.

"Amelia," he warns.

"I'm not trying anything," I whisper, "But you can't sleep in clothes."

"I'll sleep in the chair."

"No," I kiss him, "You'll sleep with me."

"Giving orders, wife?" He teases with a smirk.

"I am."

"I'll be back, *leonessa*, climb into bed."

He turns and stalks into his walk in while I climb back into bed, waiting for him. He returns only minutes later, a pair of grey sweats hanging from his hips, all his glorious muscle and that damn, hypnotic V all on show for my eyes to devour. I damn near swallow my tongue.

No man was built as perfectly as him.

I'd never let anything happen between us while Lincoln was in the same room as us, but I could admire the view. He grins, sinking those dimples into his cheeks that disarmed me every time.

"Are you sure?" He asks at the edge of the bed, hesitating.

I nod and lay, turning to my side and curling Lincoln to my chest. The light in the room goes out and then his weight presses into the mattress as he presses the length of his body to the back of mine, his nose going to the back of my head where he inhales.

"Are you smelling me?" I whisper.

"As intoxicating as any drug, *mondo mia*, but twice as addictive. There is not a part of you I do not crave."

GABRIEL

It had been about a week since Amelia had been home. The tension between us after sleeping in the same bed every night was now about ready to snap. She teased relentlessly throughout the day but with shit still happening with the city, I'd barely been home with her. My cock had been semi hard for days and I was about to fucking snap.

It's late by the time I get home, finding the den empty but my men stationed around the house. Enzo stands outside my bedroom door, nods once when he sees me and exits.

Amelia and Lincoln were likely sleeping inside so I enter quietly, trying to come up with a plan on how I would get her alone.

Only when I get inside, Amelia is not there, and neither is her son.

"Amelia?"

I do a quick scan and find the bathroom door ajar, the sound of water sloshing coming from within.

I knock, "Amelia?"

"Come in."

I'm expecting what I find. Amelia leans back in the bath, her dark hair thrown over the back of the rim and bubbles covering her. Her eyes are closed and there's a dewy sheen to her skin from the heat and steam.

I swallow. Hard.

"Where's Lincoln?" I grit out, grabbing the vanity and gripping it.

"Your mother helped me set him up in his new room. He's sleeping."

She says it so nonchalantly, doesn't even open her eyes.

"He's not here?"

And just like that the barrier keeping me from her was gone.

She shakes her head, "I asked one of your men to watch his door, I hope that's okay."

"Amelia," I growl.

"Yes, Gabriel?"

"We're alone?"

"Mm-hm," she sloshes the water with her hand.

"Get out the bath."

Her mouth curls up at the side, "I don't think I will."

"Amelia."

"Turn off the lights."

"Why?"

She turns her head to me, her eyes dark and a smile still playing on her pretty mouth, "You want me out the bath, turn out the lights. All of them."

"You're self-conscious?"

"Please."

"I want to see you, Amelia, all of you."

She doesn't move from the water, and I wouldn't force her. I keep my eyes on her as I lean across to the switch and flick it off, plunging the bathroom into darkness.

"The bedroom too."

I step back and lean out, flicking off the light.

Only once it was pitch black did I finally hear Amelia stand. Naked, she was gloriously fucking naked and wet and right there. Even though I couldn't see her I felt her moving towards me, the air charging with electricity and tension. My fingers bite into my palms.

She stops in front of me, leaving an inch between us. "Kiss me, Gabriel."

I snap, lunging for her, my mouth crashing into hers and demanding it open with my tongue. She obliges immediately, kissing me back, her hands

going to my shirt and tugging, bringing me closer. My cock swells, pressing hard against my pants and I grind forward, letting her feel just how fucking gone I am for her.

“You’re fucking mine,” I growl into her mouth, “*Mine.*”

She whimpers when I force us both out the bathroom, back to the room. My hands touch and feel every part of her, tracing her skin, her curves, the dips and edges. She drops down onto the mattress as I climb between her legs, kissing her once as I move down her body, licking down her chest, her breasts, rolling her nipple between my teeth.

“Oh god, please,” She begs.

“Do not rush me, *leonessa*,” I rasp against the swell of her stomach, dipping down between her legs where I then lick up the seam of her, her taste alighting on my tongue.

She cries out as I bury my face between her thighs, licking, nipping, tasting all of her. I slip a finger inside, then another, fucking her with my hand, stretching her and readying her for my cock.

“You think you can take another?” I say, blowing my breath across her sensitive flesh, “You’re so fucking tight, Amelia. You’re soaking my hand.”

“Jesus Christ,” she moans, arching her spine.

“Fuck, you’re such a good girl,” I kiss her clit, slowly edging in a third finger, feeling her muscles contract. “You feel how well you’re taking me?”

“Gabriel,” she groans, “fuck.”

I pump the three fingers into her, lapping up the wetness soaking my hand and her cunt. “Tell me how much you fucking want it,” I growl.

“Gabriel, please,” she cries, “Don’t stop.”

I needed to be inside her. Now.

She whimpers when I come away and strip out of my clothes, falling back between her thighs, “Open wider for me,” I demand, helping to push at her legs. One hand slips beneath her ass, lifting it from the bed while my other guides the head of my cock into her entrance. I slam forward as I yank her back, filling her completely. Her scream is like damn music.

I jerk my hips, not pulling out completely and thump our bodies together, my fingers in a bruising hold on her flesh. She moans with every move, her muscles contracting and pulsing around my dick.

“*Dio.*” I rasp out, “*dio* you feel so fucking good, *leonessa*. So fucking good.”

“Gabriel!” She cries.

“That’s it, call my fucking name,” I praise, pulling out and slamming back in.

Her nails score my skin where she grips my wrists as I continue to fuck her. God I’d only had her for one night before, but I’ve missed it. I’ve missed her.

I slow, realizing this. Gently, keeping myself buried inside, I lower her to the bed, covering her body with my own, needing more contact, needing every inch of her pressed to me. I claim her mouth as I roll my hips into her, not one part of us not touching. Her legs wrap around my waist as I sink in deep, grinding up against that sweet bundle of nerves. She whimpers against my lips.

“You were made for me, *mondo mia*, every atom of you is mine.”

“It’s too much,” She whispers, panting against me.

“It’s not enough.”

“I can’t,” she pants.

“You can, baby. You can. Feel me. Feel this.” I kiss her, “Feel what I do and what you do to me.” I jolt forward, “You make me crazy, Amelia. I need you.”

It wasn’t the claiming I expected it to be, after being without her I wanted to fuck her hard, fast, I wanted to mark her with me, smear it into her skin, make her feel me for days but this, this was slow and it was euphoric. It was a claiming in a different way.

Her nails score my skin, her pussy fluttering around my cock.

“Come for me, *leonessa*,” I kiss her, her mouth opening to let me in. My tongue matching the same pace as my hips and when she shatters beneath me, her body tensing and her pussy walls clamping down around my dick, I taste it, swallow down the moans and sighs of her orgasm. Her climax triggers my own, balls tightening and cock swelling, “I’m going to come, *cazzo*,” I growl.

“Yes!” She hisses, tightening her legs around me to hold me inside of her. My teeth sink into her neck as I empty myself, groaning into her skin as I pump, dragging out every last second.

I hold my weight, breathing heavily before I lift my head and kiss her jaw, “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she whispers, threading her fingers into my hair and tugging me, claiming my mouth. “More.”

I grin against her, “Oh I intend to, *mondo mia*.”



AMELIA

Pleasure courses through me, my core tightening as I slowly wake from sleep. Drowsily I look down, finding Gabriel's dark head of hair between my thighs, the shirt I'd stolen from him to sleep in bunched up around my hips, his big hands keeping my legs apart.

"Jesus Christ," I groan, voice roughened by sleep, my hips rolling, seeking more as he flicks his tongue against my clit and gently slides a finger inside.

His rumbling chuckle vibrates against my flesh before he scrapes his teeth against me.

"Like that," I praise, "Just like that."

"What a greedy, dirty girl you are," Gabriel flashes his eyes to me, his mouth slick with my arousal as it hovers over me. His finger is still buried in my pussy, just one and he holds it still. "Say please."

He blows a breath over my sensitive clit.

"Please," I manage to gasp out.

"Good girl," he praises, awarding me with a long, sensual stroke of his

tongue but then he comes away from me, moving up my body to kiss my mouth. I taste myself on his lips, a musky flavor that I didn't hate. He grinds his hard cock against me before he suddenly flips. My legs straddle his abs and he grins wickedly, tugging on my thighs to force me up his body.

"What are you doing?" I breathe, trying to steady my breath and the throb between my legs that hadn't been satiated.

"You're going to sit on my face, *leonessa*," He orders, "You're going to take what you want."

My eyes go wide, "I can't do that, you'll suffocate!"

He chuckles, "I don't need fucking air when I have your delicious cunt in my mouth."

Jesus Christ, his dirty mouth would be the death of me.

My cheeks heat as he continues to move me, eyes drawn to the space between my legs until I'm hovering over his lips.

"Sit," he demands, "I said *sit* on my fucking face, not hover," his voice is muffled as his hands snake around to the tops of my thighs and he forcefully makes me sit. His tongue punches up into me and I cry out at the sensation, lashing out to grab the headboard so I don't fall.

I can't stop my hips from rolling, from grinding as he fucks me with his tongue, his fingers in a bruising hold, "Oh god!"

He's relentless and he does not stop, bringing me to the peak hard and fast. I cry out as I come, hips sluggish and twitching. He gives one final lick before he gently pushes me from him, his mouth covered.

"Breakfast of champions," he grins.

I burst out laughing, unable to stop it and climb from him, slumping back on the pillow.

"I need more of that," He stares at me. "Your laugh."

His fingers brush my hair from my face, eyes soft as he kisses me once and climbs from the bed, adjusting his still hard cock. I reach for him, but he steps away from me with a smirk, "Get dressed, *mondo mia*, meet me for breakfast." He disappears into the bathroom, closing it behind him.

I'm still smiling when I come down thirty minutes later, freshly showered and dressed. Gabriel sits at the table, Lincoln perched on his knee.

It had been a week since I allowed Lincoln to have his own room, Camille had helped set it up and painted it in blues and yellows, with toys and books and his own space for his fresh clothes. It was a dream.

He never wanted for anything now and Gabriel, he had been actively

trying to be involved with him, playing with him, helping him to sleep or soothing him while he cried.

Lincoln munches happily on a finger of toast.

I sit opposite them, the plate of eggs and bacon steaming in front of me and freshly brewed coffee to the side. I pick that up first.

“I want you to learn to swim,” He says after a few moments of silence.

“What?”

“I want to teach you how to swim.”

“Gabriel—”

“I will not accept no as an answer, Amelia. You need to learn to swim, and I will teach you. Here in my pool, it will just be us.”

“When?”

“We will start today; my mother will take Lincoln for a few hours to the park.”

The incident in the pool seemed like it happened ages ago rather than just a few weeks, but I still remembered it, the fear, the panic, and I knew that Gabriel wouldn't soon forget

It wasn't just about the swimming. My fear of the water was rooted deep into my memories, how it felt to drown over and over, forced beneath the surface by cruel hands as punishment. They'd hold me under until they felt me start to slow and right before I'd lose consciousness, they would drag me back out, let me get a breath before forcing me back under.

I fought them. Every time but they were stronger, bigger...

Their abuse of me knew no bounds. My mother, while she wasn't the best mom, she never hurt me and she wouldn't have allowed them to but after her death, the courts ruled my stepfather my legal guardian and he was a mean bastard. The abuse started the same day we put my mother's body in the ground.

It was occasional at first. Once a week where he'd hit me, throw me around but he seemed to get pleasure for it and so it became more regular. I'd tried to run once but they found me and eventually he locked me in, kept me in the house to use as his regular punching bag. There wasn't an inch of me left unbruised and when hitting became boring for him, he turned to cutting, slicing with a knife or a pair of scissors mainly on my arms, my back. I'd had cigarettes stubbed out on me, my hair cut and pulled. And he drowned me. Often.

It was when I turned sixteen that he decided he could get money from me.

Sold me to his friends to use. It went on for so long that it became normal. It was what I was used to.

I had no friends, no one to turn to. I'd gone to the police before, but they hadn't done anything. No one was there. Until I fell pregnant with Lincoln, and I realized I had to save myself in order to save him.

"Amelia?" Gabriel stands, "Where did you just go?"

I swallow down the memories, "Nowhere."

I'd hidden my abuse from everyone, wore long sleeves and clothes that hid my back to conceal the scars. I was ashamed of my past. Ashamed I hadn't done more to save myself until I had something other than myself to look after.

Ashamed I'd let someone do that to me and ashamed I still let that trauma rule most of my life.

But I'd opened a well of memories now, flicked the lock on the box and I couldn't stop the memories. Couldn't stop them from flashing through my mind. I could hear Gabriel calling my name but so were they, their manic laughter as I would beg them to stop, the way it smelt when a cigarette burned a hole into my skin, the gasp of my breath every time he pulled me from the water by my hair, pulling it so tight it felt as if he were ripping it right out.

"Amelia!"

I jolt to the present, finding my nails digging into the wood on the table, blood dripping from one because I'd pushed it back. I hadn't even felt the pain.

Enzo appears besides Gabriel, staring at me, head cocked, brows low as if he could look right inside my brain and pluck out these thoughts.

"I'm okay." I whisper hoarsely, shaking my head, "Sorry, daydreaming."

Gabriel's jaw is locked tight, even Lincoln in his lap has stopped moving, his innocent eyes staring. My chest felt tight, my throat closing. Gabriel stands, handing my son over to Enzo as he rounds the table, lifting his hand.

With the fresh memories, the flinch happens regardless of whether I know he would never hurt me like that. He freezes.

"You're going to tell me," he demands softly, "You're going to tell me what happened to you."

But I couldn't breathe. I open my mouth to say so, knowing it was a panic attack having suffered with them for years.

I lash out for Gabriel, grabbing him with my bloody fingers, smearing it

into the sleeve of his white shirt. “C- can’t breathe!” I stutter between stunted breaths, “Can’t.”

My clothes were too tight, the shirt on my back burning on my skin. I needed it off.

“Take him!” Gabriel bellows but I don’t follow, too lost as I try to stand and sink to the floor instead, Gabriel dropping down with me, “Take him to my mother, Enzo. Leave now!”

“I c-can’t breathe,” I gasp out.

Water was filling my lungs, choking me, suffocating me. It was ice cold and dirty, so murky I couldn’t see anything. It stung when it hits my eyes. I was fighting.

“Get it off!” I hear myself scream but that’s not right, it’s in my head. The voice, “Get off me!”

I suck in air, but it was too tight. Everything was too tight.

“Amelia!” Gabriel. That was Gabriel.

Was he drowning me? No. He wouldn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t.

“Take them off!” I beg, “I can’t breathe.”

“What Amelia? Take what off?”

“The wet clothes!” I cry, shaking him off to claw at my own shirt.

“You’re not wet, Amelia,” he tries to say.

“I am!” I manage to get it off, get the clothes off but it wasn’t enough. I try to remove more but I’m suddenly restrained, thick bands going around me, holding me still. I scream. Too much. It was too much.

“Amelia, baby, listen to me.” His voice. “Listen to me!”

I thrash, my heart thumping so hard inside my chest it feels as if it will jump right from my ribcage.

“Listen to me, Amelia,” his voice is at my ear, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

“It hurts.” I whimper.

“I know baby, but nothing can hurt you anymore. Ever again. I’ve got you.”

The weight lifts from my chest and I suck in air, dragging it down into my lungs. “That’s it, breathe for me. Breathe, I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

“Gabriel,” I cling to him, tears wetting my cheeks, wetting his shirt.

“Shh,” he holds me on his lap, tight against him, smoothing hands down my hair, down my back.

I don’t know how long we sit there for, how long he holds me while I

quietly sob into his chest, but he doesn't let me go, not once. He whispers and soothes, stroking me as I calm, my breathing returning to normal.

"I'm okay," I whisper.

I push off him, getting my bearings, trying to figure out why that happened. I try not to think too hard, I felt fragile, like it wouldn't take much to push me back over the edge. Feeling Gabriel behind me, I reach for the table, using it to pull myself up. I balance there for a minute, centering myself, sucking clean air into my lungs.

I hear Gabriel stand behind me.

I was thankful for him, thankful he was there but I didn't know how to explain it.

I didn't know.

Every hair rises on my body, goose bumps chasing across my skin at the sound of his voice. It was a tone dripping in violence, in rage, his voice low and dangerous and all he says is, "Who?"

I swallow.

"Who did this to you?" He asks.

I don't move and then realize why he could now see the scars. The marks that litter my skin across my back and arms and stomach.

"Amelia?" He growls out, "Who the fuck hurt you?"

Slowly, as if he were a dangerous animal, I turn to face him. His thunderous expression takes the wind out of me. "Gabriel..."

"Who!?" He demands.

"My stepfather."

