

ALL THE
BROKEN
PIECES

A DARK STANDALONE ROMANCE

RIAWILDE

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RIA WILDE

Author Note

All the Broken Pieces is a dark standalone romance and is intended for mature readers.

This book includes themes, tropes, & content commonly found in the dark romance genre, this includes violence (including violence & abuse against the FMC - not by MMC), dub-con, grief, loss & memories that include an intended SA (not against MCs).

This is intended for readers 18+

This book also includes heavy explicit content which include rope play, spitting, spanking, sensory play, praise & degradation

There is light, even in the darkest of places...

PREFACE

I hadn't expected it to happen like this.

Falling in love with my stepbrother was the worst thing I could do and yet, I couldn't help it. He held my whole heart inside that unforgiving fist of his, owned me completely and irrevocably, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

And as he drives into me, his mouth fused to mine, holding me as close to his body as I can physically get, I can only feel our ties binding tighter and tighter.

My body soars with pleasure, my skin alight as he brings me to the peak, his cock sliding in deep, his tongue kissing me with the heat of a thousand suns.

"Atlas," I whimper into his mouth when he finally comes up for air.

Fiery hazel eyes clash with mine and while I know he would never admit it, never speak the words, there's something in his gaze that reflects my own, but the difference between us is that, within those soulful eyes is years' worth of pain, of heartbreak and longing. Years' worth of suffering.

"I know," He rasps against my lips, "I know, Firefly."

He was never going to give me his heart, not the way I wanted it, and I was going to have to settle for all the broken pieces instead.

ATLAS

Her hand, soft against my rough palm keeps the darkness at bay, even just for a little while.

The door to the hotel room clicks closed and then I'm on her, pressing her back into the door while I claim her mouth with mine, her hands climbing up my chest only to fist the material and pull me in closer. She tastes like damn sunshine and light, everything I wasn't, and the reason she had caught my attention in the first place.

She had stood out like a beacon for my depraved soul, something to consume and devour, to taste her light and her happiness because it satiated the numb beast inside of me.

I had to have her. Even just once.

So, I approached her, watched the way her face lifted with her smile and her brown eyes lit up. She was stunning.

Devastatingly so.

My thigh wedges between her own and she grinds down against it, her warm pussy rubbing against my material clad leg as my hands go to the thin straps of her dress and begin to pull them down, my fingers brushing against her soft skin. Her moan echoes inside my head and it only spurs me on harder. I rip the dress from her body and finally step back, taking in the flush on her pale skin, the sweet pink blush staining her chest, her neck, her cheeks. Her eyes are hooded, red lipstick smeared and her breasts heave with each heavy exhale.

I reach for her at the same time she does for me, our bodies clashing together once more, and I drag her further into the

room. The backs of her knees hit the mattress as she falls back, bouncing slightly as she lands and stares up at me while I stand over her.

“Open your legs,” I order in a low growl. Her lips pop open as she widens her thighs, showing me her lace covered sex. I grumble my approval and lean down, hooking my fingers into her panties, dragging them away before I tuck them into my pocket. She was fucking glorious.

Her honey blonde hair fans out beneath her head, satiny soft.

“Take off your bra,” I tell her.

With shaking hands, she leans up and reaches behind her to flick the hooks on the bra strap and then it falls from her chest. My cock strains against the zipper of my pants, aching and hard, and I could feel my heart thumping inside my chest as my eyes scan every inch of her naked flesh.

Fucking devastating.

I want to mar her pretty skin with my palm, redden that plump ass of hers and fill her mouth with me. I want her on her fucking knees, choking on my cock and begging me for more.

Jesus fuck, I could imagine how she might cry, how pretty she would look.

All this fucking sunshine, and it was mine.

I kneel between her legs, never once letting my eyes drift from hers and for a moment she stops breathing, holding it as she waits for what I might do next.

I don't know how she fucked up to end up in my grasp, but I wasn't going to deny it as the gift it was.

I lay my body over hers completely, covering her as I grind my still covered cock into her cunt, my lips kicking up into a half smile at the way her eyes roll back in her skull.

Lightning flashes abruptly as thunder clashes causing her to gasp, startled. I slam my mouth down onto hers, forcing her to widen for me while I continue the endless roll of my hips against her pussy, helping her climb that peak and get ready for me to fuck her so hard she'll remember me for months.

“Please,” she whispers.

I growl at her breathless plea, happy with the way she begs. Hastily, I claw out of my shirt and throw off my trousers, freeing my hard dick. It had been ready from the moment I saw her in that damn casino in the little black dress she was wearing.

She rolls her eyes down the length of me, taking in the muscle and the scars. My fingers flex at my sides while she takes her fill and when her eyes come back to mine, I give her a cruel smile.

She raises her chin, ready to meet me blow for blow.

It was only one night. We would never meet again. We never shared names or details. It was unattached, meaningless sex but I could already tell I was going to want to own her damn pussy.

Her sex glistens with her arousal, dripping and ready, her thighs tensing and toes curling.

So very sensitive and needy.

If I had her for longer, I’d show her exactly how I want it, how I like it, but I wasn’t about to scare the girl with what I wanted from her.

This would be enough for now.

I settle between her legs once more and finally touch her, using two fingers to slide through her folds, parting her and staring at her swollen pink flesh. She writhes beneath my touch, sighing but then her sighs turn into throaty moans as I slowly insert one and then two fingers, pumping my hand into her body.

“So fucking wet for me,” I praise.

“Yes,” she whimpers.

“Needy little thing,” I chuckle as her hips roll against my hand, “You want me to fuck you?”

“God, yes.”

“Beg for it.”

I pause my hand and lean down, running my lips across her cheekbone and down to her ear, “Come on, you want it, you ask for it.”

“Please,” Her fingernails claw at my shoulders.

“Please what?”

“Please fuck me,” she breathes, “God, *please*.”

“What a good girl,” I give her the praise and resume my caress on her cunt, curling my fingers and massaging that sweet little spot just inside.

She grinds into my palm and practically cries when I remove my fingers but then I’m rolling on a condom and lining up the head of my cock to her pussy, my teeth snapping together at the sensation of her tightness enveloping me.

“Goddamn,” I rasp, slowly sheathing myself, torturing myself with my own slow pace. Her hands drop to the mattress and her fingers curl, grasping the sheets as her head tips back and her spine arches. My mouth drops to her rosy nipples, sucking one into my mouth as my hips begin to move.

I wanted to savor this.

Savor this feeling, savor the break it has given me from my nightmares.

“Yes, yes,” she chants.

I knew sex would help; I knew it would take away my plaguing thoughts, but I hadn’t anticipated just how fucking good it would be. With all the women that I had fucked before this girl, they had barely given me the break but this one, this fucking little ball of sunlight, *fuck*, she felt too fucking good.

Too good for me.

I pull out and slam forward, hard, hard enough for our skin to slap together as my teeth clamp down onto her nipple.

She screams and lifts her hips.

I let her breast go and rise, pushing down onto that little soft spot above her groin as I slam into her again. Her cries are like damn music.

She widens her thighs and takes my punishing thrusts, face twisted with pleasure, “I’m going to come.”

“You won’t come until I fucking tell you to,” I command.

She moans and I tilt my face down, seeing the space where our bodies join, watching my cock pump in and out. Fuck she takes me so damn well.

A tingling jolt shoots down my spine and sweat rolls down my temple as the pleasure overtakes my senses. I’m going to come soon.

I hook my fingers on the back of her neck and press my thumbs into each side of her throat, slamming my hips harder and harder with each thrust.

Her hands grab my wrists, nails clawing.

“Come for me,” I growl, “Let me feel that perfect cunt squeezing my cock.”

My thumbs press in just a little harder, teetering on that precarious edge between pleasure and pain and then she detonates, her cry of pleasure echoing within the hotel room and bouncing back to me, drawing my own climax to the front. Her pussy is still convulsing when I empty myself, my groan loud, even to my own ears.

Unhooking my hands, I drop down onto her, nuzzling my nose into the side of her throat and feeling her erratic pulse against my mouth.

I suck her flesh between my lips, reveling in the way she rolls her head to the side to allow me better access and I mark her. I mark her with my teeth and my mouth, branding her, no matter how temporary it might be.

“So you won’t forget me,” I whisper against her ear, pressing a kiss to her cheek before I remove myself and turn my back on her, disappearing into the bathroom.

When I come out ten minutes later my hotel room is empty and gone are all her clothes and belongings.

The musky scent of sex mingled with her citrus fragrance was the only reminder that it was real.

Rolling my neck, I stride to my trousers, tugging them on and smile as my hand reaches into my pocket.

I dangle the red lace panties in front of my face before I bring them to my nose, inhaling her.

Fuck, she would be hard to forget.

ATLAS

The demons were out to play as they always were.

Rain falls heavily on the city of Redhill, much like it had been for days now and with fall now upon us, it would only happen more. The turbulent seas batter the cliffside, the waves violent and unforgiving as it clashes with the earth.

I stare down at them, at how the rock takes each wave and never breaks.

I was soaked through, from head to toe and I'd lost count of how much time I had spent out here watching the storm.

It was almost calming, facing the wrath of the elements especially since everything inside of me was mirroring the storm.

It was never ending.

This torment.

This torture.

My memories are my biggest nightmare, and I can still picture everything from that day.

It was hardly surprising that I would have demons, it was expected since my half-brother, Gabriel, ran this city as the head of the mafia. I've seen death, delivered it and dealt it like money around a poker table. I was no stranger to violence and chaos, and I had a close relationship with pain, but this damn *grief* was eating me alive.

I wince at the clash of thunder that rolls through the clouds above my head, the sound flashing images inside my mind of

my finger on the trigger, the sensation of it compressing, a phantom whisper on my hands.

It had been three months since I put that gun against my own twin brother's head and pulled the trigger.

Three months of nightmares and sickness that has brought me to this spot right now.

I couldn't say I was numb, that would be the wrong description to how I felt but I couldn't name it either. Something shattered inside of me that day and I doubted any of the broken pieces would ever be fixed.

The only thing I'd found to drown out the noise was sex but even that only goes so far, or it did, until I met that pocket sized ball of sunshine in the casino the other night.

I've thought about her far too often and haven't been able to get my dick up with another woman since.

Punishment, I supposed, for taking something that clearly did not belong to me.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Atlas?" Gabriel's voice brings me from my thoughts, and I turn to see him stood next to me. I don't know when he got here or how long he'd been stood alongside me as the weather battered us both.

Was I sure I wanted to do what I was about to do?

No.

Did I feel like I had to?

Absolutely.

There was too much unresolved business, too much water under the bridge. It had actually been Amelia's idea, Gabriel's wife, and I know she and my brother had argued endlessly about it.

My mother was a sore spot for everyone involved.

I nod once as my hand slides into my pocket, fingers curling around that delicate pair of panties I'd decided to stash on my body. I like to have the reminder of her.

Gabriel's hand claps against my shoulder before he turns and strides towards his house to where his wife waits inside.

It was hard to admit my jealousy when it came to my brother and Amelia. It left a bad taste in my mouth, but it was there, nonetheless. I supposed I was jealous of what I was never going to get. I would never get to experience the devotion to another person like they do, the all-consuming love that is clearly between them. It was clear for all to see and together, they had become a single entity. Their love story wasn't exactly fairy tale material but to look at them, no one would quite believe the lengths they had both gone to, to get to where they are now.

My feet crunch through the gravel before I climb into the car and head back home to change. When I'm done, I punch the address the investigator provided for my mother into the GPS. The streets are busy, so it takes a while before the Audi is pulling up to a pair of black wrought iron gates, a large mansion sitting beyond.

It was a far stretch from where me and Asher, my twin brother, had spent the first six years of our lives.

My mother had had an affair with Gabriel's father ending in her pregnancy with me and Asher. He hadn't wanted anything more with my mother and to hide the affair from Camille, his wife and Gabriel's mother, he refused to acknowledge us until Camille found out and he took us from her when we were six.

She gave us up without a fight and never looked back.

I didn't remember much from that time, but I do know the house we lived in was rotten and falling apart and the meals made us sick.