His jaw tightens, "Is he still alive?"

"Yes."

He spins to walk away. I lunge after him, "Gabriel wait!"

"I'm going to kill him." He states, in a tone so calm you can't miss the promise of violence coating his words. My blood runs cold.

"Don't leave me!"

He stops dead.

"Please, don't."

"You want to protect him?" Gabriel asks, back still to me.

"No, no I don't. I don't care what you do to him but I need you now."

His shoulders sag and then he turns to me, grabbing me. He pulls me right to his chest, his face burying into my hair, "No one will *ever* hurt you again, you hear me? I will never let anyone hurt you. I will never hurt you."

“I know.”

“I’ll kill anyone who dares.”

“I know Gabriel.”

He gently pushes me back, staring down at my face and then my body. I try to cover myself, but he stops my arms.

“Don’t hide from me, *leonessa*, do not hide.”

There was no judgement in his face, nothing there to suggest he didn’t like what he saw. He reaches for a scar on my stomach, a small one, brushing his thumb softly over it. I didn’t look at myself often, I didn’t like what I saw but Gabriel, he looks at me as if he’ll drop to his knees and worship me right here.

“*Sei Bellissima*,” he murmurs, “You are beautiful.”

GABRIEL

It's long after the day has ended, and my wife sleeps soundly next to me. She was emotionally drained after what happened this morning, the panic attack and then her speaking to me, reliving her trauma so I knew what had happened to her.

I'd managed to contain my rage, bottled it all up but it now sits inside of me, festering like a rotten wound. She wanted me to stay with her, I would but I couldn't sleep and in the background, I had Enzo and Devon looking up her stepfather, finding out every last detail about him.

The fucker was a drunk and an addict, he pissed his money up the wall every night or snorted it up his nose and lived in a decaying trailer down near the edge of the city. His buddies weren't any better.

I wished I'd had the time and the mental capacity to count every scar on Amelia's body, every wound that bastard inflicted so I could give him just as many cuts but I couldn't, so I was going to guess.

Slowly so I don't wake her, I climb from the bed and dress, keeping my clothes dark. I would be doing this alone.

Enzo meets me outside the bedroom, nodding and taking position to keep an eye on her and her son while I was gone. My shoes clip through the silent house, echoing down the halls and I don't stop until I'm climbing into the car, pressing the button, and waiting as the garage doors open. The dark seas stretch out before me, the crash of the waves loud, even from within the car as if the turbulent waves were a representation of my mood.

Thunderous. Loud. *Violent*.

My hands itch to destroy.

Maim and torture and *end*.

Her panic, the terror I saw in her earlier and how she had a literal nightmare right in front of me, all because of what that fucker did to her.

He drowned her.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel, white knuckling until my fingers cramped. The drive through the city, while quiet, does nothing to the rage burning through, growing hotter and hotter still. Pristine buildings turn to rotting shells, but it isn't long before my tires crunch over the gravel in front of his trailer.

All alone out here, I think, killing the engine and climbing out. I had a single gun on me. No other weapons. I wanted to feel his death on my hands.

The trailer was dark, the door still ajar after he, no doubt, stumbled in hours before. I don't know what he was doing now he didn't have Amelia, and from what she told me he got off on her pain.

I do a quick scan of the trailer and then head to the door, carefully opening it and shutting it behind me. Inside smells like stale beer and rotting food, piss and sweat fumes leaking from the stained walls. Was this where Amelia was raised?

Discarded needles and old bottles litter the floor and there were still lines on the cracked glass table in front of the TV.

He wasn't in the living room section but beyond here, there was a door that I guess leads to the bedroom.

It was almost too good, too easy but I'd met men like this before, been around them my entire life. They were predictable. They believed they were the biggest predator in this game.

They were wrong.

I don't head through immediately, instead I head back outside, finding the bucket I'd walked past earlier and fill it using the outside tap, remaining quiet so I don't wake him. Back inside, I keep that silence until I'm standing over

his naked ass body.

He was half on, half off the bed, sweat slicking his hairy skin and he snored. The smell coming off him matched the level of a corpse, a living being choosing to soak in his own juices rather than clean himself.

He made me sick. I place the bucket on the floor, rolling my shoulder, letting myself clearly vision Amelia's pain. Her fear.

And then I lunge. I grab the hair at the back of his head and yank him off the bed, plunging his face into the ice cold water before he even has a chance to wake.

He thrashes but I hold him in that bucket, keeping his face beneath the water until the last second before I pull it back out, leaning down so my mouth is close to his face, "How does it feel, asshole?"

He sucks in shocked breaths but then I plunge him back in.

His hands grab at my legs, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he knocked the bucket over but until then, I would keep going.

Water sloshes over the floor, but I get another three before the bucket finally gives. I drop him facedown onto the floor, pressing my foot to the back of his neck to keep him there.

"Who are you?"

"Your worst fucking nightmare," I growl.

I take out my gun and press it into the back of his head, the coward whimpers.

"Tell me," I say, "Did you like it when she screamed? When she cried?"

"Who?" He cries.

"She still suffers because of you," The sole of my shoe presses harder, squashing his face into the carpet. "You were supposed to protect her, instead you damaged her. You broke her!" I roar.

"Are you talking about Amelia!?" His voice is muffled but I hear him.

I kick him. Hard.

"Don't you ever fucking say her name again!"

Still whining I drag him up and make him sit, keeping the gun at his head, "You don't ever say my wife's name again."

"Wife?" He spits, "Ha, good luck with that whore!"

I hit him across the face with the gun, splitting his cheek.

"She liked it," he continues, "Liked it when my men paid more to fuck her. Liked it when I cut up that pretty skin of hers."

I wanted to explode. I really fucking wanted to. But I didn't.

Instead, I smile down at him and something in it must have scared the ever loving shit out of the man because he pisses himself right there. I reach over to the cabinet, grabbing an empty beer bottle around the neck.

He looks at it and then back at me, “W-what does i-it m-m-matter,” he stutters, “She’s been long gone from here.”

“Do you think it goes away?” I ask, weighing the bottle. “The trauma of her abuse.”

“Bitch deserved it,” the words have venom and I’m sure he means them, but they come out weak.

“Do you know who I am?”

He shakes his head.

“My name is Gabriel Saint,” I keep my eyes on his face, reveling at how pale he becomes, “I assume you’ve heard of me.”

He nods.

“Do you know what I do to people who hurt my family?”

“She’s not your family.”

I laugh, “Actually that’s where you’re wrong. You see and I’m sure you know, Amelia had a baby. A son. That boy is my nephew, and my brother is his father.”

The man blinks.

“Sadly, my brother lost his life some time ago now, but she became family the moment she became pregnant. And now she is my wife. My. Wife. Let that sink in for a moment.”

I hear him swallow but he remains mute.

“So, I’ll ask again, do you know what I do to people who hurt my family?”

“You kill them.”

“Yes, but it’s not that simple.”

He tries to move but I smash the bottle, halting him in terror. Good. I hope he’s scared. I hope he’s picturing everything he did and imagining everything I’ll do.

“I’m not just going to kill you, I am going to make it slow.”

“Please,” he begs, “I’ll leave town. I’ll never speak of this.”

I laugh, “It’s a bit late for that now.”

I’m too quick for his drug addled brain to react and I slice the broken edge of the bottle across his chest, opening his flesh.

He screams and I do it again. And again. And again.

I do it until his torso is in ribbons, blood dripping from each slash like a gory river onto the carpet. He would bleed out from all the deep wounds, but we weren't going to make it that far.

"I think that suffices for all the times you cut her, right?"

He whimpers, barely conscious.

"So, what's next? Burning? Beating? We've done the drowning, but I don't feel that was long enough."

I was covered in his blood, it stuck to my skin but there wasn't enough of it. I knew the sun would soon be rising and I wanted to be back before Amelia woke.

"You've taken too much of my time." I sigh before I lunge forward with the bottle, embedding it into his stomach before ripping it up, opening him. It was sharp enough to open him fully and I momentarily regretted my decision not to bring more with me but instead, I stand and fire off several rounds into his torso and chest, emptying the clip.

He was dead long before his body hit the ground. And just for good measure, I remove his limp dick and shove it into his throat.

"It will do," I say to his bleeding body, "Your debt with Amelia is settled."

I stride from the trailer, bringing out a handkerchief to wipe the blood from my hands.

The sky was lightening but it wasn't quite dawn yet.

By the time I make it home, the sun is just cresting over the now calm waters beyond the cliffs. My clothes are stiff with blood, my skin tight with it.

Enzo stands as still as any statue when I approach but his eyes move over me, taking in the blood stains.

When I go to move past him, he grabs my shoulder, forcing me to turn to him.

He nods once and then slams a fisted hand over his heart.

Respect.

I pat his hand, "Go rest, brother."

I don't wait for him to leave, I enter the room quietly, eyes finding Amelia's sleeping form and bypass the bed for the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes along the way. The shower is instantly warm when I step beneath it, head bent as I watch the blood run from my skin.

Behind me I hear the door click closed and then the shower screen door

opens and a warm, naked body presses up against mine.

“You were gone.” She murmurs into my wet skin.

“I had to.”

“I know.”

She was naked. Willingly. With the lights on.

This woman’s bravery astounded me. Brought me to my knees.

Slowly I turn, knowing damn well all the blood wasn’t off my skin, knowing she’s seen it before but this time, she knows this blood is for her.

Her eyes scan my face and then my body, finding every speckle of crimson, before she reaches up and brushes her thumb across my cheek.

“Can I look?” I rasp.

Her mouth tips up into a small, soft smile, “Yes, Gabriel, you can look.”



AMELIA

His hazel eyes bounce between mine, his body, his beautiful, lethal body was speckled with blood but none of that mattered. Not even when I know where he went, what he did.

I didn't care.

"I'm going to touch you, Amelia."

I nod my consent.

His eyes drop as he takes a step back, lips parting.

"You are so beautiful," he rasps. No inch of me is left untouched by his gaze. He takes in all of me, my breasts, the nipples peaked despite the warmth, the soft curve of my belly and flare of my hips. He gazes at my pussy, my legs, my arms, he looks at me as if I were a goddess given just to him. And then he touches. So softly at first, never lingering in one spot too long. First, it's the arms, feeling them, feeling the skin and then my waist, squeezing gently and following the shape down to my hips, my thighs before he moves back up, over my stomach and a couple of scars, over the stretchmarks caused by child bearing that I loved most of all. His fingers

bump over the ridges of my ribcage and then follow the path beneath my left breast, all the way round the mound until he flattens it over my heartbeat.

“Brave,” He whispers, the shower water running rivers over his skin, water droplets catching in his long dark lashes and at the edges of his mouth, “You amaze me, *leonessa*.”

My heart thuds in my chest, breath sawing from my lungs.

“Teach me to swim.”

I trusted him. All of him.

He nods, “I will.”

For minutes he doesn't stop touching, his hand exploring while he watches how much skin and muscle yield beneath his hands.

“Can I?”

I nod.

He crouches, leaning forward as he presses kisses to a scar on the left side of my ribs and then another in the middle. He kisses every scar he finds before his mouth lands at the apex of my thighs. I was wet for him already but that small, chaste peck was enough to send a rush of warmth to my centre.

“Turn around, Amelia.”

I obey.

“Hands on the wall.”

I flatten my palms on the tile, the vulnerability of the position making me tense, muscles locking up.

His hand smooths down my spine.

“Look at you, *mondo mia*,” he praises, “Being such a good girl for me.”

“Wh – what does that mean?” I manage to stutter out.

“*Mondo mia*?” he says, pressing a kiss to my spine, “It means ‘my world’.”

Tears sting my eyes at the translation.

“You are safe with me.”

“I know, Gabriel,” I admit. “I've always known.”

He bends himself over my spine, his hardness pressing against me, “It warms my heart to hear that.”

How could a ruthless mafia don be *this* sweet?

The head of his cock pushes at the entrance of my pussy, teasing.

“I'm going to fuck you now, Amelia,” he tells me, “Hard.”

“Okay,” is all I manage to get out before he slams forward, filling me.

My scream mixes with his groan, his hips stilled while he's rooted deep.

"Cazzo," He mutters, "Cazzo, cazzo, cazzo."

He never stops touching while he ruts into me from behind. His hips slam hard and determined, each thrust jerking me forward, threatening to buckle me but I take it.

"You were made for me," He grits out breathlessly, "Look at how well we fit."

"Gabriel," I chant his name.

"That's my name on your lips, *leonessa*, mine. You are mine."

"Yes! Damn it. Yes."

"God damn," he groans, "So tight. So perfect."

One hand leaves my body to reach between my legs. I expect a pinch, a caress. I don't expect the slap.

The moan that leaves me seems obnoxiously loud and his chuckle, that damn laugh, it leaves me in a puddle.

He circles my clit with his fingers while pounding into me, fucking me hard. I know I'm being loud, I can hear the echo of it bouncing back to me but he was building me up so good.

"Come for me, *leonessa*."

I had no idea if an order being enough was normal, but I shatter around him and I come hard. Harder than I ever have before. Stars flash behind my eyes and I swear I lose consciousness for a second, but he fucks me through it, drawing it out, out and then into another. I claw at the tiles, ignoring the pain in that one finger I'd damaged before in favor of the pure ecstasy running through me right now.

I shout his name, claw at his skin but he continues until his body jerks and stills, coming inside of me. My name is a chant on his lips, his fingers holding me to him as his orgasm is forced from him.

We stand there for a few minutes, the shower still running while I rest my forehead to the tiles, and he rests his against my spine.

"For you, Amelia," he whispers, "I will do it all for you."



We sleep for a few more hours, naked and satiated. It was long after dawn when we finally emerge from the bedroom, Gabriel having woke me to look

at me in the daylight.

He didn't tell me what he had done, how it had happened but I got a call just after midday that confirmed it.

"Miss Doyle?"

"It's Mrs Saint now," I correct, noticing the smirk on Gabriel's face as he sits opposite me pretending not to listen.

"This is Officer Andrews," His voice is soft, "Officers visited your property in lower Redhill but found it empty, we need you to come into the station."

I look to Gabriel, he nods, having heard what was said, "When?"

"As soon as possible."

"I'll be right there."

Gabriel folds the newspaper, legs uncrossing as he leans forward to place it on the table, "You understand the news they are about to give you?"

"Yes." I answer.

It was surreal. Knowing and hating it for so long only to accept it now.

It wasn't just because of what he did for me but understanding the reasoning, knowing the man behind the villain.

"Are you ready to leave?" He asks.

"Yes," I pluck Lincoln from his playpen. Gabriel holds his arms out for him, taking him from me.

"Then let's go."

We meet Camille in the foyer and Gabriel hands Lincoln over for her to watch while we do this.

Half an hour later, we pull into an underground parking lot beneath the station and Gabriel keeps his hand on my spine.

The chief meets us, "Mr Saint," He says, shock on his face before his bloodshot blue eyes slide to me, "Miss Doyle."

"Mrs Saint." Gabriel corrects.

"You took a wife?"

His arm slides around my waist. He doesn't have to say anything for the chief's face to pale.

"Sir, we spoke of this, what it would mean for her..."

"Hold your tongue, chief, Mrs Saint understands."

I didn't, not fully but that was okay.

"You called my wife here, what for?"

"Ah," he swallows, "Yes, well, there seems to have been an incident."

The nervousness of the man almost made me feel guilty for the fear he felt with Gabriel's presence here.

"If you would follow me."

We do, following the rotund aging man down the long, old hallways of the station towards a family room in the back. He offers us in first, inviting us to sit on aged couches before a worn coffee table.

"Miss Doyle – I mean Mrs Saint," he swallows, "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

I say nothing.

"This morning officers were tipped off to a site on the edge of the city. A body was found."

"My stepfather." I state.

"Yes." He sighs, "I understand this may be distressing for you."

I open my mouth to speak but Gabriel places a hand on my arm, subtly shaking his head before he, himself speaks, "How long have you worked with us?"

"Years, Mr Saint."

"So, you understand the tolerance we have for child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic and the like?"

"Yes sir," The chief nods excessively, "A zero tolerance for it in this city."

His hand squeezes my thigh.

"So, what of my wife?"

The chief's brows pull down.

Gabriel settles back in his chair, one hand holding mine while the other rubs his mouth thoughtfully.

"Nine years ago, you received a distressed call from a girl. They claimed they were being abused. You sent officers who clearly state signs and evidence, but the case was dismissed. Another call was made only months later of a girl screaming but the call was disconnected and never reengaged. One year later a woman called and tried to explain her abuse only for her call to be terminated. Again."

"Mr Saint, you have to understand..."

"Understand what?" He growls with every ounce of venom he owns, "Understand you let a woman suffer at the hands of her stepfather, let a woman go through the years of abuse when you *knew* the horror she was living through."

“He told police he knew the Saint’s!”

We both freeze.

“I never took on the case,” The chief sighs, “Otherwise I would have known. It was a routine call, no one flagged anything.”