Looks like she finally upgraded.

The gates open automatically, and my tires roll through, crunching over the grit until I stop at the front door and climb out, buttoning up my jacket.

I'm not even at the steps when the door opens.

The man who greets me is aging, with deep creases in his face and silver hair. He was stick thin too, like a strong gust of

wind could knock him right over.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you Simon Quinn?”

“I am.”

“My name is Atlas Saint.”

If possible, the man pales further than his already pasty white complexion.

He promptly shuts the door behind him as if to protect those inside.

“What do you want?”

“I am here to speak with my mother.”

A ruddy sort of color blooms beneath the man’s cheeks, highlighting the burst capillaries on his face. “Your mother?”

I suck my tongue against my teeth, the bitch never told him about us. Figures. “Maria is your wife?”

It was hardly surprising my mother had married Simon. At the ripe old age of seventy-nine, he had a fortune under his belt from his oil business and not many years left with his declining health. My mother was barely fifty and while the trick to trap my father hadn’t worked, it didn’t mean she wouldn’t apply similar tactics for the next man with money and power to walk by.

“She is.”

“Then we are speaking of the same woman.”

“You cannot be her son.”

“I assure you Mr Quinn, Maria gave birth to us thirty years ago.”

“Us?”

“You are wasting my time,” I grit my teeth, “Where is Maria?”

“Get off my property,” the old man spits.

I roll my shoulders, my patience all but gone out the fucking window. I take long, sure strides towards him, standing taller

than the man and looming over him, “Do I need to remind you *who* I am?”

Behind him, the door swings open and the face I hadn’t seen in twenty-four fucking years comes into view as if she hadn’t aged a damn day.

“What is the mean—” she chokes on her words as her eyes snap onto my face.

“Hello mother,” I greet with a cruel smile.

“Asher...”

I laugh.

How often had she mistaken the two of us when were children? I’d lost count but I guess it’ll be easier for her now seeing Asher was buried and rotting in the ground.

“Try again.”

“Atlas?”

“There’s two?” Simon gasps.

“Oh, that’s right, you never told him. Twins. She had twins.”

“Saint. You had a child with the Saint’s!?”

“It was a long time ago,” Maria composes herself, smoothing her hands down the rich material of her clothes. “And a mistake, as you can see, I did not raise them. I was not their mother, and I gave them up.”

A mistake.

“Well now our delightful family reunion is complete, care to invite me inside?”

“You’re not welcome.” Maria spits.

“Maria,” Simon glares at me, “Invite him inside.”

“What!?”

“The *Saint’s* Maria, I don’t need to remind you of who they are.”

I’m not able to stop my smug smile as Maria steps back with her teeth gritted and pushes open the door, “Come on in.” She

spits with venom.

I pause in front of my mother before entering the house, looking down on her much smaller frame. From afar I could believe this venom and hatred and courage but up close, I see it for what it is. Terror. Her eyes shine with it and while she is a good actress, she isn't *that* good. Her hands shake and a sweat has broken out across her brow. Hell, up this close I can see the fine lines she tries to hide under a thick layer of makeup.

Her years were running out and she hadn't gotten what she wanted.

It must terrify her.

She shrinks back beneath my penetrating gaze and if I didn't want out of here as soon as fucking possible, I would've questioned her some more. Figured out why she gave me and my brother up so easily all those years ago, left us to be raised in a house where no one wanted us.

My shoes click on the tiles of the grand foyer. All white walls and mundane artwork greet me inside, the house sterile and lacking. I hear staff moving throughout the room, chatting in muted voices.

"This way, Mr Saint," Simon offers with a hardness to his tone.

I follow him through to an office like room. A large oak desk sits in front of a set of glass doors that look out into a pristine garden where stone sculptures fill the space and trimmed hedges line the border. There was no color, no flowers, as sterile outside as it was in.

I take a seat on an oversized leather couch opposite the desk, leaning back casually and placing my ankle on my knee. I never stop watching as Simon shuffles around the desk, subtly using his hand against it to brace himself before he sits carefully into his high back chair. He tips his chin and stares at me.

Maria stands in the doorway, hands clasped in front of her.

“Gabriel sent you?” Simon asks, plucking a stack of papers from the desk and tapping them so they fall into line, “I understand our fee is late this month.”

This was just getting better and better.

The Saint’s had ordered the wealthiest of businesses to pay a commission every month which was then poured back into the city. Simon Quinn, with his billions in the bank was one of the highest payers. Of course, it wasn’t one sided, the Saint’s provided them with more business, publicity and made sure the scum that run the businesses were able to do whatever the fuck they wanted while the city and the police looked the other way.

It was a partnership.

“As you can understand,” Simon continues, “In these times, many businesses are suffering losses.”

This was interesting.

I hadn’t said a word as to why I was here, and yet this man was spilling all his secrets.

I hold all the power in this room and by the looks of my mother’s face, she knew it too.

“In today’s climate, with countries refusing to pay the premiums and consumers choosing electric and hybrid vehicles we’ve lost nearly a quarter of our revenue. With that and the need for greener consumption, we’ve yet to come up with a suitable solution that will generate what we have lost. I can assure you Mr Saint, that our commission will be paid, in full, by the end of the quarter.”

Gabriel hadn’t mentioned anything about the late commission this morning, though he knew exactly where I was going and who I was seeing. I had to wonder why.

“Please pass this message back to Gabriel.”

“Simon,” I stop him, “I am not here about the commission.”

His face pales.

“And this meeting is not for you. It is for her.”

“Maria? Why!?”

“It is a family matter.”

My mother scoffs.

I turn my gaze on her, “Asher is dead.”

Her eye twitches.

“I killed him.”

Her face remains blank of emotion but there was something in her eyes, something that told me there was more than that carefully worn mask, and I had to wonder how much she knew about Asher.

I open my mouth to say just that when a familiar flash of honey blonde hair catches my attention from behind my mother’s back.

As if sensing my presence, the woman pauses and looks towards the open door where my mother stands and then our eyes clash.

Well holy shit...

I stand, keeping our eyes pinned together as her lips drop open and realization dawns on her face.

“You...” She breathes.

My eyebrow raises and a smile pulls on my mouth, “Me.”

EMERY

I was going to be late.

Quickly plucking the brush from the vanity, I drag it through my hair and fluff up the locks before tightening the scarf around my neck, adjusting the material to cover the fading bruise on the side of my throat.

The reminder of how it came to be gives an instantaneous reaction, heat pools deep and low, making my thighs ache. I'd never been so thoroughly fucked, and I'd certainly never come as hard as I did then.

The nameless man was forever ingrained in my head and something I was clinging to, and will no doubt, cling to for a long time to come.

If all I had were memories to keep me happy then I'd take all the good ones I could get.

I had to be optimistic that this wasn't as bad as it seemed. That what my father has planned for me, and my future, is all going to turn out as it should. But it sucked. It really fucking sucked.

An arranged marriage was not how I planned to meet my future husband. I wanted sparks and fireworks, I wanted to fall madly in love with a man of my choice.

But my father had taken the cards of fate away, and instead thrown me into the world of power and contracts. If my mother were still alive, she would have had his throat for it.

It didn't matter now. My mother was dead, and I had Maria trying to take her place. They'd only been married a year, but it was long enough for that woman to change my father from

the man he used to be to this stranger who was forcing my hand and dismissing my future.

Shaking it off, I dash out the guest room and take the stairs, careful not to break a heel on the unforgiving marble. I had a meeting down at the shelter with some potential sponsors and I couldn't afford to be late.

As I step into the foyer at the bottom of the stairs, voices from my father's front office catch my attention. It's low enough that I can't make out the words but there was something in the tone that had a prickling sensation rushing down my spine.

I turn to face the noise, my eyes clashing with a familiar set of fiery hazel ones and my mouth drops open.

Was I thinking about him so much I had just hallucinated the man!?

Realization dawns a moment too late as he stands, unfolding all six feet something of him as he pins me with his stare.

It wasn't an illusion.

The same man I fucked out of spite because my father had just told me I was to marry a stranger was the same man currently holding a meeting with him and my stepmother.

"You..." The word spills from my lips on a breath.

His eyes travel over the length of me, taking in the perfectly pressed tailored, blush pink suit dress, following the curves of my body as if memorizing where his hands had touched, then all the way down my legs to the pair of stilettos on my feet.

"Me." He replies.

"How do you know my daughter!?" My father spits, "Emery, how do you know this man!?"

I didn't even know *who* this man was!

"I—" I stutter, "He..."

The man does not take pity on me. He crosses his arms and cocks his head, hazel eyes bouncing between the woman that married my dad and me.

“We, um, met in passing,” I feel heat rising to my cheeks, “I don’t actually know him.”

The man smirks as he reaches into his pocket, pulling out some red material before he brings it to his nose to inhale deeply. The blood drains from my face as I realize just what it is he is holding.

My stolen underwear.

Oh. My. God.

“I guess I should introduce myself,” He says, tucking that bit of lace back into his pocket. Maria glares at him with enough fire to rival a dragon but his eyes, they’re all for me. “I’m Atlas and I suppose I’m your stepbrother.”

If I wasn’t feeling faint before, I definitely was now.

No this couldn’t be happening. The universe cannot be this damn small and since when did Maria have a son!?

My phone buzzes with my alarm, finally dragging me from my stupor. “I have to go.”

“That would be wise,” My father tells me, shooting another glare at Atlas which falls flat.

My father was old, much older than people expected him to be considering I am only twenty-six to his seventy-nine and while I could remember how stern and angry he could get when I was younger, his age diminishes the fire I think he hopes to achieve with his look alone. Atlas barely even blinks at the man, instead choosing to watch me with a predatory focus, a hunter locked onto its prey.

“Do not forget you have a dinner with your fiancé tonight, Emery,” Maria reminds me, “Do not be late.”

My eyes close and I swallow, “Yes, Maria.”

I don’t look back at Atlas or my father, instead I flee, feeling my heart hammering inside my chest like a rampaging bull and my brain scrambling to keep up.

I climb into my car, trying to swallow down the bad taste in my mouth at both the revelation and my stepmother’s words.

He was *not* my fiancé. He was just a man my father had chosen because he had the biggest pockets.

My car peels out of the driveway and only when I'm at the gates, waiting for them to open do I look back in the rear-view mirror, seeing three figures on the porch.

"Come on," I bang on the steering wheel, waiting for the gates to fully open. I wanted out of here before Atlas could catch up to me.

I wasn't going to lie and deny how good that man was with his cock and how good he made me feel but had I known, would I have still slept with him?

I never expected to see him again nor would I have been able to, considering where my future was heading. It was why I left, without my panties and still breathless while he was cleaning up in the bathroom.

We shared no names. No identities.

It was instant, mutual attraction and we both knew what we were getting into.

Wait...

Did he know who I was when he approached me?

All these questions roll around inside my head as I press on the gas and speed from my father's house. This wasn't what I needed when I had a big meeting ahead of me.

The shelter meant more to me than anything else.

Twenty minutes later I pull into the lot outside of the shelter, the loud chorus of barking like music on my soul. It calms the riot of nerves taking flight in my stomach and I climb out, breathing in the crisp fall air. The rain had stopped but the sky remained a deep murky gray, the clouds tumbling with the wind.

I rush through the doors, letting the warmth of the place heat my chilled bones. Della sits behind the counter at reception filing paperwork for some recent adoptions we've had, and she smiles at me as I walk through.

I had five minutes before the sponsors were due to arrive.

My mother had started this shelter five years before she had died. It was coming into its tenth year since opening and has seen more than five thousand dogs, cats and other animals come through these doors. We were a no kill shelter, and we took on pets from across the country. My mother was a huge animal lover and always had been. It was my father that funded the charity, naming it *The Nora Quinn Sanctuary and Rescue*, after my mother. Over the years, especially since she died, my father has been putting less and less money into it. His company is supposed to be the main sponsor and made a pledge to donate ten percent of all profits to this shelter and any sister shelters set up under its branch.

Since my mother's passing, it has been running on donations and the odd sponsor, my father's money barely covering the employee wages. But it was money for something I loved so dearly, and I was grateful for everything the shelter received.

I set myself up in the boardroom before I head to the wall of windows that look out into the grounds of the building. Down below dogs wander freely, playing with the staff or each other as potential new owners interact with the animals. We had a highly successful adoption rate, and it was something I remained proud of everyday.

"Miss Quinn," Della calls from the door, "Your meeting has arrived."

"Thank you, Della," I smile, "Show them through."

Heading over to the door, I listen out for the sounds of footsteps and when they approach, I step out the door, nodding in greeting at the two men walking towards me.

"Mr Jacobson," I shake the older man's hand, "a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Likewise, Miss Quinn," he smiles as the younger of the two takes his place, offering me his hand also, "This is my son, Kieran."

"Pleasure," he gives me a dazzling smile, showing pearly teeth and his hand holds onto mine for a little bit too long to be

called professional. I gently coax my hand from his, gesturing them into the room as I follow behind.

“I trust the journey was good,” I ask.

“Slow, as always in this city,” Mr Jacobson grumbles. “Should we get straight to it then? After all, I’m not getting any younger.”

“Of course,” I smile, taking a seat at the head of the table and clicking on the projector behind me. I fall right into the introductory speech, memorizing all our numbers and stats over the years and how the shelter has grown more than triple in size since its opening ten years ago. It’s as I’m falling into the current sponsors we are working with that Mr Jacobson cuts in.

“I’ve heard all this before.” He tells me.

My brows tug down, “Excuse me?”

“Your mother, may she rest in peace, she gave a similar speech five years ago.”

“Oh,” I stutter, running through my pages in front of me looking to see if I had missed something. I was certain they hadn’t been sponsors before and there was no mention of them in the books.

“You won’t find us in there, Miss Quinn, we didn’t sponsor and that is not why we are here today.” Mr Jacobson nods to his son who stands.

“My father and I decided to visit today in the hopes of relooking at the deal we offered to your mother on our last meeting. With fresh eyes,” he smiles at me, “And a new perspective, we feel as if it is the right time for the *NQS & R* to step into the future and start looking at further potential.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following.”

“We would like to buy the sanctuary, Miss Quinn.”

“What!?”

“We would like—”

“I heard what you said! It’s a charity, Mr Jacobson, you can’t just buy it!”

“Everything can be bought.”

“This cannot!”

“I think you should hear us out, Emery.” Kieran says.

I narrow my eyes at him and the use of my name as if we were friends. “It is not for sale.”

“In the past two years your donations and sponsors have steadily declined,” he says, pulling out graphs and tables that he should not have access to, “you can see, in the last quarter alone you have lost almost five hundred thousand dollars in sponsorships.”

“That is only because our main sponsor pulled the deal!”

“And you have yet to replace them. How long can this sanctuary stay open if it can’t pay its staff or feed the animals?”

“I have opportunities lined up to cover the losses.”

Mr Jacobson presses his lips together and quirks a brow, calling my bluff.

I was putting a lot on today’s meeting, a lot on these two men to help keep the shelter open but they didn’t want to help, they wanted to buy. I couldn’t sell this place. I just couldn’t.

“With the declining climate, Emery, this shelter maybe has a year, two tops before those doors close.”

“That’s not true.”

“We would like to stop that from happening,” he continues as if I said nothing, “We would purchase the shelter and take on the contracts with your sponsors as well as adding our own. We value the work you’ve put into this place and would love to keep you on the board of course.” He slides a piece of paper towards me, “Just look at that list, Emery, these are all companies and bodies willing to pour money into this place if we were to own it.”

“You? The Jacobson’s?”

Kieran nods.

I look through each name, my blood running colder and colder as I place each of these to what they really are.

These were pharmaceuticals, beauty companies, perfume, soaps... these were companies that tested on animals, kept them in cages and experimented on them. These were murderers not sponsors.

“Get out.” I growl.

“Excuse me?”

I slam a hand down on the table, “You think I’m stupid?” I ask, “Do you believe me blind to who these people are? You don’t want to buy this shelter or sponsor out of the goodness of your heart. You want to use it and all the animals that come through those doors!”

“It is a way of life, Emery,” Mr Jacobson stands abruptly, “There would be no makeup after all to cover that pretty face of yours without these companies.”

“Get out!” I yell at them, “Get the fuck out now!”

“It would only be a handful of the animals,” Kieran placates, “Not all of them.”

I couldn’t believe this. I could not fucking believe this at all!

“It is not for sale.” I grit out.

“Now, Miss Quinn,” Mr Jacobson says, “You are letting your emotions get the better of you. If you would calm down, we could discuss the details.”

“There is nothing to discuss.”

“This is why women shouldn’t run businesses,” Kieran says under his breath but loud enough to make sure I heard it.

My mouth drops open at the audacity but before I can say anything, his father is running his mouth again, trying to explain just how much money is at stake here, just how much money my animal’s lives are worth.

“Please leave.” I try again. But they don’t. They continue, on and on, round and round, pressing in harder, getting closer.

“I believe she asked you to leave,” A loud voice booms into the room and in it was a current of malice, of undeniable anger and I swear the temperature drops in the room. The two men ahead of me still and glance back but I knew who was there without seeing him. That voice had been haunting my thoughts since I saw him at my father’s house this morning. “So, you can leave quietly, or I can escort you out. Up to you, gentlemen.”

“And who are you exactly?”

He laughs, deep and rough, “Apologies,” Atlas didn’t sound even remotely sorry, not with the edge of something dangerous sharpening his tone, “Let me introduce myself, my name is Atlas. Atlas Saint.”

ATLAS

I watch Emery over the men in the room, watch as the surname sinks into her brain and she puts the connections together. I see the moment she realizes exactly who I am.

This day was just full of revelations for her.

Granted, I hadn't expected to find the woman I fucked and couldn't stop thinking about in my mother's house or that she was my stepsister, but worse things have happened and now that I had her name, I would have everything on her. Emery Quinn was now mine to fucking play with.

And that right there was these fuckers first mistake. I don't share and I don't play well with others.

"With all due respect, Mr Saint, this is a business matter that has nothing to do with you or your family." The old man sputters, turning red in the face.

"Actually, all business within this city has everything to do with us but you're very well aware of that."

"And your brother?" The young one crosses his arms like a delinquent child, "he knows you're here stopping the sale of a business he would get a cut of?"

"I don't give a fuck about whether my brother knows or not," I tell him, "And it isn't me stopping business. The lady said no."

"She doesn't know what she wants."

"Excuse you," Emery spits, shaking her head out of the fog and taking her eyes from me, "Don't speak like you know me. My answer is final."

“Miss Quinn, I understand this is a big decision, so we’ll allow a few weeks for you to decide.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Time to leave,” I growl out.

Neither man is happy about leaving but they know who runs this damn city. I am an extension of Gabriel and one thing they don’t want to do is piss us off. The Jacobson’s are from old money and their pile is large, their hands in every pie they can get but that didn’t mean we couldn’t put them under without even blinking.

When silence falls, I turn back to Emery, watching as she shuffles papers on her desk, acting as if I’m not even here.

When it’s clear I’m not going to leave she finally turns to me, “I appreciate your help.”

I take in her face, her perfect little body tucked neatly into that dress and could picture exactly how it looked underneath. The curves and her softness, her wet cunt and heaving chest. My cock jerks awake at the memory of sinking in deep, my hands twitching to wrap around that delicate throat.

She wouldn’t want me again now.

Not knowing who I am. What I have done. And that wasn’t because I was her stepbrother.

I take careful steps across the room, quirking a brow in curiosity as she shrinks back. Her head tips up to maintain eye contact and her throat works on a swallow but those deep, brown eyes glisten with her memories.

My finger hooks under the scarf she has wrapped around her throat, and I tug, only stopping when her hand shoots up and covers it, keeping it in place, “Don’t.”

“Ashamed, Emery?” I ask in a low tone, inhaling that unique scent of hers. She was too pretty, with her oval face and pink cheeks, her rosy lips parting on a breath.

“I didn’t know.”

“I think that’s fair to say,” I agree, tugging harder and pulling the scarf from her throat, letting it dangle in my hand. The bruise is fading on her neck but undoubtedly there.

“Why did you do that?” She asks.

“The scarf? Because I like seeing my mark on your pretty skin.”

She blushes but shakes her head, “Not that, at the house. With my underwear.”

I feel my mouth stretch into that cruel grin I know makes people squirm. She holds deathly still as I run the tip of my finger up the column of her throat, but her body’s reaction is something she cannot control. She knows how I can make her feel and it’s something she craves even when she doesn’t want to.

“Because games make things interesting,” I tell her, “Could you imagine just how horrified your father and Maria would be knowing you fucked your stepbrother? And while engaged to another man too. Truly shocking, Emery.”

“I’m not engaged to another man.” She spits.

“Is that so?”

“It was a mistake, Atlas. I didn’t expect to see you again.”

A mistake. I was always a mistake.

My hand moves to the back of her neck before I cup it, yanking her into me until her chest bounces off of mine. She gasps, eyes wide as fear leaks into her expression.

She feels good against me, her breasts squashed to my chest, hands gripping me. I’d already known she was too good for me. I deserved nothing and would get nothing.

My hand squeezes her neck but instead of screaming, or lashing out, her body appears to relax against it as if simply accepting her fate.

“Good luck with your fiancé, Emery,” I whisper as I lean down, my lips moving against hers as I speak, “But remember he’ll never make you come the way I did so when he fucks

you and you lay there taking it, remember it was your *mistake* that last made you scream.”

I yank away from her and don't wait for a response, dropping her scarf at the end of the table. Dogs bark from their kennels while the staff of the facility talk in muted tones, no doubt gossiping about what just went down in the boardroom.

Emery doesn't follow, not like I expected her to, and it would be wise if I stay far the fuck away from that woman.



My fist lands a hard punch against the bag, my knuckles already split, sweat streaming down my body. I'd been going at it for hours, over and over, again and again.

My memories and my nightmares have taken up a permanent residence at the forefront of my mind and that day—*that fucking day*—that broke me permanently was playing on repeat.

Asher and I had been inseparable. It was how it went with twins and after we had been taken from our mother, no matter how horrendous it was living with her, we needed each other as children now growing up in a family that didn't want us just as much as our mother didn't. But they had rules and no matter whether we were born from infidelity and not classed as *pure*, we were Saints.

As six-year old's, how were we supposed to know that our entire existence was some sort of crime against the family that ruled Redhill.

Those things stained our upbringing, but we grew eventually, became something more when Gabriel took over as head of the family but Asher... he had changed.

I should have seen it.

I should have noticed the differences in him in those weeks leading up to his death. The late nights and disappearances, the blood stains on his clothes and that haunted look in his eye. There was something wrong and yet I didn't do anything.

Even if I hadn't pulled that trigger, it would have been me who failed him anyway.

My brother Gabriel had always stood by the rules made long ago about family and tradition, it was why he ended up taking Amelia's son and marrying the girl. But I supposed that's where it all went wrong.

The moment Gabriel brought home his now wife and her son was the day something in Asher changed monumentally.

And it took weeks before everything imploded.

I still picture the scene of that day as if it only happened hours ago rather than months.

Still remember how I tracked them all down to that beaten old house at the edge of the city. I saw the bodies and the blood, saw how Amelia lay sprawled on the floor exposed and bleeding after my own brother had beaten her and I *knew* then.

I felt a rage I'd never felt before on that day. Witnessing my sister-in-law and my brother broken at the hands of Asher.

So, I crossed that room and I shot him.

I killed my twin for hurting our family.

And I hated myself.

I grab the bag to stop it swinging and lean my damp brow against it, heaving in breaths as I fight the wave of grief that tries to consume me. The feel of his blood on my hands haunts me to this day, it was warm and wet, and his eyes stared at me lifelessly. But even in death my betrayal stained his face, his vacant eyes seeming to portray a hatred one could only feel after someone they trusted stabs them in the back. The violation of our brotherly bond marred our past and his grave, and because of that, I hadn't been to see him.