“I listened to those calls,” Gabriel states, “That wasn’t nothing.”

I turn my head to him so quickly I swear I give myself whiplash.

How!?

The chief sighs, “What do you want me to say Gabriel? I didn’t take the case.”

“My wife suffered for years!” His fist pounds down onto the table, “I expect you to do your job!”

“They claimed they worked for you!” the chief fires back, “I never worked on it to correct them, so they didn’t report it!”

Gabriel stiffens at my side. “What?”

“Miss Doyles – Mrs Saint’s,” He corrects, “Her guardian claimed ties with the Saints. That everything they did was approved by you.”

“And you didn’t think to check!?” Gabriel bellows.

I felt his rage, how he would take on this burden.

I stand abruptly, “I know my stepfather, my *guardian* is dead. No, I am not sorry for it. I will identify his body and then I want to leave.”

“We failed you, Mrs Saint.”

I felt the weight of his regret in his words, in the way he looks at me.

“I have a daughter,” He admits, staring down at his hand, threaded together atop the table, “It terrifies me to think she would ever have to live through it.”

“My pleas were ignored, chief,” I say, “I was discarded. I hope no person *ever* has to live through it, despite their predecessors’ crimes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m here to identify my stepfather’s body,” I sigh, suddenly tired, “Not to accept apologies for the wrongs committed. Let me confirm the bastard’s dead and send me on my way.”

“I am sorry, Mrs Saint, for how we failed you.”

“You should be,” Gabriel threatens as we are guided into a cold room. Ahead of me lays a body.

“Mrs Saint, there is no pressure here. His body... well it isn’t going to look like what you remember.” The chief says professionally, “Take your time.”

I don't.

I stride towards the shape hidden beneath the white sheet and rip it back.
Seeing my stepfathers face before me.

Pale.

Drained of life.

Eyes wide open.

I felt *nothing*.

I was glad he was dead.

“Is everything intact?” I ask, knowing even just a small percentage of my husband.

“Um,” The chief shuffles nervously, “No, half of *it* was cut off.”

I smile, knowing he suffered and when I look to Gabriel, I find him smiling too.

AMELIA

We didn't talk about my stepfather on the drive back, not until Gabriel is pulling the car into the garage.

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"I'll make you a promise, *leonessa*, one I need you to remember."

I look over to him, finding him already staring at me. He reaches across and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. The same hands that had mutilated my stepfather, touch me so gently, a whisper of fingers, a caress.

"What?"

"No man will ever touch you again."

"I believe you."

His hand cups my face, "You are safe with me." He repeats the words he spoke this morning.

I nod and turn my face to kiss his palm.



My stomach was a knotted mess of nerves and anxiety. I stare at the pool, the calm water and how deceptive it is. I could imagine it would feel good to wade through it, to feel the coolness against my skin right before it dragged me down and sucked the life from me.

It wasn't possible to simply forget.

Gabriel sits on the edge of the pool, legs dangling into the water.

I take my eyes from the surface and land them on him. On his perfectly sculpted body, his deep tan and the muscles that seem to never end. He must have taken a swim while I was changing as he was wet, the droplets of water seeming to caress him as they roll over the peaks and valleys of his abdomen as if they can't bare to leave him. I couldn't blame them.

His hair, wet, was slicked back away from his face and his shorts hang low on his hips.

"Come here," he orders softly.

My knees wobble as I walk around the edge, keeping a safe distance between me and the water until I stand just to the left of Gabriel and further back. He turns a little, hooking a hand behind my thigh to gently coax me forward.

"I can't!" I freeze.

"It's okay," he soothes, "Just come sit with me."

My palms are sweaty and I felt like I was about to throw up.

"So, I was thinking," He continues nonchalantly, prodding me closer, "We should put Lincoln back into daycare, he needs to socialize."

That addles my brain, "What?"

"It'll be good for him," He muses, "To play with other children."

"I mean, yes," I nod, "He loved daycare."

Gabriel guides me to sit close to him and it's only when my feet touch the water, I realize he's successfully distracted me enough to get me down next to him. I stiffen slightly but, the fear, it stays at the edge, a warning but with Gabriel's arm tucked around me, holding me close to him I didn't feel like I was in danger here.

"*Brava ragazza*," He says with a smile, "Good girl."

I swallow at the praise, liking how it sounds on his lips when he calls me a good girl. I'd never explored kinks before but with him, I'd explore *several*. My core tightens at the idea, thighs aching.

He turns his face, pressing his lips to my temple, "You know," he

murmurs, “You blush so pretty when I call you a good girl. My wife likes a little bit of praise huh?”

“Yes.” My voice shakes. The coolness of the water around my feet and ankles manages to keep me cool but my skin was tightening. The fear and the arousal made a heady mix inside my blood.

Gabriel lets go of me then with a grin before he slides himself into the water, bobbing slightly when his feet touch the bottom. The water comes up just beyond the band of his shorts and he wades forward, coming to stand between my legs.

“Do you want to come in with me?” He asks.

I shake my head.

His hands smooth up my thighs before he presses a kiss to the inside of my knee, “You can do it. Be brave, *leonessa*.”

His hands stop at my hips, squeezing gently. He begins to gently tug, sliding me across the tiles. My legs slip deeper and deeper. Closing my eyes, I let him drag me the rest of the way. A gasp leaves me as my body is submerged and I lash out, grabbing the tops of Gabriel’s arms, nails biting in.

“You’re doing so good, *mondo mia*.”

My breath saws from my chest as I grip him, holding on. The water wasn’t cold, but it wasn’t warm either but somewhere in between, which initially shocked me but now I was growing used to it.

It was a good step forward, a right step, even as I still clawed at Gabriel and wanted to climb his body if only to take me out the water.

His lips skim my jaw. “We’re going to walk, baby,” he warns me, “follow me.”

I squeak a little, eyes still closed as he begins to move. The water comes a lot higher on my body than it does on his, but I could feel there was a good distance between that and my face. The water pushes back at me as I stride forward, following his lead.

“Open your eyes,” he says.

I force one open, and then the other, glancing around. He’d moved us to the middle, but it wasn’t any deeper than where we were before.

“You’re safe,” he reminds me, a wet hand pushing hair from my face.

And so it goes, everyday we got into the pool, everyday it got easier. Between swimming sessions and Gabriel’s schedule, we talked some more about Lincoln joining a new daycare, even visited a few before we chose a good daycare twenty minutes from the house.

He was due to start next week.

Falling into routine with Gabriel had been easier than expected. We shared a bed every night and ate meals together everyday unless Gabriel was called off to fix something in the city. I had expected more chaos around the mafia of Redhill, expected more violence but I didn't see any of that. There were no more attacks on the house, but I didn't believe it was over. Gabriel was tense, brows pulled low in concentration while he thought through plans. I didn't ask and he didn't tell.

If Gabriel wasn't around then Enzo was, he escorted me into the city often, kept close and never allowed anyone near me. But he never spoke either. I think that added to the terrifying aura the man let off. Beautiful to look at, with his gorgeous face and intricate tattoos but deadly to touch. I'd asked Gabriel once why he didn't speak but he didn't know as he'd met the man after his vow of silence.

And in the weeks that had passed I'd become close friends with Sierra, swapping numbers and speaking often. The dress was almost complete, and I'd asked her to create a few more lingerie pieces I'd designed which I was on my way to collect now.

Gabriel had gone out this morning with the twins, who still made me uneasy, Atlas especially. It seemed he hadn't warmed to me at all but Asher was kind, I supposed. Well, he wasn't awful to me but there was this feeling an *off-ness* with both of them. Especially when I catch Asher staring at me when he thinks no one notices.

Enzo pulls the car up to the boutique, parking it out front. "Hey!" Someone yells. I glance around to find a traffic warden beelining our way.

"Uh, Enzo, you're gonna get a ticket."

Enzo looks at me, quirks one brow and smiles before he turns to the guy.

"Hey!" The warden yells, "You can't park there."

Enzo steps in front of the guy who practically skids to a stop and goes pale. Enzo was huge and built like a tank. Any person willing to step up against him wouldn't be in their right mind.

He stares down at the warden who pales even further, shrinking back. "I – I'm sorry." He stutters out and I can't help the smile of amusement. "You're exempt. Park anywhere you want."

And then he runs away and I can't contain it, I burst out laughing, doubling over as I clutch my stomach.

Enzo casually stands next to me, waiting for me to calm.

When I look up to him, literal tears in my eyes from the laughter, he's beaming a full mega-watt smile. He had perfect teeth and his eyes crinkled slightly at the sides.

"You should smile more," I chuckle, patting the man on the arm, "Makes you less scary."

The smile drops instantly, turning to stone, and that only serves to make me laugh harder.

Sierra pokes her head out the door, frowning, "What's happening out here?"

"Enzo," I wheeze between my cackles, "Enzo is just out here terrorizing our city officials. That's all."

One dark brow quirks as she looks to the man and shudders, shaking her head. I'm still giggling as we walk into the shop, me in front and Enzo close behind us.

We head straight through to the back where Sierra has laid out the new lingerie pieces. Enzo, ever the gentleman – *HA!* – averts his eyes from the lacy pieces.

"These are beautiful, Sierra," I touch the garments with my fingers, excited to wear them for Gabriel.

"Don't hate me," Sierra says, "I took the liberty of creating something else for you, well two things actually."

My brows pull down, "What?"

"Well Gabriel sent me all your drawings when he commissioned me to make the gown and well, these just stood out to me, they're so beautiful and I wanted to see if I could make them."

"And you can?"

She nods, pulling on a trolley that has several finished dresses on them. I don't recognize any except the last two.

One was red, a deep color that had slits up either side to the hipbones, the dress was short as per my design and slightly sparkly with a cowl neckline and chain straps. It was subtle and beautiful and when I drew this one, I had imagined someone like Sierra wearing it, knowing the red would be gorgeous on her skin tone.

The second dress was slightly longer but with a deep plunging neckline and a V shaped back. It was a champagne color with thick straps and across the back, thin gold chains criss crossed the space with several charms hanging from them.

“Sierra, these are stunning.”

She nods, “I’d love for you to have them, wear them.”

“Thank you,” I smile, “But this one, I never designed it for me. You should have this one,” I point to the red.

Her eyes light up, “Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

“We need to go out, actually get a chance to wear them!”

I nod, that sounded good actually. Getting out, having some fun with a girlfriend since I’d never experienced anything like this before.

“Call me to arrange,” Sierra says, her fingers still caressing the red material. “I can’t wait.”

I take my items and leave her with a smile, my own excitement bubbling up inside.

GABRIEL

“That’s it,” I praise, hands against her subtle flesh, letting my fingers feel it yield under my grip, “You’re doing so good, leonessa. Such a good girl.”

Her cheeks pink and she welcomes the distraction my words provide as I wade her deeper into the pool, the water rising until I bring us to a stop when it reaches her chin. Fear lights up in her eyes and her nails claw at the skin, breaking it.

“It’s okay,” I confirm, “We’re okay. I would never let anything happen to you.”

Her saucer wide eyes catch on mine, and I step into her, letting my body do the talking. I can feel her erratic heartbeat against my skin, feel how terrified she really is. But she was being braver than any person I’d ever met, facing her fear, trusting someone with it.

I fucking hated how he had made her suffer, that he was the reason, but the fucker was dead now and she never had to suffer again.

“Tell m-me again,” She whispers shakily.

I keep us both calm and cock up the side of my mouth in a smirk. I lean

down to her ear, snagging the lobe between my teeth. She whimpers, fingers digging in harder. “You want me to tell you how good you are?” I whisper.

“Yes.” She breathes.

“You’re being such a good girl,” I praise, “So brave. *Moglie mia*, you can take anything.”

Her breath saws from her chest.

“I want to do something, but you need to trust me, okay?”

She nods.

Slowly, I let my hands glide down her body until I can grab the backs of her thighs and then I lift, forcing her legs around me.

She squeals a little, arms snaking around my neck and tightening enough to put pressure on my windpipe. “I’m gonna need to be able to breathe,” I rasp lightheartedly. She instantly let’s go, regret on her face but in the abruptness of it, she forces herself back too quick for me to keep hold of her. Her face dips beneath the water for just a second. I bring her back up, hand on the back of her head, holding her to me. She doesn’t scream or panic, just squeezes as her heart goes crazy.

“It’s okay,” she says, “I’m okay.”

“I can’t take away your memories of pools, Amelia,” I say to her, smoothing back wet hair, gently lowering her to grind her against my cock, “But I can give you new ones. New memories to think about anytime you’re by a pool. I can give you something that’ll make you ache and crave me. Something that’ll make these pretty thighs press together and soak your cunt.”

She groans, hips rolling against the hardness tucked beneath my shorts. “Someone might come in.”

“They’ll only come if you make a noise,” I lick her jaw before gently scraping my teeth across it as I press up harder, “I am going to fuck you, Amelia, right here. I am going to make new memories with you. It’s down to you whether we have an audience or not.”

“Please,” she begs.

“Such pretty manners,” I praise as I turn us and wade to the edge, pressing her back against it. “Keep your legs around me.” I tell her as I let go, balancing her on the edge while I go for the straps of her swimsuit. I tug them down, freeing her breasts, nipples peaked with her arousal and dip my head, taking the hardened bud in my mouth while I push the swimsuit the rest of the way down. She stretches out her arms to hold herself and releases her legs

as I let go of her nipple with a wet pop and shove the swimsuit the rest of the way down. Naked and aching, she watches me with darkened eyes and parted lips.

I slide a hand up between her legs, feeling her slick pussy against my fingers, caressing her clit with the tips of my fingers. Her head tips back at the pleasure I give her, a sigh escaping her lips. I shove my shorts down, pumping my hard cock once before I guide her legs up and wide and slowly push inside of her, feeling the spasm of her walls as I fill and stretch her open for me.

“You feel so good, *amore mia*,” I rasp, looking beneath the water at the moving shape of our bodies and where we fit together, my cock disappearing between her thighs. “So good.” I pull out and pump back in, hands going to the edge either side of her. The water made it hard for me to fuck her like I wanted, hard and fast and rough but the pleasure of seeing her like this, relaxed in the pool, her body wet and open for me it made me pause until one breathy moan leaves her lips, “More.”

“Lift yourself out the pool,” I command, watching as she does, the bounce of her breasts and the way her muscles flex. I follow her out, grab the back of her knee to lift it and then slam inside.

“Fuck!” She cries.

The unforgiving tiles bite into my knees as I slam into her, the sound of our wet skin slapping together echoing in the pool room.

“Yes,” She chants, “yes, yes.”

I guide her ankle to my shoulder and then my hand goes to her throat, squeezing and her moans get louder the tighter I hold. Praise wasn't her only kink I see.

I grin at that, knowing all the fun I could have with my pretty wife.

I pound relentlessly into her tight cunt, rolling up against her clit with each thrust.

“Mine,” I growl, “You are mine.”

“Yes, Gabriel,” she gasps out, “I'm yours.”

Something bangs to the side of me, like a door slamming or being knocked but I'm too deep, the pleasure too much for it to grab my attention, not with the way my balls are drawing up, my climax about to barrel through me and she hasn't come yet.

That wouldn't fucking do at all.

She was soaked, her pussy so wet and warm I knew it wouldn't take

much. Her spine arches, breasts peaked and I squeeze her throat tighter, enough to make it hurt. Her hands go to my wrist, nails biting, not to push away but to pull tighter.

I pull out abruptly, getting to my knees between her legs, “Turn around,” I rasp, “and get on your knees.”

She complies, giving me her back, the view of her ass seeming to make me harder. Fuck, that ass, I push her forward slightly and then my hand connects with her cheek, reddening on the spot. She lets out a cry right as I drive forward, impaling her on my cock.

And then she’s coming, hard and violently, her pussy spasming erratically around my cock while I continue to rut into her.

“Cazzo,” I growl, reaching around to toy with her clit. “I want another,” I growl.

“Jesus,” she yells, “I can’t. I can’t.”

But I don’t stop, needing more from her, needing to feel that sweet cunt of hers tightening on my dick some more. “God damn,” I groan out, “You fucking can, and you fucking will. You’ll give me another like the good girl I know you are.”

Her wetness coats me, my thighs, my fingers as I play and fuck, I was going to come soon, and hard. My teeth sink into the soft spot between her neck and her shoulder, hard enough to bruise, to cause her pain and that orgasm draws into another one as I explode into her, emptying myself and filling her. She cries out while my roar is muffled against her skin.

Spent, I withdraw my mouth, licking over the bruise on her shoulder and pull her back into my lap, cradling her against me. She breathes hard, both of us wet, panting...

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She nods, not forming words. I slide my hands down her naked body, the warmth of it like a brand against my skin.

She was so perfect.

So fucking right.

It physically hurt something deep inside my chest to wonder what my dark life would be like without her in it.

Mondo mia. My world.

Moglie mia. My Wife.