I didn't say goodbye because I didn't deserve to.

Sex was a coping mechanism, pain a distraction.

My knuckles bleed onto the hard flooring of the home gym and I sink down into it, wanting to burst right out of my own skin.

My thoughts swim back to Emery, and it just makes me hate myself more.

EMERY

He was tall, broad, packed with lethal muscle and large hands. I'd always been attracted to hands and felt like you could tell a lot about a person by simply looking at them. And his were large, with long skilled fingers and callouses that told a story of a man used to using them. There was something undeniably sexy about the way roughened skin feels against soft and sensitive skin.

Ropes of prominent veins curled around his arms and his titan wide shoulders stretched his suit. Hard pecs and abs with peaks and valleys I wanted to explore with my fingers, my tongue, tapering down into that damn Adonis belt that—let's be honest—made women lose just a few brain cells. Strong thighs, long legs, big... *feet*.

And it was all wrapped up with his beautifully devastating face. His dark features only highlighted those fiery elements hidden in his dark eyes that sat beneath low dark brows. His nose was strong but slightly crooked, a possible break I assumed and then his mouth. That glorious mouth that curled up higher on one side when he smiled, even if it was cruel, and framed by well-groomed hair.

He was a work of art.

He was kissed by beauty so cruel it would ruin.

But *God*, the way he worked my body, treasuring each part of me as if I belonged to him, kissing and tasting and pleasuring. When he finally slid his large cock—

“Emery?”

I jump in my chair, knocking the glasses on the table so they clink together and water sloshes over the side of the one I was holding between my fingers.

I stand abruptly, hitting my legs on the edge of the table as I turn to face the man my father wanted me to marry.

Jack Harris is exactly as I expect him to be.

As the son of the Governor, he was one of the city's most eligible bachelors and how my father or Maria managed to convince him of this union was beyond me.

He's classically handsome, tall and well presented in his gray suit. He has reddish brown hair, styled expertly without a single strand out of place and his face is clean shaven. He is everything that is to be expected of me as the heiress to a billion-dollar oil company.

But it wasn't because of the company I was doing this. I didn't want it. It was because my father threatened to cut off the last of his funding for the shelter if I didn't.

"Hello Jack."

He gives me a smile that doesn't meet his eyes and gestures for me to retake my seat while he moves to the other side of the table.

I stare at his face, at the straight nose and flat mouth, at his blue eyes and trimmed brows and just feel...sick.

He stares right back, taking in the pants and blazer set I had chosen to wear for the evening, and literally curls his nose in disgust when he takes stock of my hair that I had curled, and then pinned up so only a few spirals frame my face. I'd forgone a whole face of makeup and I was in serious need of a manicure after the weeks I'd spent in the shelter, cleaning kennels and playing with the animals but these were all superficial things that I didn't care about.

"As my fiancé there are expectations," he tells me, and my brows shoot up at the tone. This was the man I was supposed to marry, and he was talking to me as if the contract we were to sign between us was no more than simply business. "You are to wear only dresses or skirts from now on."

“Excuse me?”

“Your mother—”

“Maria is not my mother.”

“Expectations, Emery,” he repeats, “Do not speak over me.” I had nothing to say, no retort because I was stupefied by him, at how this whole date had started. I guess I had to appreciate he wasn’t hiding who he was.

“As I was saying, your *mother* and I have discussed this in length.” I grind my teeth at the use of the word mother again but bite my tongue, glancing around the restaurant. It was fancy and expensive, low lit with classical music gently playing throughout the building, “She had promised me I would be getting a good girl. Was she wrong?”

He waits and cocks a brow expectedly. I had to think about the shelter, if I screwed this up and Jack reported that back, I’d lose anyway. I couldn’t let that happen. Not unless, by some miracle I found a steady stream of money and a lot of it.

“My apologies, Jack,” I grind out, trying to cover the venom in my tone. “I don’t know what came over me.”

My mother had raised me to be loud. To be fearless. Strong. In a world of men constantly trying to dominate us, she taught me that just because I was female did not mean I was weak. I had a voice and I had power and I was to use it. No one dared speak to my mother the way Jack is speaking to me. And these expectations, the dress code, the demand of silence, it went against all that I knew.

I was taught to find the bright things in life, to always look at the positives but in this situation, was there any?

I guess the money I’d be getting for the shelter. Those animals’ lives were worth more than me and I would and will sacrifice myself to see that shelter continue to thrive.

The shelter belonged to me, in all ways other than on paper. It was to be handed over on my thirtieth birthday, four years from now and that had always been the plan, long before my mother died. In that time anything could happen.

Jack smiles coldly, “Of course you have benefits in this marriage.” He nods, holding up a hand to call over the waitress. “My father will be putting money into your father’s company, keeping it afloat, I even agreed to sponsor that little business of yours.”

“It’s a shelter,” I correct him.

He narrows his eyes, but the waitress arrives before he can reprimand me, “Are you ready to order?”

“Yes,” Jack doesn’t even look at her when she speaks so I pointedly make an effort to smile warmly at the young girl, “I’ll take the—”

“She’ll have the chicken and a small gin and tonic. I will have the salmon and a whiskey on the rocks.”

I glare at him while the waitress stares wide-eyed at the audacity of the man to order for me. I don’t even like gin and tonic.

“That’s all,” he dismisses her with a snappy tone when she doesn’t immediately leave.

“You’ll control that too?” I hiss under my breath.

He smiles, glaring, “Expectations, Emery.”

“It sounds like you want a pet, not a wife, Jack.”

“It is required of me to take a wife, Emery, I also have an image to uphold as the Governor’s son and as it is forced, I will make you what I want you to be.”

“I don’t get a say?”

“You’re a good girl, Emery. I knew it before your mother propositioned my father. A good fit coming from the right family and upbringing. You understand the rules in our society. As a woman, it is your job to look good and stay quiet. If I have to control your wardrobe, your schedules and your food, I will. I’m sure there’s enough fire in you to spite me, I see it in your eyes, and I will not tolerate disobedience. You will do as I say when I say it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I have my ways to make you the good little wife I know you can be.” There’s an undercurrent of violence in his tone that makes a cold sweat break out down my spine.

The waitress returns with our drinks and leaves quickly, not bothering to make eye contact with either of us.

“There is the Fall gala next week, I expect you to be on my arm. It is there we will make the announcement of our engagement.”

I can feel myself collapsing inwards, losing parts of me and I just nod. I just have to think about the shelter, the animals. I can do this.

I listen to Jack speak for the rest of the date, I don’t take a sip of my drink at all and my mind whirls between the shelter, the man in front of me and the man who had stepped in back at the shelter. Atlas Saint.

The Saint’s were terrifying. Controlling.

They were the demons that haunted this city.

And while I hadn’t known who he was at the time, the way he treated me was a far cry from what I would have expected of him. I’d heard stories about kidnap and violence, of murder and corruption surrounding that family. And one was now my damn stepbrother...

“Are you listening to me, Emery?”

I snap my attention back to him, “I am.”

He narrows his eyes, detecting the lie.

“I’m just tired,” I say, covering myself, “It’s been a long day.”

“Perhaps we should be discussing your options at the *shelter* then. Perhaps you spend too much time there.”

“No!” I blurt.

His cruel mouth curls into a knowing smile, “It has been a lovely evening, Emery, I look forward to spending much more time with you.”

ATLAS

It's just before ten when the car pulls up in front of the luxury apartment building in the city center. The roads are quiet with only slight traffic and the sidewalks empty.

The sleek black SUV stops, and the driver climbs out, opening the back door to allow Emery to exit, her new fiancé slipping out behind her.

Anger immediately fires hot and heavy inside of me, making my heart pump harder, my blood pound furiously inside my ears.

She moves to walk away but he grabs her tightly on the top of her arm, his fingers digging in and her face twists with a wince. My hands curl into fists but when he forcefully kisses her, a hot new kind of rage has me reaching for the gun. I'll shoot the motherfucker right where he stands.

It didn't matter that she was not mine, nor would she ever be but watching that, watching some other man lay his hands on her made me want to rip myself from this vehicle and put a bullet in his fucking skull. I have to grip the steering wheel to root me in my spot, my teeth clamped together as I battle the urge to murder a man in the middle of the street.

She snatches away from him and he simply just grins before he climbs back into the car, slamming the door shut. She doesn't move from the spot once he drives away, instead her groomed brows pull down in concern and her face twists with a sadness I didn't like seeing on her pretty face. She continues standing there as I continue to watch but after a few minutes

she heaves a sigh and drops her head in defeat, turning to head into the building.

I've fought one urge tonight and this, the one calling me to follow her is one I will not ignore. Once I see her inside, her small frame disappearing into the elevator to head up to her apartment, I climb from the car, crossing the street to the building.

I greet the doorman by name as he lets me inside.

She has the penthouse, courtesy of her father which had been gifted to her on her twenty-first birthday. I take the private elevator up, using the information that had been given to me after I'd requested a file on her and had disclosed the security detail to her home. The elevator pings quietly on her floor and then the doors slide open, revealing her home.

It was warm and bright, a far cry to what she lived with at her father's house. The couch was a bright turquoise with white throw blankets and cushions. There are books lining the walls and glass tables with brightly colored flowers in vases on each surface. There were spots of color everywhere, from the artwork on the walls to random decorations that lined shelves and even the kitchen was a mismatch of color. A large TV dominates the wall ahead of the couch but beside that is a wall of windows, looking out onto the city below. I could see the lights of the marina from here.

She wasn't in the front part of the apartment, so I let my legs carry me through the halls, my shoes silent against the plush carpet. The closer I get to the single light on at the end of the hall, the more I hear. Quiet music plays and I can make out the soft notes of her voice gently singing along to it over the sound of the shower running.

I push open the door to her bedroom, finding the door to the ensuite across from me slightly ajar.

Her bedroom was a mixture of grays and pinks and whites with soft and fluffy blankets and throws. The large vanity held an array of cosmetics and perfumes and I cross over to them, picking each up and smelling them until I find the small bottle that contains the scent that reminds me of her. Citrusy and

floral, a delicate and yet potent aroma that claws its way down my throat.

I tuck the bottle into my pocket just as the door behind me opens and I hear her gasp as she sees me.

“Hello Emery,” I say, not turning and continue my perusal of her belongings.

“How did you get in here?” She finally speaks.

I turn to her now, letting my eyes drop down her body, noting how tightly she clutches the towel to her chest. There’s a beautiful flush to her skin and her hair is pushed back from her forehead, darker now it’s wet and dripping onto the floor.

I don’t answer her question, instead I take careful steps towards her, quirking my brow at the way she steps back from me.

“Did you have fun on your date with your fiancé?” I ask.

She clamps her mouth closed and I look at her lips, picturing how he kissed her. She did not want that kiss.

“Atlas...” She breathes, the pulse in her neck fluttering wildly enough I can see it pumping in her delicate throat.

Her eyes flutter closed when I lift a finger and drag it over the pulse.

Keeping my finger there, I let my eyes trail to her arm and anger overwhelms me at the sight of the red markings the shape of fingers that circle the top of her arm.

I lean in and press my mouth to hers, a gentle, testing touch before I whisper against them. “I will kill him.”

Her eyes snap open and I note the green swirling in the brown framed by long lashes. “What?”

“He has bruised you.”

She looks at the mark on her arm and then lifts her hand to cover it, “I’m fine.”

“You want him touching you like that?”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“Excuses, Emery. I saw it.”

“Are you following me?” She hisses.

I take a step back, looking down at her. The air between us crackles with the building tension, her chest rapidly rising and falling as her eyes linger on my lips. She wants to be angry with me, annoyed at my uninvited visit but like me, she is helpless to deny just how good we are together. Once would never be enough to squash this magnetic draw we have with each other.

Just one more taste.

I could have just one more.

Her eyes bounce up to my eyes, pupils dilating as her breath saws from her lungs and then I lunge. We collide, my mouth fusing to hers as my tongue forces entry and she opens to let me in.

“We can’t,” she whimpers, fingers sliding into my hair as she tugs and pulls me closer, the move contradicting her words.

I growl against her wet mouth, pushing her back until her spine thuds against the wall and then I lift, forcing her legs around my waist. Her towel drops, leaving her completely naked against my suited front.

People chase the sun all the time, chase the light and that’s what she was. Rare sunshine in my storm, I couldn’t resist basking in it when it was this close. She reminded me of a feeling I had when I was a child, of being free, of seeing the beauty of the world. She reminded me of the fireflies Asher and I used to chase when we were young, and the ugliness of our lives hadn’t yet corrupted our souls.

I pull her hips forward and grind my hard cock up between her legs, grinning against her mouth when I feel her rolling her heat against me.

“Still think we can’t?” I ask before I drop my mouth to her neck and suck, letting my teeth scrape threateningly against her flesh, right over the fading mark I’d left her with before.

“We shouldn’t,” she says.

“Should I stop, firefly?” I ask with a rumble, “Would you prefer it was your fiancé here and not me?”

With her back to the wall, I balance her there and bring a hand up to cup her breast, rubbing harshly across her peaked nipple. She moans, tossing her head back and exposing more of that pretty neck of hers.

“Don’t stop, Atlas.” She pleads.

“You beg so pretty, Emery,” I praise.

How I craved to see her on her knees with her mouth filled with my cock. I wanted to punish her for how she made me react.

I yank at my pants, freeing my aching dick and position her until I can feel the tip of me sliding into the tightness of her pussy.

“Fuck,” I groan, feeling her enveloping me, her heat and softness rushing through me, making me forget all the darkness, all the demons until only she remained. If we were in an abyss, she would be that firefly that lit the way.

Her nails sink into my shoulders, and I just about feel the bite of them through my clothes. I thrust up into her, banging her against the wall.

“Yes,” she hisses on a breath.

“God, you’re so fucking perfect, Emery,” I rasp against her skin, “your cunt is fucking heaven.”

She groans and I move us away from the wall and to the bed where I slide her from my dick, grab her hips and spin her. A hand to the back of her neck, I push forward, bending her over and thrust hard back into her. She screams and tries to lower until her stomach is flat but I don’t let her, I grab her hips, fingers holding tight and slam into her again and again. Hard, fast, violently, a punishment for how she made me fucking feel.

I didn’t know the fucking woman. Didn’t fucking care about her but she did something to me. She made me forget who the fuck I was.

And it was her fault.

“Atlas!” She moans loudly, liking it, taking it.

I strike her across her ass, reddening her cheek instantly and she comes on the spot, surprising the both of us. She calls my name and her cunt spasms around my cock, squeezing me so fucking tight I threaten to blow right there.

“You’re a dirty fucking slut for me,” I growl, pushing into her, fucking her relentlessly and all she does is whimper and moan, purring for me. “Come again for me, Emery. Let me fucking have you.”

I reach around, sliding my fingers against her swollen clit and she bucks against me, crying out. She was drenched, my cock and fingers coated in her arousal. My other hand remains on her hip, dragging her back with each thrust forward, our bodies slamming together loudly.

Her cunt spasms and then clenches violently, and she cries out once more, her orgasm bringing on mine. I yank myself from her and come up her naked back, marking her with me.

She collapses her body down onto the bed, breathing hard and I fall down next to her, my cock still out and softening. I glance to where she wears me on her back, liking how it looks on her flesh.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” she whispers.

“But it did.”

Tucking myself away, I climb from the bed and head into her bathroom, gathering a warm washcloth before I go back to where she lays, facing away from me now. Gently, I wipe away myself from her skin, soft as I go, and I see her back move with her sharp inhale.

When she’s clean, I reach down and move her blonde hair away from her shoulder, trailing a finger across the curve of it. A final touch.

I don’t say anything as I move away and then leave, and she doesn’t follow. It’s when I hit the elevator and the doors are closing that I hear the first sounds of her tears.

EMERY

This was the only place I could go.

I had a war going on inside myself and other than crying and getting drunk, I could do nothing about it. I fucked Atlas again. Fucked him and screamed for him. My ass still ached from the strike he gave me, and my body remembered exactly what that blow did for it. The orgasm from the shock and sting of the slap is enough to leave me trembling again.

I'd never been slapped during sex, not once, but then I'd only slept with a handful of men, and they never made me come like Atlas did.

He knew exactly what to do, what to say to make my body sing.

He called me a dirty little slut... I had been flooded with heat at the rasp in his voice, at the pleasure with which he stole from me. And I liked it.

I squeeze my eyes closed as my pussy throbs to the memory.

Loki, a three-year-old Pitbull rolls onto his back, showing me his belly while big eyes stare at me upside down. I scratch him where he wants it, watching my hand as I do to distract myself from the memories of just a few hours ago.

I'd come here immediately after it happened, partly afraid Atlas would return, and I would climb him like a tree and partly because I could feel myself breaking down. The dogs always calmed me. They took away my pain and after my mother had died, I spent all of my time here. I did what I had to during the day and most night's I'd fall asleep in whichever

kennel I chose for the evening, cuddling whatever dog was in there. I'd wake exhausted, covered in dog hair and smelling like one too but I didn't care at that point.

Loki jumps up from the floor and then licks my face abruptly before he suddenly pounces on a soft toy and starts playing.

It was a good job my apartment building didn't allow pets otherwise I'd have likely taken all the dogs home with me.

Loki had been here only a short while, his owner had suddenly passed away and had no family to be able to take him on. He'd cried relentlessly for days when he was first brought in, and we had had to sit with him for hours at a time. I'd grown a special bond with him since and while I loved the other animals here, he was something special. He drops the toy into my lap and wags his tail so hard the whole of him moves with it.

When I don't immediately lift it to throw it for him, he plops himself down hard and cocks his head studying me intently with eyes that held far too much intelligence.

"I'm okay," I whisper to the dog.

He just stares and stares some more, watching me. I reach forward and he nudges my hand with his nose before he comes and curls up, half on and off my lap. He lets out a soft whine which cracks my heart. My hand goes to his neck, to the spot just beneath the blue collar I'd picked specially for him where I know he loves to be scratched.

I end up falling asleep there, with Loki on my lap and my back against the wall of his kennel.

I wake to the shrill of my phone ringing and through sleepy eyes, I glance at the caller ID. My father.

"Hello?" I yawn.

"Where are you, Emery? I am at your apartment, and you are not here."

I cringe noticing the morning light streaming through the window opposite me and the noise of the shelter staff arriving for their shifts.

“I’m at the shelter, dad.”

He makes a huffing noise, “Well?”

Loki groans when I gently nudge him off me and then stretches, staring up at me expectedly. It was feeding time.

“Well, what?”

“Did it go well with Jack?”

“As well as expected,” I snap at him, climbing from the floor of the kennel and stretching out my muscles, that delicate spot between my legs twinging with the memories of last night. Heat floods me but I squash that down, banishing my stepbrother from my mind.

I still wasn’t over Maria having a son that no one knew about or the fact I’d slept with him. Again.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He asks.

“Exactly that,” I grumble, “if you expect it to be fireworks and happily ever after when you’re literally forcing this then I can tell you now, you’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“Emery Nora Quinn,” My dad hisses, “It is your duty as my daughter to ensure this family remains strong.”

“Even if it ruins my life?” I question.

“Jack Harris is a good match and will give you a good life.”

I stifle my snort at how wrong he is. But there was no use arguing with him about it.

“You know what is at stake here, Emery,” He continues, “The future of my company. They have offered a lot of money to be put into the business to keep it running. In return Jack needs a wife. Not to mention, you know what will happen should you refuse the proposal.”

“You’ll stop the money for the shelter,” I repeat his warning.

“Yes Emery.”

“I get it,” I say to him, “Don’t worry but I hope you know I am not doing this for you or the company. I am doing this for the dogs.”

I hear my father sigh and before he can speak, I interrupt, “I have to go. Bye.”

I end the call and hang my head, pushing the heels of my hands into my eyes as if that could stop the sting burning behind them. My staff rush through the building, preparing breakfast for the animals as I slip out into the early morning sunshine. It wasn't warm by any means, with a brisk chill coming in off the ocean that surrounds the city of Redhill, yet the sun beams down, drying the rain from the ground.

I head to the car but stop when I notice the man parked across the street. Atlas leans against his Audi, arms crossed over his chest. He wears glasses to conceal his eyes, but they burn through me nonetheless.

I drop his gaze and hurriedly climb into my car, leaving him to watch as I pull away.



I know he followed. I felt it. Felt him.

His car remains parked on the other side of the street, but he makes no move to get out. I risk a glance to him but with the tinted windows I can't see his form. Shaking it off, I head through the doors to the building, greeting the doorman who is currently busy setting up a for sale sign in one of the windows. Someone must be moving. He grunts his greeting back.

Inside, I make a coffee and set myself up on the kitchen island with my laptop, pulling up the data and numbers for the shelter.

With the current level of money flowing through I'll be able to pay the staff and keep the dogs happy for another four months, but after that, with the termination of a few key sponsors I'll be lucky if I'll be able to feed the animals.

I needed my father's money. Desperately.

We had an adoption event coming up soon and while that brought in some revenue it wouldn't do much to put a dent in the current situation.

But at least some of the animals will finally get homes.

Silver linings and all.

Cupping my coffee in my hands I cross over to the windows that look down onto the street below. It's high but not so high I can't make out things on the street and the Audi Atlas was driving has now disappeared from the side of the road.

Why had he followed me?

Why had he even come here last night in the first place?

Our lines were too tangled already, with him being the long-lost stepbrother I never knew I had *and* being part of the ruling crime family that ran this city, I had to stay away from him.

Nothing good could come from being involved with a man like Atlas Saint.

ATLAS

My fist pounds against the pad, one, two, one, two, my grunts echoing in the empty gym. Enzo, the enforcer for the Saint's stands as strong as a wall, taking each hit, not moving an inch with each one.

I might have wondered if I'd somehow lost my strength but no, Enzo is just a big fucker that I doubt even a truck could move. He makes no noise. Not even a grunt. I'd never heard the man talk, no one had, not even Gabriel and the two of them had a brotherly bond that rivaled our own.

Why? No one knew.

But he was an intense fighter, and when he wasn't enforcing for the Saint's, he commanded the underground fighting pits and had done so for many years. He had his secrets and his own past as much as the rest of us. We knew the bare minimum about him, but he was loyal, that much was clear, to us, the Saint's, and to the man who worked the pits with him, but those two paths never crossed. It was intriguing, like a puzzle that needed to be solved. Enzo however won't give you those pieces, so you're always left with more questions than answers.

I pause, taking a breath.

Gabriel had forced the training sessions thinking it would help with the processing of what I did, with the anger and guilt and grief, but it didn't. Nothing fucking helped that.

Except Emery.

Enzo stops my train of thought before it can get going by slamming the pads together, drawing my attention. He shoves them forward, his way of telling me to continue.

He was the most skilled fighter, with his experience championing the pits, there isn't a single person in this world stupid enough to step up against him. Plus, his penchant for torture was widely known. Guy got a hard on for seeing people suffer.

I spend the next hour in the gym, pounding on those pads, my breathing sawing from my lungs and skin slick with sweat.

I stop by my house after the session was finished for a shower before I head up the cliff to Gabriel's, parking the Audi out front. Through the front windows I see them, my brother and his wife, Amelia, her son perched on Gabriel's knee and my chest twinges.

Happiness.

It was never promised to us in this life and when you found it... you kept a tight hold on it. Gabriel would do everything for that woman.

"Atlas!" Amelia grins, walking towards me to give me a hug.

I pat her back awkwardly and join them, accepting the glass Gabriel hands me.

I knew why I'd been invited. I'd avoided them since seeing my mother and now they wanted to know what happened.

"She's still a bitch." I down the whiskey, grabbing the bottle to pour another.

Amelia grimaces, her attention on her son. "Did she say anything?"

"I told her I killed him," I swallow through the lump, "She didn't care."

"It's done," Gabriel sighs, clamping his hand on my shoulder in his way to show his support. "We knew she wouldn't change."