Amore mia. My Love.

GABRIEL

Amelia would be going out with Sierra tonight. Enzo and I would be joining them, but it was good for her. I was happy that her and Sierra had become friends, they were a good match and Amelia needed someone like her.

She had grown so much since I'd taken her all those weeks ago, her ideals had changed, her views and opinions and her courage.

She was a beautiful woman, one far too good for me.

I stop the car at the jewelers on the way back from the marina after checking a new shipment that's come in.

I'd kept this one under lock and key, only Enzo and Devon knew it was due and it came in without a problem. I've had five shipments hit in the last week alone, losing millions in revenue because I haven't figured out who the damn traitor is.

Whoever they were, they were damn smart and I would hand that to them.

Climbing out, I'm met with the pressing heat of late summer, the smell of the salty ocean thick in the air. Tourist season would be coming to a close soon, but the streets today remained busy.

The airconditioned building was clean, tidy, all glass and white light and behind the counter stands a young woman.

“Mr Saint,” she nods.

“I called in a favor.” I don’t mince words or pleasantries. I wanted home to my wife.

“Mr Saint,” Gio steps out of the back room, the rotund man joyful as always. He’s been a friend of the Saint’s for a long time, his father having come here with my grandfather all those years ago. He was far too old to still be working but if there was anything I knew about the man was that he never stopped. “I take it you’re here for the necklace?”

I nod.

“It wasn’t easy,” he laughs, “I had to have it imported.”

“Send me the import tax bill,” I shrug, “I’ll sort it.”

“The money you’re about to pay for this is quite enough, Mr Saint.”

I didn’t care the cost.

Gio places a box on the glass case, sliding it towards me where I then open it, viewing the necklace inside. It was stunning, the stone gleaming and rich.

“It’s perfect.”

A second box is placed next to it, much smaller than the first. The climbing earrings were a perfect match to the necklace and while nothing could match my Amelia in beauty or rarity, this would be a close fit.

“I’ll take both.” I confirm.

The twenty-two mil I pay for them is nothing to her worth. They are placed in a thick paper bag, tied with a ruby red ribbon.

When I arrive back at the house, I step from my car and instead of heading directly inside where I know Amelia will be getting ready for the night, I head to the clifftop, where the sea is a calm expanse and the sun is setting, painting the sky in pinks and oranges. Sea birds swoop low for their evening meals and a few boats sit peacefully on the water. I look down, seeing the sandy beaches where the water meets the land, the steep, sharp cliff edges protruding and deadly but the water almost erasing that fact. There were caves along these cliffs, deep caves that hid lagoons of water so clear you could see all the way to the bottom.

I’d explored them with the twins and my brother when we were children and things were simpler. When there was no war and no hate, and the adults managed everything so we wouldn’t see.

In one of these caves, we had carved our names into the rock, these pre-teen naïve children who believed all was right. We said we would come back as adults one day and write them once more as the men we had become.

But that wouldn't happen now.

Not with my eldest brother dead and the twins, both of them, prime suspects on the traitor list.

I glance behind me, to the house and the wall of windows where Amelia was getting ready but take one last look at the sea before me. Then I turn to the house and head inside, going in search of my wife.

I find her in our bedroom, sat before a mirror in a champagne colored dress, her long, dark curls pulled up to sit on top of her head. She wore make up in a deep smoky eye effect and deep red lipstick. She was so stunning my feet froze on the threshold, staring at the reflection in the mirror that stared back at me.

"You look incredible, *mondo mia*," I manage to rasp out.

Her cheeks pinken at the compliment.

I cross the room, coming to stand behind her, my hands landing on her bare shoulders. The dress was tight fitting and had a deep V plunge in the front and the back. Several chains hung from the material in the back, a gold color that set off the tan skin of her body. Her scars were on show, the white and pink marks easily visible in the gaps of the dress.

"I want to feel beautiful," She tells me, dipping her eyes, "But I don't think I feel it."

I soften, unable to help that second nature when it came to her. "*Amore mia*, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, you understand. No one could ever compare."

"My scars..."

"Your scars make you the *leonessa* you are. They make you a warrior, a fighter, do not ever doubt your strength."

She nods but doesn't appear convinced.

I place the paper bag on the vanity.

"I got something for you today."

Her blue eyes meet mine, "You did?"

"I did." I confirm, "Now believe me, there isn't a single thing in this world that could ever compare to you."

"Gabriel," she starts.

"Listen," I order, sealing her lips.

She closes her mouth.

She really did look beautiful tonight.

I pull the larger of the two boxes from the bag, laying it on the vanity. I open it, the necklace inside catching and glinting in the lights set up around the mirror.

“Gabriel,” she gasps.

“This is the rarest diamond in the world,” I say to her, “I couldn’t find anything better fitting to match you, Amelia.” I lift the necklace from its bedding. A thin gold chain that would sit close to her throat but in the center dangles another chain, straight down and on the end sits a red diamond. The length of it would mean the pendant would sit right between her breasts.

“As much as I prefer my hand as your necklace, Amelia, I knew it couldn’t be there forever so this was the next best accessory for the woman who held my whole heart.”

I let my fingers wrap around her throat, my tanned skin setting off the bright gold of the necklace and forcing her chin up. “Open the other box.”

She reaches for it, popping the top to reveal the earrings in a leafy design that would climb her ear, following the delicate curve of it. In every other leaf sat another red diamond, much smaller than I’d have liked but with the way she stares at them, I can’t help but inflate my chest.

“It’s beautiful,” She breathes, picking up one to apply to her ear and the other, fingers delicately touching each stone and curve.

“For you, *amore mia*.”

“You didn’t have to,” she says,

“And that’s why I did, Amelia, because you deserve it when you don’t believe you do.”

“This is too much,” she breathes.

“With you, too much is not enough.”

She kisses me then, smearing that pretty lipstick while wearing the jewelry I’d bought for her and wearing the pretty dress she designed, and Sierra made. She was a walking dream.

“Give me twenty,” I tell her, “There’s one last thing.”

She nods, letting me go but I give her one last kiss before I disappear into my closet and change into a deep gray suit and white shirt. I style my hair and then take her hand guiding her down to my office.

“I want you to have fun,” I tell her, “Enjoy your time, Amelia, but I need you to be safe.”

“I know,” She nods.

I sit in the chair behind my desk and open a draw that holds a small, light weight pistol and the thigh holster designed for it.

“Come here.”

She stops between my parted legs.

Reaching forward, I hook my hand behind her knee and lift, resting the toe of her stiletto against the edge of my chair. My hands smooth up her calf.

“You know how to work this,” I say, “You do not hesitate doing so. There are no questions. You shoot first.”

I slip her foot into the holster and slide it up her leg, over her knee until it rests around her thigh, fingers brushing on her skin, high up and close to that sweet spot right at the apex.

Her breath rushes from her lips as she watches every move I make.

I place the holster high up, high enough to be concealed by the length of her dress and then I press my hands around her thigh, my eyes on hers.

“You will stay safe for me, Amelia,” I tell her, “You will come home to me.”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

“Always,” she promises.

I tighten the holster until she gasps out in pain and then pleasure as I let my hand wander further, brushing over her laced covered sex. “Don’t look!” She gasps out.

“What?”

“It’s for later, a surprise.”

The tips of my fingers dig into the very top of the inside of her thigh, “I do not like surprises.”

“You’ll like this one.” She promises.

With a flare of my nostrils and a calming of my need, I suppress the desire to rip that beautiful dress from her body and have her over the desk. Instead, I pluck the small pistol from the draw and fit it into the holster, keeping her leg up, the toe of her shoe between my own.

“It is easy to use,” I explain, purposely whispering a finger across the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, “here is the safety,” I point to the small button, “It is loaded. You aim, you fire.”

“And if I miss?” She gasps out.

“You won’t miss, *leonessa*. You do all to come home to me.”

“Yes.” She admits.

“That’s my girl.”



AMELIA

I felt beautiful, no more than that, I couldn't explain the elation in my chest or how, with Gabriel's hand in mine, his lethal body beside me, I felt like a damn queen. Even with the scars visible, something I hadn't missed when I put on the dress. I'd tried not to stare because if I did, I'd have lost my nerve but with the way Gabriel looked at me, I couldn't help but feel as if the world was at my feet.

The weight of the gun on my thigh threw me off slightly but I'd grown used to it, the metal warming to my skin.

Sierra bounces down from the bar stool, waving over to us. She was gorgeous in the red dress, her curvy body filling it out and the slits teasing at her legs. Her dark hair was pulled across one shoulder and the silver chunky necklace choker gleamed at her throat.

"This dress!" She squeals when we stop before her, taking my hand to force me into a twirl, "You look gorgeous, Amelia!"

I let her link my arm, dragging me away from Gabriel, but him and Enzo stay close to our backs. Gabriel had told me on the way here that this casino

was his own.

At the bar, I slide onto a stool, ordering a glass of wine when Gabriel's hand slides across my thigh, his body at my back. "Don't wander off tonight, you stay where I can see you, okay?"

"Sounds like you're paranoid, Gabriel."

He kisses my temple, "I have plenty of enemies, Amelia and many attempts have been made for my life. I do not care about me but you, they will use you if they feel they have the chance."

I swallow.

"But we will not hide, and I will not keep you trapped like a bird."

I nod, "I'm sure it'll be fine," I brush it off but nervous prickles tingle across my spine. I hadn't forgotten how dangerous being with a man like Gabriel must be but hearing it aloud, it became far too real.

"Maybe so, but you understand, *si*?" he asks, "You don't leave my sight."

"Yes sir," I joke, accepting my wine and grinning around the rim as he grumbles in my ear.

"My pretty wife," he growls. "You won't be joking later when I have you screaming on my cock."

I choke on my wine.

"Don't pretend you don't like it, *leonessa*, I know what's going on in that pretty head of yours. I bet you're soaking your panties right now thinking about it."

"Gabriel," I stutter out.

His fingers tense on my leg, "We're going to explore every fantasy of yours."

"What did I miss?" Sierra rejoins, interrupting the moment. "Oh, I'm sorry did I interrupt something?"

"No, no," I down half my glass, trying to subtly press my thighs together as if that'll stop the dull throb he's just coaxed with his filthy words.

I feel him smile against my temple before he pulls away, "I was just telling my wife how stunning she looks in this dress." He plucks a crystal glass from the bar, sipping at it.

Enzo grunts. Jesus Christ, he heard it all, didn't he? I press my fingers to the bridge of my nose, my cheeks heating. How had I forgotten we weren't alone.

The casino was loud behind us, the tables packed with cheers being shouted while the bar was just as busy, low music playing from speakers

dotted around the room.

Gabriel stays close to my side, speaking with Sierra about the boutique while Enzo remains stoic and silent, the brooding titan of a man making sure people give us a wide berth. It was easy, light, like the world wasn't in flames and Gabriel wasn't the ruthless man ruling the city.

I could have both worlds.

I relax back against him, content with how things had gone.

Until loud shouts start to travel from within the casino. I look over to find a mass of people suddenly fighting, beer bottles and glasses being thrown and fists flying.

"Enzo," Gabriel growls. The man doesn't wait a second before his long, thick legs are closing the space between him and the group.

"He can't take on all of them!" Sierra cries.

"You'd be surprised."

But Gabriel had too much faith, because while a few stopped and gawked at the man, the crowd was too large for him to handle on his own and he's soon swallowed up.

"Shit." Gabriel goes to move but then hesitates.

"I'll be fine!" I yell at him.

He stares down at me, eyes blazing, "Stay here," he growls before he's moving, grabbing as many men as he goes. The commotion swells in the bar, people moving forward quickly, smartphones flashing as they try to take photos and videos of the mass brawl. Someone knocks into me, and my elbow hits my wine glass, tipping it over. The full glass of red lands in my lap.

"Ah!" I jump up. "Shit!"

"Amelia!" Sierra yells, "No, not the dress!"

I curse, "Fuck." There was a huge red wine stain across the thighs, barely missing my crotch and I hold the hem away to try and save it from soaking all the way through.

"I'll be right back," I tell Sierra.

"I don't think you should," She chews her lip.

"I can hardly sit here wearing a glass of wine, just tell Gabriel I went to the bathroom."

"He'll be pissed."

"Yes well, I'll deal with that later."

"Your funeral."

I pout but head off, forcing myself through the crowd to get to the bathroom. With the commotion, they were thankfully empty, so I lock the main door, stopping anyone from coming in and yank the dress off, leaving myself in just my underwear as I head to the hand dryer on the far wall.

I mean being half naked in a casino made me slightly anxious, so I turn, keeping an eye on the door.

Five minutes pass and the dress was slowly drying, it was ruined with the god awful huge stain on it but I could put it back on without risk of ruining the underwear too. I'm just preparing to do so when I hear a creak coming from the door.

It was a lock that could be unlocked with a tool on the other side, but I can see it turning. Slowly. As if whoever was trying to unlock it was struggling to do so.

"It's busy!" I yell, panicking, "Someone's in here!"

"Fuck." Comes a muffled grunt. And then silence.



Gabriel

"Get the fuck out my casino!" I roar at the bloody men, their clothes shredded, faces swelling and bruised, "Get out before I murder you myself!"

They scatter.

I straighten the lapels of my jacket and head back inside, watching the crowd frantically go back to whatever they were doing before they got a show. I find Sierra at the bar but the stool next to her was empty and red wine was spilled over the floor.

"She's in the bathroom!" Sierra manages to rush out before I can say anything. "Someone spilled wine on her."

"I told her to stay!"

"I know but she went anyway. You can't expect her to stay in wet clothes, Gabriel."

I change direction, heading towards the women's bathroom. When the door comes into view I see a figure, dressed in black, hacking at the lock.

"Hey!"

They take off. For fuck's sake. One night! I wanted one fucking night.

I pull my keys out and slide the tool into the lock, flicking it and

slamming the door open.

Amelia screams.

I shut the door.

“You have trouble following simple instruction, *moglie mia*?”

“Gabriel!” She clutches her chest. “Fuck you could have knocked!”

“And you could have done as you’re told.”

“Look I’m sorry but I wasn’t just going to sit there soaking wet.”

I let my eyes drift down her body, relaxed now she knows it’s me and dressed in very pretty lingerie and the holster. The white lace panties cover nothing, and she’d forgone a bra because of the backless style of the dress.

“These were my surprise?” I ask.

“Yes, they’re my design.”

“Turn around.”

She smirks and does, showing her backside and her long legs, still in the heels she was wearing.

“Give me your dress.”

She hands it back to me, “I think I got it mostly dry.”

I shrug out of my jacket, coming up behind her. I wanted her but I wasn’t about to fuck her in the casino bathrooms.

No, I was about to teach my Amelia a lesson about what happens when she disobeys my orders when they’re there to keep her safe.

“Arm.”

I help her into my jacket. It fell to her thighs, covering her but not enough.

“We are leaving now Amelia.” I shoot a text message to Enzo, telling him to get Sierra home and guide Amelia to the door.

“You’re mad at me.”

“I’m not mad, *leonessa*.”

“You seem it.”

“I’m disappointed you didn’t stay like I asked you to. Did you know someone was trying to get in here while you were naked?”

“I thought I heard the door unlocking, I thought that was you.”

“No. It was not.”

“Okay, well, Gabriel, you can’t coddle me.”

“I’m keeping you safe.”

She rolls her eyes.

I grab her chin, forcing us to stop, “Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

“Gabriel, I—” I cut her off with a punishing kiss, teeth, and tongue bruising. “Let’s go.” I growl breaking it off.

GABRIEL

I glance over to Amelia in the passenger seat. “Take off the jacket.”

Her head snaps to me, eyes widening.

“Now, *mondo mia*.”

She blinks a few times and swallows, before she unbuckles her seat belt and moves her hands to the lapels of the jacket, hesitating.

“You disobeyed me,” I say to her, turning my head to stare at the dark, cliff-top road ahead. “I told you to stay where you were. I told you why. It’s dangerous, Amelia. I’m not trying to control you or lock you up. I am trying to keep you safe.”

“Gabriel, I’m sorry—”

“Jacket, Amelia.”

“Why?”

“Now.”

She shrugs out of it, leaving her in just those tiny white panties and the gun strapped to her thigh. Her chest heaves with her breaths, skin flushed.

“I would never hurt you,” I remind her, “Underwear too.”

“Gabriel...”

I hold out my hand expectedly.

It was too dark on these roads for anyone to see her. She shimmies the underwear down her thighs and then drops them into my waiting palm. “That’s my good girl,” I praise, bringing the underwear to my nose and inhaling her scent, “You smell divine, *mondo mia*.”

She sits gloriously naked in the passenger seat of the car.

“I would never hurt you,” I tell her again, “But there are ways to punish without the pain.”

“I’m sorry.”

I pull the car into a darkened layby beneath some trees and lean over, unstrapping the holster from her thigh and tucking both that and the gun into the glove compartment.

“What are we doing?” Fear leaks into her eyes.

“Climb into the back.”

Shaking, she does, sliding between through the space between the seats. I follow her body with my eyes and then climb from the car, the kiss of salty sea air calming the riot slightly. I then climb into the back, locking the doors. She has her back to the door, knees to her chest and arms locked around them.

“What are you going to do?”

“Wicked, wicked things Amelia.” I wrap my hand around her wrist gently, pulling until she let’s go and then I force her legs down. A flush darkens her skin, and her labored breaths fill the silence.

My pretty wife liked it.

“Are you wet right now, Amelia?” I place my hands on her thighs, prying them apart, her beautiful cunt glistening.

“Gabriel,” she moans as I slide a finger through her heat, her arousal coating me.

“God damn, Amelia, so fucking wet.”

Her hips lift from the seat as I let that finger slide all the way to her entrance, teasing but not fully entering. Just enough to leave her wanting.

“Do you know what I do to men that disobey me?” I rasp, feeling her pussy get wetter and wetter, the sound of her flesh moving beneath my touch loud as I slowly slide inside and then out again, pumping gently with one finger.

“No,” she breathes.

“I torture them until they remember who owns them,” I admit, “I inflict pain that brings them to the brink of death every time, but I stop before I allow them the mercy. I keep them conscious, alive. I keep them there, reminding them what it means to disobey me.”

“You said – oh!” She cries, hips bucking as I ram two fingers inside, curling them to toy with that sweet rough spot just inside.

“I know what I said, wife, I’m not going to do that to you.”

I tease that sweet spot, watching as her legs begin to quake, a sweat dampening her skin and the heat in the car fogging the windows.

“Yes, oh *god*, right there.”

I smile, pushing her right to that peak, getting her ready and just as she’s about to tumble over, I pull out, stopping the impending climax. She cries out at the loss.

“You want to feel good?” I ask, gently circling her again.

“Please,” she begs.

“They beg too,” I tell her, leaning forward to capture her bottom lip with my teeth, free hand coming up to cup her breast, rolling the hardened peak of her nipple between my fingers. “They beg for death and mercy. Do you know what you’re going to beg me for?”

“Gabriel,” she runs her tongue over my lips, my cock aching with how hard it is for her.

“You’re going to beg me to fuck you, you’ll beg me to make you come. You’re going to want me so fucking bad you’ll feel as if you’ll go crazy without it. And I’m going to keep pushing you and tugging you back.”

She whimpers, “I’m sorry.” She reaches for my belt, attempting to free me. “Please, Gabriel.”

I move out of reach and then grab her knees, yanking her forward until her back hits the seats and I can grasp her hips, pulling her ass into my lap. I keep my back on the door, one leg bent to allow me to remain in this position while the other supports me on the floor of the car. I grasp and lift, bending slightly as I bring her soaked cunt to my mouth. Her arms lash out, fingernails scratching down the leather of the chairs. It wasn’t a comfortable position for her, but I keep her there, my face buried between her thighs, lapping up all that wetness for me. My tongue strokes her pussy, but I avoid that throbbing, sensitive clit.

My tongue punches into her, tasting her musky arousal on my tongue and swallowing it down before I finally flick my tongue over that sensitive bud.

She soaks my lips and chin as I bring her up, up, up, her legs shaking and then I stop, turning my face to kiss her inner thigh.

“I’ll never do it again,” She whimpers, “Just please. Gabriel please.”

“I know you won’t baby, but a punishment is a punishment and this is going to last all night, Amelia.”

Her little whimper makes me smile. Gently I lower her hips and help her to sit. Her eyes light up when she sees me taking out my cock, stroking up the shaft and smearing the bead of precum over the crown.

“Greedy girl,” I smile, reaching forward to grasp the back of her head, “Let me fuck that pretty throat of yours.”

She doesn’t hesitate, she closes her warm wet mouth around my dick and takes it all the way to the back of her throat, swirling her tongue over the little ridge on the underside of my cock.

“Fuck!” I lift my hips as she comes down, going in deeper. She gags around my length, but she doesn’t stop.

I grab her wrist when she tries to slip her hand between her own thighs.

She grumbles on my cock, the vibration of the sound shooting a burst of pleasure into my balls. *Dio*, I wanted to fuck her into next week.

Keeping my hand on the back of her head, I fuck her face hard and fast. She gags around me but takes it, takes me and sucks.

“God damn, I’m going to come,” I growl, “You’re going to fucking swallow it, Amelia. All of it.”

She hums her approval.

My grunts are loud, the windows completely opaque with condensation and I’m coming, hot and loudly, hitting the back of her throat. She swallows it all down, continuing to suck me for every last drop before she lets it go with a wet pop.

She looks up at me with glazed eyes, “My dirty little wife,” I praise, using my thumb to wipe away the tears on her cheeks, “I’m taking you home now where no one can hear you scream. Tonight, you’re going to be my fucking whore.”



AMELIA

The house was empty.

It was surreal, to be in a place I'd only ever seen teeming with life and movement. But the darkened halls were echoing in the silence, the crash of waves thunderous against the cliffs.

I was still completely naked save for the heels on my feet that beat like a war drum while Gabriel led me to the bedroom after snagging a bottle of whiskey from the den.

"Gabriel," I begin. My voice was sore, my body aching, shaking, so ready to be released I thought I might cry if I didn't get it.

His punishments were beautifully cruel. The way he played my body like an instrument, how he kept me on that edge. It was torture and ecstasy. I wanted it to never stop and stop all the same.

"Shh," he orders softly, guiding me into the bedroom and then to the bed where I sit.

He moves around the room, not looking at me, collecting things that he places on the bedside table. The whiskey and two ties.

“Go lay back on the pillows,” he tells me, “Arms above your head.”

I shuffle back, moving up and doing as he says. He moves to the foot of the bed and gently removes one shoe and then the other, discarding them on the floor and then he moves to my wrists, picking up one tie and wrapping it around my wrist before he secures it to the bedpost.

“What are you doing?”

He says nothing as he moves to the other one.

“You’re going to beg me to stop,” he says, “but you won’t want me to. I need you to give me a safe word.”

“A safe word?” Both fear and excitement work its way through me. A part of me already wanted this to stop, a part of me afraid of how this might end but a bigger part wanted this more than I wanted the air in my lungs. I’d heard of people using safe words but never had I imagined being in the situation where one was required.

He chuckles, sensing that confusion, “You don’t need to be afraid, Amelia, this will be good for you as much as you’ll hate it. This is punishment and I’m going to do things you’ll hate to love but I want to know if it gets too much. You have to tell me.”

“So, a safe word?”

“Yes.”

“Casino.”

He smirks, “Okay.”

The ties secure me tightly to the bed but not so tight they cut off the blood to my hands. They chafed the skin but it was bearable.

He stands to the side of the bed and removes his shirt. The bulge in his pants strained against the material, but he doesn’t free himself, instead he bends and takes items from the bottom drawer of the nightstand.

I see the dildo and vibrators sitting next to the whiskey.

My mouth drops open.

“Ever used these before, Amelia?” He teases, picking up the large cock, “Did you ever use toys on that pretty cunt of yours?”

“Yes.”

He grabs a small bottle next which I realize is lube before he comes to kneel between my legs.

“You look so pretty like this,” He tells me, whispering his fingers down my stomach, the muscles quivering where he touches. I was on fire, every nerve ending ready to explode.

His hand slides through my pussy, teasing. I was already wet, practically soaked but he wanted more. It wasn't hard considering how tightly strung I was. I throbbed with a desperate need. Wanting him more than I had ever wanted anything.

My breath sawed from my chest, eyes stuttering closed as I prepared for the blow of him taking away the orgasm. When it happens, he chuckles and I shake my head, blowing out a breath. Then I feel the large head of something pressing into my entrance. I swallow as I look down, seeing him watching as he presses the hard length of the dildo into me. He watches it intently as if he dared not to miss a single second of it.

It was big and I could feel it stretching me but the coolness of the lube and the slickness of it helped as he pushed it gently into me. I widen my thighs.

"That's it," he praises, "Such a dirty fucking girl."

"Fuck," I groan.

"Look at how good this pussy takes it," he rasps, "You take everything I give you so well Amelia."

I needed more. I bare my hips down, trying to get him to press it into me some more but he has the control and that damn dark chuckle tells me he knows it.

"Greedy girl," he pumps it slowly, not filling me completely with it, "Are you thirsty, Amelia?"

Was that a genuine question?

When he stops moving, my eyes snap open, finding him waiting for an answer expectedly.

He holds the cock still inside me, staring.

"Are you thirsty?"

I swallow and nod.

He grins and leans across my body snagging the bottle of whiskey from the unit beside me, keeping the toy unmoving inside me. I squirm, trying to get him to move.

"Ah, ah," he chides, "Stay still, Amelia."

He lets it go to open the bottle, throwing the lid off then grabs it again before it can slip out. He pushes it in slightly, making my eyes roll back in my head as he moves up my body.

"The things I want to do to you right now, Amelia," he growls low.

"Then do them." I gasp out.

He chuckles, “Dirty girl.” He slowly fucks me with the cock in his hand while he hovers above me. “Open your mouth.”

I do as he says and then watch as he takes a large swig of the whiskey before he places it down on the unit, settles his mouth above mine and releases it all onto my waiting tongue. I swallow but some dribbles out the side. Gabriel lowers his face to mine, “All night. I’m having you all night.”

I don’t get a chance to respond as he slams the cock into me hard and licks up the trail of whiskey from my cheek.

“Yes,” I pant, “Yes, more.”

“*Cazzo*, Amelia, seeing you like this.”

I yank at the restraints, wanting to touch him and his eyes bounce around my face, taking in my pleasure. Everything was coiling tight, I wanted to scream.

His eyes dip down to my pussy, I could feel my wetness around my thighs, beneath my ass.

“Dripping,” he muses before he tugs the dildo away and positions himself between my legs. “I can’t wait.”

I frantically shake my head, “Then don’t, fuck, please, Gabriel.”

He yanks his pants and boxers down before he lines his cock up to me and slams his hips forward, crashing into me. I pull on the ties, but they don’t yield and I’m still at his mercy.

He drills into me, hard and punishing and it feels so fucking good. His body lines over the top of mine, his nose running down the length of my own, the hazel of his eyes on fire. He reaches up and releases one tie and then the other before he spins me around, forcing me to my hands and knees.

“How long do you think you can last, *mondo mia*?” He holds still behind me, not re-entering, instead his hand travels down the length of my spine and then down between my ass cheeks. I stiffen beneath him, swallowing. He keeps going, sliding his fingers into my wetness, stretching me before he comes back out and up, using my own arousal to smear it between my cheeks, over that hole I’d vowed no one would touch.

The vow was dead now because at this point, I was willing to give him anything he pleased.

“You are so beautiful like this,” He whispers, “Needy and open for me. Completely mine.”

I press back as he lifts, sliding himself deep, both of us groaning.

“I asked a question, how long?”

“Not long.”

“I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“Try not to.”

“What!?”

“Trust me.”

He begins to move, hard and fast, his body leaning over my back, breath on my spine. His hands now hold my hips, yanking me back as he fucks forward, the hard slap of our skin loud to my ears.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasps breathlessly, “You feel so good.”

But I was building. Higher and higher, tighter and tighter, like there was a rope inside of me, tightening with each thrust and once it snapped, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

“I can’t,” I cry, fingers clawing at the sheets.

“You can, *mondo mia*,” He says.

My teeth grit, eyes squeezing closed. I can only focus on what he’s doing to me, how he ruts into me with precision, hitting the spot with each thrust.

“That’s it.” He praises.

“Oh *god*,” I gasp into the pillow.

“You’re doing so good. Keep holding. I can feel how tightly you are baby, your pussy feels like heaven.”

“Gabriel,” I plead.

He presses his lips to my spine as he reaches beneath me and then between my legs. I jerk as he slides his hand through my heat. He brings the hand away and then suddenly he slaps it against my clit.

I can’t stop it.

My orgasm barrels through me. A surge so strong I scream as a warm wetness coats my thighs, rushing from me. My pussy spasms and contracts around Gabriel’s cock, continuing on as surges of pleasure rock my body.

“God damn,” Gabriel yells, continuing to move his hand, dragging out the orgasm until I feel like I’m about to pass out. Gabriel’s thrusts become harder but more erratic, his cock jerking inside of me until he stills and groans out his release, swelling and filling me completely.

I collapse down onto the bed, Gabriel falling atop me, our breathing hard, our skin soaked and my thighs sticky.

“I don’t know what just happened,” I admit, having never felt something so intense or *that* happening to my body.

I feel him smile against my skin, “You just squirted,” he sounds pleased, “You came all over me.”

My cheeks heat.

“And it was fucking beautiful. You’ll be doing it again. A lot.”

“You’re gonna kill me.”

He laughs as he lifts himself, situating himself between my legs. His hands part my thighs.

“I need a minute,” I laugh.

His fingers push up the inside of my thigh, spreading through the mix of mine and his climax, gathering it before he pushes it back inside.

I groan at the mix of pleasure and pain.

“So greedy.”

He lays his body down beside me and I turn my head to him, seeing his content, relaxed face staring back at me. He leans forward and kisses me against my brow. I was sleepy and spent, my eyes slowly falling closed as Gabriel rests his brow atop my head.

Sleep claws at the edges of my consciousness but it’s then I realize how deep my feelings for this man went.

I was in love with him.

I am in love with him.

I curl myself tighter to him, knowing I couldn’t sleep just yet, I needed to shower but I wanted him closer to me right now. He takes me in, wrapping me up.

My lips press on the space above his heart.

“Gabriel?” I mumble.

“Yes, *mondo mia*.”

“I love you.”

Something rumbles inside his chest as his arms tighten, “And you own my heart, *amore mia*, I am in love with you.”

AMELIA

Can you still feel me between your thighs, wife?

The text comes through as I'm pouring coffee, my phone vibrating against the counter. My cheeks heat at the words.

Yes.

I pluck up the coffee and head to the gardens. Lincoln was at daycare and Gabriel had to leave early this morning with Enzo. I, of course, was not alone. He made sure there were two men left behind to protect me. I take a seat on the patio, the gentle sea breeze teasing my hair.

It had been a long night. A long, dirty, sweaty night. And I ached in the most delicious way. A soreness that reminded me how Gabriel treated me last night, bringing me to orgasm several times with his hands, and his tongue and his cock as well as the toys he'd brought out.

I'd told him I loved him.

I'd never loved anyone before, but I knew it for what it was. My heart beats for him. He had consumed me, devoured me whole and he could keep me.

I never doubted the words when he spoke them back.

He showed me in more ways that words would ever be able to speak.

I sigh contentedly, sipping my coffee.

I'm imagining you coming all over my cock, Amelia. I can't stop thinking about it.

I grin, **Well, you best learn to focus, your men might believe you're going soft.**

I'm certainly not soft right now, wife, not when I have your pussy occupying my thoughts.

I shake my head and decide not to respond. I didn't want to distract him from whatever had happened that had Asher calling him out at the crack of dawn this morning. He needed to come home to me and if he was distracted by my texts, I'd never live with myself.

My phone stays silent for all of ten minutes before another text comes in.

You best have a decent excuse as to why you are not responding to me.

You're busy, I type back.

I'm never too busy for you, Amelia.

He had a way of completely melting me with his words, even over text message.

When will you be home?

Soon. Promise. Get warmed up for me.

Again? I shake my head.

All night.

Behind me something bangs inside the house.

Clutching my phone, I climb up and head inside, "Hello?" I call, "Is everything okay?"

There's a grunt and slight moan that comes from the kitchen. Had someone hurt themselves?

I head towards the kitchen, nerves knotting in my stomach and when I come round the corner, I see the blood first. A pool of it blooming across the tile and then a body, throat sliced wide open. The man was still alive.

A scream bubbles in my throat but I don't let it out as I quickly dial Gabriel, bringing the phone to my ear as I spin round, feeling eyes on me.

"Couldn't resist, baby?" His deep voice chuckles down the phone. I breathe heavily as I move back into the kitchen, towards the man slowly bleeding out on the tile.

“Amelia?”

“Someone attacked one of your men,” I rush out, “He’s bleeding out!”

“What!?”

“Gabriel, there’s someone in the house.”

I get to the guy, trying to keep the fear from consuming me as I crouch down and place my hand across the wound. He grips my wrist, eyes wide.

“It’s okay,” I whisper with a shake in my voice.

The man weakly shakes his head and opens his mouth to speak but no sounds come out.

“Amelia!” Gabriel’s roar shakes me back. Had he been speaking?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, “I don’t think I can save him.”

“Amelia get out the house.”

I look to the guy, watching as he weakly dips his finger in his blood and then spells out a word on part of the clean tile next to him. R...U...N...

And then his eyes roll back and he goes limp.

“He’s dead.”

“It’s okay, Amelia,” Gabriel is moving, running, his breath harsh in my ear. “I need you to listen to me, okay?”