“No, and now she’s using someone else to get what she wants.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she married Simon Quinn and is arranging a marriage for his daughter and Jack Harris.”

“Jack Harris? The Governor’s son?”

“Mm,” bile burns the back of my throat and I wash it down with the whiskey. She wasn’t mine. She would never be mine. I didn’t even know her damn it...

But I knew her moans, God damn her *moans*.

“You know the girl?” Gabriel asks, his finger tracing his bottom lip thoughtfully while he waits for my answer.

“Who? Simon’s daughter?” I knew he was referring to my new *stepsister*, but I didn’t want to admit to how much the little fucking ball of sunshine had crawled under my skin. Was this how addicts felt when they take the first hit? Is this how you become intoxicated by the high of a drug or the numbness from alcohol? Twice I’d had her and twice I’d told myself I wouldn’t go back but even now I could feel an itch starting beneath my skin, some part of me connecting to her, a rope that tethered us together and it was the incessant tugging that made me want to climb into the car and find her.

She deserved punishment for eliciting all these feelings in me. The little fucking siren.

“Yes, his daughter,” he narrows his eyes, picking up on my evasiveness.

I shrug, “I’ve met her a couple of times.”

Not a lie.

“And what of her?”

Perfection. An utter masterpiece made up of silken blonde hair and creamy skin and purity... my opposite in every way.

“She’s nothing.” My tongue burns.

“The Governor is holding a gala next week,” Gabriel says, “I want to know why Simon is giving away his only daughter to Jack Harris. It’s hardly a secret the man is a bastard who treats his women no better than the trash he throws out.”

I knew why or at least, I’d guessed it.

“His business is failing.” I say. I doubted Maria knew that when she married the old guy, I’m sure she thought she was getting an easy run with him, and I could understand that. The Quinn’s were a prominent figure in the high society of Redhill, rich, influential, and respected. They had enough power to keep the news of their dwindling profits a secret for some time, even from Maria and she would have jumped at the first opportunity of being given some power. Money and power went hand in hand, with enough of it you could have everything you wanted, anyone you wanted...

But now she was tied to a man who was failing but instead of leaving she would manipulate and scheme until she got her desired outcome.

But what was Jack getting out of the deal? Maria would get money and more power from being linked to one of the most influential figures in Redhill and Simon would likely take the handouts from the Governor but what did Jack get?

I chew the inside of my cheek as I contemplate the whys of it.

“I want you to go to the gala, Atlas, take Enzo and get me answers. It’s more than just dwindling profits, and nothing happens in this city without my knowledge.”

“Understood,” I stand to leave.

“And Atlas?” Gabriel calls to me before I can make my exit.

“Get more information on the daughter, what does she get from this deal?”

I don’t turn to him as I nod my head and leave to the sounds of Lincoln’s soft mumbling and coos.



I pull up to the apartment building, evening now having fallen across the city. There were still people bustling on the sidewalk and the road laden with traffic, but I had a mission now and I was all too happy to start right away.

I greet the doorman who nods once and head through to the elevators. She would be pissed to find me in her apartment again and the thought of it almost makes me hard.

I find her in her kitchen, pouring boiling water into a mug.

“Hello firefly.”

She screams, jumping so hard she knocks the steaming cup off the side and onto the floor and then she’s screaming for other reasons as the boiling water scolds her bare feet.

“Shit.”

That wasn’t what I had planned.

She cusses and darts for the bathroom, throwing herself into the tub and turning the cold tap on, soaking her now red feet in cold water.

Her face is twisted in pain, but it doesn’t hide the glare she’s throwing me. “What the hell are you doing here!?” She hisses, her teeth clenched together in both pain and anger.

“Let me see,” I go to her, “sit on the edge of the tub.”

“Go away, Atlas!”

“Unfortunately for you, firefly, that isn’t an option.”

“How the hell do you keep managing to get in!?”

“I know people.”

“People as in the doorman,” she spits, “I’m going to the building management tomorrow and getting him fired!”

“And cost a decent man his livelihood? I didn’t know you were so ruthless.”

“You don’t know me at all!”

“True but I know you would never cost a person their job, even if they had wronged you.”

She was still standing with her feet under the cascading water of the tap, the bottoms of her striped pajama bottoms now soaked but her feet, while red, didn't look too badly burned.

“Sit down, let me see.”

With a huff, she balances on the edge of the tub, facing me and then lifts her damaged foot, resting it on the edge closest to me. I take it in my hands. Everything about her was small, my large hands engulf her foot, but I take care as I run my fingers over her red skin, checking for further damage. She watches me with her deep brown eyes, perfectly groomed brows pulled low over her eyes.

“Why are you marrying Jack?” I ask, meeting that gaze.

She sighs but doesn't answer.

I let my eyes do a sweep of her body, noting how tight the cami she's wearing is, molding to her frame like a second skin, leaving the dip of her waist, the curves of her breasts free for my eyes to explore. The pajama pants are oversized, hanging from her hips but I could picture her toned thighs, the firm globes of her ass.

“I asked a question, Emery.”

“Because that's what my father wants.” She snaps.

“And you're always such a good girl, aren't you Emery.” I let go of her foot, it would be sore, but it didn't look like it would blister.

Her cheeks flush but she doesn't answer as she climbs from the tub, splashing cold water across the tiles as she makes her way into her bedroom. My eyes move to the bed, remembering having her on it and then new scenarios are popping into my mind of me punishing her. Of her crawling to me, my cock in her mouth, her choking on it while her hands are tied, and her legs are splayed.

She grabs another set of pants from her drawer and arches a brow at me expectedly. Oh, she wanted me to leave.

I sit on the bed instead and then lean back, lounging on her pillows while I link my hands behind my head and settle in for

the show.

“You can leave.” She says.

“I have questions, Emery,” I tell her.

“If I wasn’t clear before, Atlas, you’re not welcome here.”

I grin cruelly at her, her words working into my skin, “I won’t be leaving here, firefly, not until you give me the answers I want. I have plenty of ways of getting it out of you, Emery, so make a choice. Do you want to be a good girl and tell me what I want to know or are we going to have a problem?”

EMERY

I could feel the blood draining from my face, the cold wash of fear chasing away any lingering lust I felt for this man.

I supposed that was both good and bad, good because it made me see sense and bad because this man was a Saint and despite the name, he was everything opposite.

“Tick tock, firefly,” He smirks, eyes darkening as he peruses the length of me once again. “Will you give me my answers?”

“What do you want from me?” I breathe, the grip on the pants in my hands tightening to almost pain and the wetness beneath my soles turning icy, something I knew had nothing to do with the water. How could this man make me so hot I burned, only to turn me to ice the next moment.

“You’re marrying a man because your father said so,” he quirks a brow, “You always do as you’re told?”

“When I have no other choice,” I answer honestly.

“And you have no choice here?”

“No.”

“What do they have over you that makes you believe this is your only option? What do you get Emery?”

Money. Money for the shelter. I don’t say that though. It was my one weakness. One that was already being exploited and to give that weakness to the devil would be as bad as selling my soul to him. I had enough people using it against me, I didn’t need him too, because having him use it would no doubt be

exponentially worse. No one could be trusted, not anymore. I'd have to be desperate.

"It doesn't matter what, Atlas, just that I have to."

He narrows his fiery eyes, eyes that burn where they touch. A brand, that's what they were because everywhere they glanced felt as if they were touching me physically. Goose bumps pebble my flesh and I swallow, a move he tracks with a predators focus.

"You don't have a relationship with your mother," I say, changing the subject.

His demeanor changes in a second, a mask of hard indifference coming over his features, "Maria was simply a surrogate. There is no relationship to have."

"That's sad," I admit, "To not have a relationship with your parents."

"And you love your father so much that you'll just blindly follow all his orders?"

I don't answer, instead I head to the bathroom and push the door closed slightly, quickly changing the wet pants for clean ones and returning, finding him in the same spot, eyes tracking me as I make my way to the small armchair I had by the windows.

I take a seat, far from comfortable. "It isn't like that." I say finally in answer to his previous question.

"Then tell me."

"Why are you asking?"

"The Saints have an interest in all affairs, firefly."

"Even mundane ones?"

"Mundane?" He scoffs, "nothing about Simon Quinn marrying his only daughter off to the Governor's son is mundane. It's a power play, one I'm sure Maria had some influence in orchestrating. What's more interesting is the fact that the Governor agreed. He's not a man easily bought."

"And you think I have something to do with that?"

“Well, you are marrying his son.”

“Not for love or the want to.”

“And you’re happy to go through life miserable and tied to a man known to treat women a little better than a rat found in an alley?”

“It doesn’t have to be forever.”

“Just until you get what you want.”

I don’t answer, instead choosing to glance out the window at the dark city, the lights twinkling on the skyline.

“What does Maria and your father have against the Governor?”

My head snaps around to him, “What?”

“I’ll let you into a little secret firefly, when the Governor was elected it took Gabriel some time to win him over,” I didn’t need to know more than that, “He wasn’t easily bought and it’s been no secret that many families have expressed interest in joining their lines and each one was turned down, until *you*.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Atlas.”

A muscle in his jaw ticks.

“There’s something more here,” he tells me softly, “I need you to figure it out.”

“I’m not helping you.”

“Then I cannot help you.” He finally stands from the bed, “You help me, maybe I can get you out of this marriage.”

I sigh, looking down, “Nothing can get me out of it, Atlas, not even you.”

I don’t look up, even though I hear him coming towards me. His fingers, surprisingly gentle, hook beneath my chin before he tilts my face until I’m looking into the fiery depths of his, “Everyone has options.”

I softly shake my head. “Not me.”

“Where will you go?” He asks.

My brows tug down, “When?”

“When this place sells.”

I jerk back hard enough that his fingers drop my chin,
“Sorry?”

“This place is being sold, Emery, it’s on the market right now.”

“No!”

“You didn’t know?”

“It’s not for sale.”

He cocks his head and brings out his phone, looking away only to look at the screen in his hand. When he finds what he’s looking for he shows me the screen, and everything empties out of my head.

No.

No, that can’t be right.

But then I remember the for sale signs. I’d never thought they could be for my apartment. How could my father do this?

“Where will you go?” He asks again.

“I don’t know.” I answer honestly.

A call with my father the following morning after a long night of restlessness confirmed what Atlas had said previously. My apartment was for sale.

They were getting rid of it in preparation of my marriage to Jack. I was to move in with him the moment it was sold, and no one knew how long that would take.

They were taking everything from me.

Everything I had yet didn’t have at all.

What did I own that was truly my own? The apartment was paid for and in my father’s name, my car was leased by my

father's company, the shelter was against my father's name too until I turned thirty.

I had nothing. But then I hadn't earned it had I? I was given everything.

And now everything was being taken because they had the control.

Tears fall silently where I sit at the kitchen island, the phone in front of me and face down from where I'd thrown it after the call to my father.

Atlas had left moments after he'd revealed the apartment was for sale, leaving me to stew on it. I hadn't called my father last night, I guess some part of me hoped it was some dream, a very vivid one but I'd clung to that hope and fantasy even if I knew what had happened and what had been revealed was true.

It still crushed me hearing it from my father though.

I swipe angrily at the tears on my cheeks.

Crying wouldn't fix this misery.

I thought back to what Atlas had said, about how Maria and my father having something against the Governor, and I wondered if he was right.

Would I be able to find out?

Could there be some way out of this?

I didn't know, but I was damn sure going to find out if there was an option here.

I had to fight.

I had to fight for myself because I was all I had.

EMERY

A week had come and gone, and it was the day of the gala. I'd had no more unwanted—were they truly unwanted?—visits from Atlas and I hadn't heard from him either. I'd spent a lot of time at the shelter because apparently my apartment was a big hit, and the realtors were showing it off every few hours to the rich and powerful every chance they got. They hadn't had any bids yet and I didn't know who I needed to thank for that.

I stare at the dress Jack had sent to my apartment. It was a red number, a ballgown style with a pretty tulle skirt and bodice that was embellished with crystals that glittered every time they caught in the light. It was the perfect statement dress, no doubt picked for exactly that purpose. I was to look the part of Jack's perfect bride.