“O-okay,” I lift from the floor, backing up.

“Get to the nearest exit, go to the garage and take one of the cars. There is a box on the left, the code is four four eight seven, there are a couple of spare keys inside.”

“I’m going,” I felt numb. The fear was ready, the panic right there to paralyze me.

“I’m with you, Amelia, okay? I’ve got you.”

I nod though I know he can’t see me. He’d be here soon.

The front door was closest, so I head there, pulling on the handle but it doesn’t open. “The door is locked, Gabriel.”

“The key, Amelia, is in the bowl next to the door.”

I check but there was no key and then I see a circular bit of metal on the tiles at my feet. It was the head of the key, and when I slide my eyes to the lock on the door, I see the rest of the key, snapped off and jammed into the lock.

“Oh god,” I breathe.

“What Amelia?”

“They broke the key in the lock.”

“Shit. SHIT!”

I back up from the door. “They’re in the house, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Amelia, they are. Get to the back door. Now.”

“I’m scared.”

“I know baby. I know.”

I stumble numbly towards the kitchen, back towards the back door where I’d been having coffee. I’d left that door open. It comes into view, but I wasn’t alone.

The second man that Gabriel had left to watch me this morning was standing on the other side. He grins cruelly when he sees me, lifts his hand and waves with his fingers.

“I can’t get out the back door,” I tell Gabriel. “The other man, he’s the one who killed him. He’s blocking the door.”

“Okay Amelia, listen to me, there is a panic room. It has not been used in years but its operational. You have to go upstairs.”

“Which room?”

“Your old room, there is a button on the inside of the closet. Press it.”

“Okay, I’m going now.”

I turn towards the stairs and freeze.

“Oh my god,” I breathe out.

“Hello Amelia.”

GABRIEL

“Oh my God.” Her whisper is filled with terror.

“Amelia!” I roar but the phone goes dead.

I’m running, my legs hitting the dirt hard and fast. I needed to get to her. Now!

Atlas, Devon and Enzo keep my pace, not understanding why but sensing the urgency.

I try calling again but she doesn’t pick up.

And then I’m driving, the wheels of my car skidding through the gravel. Enzo speeds off ahead of me, his motorbike quicker and more agile in the traffic.

He’d get there. He’d get there and save her.

“Gabriel, talk to me, what’s happening?”

“They’ve gone after Amelia. They’re in the house.”

“Your men are there, yes?”

“One’s dead,” my hands grip the wheel, “The other is a traitor.”

“Shit.”

“If they hurt her...”

“We’ll get there in time!” Devon growls, pulling out his phone. He starts calling people, contacts, my men and the cops. “Someone will get there in time!”

“Who is it!?” I demand. “WHO!?”

“I guess we’re about to find out,” Devon says somberly as I swerve through the streets in the city. Atlas was on my tail, Enzo long gone.

It feels like forever before I finally make it to the long road that would head to the house but I can see it. A small dot on the top of the cliff.

My Amelia.

My wife.

I press hard on the gas, screeching up the clifftop road and then slam on my brakes when I finally make it to the courtyard outside the house.

The door has been kicked open.

I thunder towards it, skidding to a stop on the tiles in the foyer.

“Where is she!?” I demand, finding Enzo crouched at a small puddle of blood near to the entrance of the kitchen. My eyes find the small bloody handprint on the wall.

“*Where is she!?*” I roar, “*Where is my wife!?*”

Enzo lifts from his crouch, staring at me with regret and then he shakes his head. Atlas thunders in behind, seeing what I am. “Where?”

Enzo shakes his head at my brother.

“She’s not gone,” I growl, “No, did you check the panic room!?”

Enzo steps up to me and grasps my shoulder, squeezing, a sign of sympathy.

“Amelia!” I shout, shaking off the hand. No, no she wasn’t gone.

I barge past my man, hearing them follow and follow the blood. There were smears of it on the floor, bare footprints and handprints on the wall. Was this her blood?

I find the dead man in the kitchen and almost slip on his cooling blood, but I don’t stop as I rip my house apart, her name a hoarse shout on my lips as I call it again and again.

She couldn’t be gone.

“Amelia!”

“Brother!” Atlas yanks me back, “She isn’t here.”

I turn on him, “It was you!”

His face twists in shock, “What?”

I slam my fist into his face, “It’s you isn’t it. You planned this. You’re the one against me!”

He fights back, blocking a hit while landing one of his own against my jaw.

“What the fuck!?” He bellows.

“You think I don’t know! You think I don’t see your hatred!”

It was clicking together. How the men in the basement had stared at his face. How Amelia had acted when she was in the hospital, and he arrived.

They knew his face.

It was him conspiring against me. It was fucking him!

Arms wrap around me, stopping me from going after him again while Devon grabs Atlas. I thrash to get away from Enzo, to get to Atlas, to fucking *end* him.

“Where is she? *Where is my wife!?*” I roar.

“I don’t fucking know!” Atlas spits blood.

“I’ll kill you, Atlas. I will fucking rip out your throat.”

“Then fucking end me, Gabriel. You think I fucking care if I die!?”

“Enough!” Devon yells, “It isn’t him!”

I freeze, my temper simmering for just a moment.

“I’m going to let go,” Devon says.

Atlas snatches out of his hold, glaring at me while he wipes the blood from his lip, “I care about this fucking family, Gabriel, despite the shit you’ve put me through. This is the only family I have.”

“Gabriel,” Devon catches my attention and then shifts his eyes to the table close to the door. On top lays a note, held there with a bloodied kitchen knife.

I feel my blood run cold as I walk towards it, finding a long strand of dark hair, cut roughly and the note.

My eyes scan the words. The message and warning.

I order no one to follow.

I go alone.

And I leave to collect my wife.



AMELIA

“Why are you doing this?” I cry, gritting my teeth at the pain. He holds me by my hair, forcing me to move, bare feet being cut up by the broken glass and grit on the floor. My face ached from the hits I’d taken, and the wound on my arm from the knife had stopped bleeding, but it hurt like a motherfucker, the skin tight and damaged.

Asher roughly pulls me to a stop using my hair and then yanks my head back. I cry out at the bite of pain on my scalp. He forces me to look at him, at his twisted face.

There was nothing in his eyes. A bleakness that promised endless torture.

“Why?” He mocks and then laughs, “Because you all fucking deserve it.”

And then he forces me forward again. My hands were bound behind my back, tied together tight enough that the rope cuts in deep and restricts blood flow to my hands.

After the fight back at the house, he’d dragged me out to the car, shoved me in the trunk and took off. He drove wildly, my body being thrown around like a damn doll.

He was going to kill me.

He'd stopped at an old house near the edge of the city and dragged me through the overgrown grass and shrubs, the thorns and branches cutting at me some more.

I'd die here. In this old house where no one would find me. Gabriel would never find me.

Tears prick my eyes, but it wasn't the right time to cry. I had to figure this out, figure out how to get out of this.

Asher suddenly stops.

"I'm going to kill him too," he tells me, voice almost calm, "Just like I did his brother."

"You killed Lucas?"

He nods slowly, as if his mind has rolled back to the time it happened. "He fought. I almost didn't manage it, but you see, the Saint's have a false sense of power. They think themselves bigger and better, but they underestimated me. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"You'll never be even half the man Gabriel is!" I snap, trying to snatch out of his grasp. I cry out when he yanks so hard, I feel several strands come loose. He forces me a little way down the hall and then the smell hits me, a foul, heavy smell that stuffs itself up my nose. It's so potent I almost taste it on my tongue, feel it hitting the back of my throat. I cannot suppress the gag.

Asher kicks open a door, and the stench worsens until I'm doubled over, vomiting the contents of my stomach.

He doesn't give me a chance to recover as he snaps my head up to look into the room.

A body.

Rotten. Half of it has been eaten by rodents and insects alike. The skin was falling away from the bones but it was a mixture of different colors, from grey to green to yellow. The hair was coming away from the skin and he had no eyes.

No fucking eyes.

I vomit again.

"This is where Gabriel will end up. Rotting in this house forever. But don't worry, pretty Amelia, he'll be good food for the vermin."

Oh my god, that was Lucas. That body, it was Gabriel's brother. Lincoln's *father*.

"He won't come for me," I rasp, spitting the bile from my mouth as I try

to breathe through my nose, “He isn’t that stupid.”

Asher laughs, “That man loves you. More than himself. More than this city. He’ll come for you.”

“No.”

“I was jealous of it at first,” Asher continues, closing the door, “he got everything. The city. The power. You. But then I realized how weak that made him because to begin with you were just the whore who got knocked up by his brother, but then he married you. Took the boy. Made him an heir. He fell in love with you within the first week and then you became more. And that right there, will be his downfall.”

I had to pray he wouldn’t. That Asher was wrong. Gabriel loved me, I knew that, felt it with every ounce of my being but he had to be smarter than that. He had to know it was a trap.

“You don’t have to do this,” I try as we start making our way down the long narrow corridor underground, away from the rotting body and the festering flesh, “Asher, please.”

“You can beg, Amelia. I will listen.” He says, “But neither you, nor him will leave here alive. I am sorry for you but I’m sure you can understand why I need to kill you too.”

I swallow. Would he go for Lincoln next?

Camille?

Would he take out all of them so only he can sit on the throne? What about Atlas? Was he in on this too?

It was obvious Asher had managed to sway several men to his side, used them to destroy Gabriel’s city, his life while trying to take the throne from him but what about the moody twin of his?

“You’re a monster.”

“You have to be a monster to survive in this life, Amelia, your husband taught me that.”

I didn’t want to die. Not yet.

He kicks a door open at the end of the hall, pushing me inside before he slams it closed and drags me across the room. I fight and kick but he’s stronger than I am and with the grip on my hair and bound hands, I couldn’t get away from him.

“Please!” I beg.

He throws me down hard, my knees give out under the strength of it, and I smack into the pole that juts from the ground to the ceiling, side of my head

bouncing off the unforgiving surface.

He comes for me and even though black dots dance behind my vision and my head thumps, I kick out, managing to land a blow to his groin and then his head as he doubles over in pain.

“You fucking bitch!” He growls, lunging for me, landing on top of me so hard I feel something snap in my leg.

I scream and my vision blurs with the pain.

He’d broken something. Oh my god.

The back of his hand slams against my face and I hit the floor, paralyzed in pain. In fear. He’d kill me before Gabriel even arrived, make him see me. Rub in how late he was.

Oh fuck. Oh no.

Tears sting my eyes and I’m helpless to stop them as they track down the side of my face. Asher manhandles me, my body too weak, too limp to fight him as he ties me to the pole, arms bent at an awkward angle that made it too painful to try and slump.

“You made me do that,” He growls, voice muffled as if speaking from behind a pillow, “That was your fault.”

He paces back and forth in front of me, mumbling to himself but I can’t understand what with the ringing in my ears.

“Right about now,” He crouches and grips my face, forcing me to look at him. His voice seems tinny but now he’s closer I can hear him, “He would have made it home. Seen you missing. He would have found my note.”

“I hope he rips out your heart.” I spit weakly.

“He’s coming for you right now, Amelia.”

“No.”

“Yes, but don’t worry,” he slides his finger down the side of my face, almost tenderly, “I won’t force you to watch your husband die but him, he’ll witness it when I take your life.”

I swallow.

“Maybe there’s an afterlife,” he shrugs, “he’ll find you again if there is, I’m sure.”

“You don’t have to do this, Asher.”

“Oh but, Amelia, I do. It’s already started.”

“No man will ever stand behind you if you do this.”

“Accidents happen all the time, Amelia and those who know the truth? They won’t live long enough to rat.”

He snatches away from me, leaving me with those words as he drags a chair from the side of the room and casually takes a seat, propping his ankle on his knee and checking the time.

“I give it half an hour,” he calls over, “I would suggest you make peace with whatever business you are leaving behind.”

I want to ask about my son, want to know what he has planned for him after this, but I don't want to bring attention to him. If Gabriel has any sense, he'll get Lincoln and send him far, far away from this. I'd ask Camille if I could, tell her to take him and run.

I would hurt but he'd be safe. Alive.

Gabriel wouldn't come.

He wouldn't.

My body slowly becomes numb, the pain dulling. Vaguely I was aware this was how shock started but it didn't matter.

Don't come Gabriel, please. Do not come for me.

I hadn't realized I'd said it out loud until Asher strolls over to me, his body a blur.

“Your prayers are useless,” He turns his phone screen, showing me. I blink through the fogginess at the image. Gabriel's car and the man himself climbing out. “He's already here.”

GABRIEL

Come to this address.

Alone.

If I see one person with you, I put a bullet in her skull.

I'll be waiting.

No name. But I had a feeling.

The house was old, falling apart with boarded up windows and a half wild garden, the grass as tall as my thighs and the bushes overgrown, thorns snagging at the jacket covering my arms.

I didn't recognize the single car parked out front but that didn't mean shit.

The door creaks open as I push it, one hand holding my gun. There was blood smeared across the wooden floorboards, more on the walls. I follow the trail, keeping my feet light and silent.

It was against everything I taught myself, against all better judgement heading into a house with no clue to how many could be hiding inside, or what I was up against.

But Amelia was here.

My wife was here. And I'd blindly throw myself through the flames for her.

I suppress the urge to call out her name, instead I follow the trail that'll lead me to her. It stops at a steep set of narrow stairs and there was nothing but darkness. I take them slowly, careful with where I place my feet guessing a house this old and forgotten, the wood would have rotted through.

Silence greets me at the bottom, the air moist and stifling. I could feel my heart pumping hard in my chest, I wasn't scared of what was down here but how I may find her. That was too much blood. She had to be alive.

This was my fault. I'd failed.

I'd fucking failed *again*.

The deeper I go, the heavier the air becomes until a rotting sort of smell hits my nose. I'd recognize the scent anywhere.

A decaying body.

For a minute panic seizes my muscles but sense takes over quick enough for me to realize if Amelia was dead, her body wouldn't be rotting just yet. I find the door the scent is coming from and push on it, instantly having to stop the gag that threatens to take me out. I press my jacket to my nose, staring at the body laid in the middle of the floor.

That was my brother. I step forward, hearing a splash beneath my foot.

Someone had been sick here.

Amelia.

The bastard had shown Amelia this.

Rage burns at a whole new level as I spin away from the body and thunder the rest of the way through the darkness coming to the only door left.

I kick it open.

And there she is.

My Amelia. My wife.

"No!" She screams roughly, her face bruised, body bloody and her ankle at an alarming angle which suggests a break.

"Amelia!"

Something slams violently into the back of my head.

"No!" Amelia screams again, "No stop!"

I go down and a foot collides with my abdomen and then my face. I hit the grit, vision blurring but I won't stop. I drag myself towards my wife.

"Amelia!" I cry again.

"Stop!" She screams, "please, no stop!"

A foot hits the back of my neck, pinning me before I'm whacked once more, and all the lights go out.



“Amelia!” It’s the first word out of my mouth when I come to. I try to move but something stops me. Chains rattle, my arms, they’re stuck above my head, and I dangle there by my wrists, the very tips of my toes – my bare toes – brushing against the floor. Crusted blood makes my skin on my face tight.

“I’m here!” I hear her cry, “Gabriel, I’m here!”

I search for her, eyes blurry but then her shape comes into view, and I focus everything I have on her. She’s on the floor, bound with rope to a pole. She’s bloody, pale but alive.

“Where are you hurt?” I demand.

“Gabriel,” she cries, “Why did you come!?”

I hear footsteps.

“I’ll always come for you.”

“We’re going to die, Gabriel,” she cries softly, “We’re both going to die.”

“No, *amore mia*,” I vow, “No we are not. I’ve got you, Amelia.”

She laughs wetly without humor, it’s not a cruel or angry laugh, but one filled with this gut churning sorrow, “I love you.”

“We’re not saying goodbye!” I growl.

Her bloodshot eyes, glistening with hot tears meet mine but she’s defeated. She believed this was the end.

The door opens and my head snaps around, teeth bared.

And Asher walks in.

“Hello brother.”

“I should have known,” I grit.

“Yes,” Asher nods, “You should have and yet, here we are.”

“Why?”

“Why, Gabriel?” Asher scoffs, slowly taking steps towards me, “Because you fucking took everything!”

His fist slams into my solar plexus, knocking the wind from my lungs. I choke, trying to drag in air.

Amelia cries.

“Did you know I recorded that message myself?” Asher says casually as I wheeze from my chains, “Back at the casino all those weeks ago. I slit a man’s throat and recorded that message and then I brought it to you.”

I think back to that, to the warning I didn’t listen to. Regret churns so hard inside of me it’s worse than any pain he could inflict.

“And you did nothing Gabriel. I watched you listen and then you walked away like this damn city meant nothing. You brushed off the attacks because you genuinely believe you are un-fucking-touchable and yet here I am proving you wrong. I took your shipments, burned your warehouses and orchestrated all the attacks and still, you did nothing.”

He wanders towards Amelia, crouching in front of her and grabbing her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“Take your fucking hands off her!”

“You are nothing, Gabriel, but an entitled cunt. You don’t deserve this power. This city. Your brother didn’t either.”

“You killed him.”

He studies Amelia’s face as she glares at him, “It wasn’t easy.” He says, “He fought and staging that accident, fuck, I almost got caught.”

He finally lets Amelia go and I relax a little until his hand slides to her thigh. She swallows, jaw clamping closed.

I needed to get him away from her, to focus on me.

“Asher,” I growl, “what did you hope to achieve!?”

“This city of course,” he says, “You Saint’s never deserved it. I took it all from you. Your business, your properties. I burned it all and you had no idea. You were too busy, playing with things not important. I knew what needed to be done, I did it. But you Gabriel, you honestly believe you’re better. Walking all over us like you believed yourselves gods. I’m here to show just how fucking mortal you are.”

“And what, you think you’re better suited!?”

“I am!” He bellows, standing abruptly and storming towards me. “I am the better one here. The smarter one. I deserve this city!”

“Asher please!” Amelia cries out, “Please stop! Gabriel will let you go! It doesn’t have to be like this!”

His attention moves back to her. No. No. No.

It doesn’t matter how often I scream his name, he goes to her anyway and takes out a knife.

“Asher!”

Picking up the hem of her dress, he slices it through the material and then uses it as a gag. “Women should be seen and not heard, that’s what I was always taught!”

“Those are archaic rules long since abolished in the family!”

“Perhaps we should bring some back, hm? Like the one which states that should the *true*,” he spits the word, “heir no longer be fit to rule, the next generation will be sworn in to take over.”

“You cannot have this city, Asher.”

“It’s already mine.” He shrugs, “I have plans in motion to get rid of Enzo and Devon because I’m not foolish enough to believe they’d work for me but once they’re out the way, it’s all mine. There’s no one to stop me.”

Amelia thrashes, trying to dislodge her gag.

“You showed your weakness, Gabriel. I’ve studied you since we were boys, I never saw one. Not in the many years I was forced to live under your roof, under *our* fathers’ rules, and I never saw you break. Until her. You pushed the city to the side for what? A used bit of pussy.”

“This is all because you’d never get it, not unless everyone died.”

“Yes, because I fucking deserve it! You don’t. Not when you put a bitch on a pedestal and treat me and my brother like we’re some half breed mongrels. I earned this by putting up with your bullshit. It was handed to you, but you don’t deserve it.”

“You tried to kill her, that day in the pool. And Lincoln.”

“I wanted her dead. Lincoln dead. No more Saint’s, only me and Atlas.”

“Atlas agrees with this?”

“He will.”

“Let her go,” I plead, “She doesn’t belong here.”

“You’re right,” he nods, running the tip of the knife along her thigh, “But you brought her in. This is on you.”

“Asher!”

“You and your family took everything from me, from Atlas. Took us from our real family, forced us to live in a home where no one wanted us and made us watch while you ruled and gave us scraps. I will take everything from you for what we had to suffer.”

“You want the city, fine, it’s yours, let her go.”

“I don’t think I will,” he smiles cruelly, looking to me. He pushes her dress up, exposing her crotch.

“Do not fucking touch her, Asher!” The chains rattle, my shoulders feel

like they might pop from the sockets, but I have to get out, I have to get to her.

“She was good enough for both brothers,” he muses, “First Lucas fucked her, got her pregnant and then you, couldn’t resist fucking your brothers baby mamma.”

Amelia tries and fails to move away from Asher’s hand, kicks one leg, but the other isn’t moving.

She cries, tears streaming down her face as she frantically shakes her head. I hear the muffled no behind the gag, hear her pleas.

“If she’s good enough for you, she’s good enough for me, right?”

“Asher stop!”

He forces her injured leg out. The scream is barely contained behind the gag. He then forces the other one out, opening her up and then pressing his weight against the good leg to stop her from moving.

“Amelia.” I rasp, swallowing, the chains rattling, “Amelia, baby, look at me.”

Her wide, terrified eyes fall to me.

“It’s only me here, *mondo mia*. It’s only me.”

Asher laughs cruelly, “You’re going to watch brother while I take everything from you.”

“I’ve got you, Amelia, okay?”

Her tears stream down her puffy face, over the gag in her mouth. I was helpless, I couldn’t fucking stop this.

I’d failed. I’d fucking failed.

Asher moves her underwear to the side, exposing her. Amelia cries but keeps her eyes on me.

“I’m sorry, Amelia,” I tell her, “I’m so fucking sorry.” He touches her.

My breath saws from my chest, panic and fear and rage mashing together. I didn’t feel the pain in my body, I didn’t feel anything.

“I’m right here with you, Amelia.”

“Should we remove the gag, Gabriel? So we can hear those pretty screams.” Asher moves his fingers and her eyes squeeze closed, “I saw you once. She comes so pretty doesn’t she.”

My nostrils flare.

He moves his hand to the gag and pulls it from her mouth, “Come on, pretty Amelia, scream for us.”

She spits in his face.

But then she screams just like he wanted as he brings his hand away and then hits her, closed fist, hard, into her centre. I refuse to look away, this is my fault. Her pain is mine.

“I think her pain is much more beautiful than her pleasure.”



AMELIA

My throat is raw with the scream, the pain radiating through me. I felt blood between my legs, warm, felt where the blow had broken my flesh and realize he was wearing rings which would have caused the damage.

“Amelia!” Gabriel roars, roars like a lion trapped in a cage, unable to protect the only thing that matters to him.

This was how I would die.

I’d thought about my death before, but I didn’t expect it to be like this. It had always been my stepfather to kill me in my nightmares and since Gabriel had killed him, I hadn’t thought about it again. I thought I had longer.

The leg Asher was leaning on had gone numb from the pressure of his weight and my other leg, with its broken bone, I couldn’t move.

Even thinking about it made me want to pass out.

So I had to endure.

And Gabriel did to.

“Don’t look,” I rasp over to him, “Don’t let this be the last thing you see of me.”

“Baby.” Those were tears in his eyes. Tears on his cheeks.

His sorrow cut deep and true.

Asher wanted Gabriel to suffer, and he was doing the one thing sure to do it. Me.

Asher lifts his knife, bringing it to my chest. My breath stops.

“Asher, please,” Gabriel begs.

His cruel laugh is cut off when the door slams open so suddenly, I scream, the tip of the knife cutting into me as my body jerks with the startle.

Atlas fills the door frame.

His face thunderous.

Gabriel drops his head, defeated.

Had he hoped someone else would come?

“Atlas?” Asher moves away from me, distracted.

Atlas’s cold eyes slide to his twin and then to me, taking in the state of my body, the blood, the bruises, how I was exposed. I didn’t have it in me to care about dignity.

Atlas takes careful steps towards his brother.

“It’s about time,” Asher tells him confidently.

But then Atlas raises his gun, forcing Asher’s brows down at his brother in confusion.

There’s no warning, no hesitation as a shot echoes in the small space and blood splatters across my face. A warm, wet spray that lands on my lips and cheeks.

For what feels like several seconds nothing happens but then a body falls. Asher’s body, landing across my lap, still...lifeless...dead.

Silence falls as heavily as lead.

“Amelia!” Gabriel breaks it first, the shock wearing off as he rattles his chains furiously.

But I’m still in shock, everything hurt, I was covered in blood and Atlas, he stares at me with a mix of horror and sympathy. He tugs Asher off of me and I catch a glimpse of his face, the leaking bullet hole still dribbling blood down his face. His eyes remain open and I swear they watch me as he moves.

Behind Atlas I see Devon and Enzo thunder in.

Atlas moves quick, shielding my body as he moves my dress down, covering me.

“I’m going to untie you,” he whispers with a shake in his voice.

I nod.

He reaches around me, his face next to my ear as he gently tugs at the knot. His breath comes heavy and rattling, and I can sense he's barely holding it together.

He'd killed his twin brother.

When my wrists are free and he goes to move away, I use the last bit of my strength and throw my arms around him.

"Thank you." I whisper with a break in my voice.

He doesn't hug me back, but I feel his body relax before he pulls away to help the others get Gabriel down from his chains.

My eyes slide to Asher's body and a shudder runs through me.

I was so tired. So fucking tired.

I feel my body slump back on the pole, somewhere next to me, bodies move and chains rattle, but I didn't have it in me to look.

Gabriel was alive. He was safe.

I hear him drop.

"No!" He growls.

My eyelids droop.

"Her! See to her!"

Who was he talking to?

Oh that's right! Devon. Enzo. They were here too.

Hands grab me and my eyes snap open, flinching, "It's me, baby. It's me."

Gabriel's face floats in front of my face, "Hi."

"Amelia," tears move down his face as he checks me over, wincing with every new mark he finds, "I'm so sorry."

"She's in shock, Gabriel," Devon announces, "We need to get her out of here."

"I'm tired."

"That's okay," Gabriel tells me softly. My eyes were heavy but I could see the blood on him, the bruises.

"You're hurt."

"I'm okay. I'm going to lift you now, Amelia."

I nod. I wouldn't mind being carried, I was so tired. And cold. I was cold.

Did I say that out loud?

Enzo steps forward, shrugging out of his jacket to lay it over my front as Gabriel slides his arm under my legs, only to freeze and bring it back out.

Blood.

So much blood.

“What the fuck did he do to her!?” Devon bellows.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I frown, “Did I start my period already?”

Gabriel’s eyes fill with fear as he snaps his head around to Devon who’s already moving. “I need to look, Gabriel,” he warns.

Gabriel positions himself behind me, placing my head on his lap as Devon gets to his knees at my feet.

“Amelia, baby,” Gabriel says, looking down at me. “Look at me for a minute, okay?”

They were all being so gentle. So soft.

I stare up at him, “Are you hurt?” I whisper.

He shakes his head as a tear drips off the end of his nose and lands on my lip. My tongue peeks out to taste it. “Then why are you crying?”

I know Devon is touching me, lifting my dress but I was so captivated by his blazing hazel eyes swimming with more sorrow.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“We need to get her to the hospital,” Devon declares, “Now.”

Gabriel moves me off his lap, letting Devon cradle the back of my head. His concerned face looks down at me, “You doing okay?” He asks with a crack in his voice.

“Tired.”

“I know, Amelia, but you’re gonna be okay. On the count of three I want you to take a big breath.”

“Why?”

“Just do that, okay?”

I nod.

“One,” his eyes slide to Gabriel, “Two... three, big breath.”

I suck in a huge lungful and let it out with a scream as my body is hoisted from the floor. My whole body lights up like a damn throbbing beacon. Jesus.

I was no longer tired, no longer confused. Images flash in my head as each injury pounds its pain. Gabriel cradles me as I cry, unable to stop it. I hear footsteps, voices, orders and shouts and then I’m being placed into the back of a car, Gabriel beneath my head as I lay in his lap. Devon is at my legs, holding them. He reaches for my wrist, fingers on my pulse.

“Go!” He orders.

Atlas slams on the gas.

I don’t remember the car journey, but I do remember being moved from

the car, the pain again at being jostled around and then there's a bed under my back and people in blue scrubs and something sharp stabs me in the arm and then I fall asleep.



AMELIA

Words like shock, nerve damage and extensive injuries swirl around the space I lay in. I only see darkness, only feel the softness of a bed under me but it was warm, and it felt safe so I let myself drift off again.

When I wake the second time something lays on top of my hand and the only thing that makes a noise in the room is a beep to my left, but it was dark.

I try to move my hand, trying to dislodge whatever it was on top of it.

It moves and someone uncurls themselves abruptly, “Amelia?”

Gabriel. It was Gabriel. I reach for him, feeling tubes and wires holding me back. Wait my leg was elevated. I struggle to do anything but then he’s right there, his big hands cradling my face, his face, darkened in shadow but there, right fucking there.

“*Mondo mia*,” he breathes before his mouth is on mine, kissing me, my mouth, my cheeks, my chin. Dampness hits my skin.

“Don’t cry,” I rasp, voice rough from disuse.

“I’m so sorry, Amelia. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is my fault. I should have known. I should have confronted him when I had my suspicions.”

“Where’s Atlas?”

“He’s getting coffee, hasn’t left here since we brought you in.”

“He killed Asher, Gabriel,” I whisper, “He’s in a lot of pain.”

“I know.” He rests his brow on mine, “I know.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Four days.”

My eyes widen, “What!?”

“You were hurt, Amelia, badly.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...” I trail off.

“You’re what!? Why the fuck are you apologizing?”

“Well,” I shrug, wincing when I feel muscles twinge.

“No Amelia,” He sighs, “No. Jesus, I thought I lost you. Again!”

I sift through the memories, the hits I’d taken, the slice from a knife on my arm and... between my legs. My ankle.

I swallow hard.

I wiggle a little and suck in a sharp breath, feeling how tender and sore my sex was.

He’d hit me. I felt it split.

I grit my teeth as the swarm of memories push in. The pain and the blood.

“You’re okay,” Gabriel soothes, “You’re okay. I’m here.”

“What did he do?”

“You’ve got a broken ankle,” Gabriel swallows, “In two places, and a fractured cheekbone. Your arm needed stitches.” He pulls back, distancing himself as he looks me over, “Bruises, cuts but um...”

I squeeze my eyes closed.

“He hit you and the impact, because of the rings he was wearing cut you quite deeply. They’ve repaired the damage and don’t think there will be nerve damage, but you lost a lot of blood.”

He’s completely pulled away now, his face twisted, “Gabriel?”

I’ve never seen the man unsure.

“He wanted to make me suffer,” Gabriel murmurs as he nods, “He used you. Hurt you.”

“Please don’t...” I breathe, knowing where his mind was going, what he was prepared to do.

His eyes snap to mine, “Amelia, this happened because of me. It could

happen again except next time, they might kill you. Rape you.”

I shake my head, “That could happen anyway, Gabriel.”

“No. No it wouldn’t have if I didn’t take you in the first place.”

“Is Lincoln safe?”

“My mother took him out the city for a few days, they’re in Disney at the moment with my mother’s bodyguard.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Silence falls between us and I could feel my heart breaking inside my chest. I let it come, let myself feel the pain. “Gabriel,” I cry, “Please.”

“I can’t do that again, Amelia. I can’t watch that happen to you again. This would be the best option.”

“You are not leaving me!” I shout through the tears, “You are not!”

“You think I want to!?”

“I don’t know, Gabriel,” I snap, “It seems like you’re running away.”

“Don’t!” He growls, “Don’t do that!”

“You wanted me, Gabriel. You told me you loved me,” I taste my tears on my lips, “But you’re running. This is your life Gabriel, and it’s not safe but you wanted me and now what? You don’t?”

“No baby, no,” He lunges, grabbing my face, “I can’t bear to live with myself if you were to be hurt again. I listened to you scream, Amelia and I couldn’t do anything.”

“I thought we were going to die,” I whisper softly, leaning into his hand, “And you know what I thought?”

“What?”

“That if I did, it wasn’t so bad. It was horrific and I’m going to need help but no matter what he did, I still loved you. I still had you. And if I died then, there wasn’t a single thing about us I regretted.”

“Amelia…”

“I’d do it again.”

“I love you, *dio*, I’d burn the fucking world for you!”

“Then don’t leave me, Gabriel, please.”

His brow drops to mine, and he sighs, “You’re my wife, *amore mia*,” He tells me, “I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

“Then don’t Gabriel.” My fingers curl into the lapels of his suit jacket, “Then don’t.”

He kisses me softly.



They discharge me three days later.

Gabriel pushes the wheelchair while Enzo and Devon flank my sides, stoic and letting off this menacing aura that kept people at bay.

The whole three days Gabriel stayed with me. Devon popped in, explaining everything, the breaks in my ankle and cheek, how the healing process would go, but when it came to *that* topic, the air in the room changed.

It was charged with so much aggression I felt it in every pore. Devon spoke through gritted teeth and barely restrained anger for what had been done to me. I was expected to make a full recovery, that the surgeons, who specialized in reconstructive surgery for intimate areas, were renowned for the levels of success they had with traumas.

I was sore and going to the bathroom was uncomfortable, but I'd live.

Gabriel had both bodies collected from the house and the building demolished in the time I'd been in the hospital. Lucas was having a ceremony tomorrow, and while Asher would not, Gabriel had given him a plot in the family cemetery for Atlas's sake.

When we reach the idling SUV at the front of the hospital, Gabriel helps me into the back, handing me through the crutches I'd be using for at least the next six weeks and then climbs in next to me, Devon and Enzo taking the front.

It was a quiet drive but easy. I'd made appointments with a therapist to process the trauma, I wouldn't go through what I had before and leave it until I suffered. I'd work through it now.

Gabriel didn't mention again the thoughts of leaving me and Camille was bringing Lincoln home tomorrow.

I was tired. I ached.

But I was okay.

Gabriel was okay.