My eyes then went to the box on the bed. A box that had been sent today, the black ribbon tied around it still secured. The note had one word on it. *Atlas*. He had sent me something. A week of no word except this.

I was ready for the gala, my makeup done to perfection, my hair curled and pinned away from my face but still down so the length of it traveled down my back.

Dressed in just my robe, I head to the box on my bed, hands clammy as I reach for the knot binding the lid. The swish of satin seemed louder than it should as I tugged and it came undone, unraveling in a mess of material and then I'm removing the lid, holding my breath as if there were a bomb inside and not... a dress.

It was emerald green and in a satin material. My fingers are gentle as I pull it from the box, bringing it out and in turn unfolding it to its full length. It didn't seem like much, but I knew that wasn't the case, with its thin spaghetti strap and cowl neckline, I knew it would hug my curves and there was a deep slit in one side of the dress that when on, I was sure it would end well above my hip.

I had never seen anything like it, not in any of the stores around Redhill or online, almost as if the dress was a one of a kind.

Unable to stop myself I try the dress on, my fingers following the curves of my body as I look at myself in the mirror.

Now this, *this* was a dress that made a statement.

Gorgeous. Unique.

I look back to the red dress knowing it was the one that I had to wear. I had no choice. I had to do what was expected of me. But this dress...

This dress made me feel beautiful. It made me feel like myself and yet was something I would never have chosen on my own.

I couldn't wear it, could I?

It would displease Jack and right now, I needed him on my side, didn't I?

The car Jack had arranged for me pulls to a stop outside of the hotel in which the gala was being held. Golden light spills out from the many windows in the building and through the obnoxiously large doors I could see a huge chandelier made up of diamonds and crystals hanging in the center of the foyer. People mingled away from the main hall where the gala would be taking place and staff frantically moved through the crowd at some unknown demand, refreshing drinks and food.

“Ma’am?” The driver questions patiently when I don’t move away from the door.

Everything would change tonight, everyone would know that Jack and I were engaged. That I was to be his wife.

His good little wife.

“Sorry,” I mumble, smiling at the man who had brought me here. He looks at me sympathetically but closes the door and moves away when I take a step forward.

“Have a good evening, ma’am.” And with that, he climbs back into the car and drives away. Taking in a breath, I move into the hotel, the dress swishing around my legs. The cold air of the night kisses my skin, but it couldn’t rival the icy chill I felt within my soul.

No one looks at me as I enter which was a grace and I manage to snag a glass of champagne from a passing server which I promptly sip on, the red color of my lipstick leaving a stain on the rim.

Alone, I make my way into the hall where the main event was being held, finding rows of tables set up for the meal and a small area where dancing could take place, but I’d been to enough of these to know it was there for pretenses only and wouldn’t be used much. There was a raised section at the far end where a band was still setting up and one wall was being occupied by a bar, managed by several members of the hotel staff. Most tables already have someone sitting at them and I scan the faces, looking for someone I recognize.

I find my father and Maria at a table close to the front speaking with a couple. They haven’t spotted me yet, so I move on, finding Jack’s father and then next to him, Jack himself and he was looking directly at me...

His brows draw down in a grimace, his mouth a harsh, flat line as he takes in the length of me.

I fight the need to drag my hands down myself, I knew there were no wrinkles in the dress that needed smoothing, no marks or dirt. It was just a case of I didn’t fit the box he wanted to put me in.

Of course, it didn’t help that I chose Atlas’s dress over his.

This was a scandal in his eyes, a disaster waiting to happen with how high the slit went, revealing my hip bone and one wrong move would reveal all to the world.

I drop his gaze, continuing my perusal of the room, only to stop dead at the fiery eyes that burn into me from the bar.

My breath lodges in my throat, and it feels as if something was trying to crush my chest as Atlas bore his eyes into me like they could flare me from where I stood.

Next to him was probably one of the scariest men I'd ever laid eyes on. Taller than every single person in the room and twice as big, I knew there was a bunch of hard muscle contained beneath his suit and I catch a glimpse of tattoos at the collar of his shirt. Hard eyes watch me intently and unnerved by his intensity, I shift my attention back to Atlas. He watches with an amused look, clearly noting the fear I leak at the sight of his companion. He tips his glass in my direction, a greeting I supposed, and then lifts the glass to his lips, downing the contents. I am instantly drawn to his throat which bobs as he swallows.

“Emery,” His voice startles me from the staring game I was having with Atlas and my eyes jump to Jack who smiles a smile that barely conceals his ire. He was pissed about the dress.

“Jack.”

“The dress didn't fit?”

I could lie and confirm but I could still feel Atlas's eyes on me and somehow that boosted my confidence. I meet Jack's eyes and say, “It fit, I just didn't like it.”

Anger flashes across his face and then his hand is on my arm, squeezing, a replica to the first date where he grabbed me outside my apartment, “Expectations, Emery.” He spits quietly, lips curled in disgust.

I barely conceal the wince at the pain his grip causes, and I could have sworn, out the corner of my eye, I saw Atlas move only to be stopped by the man at his side.

“You’re hurting me,” I whisper, tugging my arm uselessly against the grip. I was so sick of being manhandled.

“I’m going to do a lot more than that,” Jack growls beneath his breath, “Do not embarrass me tonight, Emery.” I don’t miss the underlying threat of *or else* beneath his tone.

He eventually lets go and leaves without another word, storming towards my father and Maria, no doubt to complain about my *behavior*.

Shaking it off, I start to move towards the bar, towards Atlas who watches me like I was his next meal. He was devastating in his black tux, the picture of lethal masculinity and cunning, right down to the polished shine of his shoes and casual stance. He stalks me with his eyes until I reach him and continues to do so as I place my glass down and order a brandy.

I’d acquired the taste from my mother who had a single brandy on the rocks every night before bed and had introduced me to it a few years before she had died.

“You look beautiful, firefly,” Atlas eventually says, “I knew this color would be perfect for you.”

“You picked it yourself?” I ask.

“I did.”

“Where did you get it?”

“My sister-in-law is a designer; this is a one of a kind.”

“It’s beautiful, Atlas, thank you.”

“And your fiancé thought so too?” It was posed as a question, but I heard the anger behind the words. He’d seen what had happened and was fishing for an excuse to use that rage I could see simmering beneath the surface. I was starting to realize that Atlas was an incredibly angry man.

I could feel his companion’s eyes on us, could see him calculating, putting bits together. He was picking up all the broken pieces between us and fitting them together like a puzzle.

I didn't look at him though, I didn't want to see those unforgiving eyes or that hard expression. He was attractive, ridiculously so, with his dark blond hair and blue eyes but that pretty face wasn't enough to hide the monster lurking underneath.

"Emery!" Maria calls to me and I wince at the sound of her voice.

"You are being summoned firefly, best not misbehave."

I throw a glare at Atlas before I turn and make my way to their table, hoping to all things that were Holy that my face masked the anger I felt towards them, and my tongue wouldn't get me into trouble tonight.

ATLAS

She was radiant.

No, she was more than that.

She was more than the sun on a rainy day, and more than the moon after endless nights of darkness. Emery in that dress, with her hair curled and her shoulders back, prepared for everything that would be thrown at her, was something men would go to war for. And I was prepared to.

I was prepared to open fire on this whole damn hotel if it meant getting her out of here.

I wanted her. I shouldn't. I didn't deserve it. Deserve *her*, but damn I *wanted* her.

Enzo was stiff beside me, watching everything and everyone. He'd sized Emery up the moment he spotted her, and she'd shrank under his gaze. I didn't judge her for that, even the fiercest of people cowed beneath him.

I'd wanted to destroy Jack after I'd witnessed his man handling once more but Enzo had stopped me, throwing me a look that said, '*do not kill the Governor's son with witnesses*'. It wasn't a 'don't do it', it was a 'do it when no one is watching'.

It wasn't easy though. As much as I disliked Emery for everything she made me feel, she was mine to torment, not his or Maria's, not even her father's.

Mine.

I was still picturing her crawling to me. Still picturing her choking on my cock, begging and pleading while I treated her like my personal little whore and the more I thought about it, the more I *needed* it.

But I had to remember she was in my enemy's territory, she was close to the woman I hated above all else, close to the woman I blamed for my brother's death as much as I condemned my own soul. I may have pulled the trigger that ended Asher, but she was a part of his demise, I knew it, even if I was still yet to prove it.

I watch Emery, standing before Maria in that perfect dress with Jack at her back. A lamb in a wolf den was what she was right now, everyone there would sink their teeth into my little firefly and rip her to shreds. She had nothing to do with anything going on, but she was keeping something from me. I don't know why she won't tell me the reason she's agreeing to marry Jack.

She was a smart woman; she knew the danger Jack posed against her and yet she was risking her safety by going ahead with it. Why?

And where would she go now her apartment was for sale?

I tip my drink to my lips, my eyes remaining on her from across the room with all these unanswered questions. Maria had spotted us, Simon too, and promptly pretended they hadn't even if their faces drained of color knowing we were watching.

We had been seated at the back of the room, mostly away from everyone and in the shadows. That was fine by me, they may have thought it a slight, but no, I'd have full view of the room and an unobstructed line of sight right to Emery's table. She sits to the left of Jack with Maria on her right, the Governor and Simon were opposite and there were a couple others with them that I didn't care to remember their names. Enzo sits with his elbows resting on the table, a look of amusement

pulling at his mouth as he takes in the reactions of the people who had been seated with us.

Emery hadn't relaxed for even a second, not through the dinner or the drinks or the speeches and even now, as Jack forces her to stand and take to the raised stage at the end of the room, she's stiff and robotic, her face twisted in unease. Maria is watching like a hawk; the Governor is grimacing.

Jack catches the attention of the room, a smile as fake as they come on his mouth. He starts by speaking about the gala, about the money they raised here tonight before he hooks an arm around Emery's shoulders causing my own spine to stiffen.

Mine.

I roll my shoulders, teeth clamped painfully together.

"I wanted to take a moment to introduce someone very *special* and make an announcement."

Emery swallows, her eyes closing as if in reprieve before they open again and latch onto mine. There was a sadness to her, a deep sorrow that dimmed her sunshine.

"This is Emery Quinn," Jack continues, placing my firefly in the spotlight, the green satin of her dress shining beneath the light. Her chest heaves with her frantic breaths, she was panicking. I tilt my chin, keeping her eyes on me and take a deep breath, one she mimics and then again, and again, until she calms. She never lets her eyes stray from mine, something I doubt many would miss but then again, they weren't paying her much attention, that was all for Jack.

"And I am pleased to announce our engagement. You're looking at the woman who finally managed to tie down Jack Harris."

A murmuring begins throughout the room, and I take my eyes from Emery to pass over Maria who smiles up at the stage, triumphant, like she'd won a war.

"This isn't fucking right," I mutter to which Enzo grunts his agreement. When the muttering ceases, Emery goes to move off the stage but before she can, Jack tugs her, hard, towards

him, causing her to stumble into his chest as his arms wind around her.

My hand grips the armrest of my chair, and then his mouth is on hers and she can do nothing to fight him off in front of everyone. I hadn't realized I was moving until Enzo slams a hand down on my shoulder, forcing me back into the seat.

I see her hands, trapped between the two of them and where he pulls, she's pushing, trying to separate the two of them.

Fuck!

I'll kill him. I will fucking *slaughter* him.

To try ease the burning rage I drag my eyes from the scene only to meet Maria's gaze. She quirks a brow and I wonder if she *knows*. Her eyes drag down my frame with disdain before she turns back around and starts to clap.

Enzo's hand is still pinning me down and finally, to a chorus of loud applause, Jack releases Emery who turns and storms off, her cheeks pink and eyes glazed with tears. She doesn't stick around, instead she practically runs from the room, ignoring anyone who tries to stop her or talk to her.

Enzo releases me and I'm moving immediately, out of my chair in the next second, and through the door she disappeared out of.

I find her in the women's restroom and step inside, locking the door behind me.

"No tears, firefly," I tell her.