At the house, I take the offered crutches and slide my arms through the braces and take the handles, easing myself from the vehicle. I had a bag of meds and several pamphlets I doubted I'd look at to accommodate me.

But I stopped, glancing back at the view of the sea beyond the cliffs and then to the house, and for the first time in a very, very, long time, I felt like I was home.

GABRIEL

I roll my neck back and forth, staring at the line of men in front of me.

I stop at one, cocking my head as I lean down to make myself eye level and grab his chin, “I paid for your sisters college tuition when you first joined me.”

“I’m sorry,” He blubs.

I snatch my hand away, and move to the next and then the next, stopping once more before scoffing, “How’s your mother, Tony?”

“S – she’s good.”

“Medication still working out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And that health care debt?”

“Gone, sir.”

“That’s right,” I nod, “Because I paid it for you.”

“Sir, you have to understand–”

“You betrayed me. My trust, my family, my wife. And me.”

“It was a mistake.”

“Mistakes are deadly in this life, Tony.”

I step back as I stare out to the dark water on the dock. Somewhere far off a vessel horn bellows, drowned by the darkened sky and the rain that plummets from the heavens.

“Stand ready.” I order.

Each man raises their weapon behind the line of traitors. One man for each.

Safety catches click in unison.

“Fire.”

There’s a chorus of gun shots, all mingling into one loud boom that echoes through the container yard and then each body falls.

It wasn’t over.

Talon had found several leaks within my organization, sent me image after image, proof after proof of every single man that stepped against me and my wife. He’d hacked every system he could find, got me every image, document and footage his skills could supply me. And he now had a permanent job in my ranks and consistent money to give his family more.

He’d kept it under lock and key, like I’d asked. Followed leads and sniffed out the ones who had betrayed. If he had been just a day earlier, I would have found out it was Asher long before he had managed to inflict the damage.

I thought of it often. The blood on her frail body, the scream of her pain. It drove me forward, made me thirst for vengeance for her.

The bodies are kicked into the water, concrete blocks already tied to the ankles.

This had been going on for six weeks. They’d all run when they realized they had lost, even the ones who weren’t part of my organization. There were very few left now. It would take me a long time to finally punish them all.

“I’m going home to my wife,” I declare.

No one stops me and the next thing, I am speeding down the road, back towards my house where Amelia waits. It was late, she could be asleep, but that was okay.

She had suffered weeks of nightmares, of tears and pain, I was just happy to watch her in our bed, safe and alive.

I cut the engine out front and head inside, Colt greeting me at the front door. He nods and grins, now back to being Amelia’s full time bodyguard.

Enzo was good but he wasn’t built to look after just one person.

I grab a bottle of wine from the kitchen and two glasses, just in case, and head up, finding my bed empty.

But not the room.

Amelia stands at the wall of windows, a sheer dressing gown hanging from one shoulder, the other side having slipped off and now resting in the crook of her elbow. It was sheer enough to show her naked body underneath.

My mouth watered at the sight, and I glance at her reflection in the glass, somewhat distorted but no less enthralling.

She shifts her shoulders, having seen me enter the room, letting the other side of the gown slip off her shoulder, revealing her bare back and then she drops her arms, the material floating to the floor.

“*Mondo mia*,” I breathe.

“Husband.”

My cock twitches.

I devour her nakedness with my eyes, her curves, all her scars, that perfectly plump ass and her long legs, her ankle now out the cast. She still didn't bare weight on it much, I could see that in her positioning right now and she had recovered in that space between her legs. But I didn't know if her nerves had been repaired. I didn't know if she could still feel me.

I swallow, the regret still burning hot and heavy inside of me.

“It's okay,” She says, sensing the shift. “Let me show you.”

She turns to me, baring herself. Her skin glowed in the low lighting of the room, and she smiled at me, eyes twinkling with a mischief I hadn't seen on her before.

She makes her way to the bed, climbing onto the mattress while I remain still.

I watched her as she parted her legs, showing me that soft pink centre and then she reached between her thighs, her delicate fingers parting her folds and dipping down, circling her entrance.

“I thought about you,” She breathes.

“When?”

“When I touched myself today. I thought about that night after the casino. What you did. How I felt.”

My fingers tighten on the bottle in my hand.

She plays with herself, circling her fingers through her pussy and then stops at her clit, head rolling back as she applies a little pressure there, a sigh escaping her lips.

“I remembered what the whiskey tasted like coming from your mouth,” She whispers breathlessly before she reaches across and plucks the vibrator from the side that I hadn’t noticed there before. She switches it on and presses it to herself, groaning at the initial sensation.

“Amelia,” I growl.

“Gabriel.”

I cross the room in quick strides, discarding the bottle and the glasses to the floor and climbing in between her legs. “Let me.”

She switches off the toy and meets my eyes, her own dark with lust.

“I’ve missed you, Gabriel.”

I bury my face between her legs, tasting her intoxicating musky flavor on my tongue.

“Fuck!” She cries.

I kiss and I suck and lick, tasting every inch of her, punching my tongue into her before bringing it back up and swirling it around her clit. She bucks against my face, her arousal coating my chin, my lips and I take more. I swallow it down.

I slide a finger into her, the warmth of her cunt wrapping around it, “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“Gabriel,” She growls, “*Fuck me.*”

“*Cazzo.*”

I strip as quickly as I can, landing between her thighs as I take her mouth, giving her a taste of herself, gently pushing my aching cock against her tight entrance.

She widens her thighs, “please,” she begs.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I grind out.

“You won’t,” She claws at my shoulders.

I ease myself inside of her, gritting my teeth at the feel of her cunt enveloping my cock, at how well she takes me.

I drop my head to her shoulder, trying to steady my breathing as I fill her.

She wraps her legs around me, “You feel so good, Gabriel.”

I roll my hips, “I’ve fucking missed you.”

“Me too,” she breathes heavily, lifting her hips.

“Tell me, okay?”

She nods.

I pull out and slide back in, slow, steady, her pussy stretching around me. I watch her face, at the pleasure twisting her features, lips parted, eyes closed.

“Look at me, *moglie mia*,” I order.

Her blue eyes snap open, finding mine, “I’m looking.”

“Open,” I order as I grab her chin, keeping her head where it is. Her lips part and she shows me her tongue.

“Good girl,” I lick across her bottom lip before I lean back and spit onto her waiting tongue.

She swallows it down, groaning, cunt fluttering around my hard cock.

“Such a fucking good girl, aren’t you, *amore mia*.”

“Yes.” She whimpers.

“I know you are,” I lean back, “That’s why you’re going to get on your knees for me.”

She obeys immediately, bringing herself from my cock to be able to turn. I grab her hip, lifting slightly as I position myself and yank her down, my cock sliding home. She cries out, reaching back to grab my thighs with her nails.

“Yes, fuck,” she moans.

I reach around her front, hesitating for just a minute before she snatches my hand and places it on her, her own finger guiding mine.

“Just like that,” she moans.

She lifts and moves herself against me, breasts bouncing, breaths sawing from her lungs as I roll my fingers against her clit and she rocks against me.

“I’m going to come,” she tells me.

I thrust forward hard, hitting that sweet spot. I wasn’t going to do that thing I knew would make her squirt but soon, when I was confident in her healing I would have her drenching my thighs again. I fuck into her, burying myself while worshiping that sweet bundle of nerves.

She cries out as her pussy begins to spasm, her climax pumping through her. I fuck her through it until I peak and then roar as I come, emptying myself into her, filling her with me.

Spent, I collapse down next to her, dragging her to me.

“*Dio*,” I pant, “I love you, *mondo mia*.”

She chuckles, “I love you too.”

I roll her until she’s facing me, brushing back her sweat soaked hair, “My wife.”

“Always.”

I kiss her gently.

“I brought us wine,” I tell her, “Are you thirsty?”

She smirks, cocking a brow, “Unless you’re spitting it into my mouth.” Her tongue traces her bottom lip, “I don’t want it.”

Epilogue

AMELIA

The house and gardens swam with people, faces I recognized and some I didn't. Every official was here and every single local celebrity.

The dress felt like a dream on my body, perfectly made by Sierra and I finally had a chance to wear it. Sierra had become my closest friend and her talent and skill, it felt right wearing the dress I designed and she created. I could see her now, as I stand at the patio doors, looking out into the garden that had been transformed for the evening with pop up bars and a gazebo, a band playing with the cliff top view behind them.

It had been Gabriel's idea. A second reception, he'd called it, seeing as our first ended in blood and death.

He slides up next to me, arm snaking around my waist to pull me close, "You, *moglie mia*, are stunning."

I glance down at his black tux, fitted and tailored to his broad and muscled shape and my mouth waters. We had guests to entertain and conversations to have, I tell myself, I couldn't stand here and picture my lethal husband, naked and hard, pounding into me while I screamed, over and

over...

“Ah, ah, Amelia,” He kisses my temple, “Keep those dirty thoughts going. I want to play some later.” And then he walks off, leaving me with a wink and smirk.

I shake my head.

I find Sierra, grabbing us both drinks from the server that wanders around with a tray of champagne.

“You look so good,” She smiles up at me, touching my arm, “So good.”

It was more than the dress. More than my make-up and hair. I was happy.

I close my eyes against the sting of tears, “Thank you.”

“Lincoln!”

My head snaps around, finding Camille and Enzo chasing my son as he toddles through the crowd in a tiny little suit. I laugh when he beelines for me, this big, chubby smile on his face. I pluck him from the ground and clutch him to my chest, “My boy,” I whisper, “I love you.”

“Momma,” he babbles.

I kiss his cheek, but he wiggles relentlessly so I put him down, “I’ve got him,” Camille beams, kissing my cheek, “I’ve missed doing this.”

I laugh, “Thank you.”

“Always,” She smiles at me before chasing my son again, her laugh infectious.

Enzo grunts at me, earning an eyeroll from Sierra before he kisses my cheek and too, disappears.

The band moves into a slower song.

“Dance with me?” The voice is not Gabriel’s.

“Atlas,” I gasp.

He dips his head, “Amelia.”

I take his offered hand, too stunned to do much else as he guides us onto the dancefloor and sets our position. It was gentle and polite, a hand on my waist, the other in my own and he moves us slowly to the music.

I look into the eyes that still swim in pain.

“I’m sorry, Atlas.” I whisper.

“Are you okay?” He asks.

I nod, “I am.”

“Then I’m not sorry, Amelia. I miss my brother. I hate myself. But I’m not sorry.”

“Atlas...”

“It’s okay.”

We dance for a few minutes in silence, “Why did you do it?”

Atlas sighs, “I hate that I was forced into this. Hate it. I lost my mother and everything I had known. But Gabriel had been kind to us when we grew up, treated us like family. There were rules and traditions that should have stopped him, but he didn’t listen and when he took over from Lucas, he made us prominent figures, something that hadn’t been done before. I respected him and I knew he looked at us as pure brothers, not the half-brothers we were.”

“Gabriel does love you.”

“In his way. Asher didn’t see that. He saw what was taken rather than what was gained. Our mother didn’t want us.”

“I’m sorry.”

He smiles down at me, “I know you are Amelia,” He nods, “But he didn’t see what I did. I knew that he was straying, I didn’t know the extent, but I knew. I was mad, mad at Gabriel and this family. At the strain and the ridiculous rules but it was family. I would never turn my back on it. If I had known Asher was doing what he was doing, I would have done something.”

“I believe you.”

“I miss him.”

I swallow, eyes stinging.

“But what he did was unforgiveable. Even if it wasn’t against our own brother, what he did to you...” His words trail off and he dips his head.

“Atlas,” I force him to look at me, “I am okay. I promise. It’s over.”

“It hurts Amelia.”

My heart shatters for him, breaks apart and I knew I’d never forget what he had done. I squeeze the hand that holds mine, “I will say it again, Atlas, thank you. I’m not dismissing what had been done to get us here, but I thank you for saving *his* life. My life.”

“You love him.”

“Always.”

“You’ll be the change we need,” He smiles but its not bright or warm, accepting.

“May I have my wife?” Gabriel’s voice cuts through us.

Atlas smiles, “Of course.”



Gabriel

I take her hand from my brothers, having watched them for the past five minutes. They'd gained a friendship in the past weeks, a strange, understanding friendship that I knew they both needed.

But I wanted my wife, in that pretty dress, that smile directed at me.

I guide her into a dance, her head tipping back in a laugh as I move us across the dancefloor.

"You are truly stunning, Amelia."

Her cheeks darken, "Thank you."

I dip my head and lick up the column of her throat. She turns her face into my ear, "I'm not wearing any underwear."

I freeze, instantly growing hard, "What?"

"I'm naked under this dress, Gabriel."

A low growl seeps from my throat, "My brother just danced with you." I grind out, "And you're not wearing anything under that dress?"

"Nope," She pops the P.

"Amelia!"

"Yes, husband?" She smiles up at me sweetly.

"You have five minutes."

She cocks a brow.

"Get your ass into my office. Take off your dress and wait in my chair."

"Or what?"

"Do you want to find out?"

She steps from my grasp, smiling, "Maybe."

But she heads in the direction of the house, throwing a look to me over her shoulder.

I wait the five minutes I gave her, and then I follow.

When I slip into my office, shutting the door behind me I find her exactly where I told her to be, gloriously naked save for her heels that are propped up on my desk.

I throw my jacket off, loosening my tie as I walk towards her and then cage her to the chair.

There was so much brightness inside my chest, so much feeling and

warmth. I felt everything for this woman. Everything I never thought I'd get.

But I knew what my wife liked, so I dip my head towards hers, kissing her mouth before I come away again and dip my eyes down her naked body.

“Now tell me,” I whisper, “Would you like to be my whore tonight, or my wife?”

Thank you

Thank you so much for reading No Saint! I hope you enjoyed Gabriel & Amelia's story as much as I adored writing it! These characters spoke to me in a way I can't describe and you taking the time to read them means everything.

So thank you.

If you enjoyed this book and want to read more from me, you can find all my books on Amazon and all available in Kindle Unlimited.

So what's next?

Well, you didn't really think I was going to leave these characters here, did you? While No Saint is a standalone and will remain so, I couldn't just abandon some of these characters and Atlas's story will be coming next, an all new, dark standalone romance.

All the Broken Pieces is coming early 2023!

Keep your eyes peeled for more information coming soon and news on Enzo and Devon too!

Happy reading, everyone!

Ria, xo

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Acknowledgement

I'm going to start this by giving a HUGE shoutout to my husband. Honestly, my love, I have no idea how I would get through all of this without you. My rock. My inspiration. My all.

Now to my girls.

I feel so Privileged to have the people I have surrounding me. I never expected to gain the friendships, support and love when I first started and now I have it, I have no idea what I would do without it.

So I'll start with Amanda. The batman to my robin, the nacho to my cheese, there hasn't been a single day that has gone by without us talking in whatever capacity. You've stuck with me through this entire book, you have provided me with support and love and courage. On the days when my head was against me you helped me through and hyped when I needed that push.

Thank you, batman, for being one of my best friends, for your love...for everything.

Claudia - bish we all know I can't live without you. A constant for me, my personal cheerleader, a rock I never knew I needed and one of my absolute bestfriends. If an ocean wasn't between us we would be sipping those cocktails by the pool talking all things book boyfriends.

Gabriel was a character you whole heartedly supported and demanded the moment I mentioned him and here he is! Thank you babe, if you ever leave me, know I'm stalking you... just sayin'.

Abbie - the last time I included you, you got emotional on me, is that going to happen again? I have so many thank you's to give you. From alpha reading to your social media advice. We ave talked non-stop for months and if I lost you now, I'd be lost.

And just so you know, the word Treacle has not left my head in weeks!
But thank you, TREACLE!

Beky, Stacy, Rissa, Kay, - honorable mention to you ladies for keeping me entertained and smiling through this whole process with your wild conversations. You ladies are special and thank you for coming into my life when you did.

We're not going to forget my absolute boo, Charly for how quickly she got through this book and helped me decide a couple of final touches or the two hour long phone calls when they were only supposed to be 5 minutes!!
You the real MVP babe.

And to my street team, for sticking with me from start to finish, for providing support and love and help when I needed it the most. I've only been here a little over a year and I'm still learning but you ladies fully support and push me the right way. Thank you.

And finally, to you the readers... it baffles me still, just over a year later that there are so many of you who want to read my stories out of the thousands upon thousands out there. But thank you.
Thank you for choosing this one.

Happy reading my loves!
Ria xo

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR!

Ria Wade is an author of dirty, dark and dangerous romance. A lover of filthy taking anti-heroes and sassy AF queens! She's always had a love of reading and decided to pursue her passion of words in late 2021 and hasn't looked back since! Little Bird and Twisted King, Ria's debut dark romance was the start of something amazing and she now has plans for several new series and spin-offs with some of your favorite characters as the main stars!

She currently resides in the UK with her husband, daughter and 2 dogs. You can often find her daydreaming or procrastinating with her head buried in a book!