She grips the counter in front of the mirror, her back shaking with her sobs.

I catch a glimpse of her reflection, noting the black tracks left from her mascara, the tears following the lines like a path.

"He wins if you cry, Emery."

"They've already fucking won!" She snaps.

"No firefly," I take easy steps towards her, crowding her back. I reach around, grabbing her chin to force her to look at herself in the mirror, "They haven't won."

She meets my eyes in the mirror, the tears still tracking down her face gutting something deep inside my body. This was a woman with so much goodness and light in her, a woman who had chased my shadows away with just a kiss, a touch, and that was before I'd ever truly met her.

The need to punish her for it was second to the need to comfort her, to chase away that sadness. I would go back to playing with her tomorrow but today, today she needed something that I had no right to give her.

She needed comfort from someone, and she wasn't going to get it from those fuckers out there. She had me and that would have to do.

Even if me was nothing.

I bring her back further into my body, fingers holding her chin delicately while my other hand traces her arm, reveling in the goose bumps that pebble her skin from my touch.

We were like oil and water, a storm, destined to break, to destroy, but beautiful when it collides.

"Their world isn't like yours, Emery, you grew up in it and yet somehow managed to keep your morality, your purity, this is just another game. Another battle. Don't let them break you."

"But I think you want to break me too," she whispers.

My lips notch up into a half smile, "Oh firefly, I want to break you very much but for reasons completely different. You will shatter for me, Emery, I assure you of it, but I'll put you back together again, don't worry. You'll keep these pretty wings."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I can."

"You're no better than them," she breathes.

"No, I'm worse than them but if anyone is going to make you cry, it's going to be me."

She shakes her head, moving to step away from me but I don't allow it.

"Sweetheart, you'll want it. You'll want me to break you."

“No.”

“Come dance with me,” I order softly, ignoring that little spark of defiance. I was right in what I was saying. She’d want it but she couldn’t see it right now, and I’d get what I need from her. “Wipe these pretty tears away, fix your dress and come dance with me.”

She swallows and then starts to fix herself. I smile proudly and when she accepts my hand, I link her arm with mine and take her back to the hall, sweeping her into a dance the moment our feet hit the small, wooded area at the front.

Eyes watch us, *their* eyes watch us but only three people in this room knew she was my stepsister, Maria, Simon, and Enzo. They knew they couldn’t reveal it, not with the Governor and Jack, so I pull her closer, indecently so, forcing my thigh between her legs which opens that slit up and then sweep her back in a move that arches her spine and presses her tight cunt to my thigh. And I meet Jack’s angry gaze, and I smile.

EMERY

He left me wanting. Hot and wet and breathing so damn hard it feels as if my heart might beat right out of my chest.

People were watching and I knew that's why he was doing it. Jack was watching and I think Atlas liked that, liked that he was pissing off the man I was being forced to marry and he was definitely pissing off his own mother. And I let him.

I let him sweep me over that dance floor, using his body and his confidence to wind me up until I was a tightly pulled string with only a few threads left before it was going to snap. He knew by shoving his thigh between my legs it would rub up against me and there was no denying how my body responded to him, even if I knew it was wrong and I shouldn't be allowing him to do it in front of all these people.

It was a show of defiance, restoring some power back to me and I was thankful in this moment for Atlas.

"You're coming home with me," Atlas whispers in my ear. A tingle rushes down my spine and my eyes widen, "Remember that when you're dancing with him, firefly. You're mine tonight."

I don't get a chance to speak as Atlas steps back, leaving me cold, and walks away from me at the same time Jack grips my arm harshly, tugging me to him. I'm quick enough to turn my head, avoiding his mouth as he tries to kiss me again. I didn't want this man's mouth anywhere near me.

"Who was that?" Jack growls, forcing me into a dance.

“Nobody,” I say, “Just someone I met tonight.” The lie rolls off my tongue, if Jack didn’t know Atlas by face, I wasn’t going to reveal his identity.

“You grind your pussy against every man’s leg, Emery?” Jack snaps low and heated. When he tries to force my legs apart like Atlas did, I step away, glaring at him.

“Don’t fucking touch me like that, Jack.”

“You’re to be my wife, I’ll touch you however I damn well please.” The hand holding mine tightens to the point of pain, crushing my fingers and knuckles in his much larger palm. I bite my tongue to stop myself from crying out. “You embarrassed me, Emery. I warned you.”

“Why are you even agreeing to this!?” I grit out, trying to free my hand from the crushing pain.

“Because I like power, Emery, and you’re just another little toy to play with. Don’t get me wrong, my father is forcing my hand but it’s not so bad, not when I get to hear you scream.” He pulls me into his body, mouth going to my ear, “They always scream, Emery and they always bleed. I think making you bleed might be my new favorite.”

“You’re a psycho,” I stutter out.

“I told you not to embarrass me, Emery, I warned you, but I guess a little dumb bitch like you won’t learn until she’s taught.”

“Get the fuck away from me!” I yank away, my voice slightly raised, enough to draw attention to us. He lets me go but I can see the reprimand coming, the threats, so I flee, and I don’t look back. I don’t see Atlas, not that I would go to him. I needed to get away from here. Now.

Jack had given me enough warning that if he had his way, if he got me alone, I wouldn’t be walking away from tonight unscathed.

There had been rumors about him, ones that never had been confirmed but I had a feeling they were more than just stories. He hurt women. He liked it. And he would hurt me.

Shit.

This was just going from bad to worse. My dress feels heavy as I make my way out of the hotel, not bothering to check if I had been followed. I couldn't take the car I used to get here, that had been hired by Jack and could be traced, and when I pull my phone from my purse to dial an uber, I find my phone out of charge.

"Fuck," I whisper, "fuck, fuck!"

It had started to rain, and I couldn't stick around here, I couldn't go back in and look for help either. I needed to hide for tonight.

I wouldn't be another rumor floating around on the internet, I wouldn't end up in the hospital because a man enjoyed causing women harm.

My heels click as I begin a gentle jog, taking it easy so I don't slip and break my damn neck. It was cold, too cold to be out in the wet without a coat or warm clothing. The shelter was several blocks from here, but I could walk it, even if it took me hours in the middle of the night. If I could get into the city center, I could hail a cab from there.

I was walking for thirty minutes when my feet started to ache from the heels and the cold. My fingers were numb, my hair plastered to my back, dripping icy water down my already freezing skin. I hadn't been able to stop chattering my teeth, the brutal clack of my jaw bouncing together causing a deep ache in my face and teeth. My toes were numb, my body cold and wet.

Perhaps they'd find my body in the morning, frozen to death.

Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry.

Behind me I hear the slosh of tires on the road, a car slowing down before it stops behind me. I don't turn, too afraid of what I might find. It wasn't safe to walk at night alone, but I'd chosen to take my chances. I hadn't seen anyone in the last thirty minutes, no cars on the road, no people in the streets so the sudden appearance of one made me a little uneasy.

"Emery!"

I stop dead, turning slowly to find Atlas walking through the sheet of relentless rain towards me. His eyes drag down the length of me and then he's quickening his steps with a curse, throwing off his jacket. His companion frowns at me from where he's standing out of the car on the driver side.

"Shit, Emery, what the fuck are you doing?" He throws the jacket over my shoulders and instantaneous warmth starts to fight some of the chill on my skin but it's not enough to stop the whole-body shivers or the chattering teeth. I don't fight him, I don't have the energy and he turns me back to the car, throwing open the back door to gently coax me inside. He then follows behind me, pulling me into his lap and using his body to curl around mine.

His warmth and the heating that blasts through the fans in the car feels so fucking good. I would not fight this, not even a little.

Atlas holds me tight, arms of steel keeping me against his chest. My dress was getting him wet, but he didn't seem to care, not as his hands rub my skin, trying to chase the cold away.

"My place," I hear him say but I was tired. The shivering, the cold, the whole evening had zapped at my energy, and I wanted to sleep. I wanted to stay asleep for a long time. I could feel myself still shivering against his body, the warmth of him and the car not quite enough to rid the bone deep ice from me. My consciousness slips in and out as we drive and then I could feel myself being moved, cradled to a chest, and carried. I cling to Atlas, holding on for dear life as if afraid he would take the warmth away.

"Where are we?" I mumble.

"Shh, we need to get you warm." He says, continuing to carry me. My blurry eyes try to take in my surroundings, dark walls with black and white art that I couldn't quite make out with my weak vision. All the color merges together but it was dark tones with white splashes, something about it giving masculine sophistication and opulence. He turns us into a room that appears to be tiled and I rapidly blink in an attempt to get a

clearer picture but when Atlas sets me down, removing the warmth of his body, my focus shifts and I lunge for him. “Just wait a moment, firefly.”

I do as I’m told, shivering with his jacket still around my shoulders. I probably looked a mess, makeup all over my face, hair drenched and dress clinging to my cold skin. Steam suddenly begins to rise from the shower and then Atlas is back, stripping me of his jacket and finding the zipper on the dress. It wasn’t cold in here, but I couldn’t get warm.

“Fucking hell, Emery, you’re freezing,” he growls. The dress pools at my feet but then he’s in front of me on his knees, gently gripping my ankle to lift it and pull the dress out from under me. He does the same to the other one and then the dress is gone and he’s removing my shoes and then my underwear. I was so cold my nipples were hard, and every inch of my skin was pebbled with goose bumps. Atlas lifts me and together we climb into the shower, him still fully dressed and once inside, he lowers us to the floor, my naked, shivering body cradled in his lap.

The water was hot, almost too hot and it hurt where it touched my skin. It was a fight to rid me of this cold and time disappears, making it impossible to keep track of how long we remain there with the water cascading over us both. Atlas was soaked through and yet he kept his hands rubbing over my skin, over the pebbled flesh but eventually, the tremors stop. Pins and needles prick against my fingers and toes as I gain the blood back into my extremities and it feels like I’m able to finally loosen the breath in my lungs, my muscles stopping the jerky spasms.

“That’s it,” he whispers, “good girl, Emery.”

Had he been talking the entire time?

I lift my face so I can see him, seeing the fury of a storm brewing in his eyes as he looks down at me. Water cascades down his face, his hair hanging forward almost like a curtain across his brow. His jaw was clenched, teeth grinding but I didn’t think the anger was aimed at me.

“Why did you run?”

I move the fingers in my hand, now I could feel them again, the pain was there, the incessant throb in my joints where Jack had crushed my fingers and knuckles. Drawn by the movement, Atlas looks down at my hand. I feel his muscles jump and the anger he radiates is almost palpable.

“He hurt you again.”

I curl my fingers into my palm, wincing with the ache. I couldn't hide it.

“I embarrassed him,” I whisper, “By dancing with you.”

He grimaces, “And you'll still marry him?”

“You're wet,” I state the obvious, avoiding the question, “I'm sorry, I—um—”

“Sit. Down.” He orders when I try to get up.

The water runs over us both, but he doesn't move more than to grab the soap on the edge, squirting a bit into his hand. He begins to lather it over my skin in soft strokes but the silence, it's deafening.

He was mad.

Furious.

“What does it matter?” I ask.

His fiery eyes jump to mine and narrow. “I suppose it doesn't.”

I swallow, an ache forming in my chest. He only cared because if Jack broke me first, he wouldn't be able to.

“You can stop now. You can let me go.”

“No, I don't think I will,” he muses, his eyes following the line his hand is making and when his fingers brush the underside of my breast, I suck in a gasp and then hold it.

This... Us... it couldn't happen.

I didn't want to be broken.

Not by anyone.

“I'll be fine.”

“I’m sure you will, firefly,” his deadly calm was unnerving. It tightened my muscles and sank a small bloom of fear in my heart. I could never forget who this man worked for, what he could do and not think twice about. How much blood had stained the very hands now working soap into my skin? How many lives had they stolen?

He takes what he wants. Steals it. And that’s all I was. Something for him to steal.

“Stop, please,” I whisper.

“You want me to stop?” His eyes meet mine and for just a second, I see something else in his eyes, something other than the anger. Pain. A lot of it.

“What happened to you?” I whisper, unable to stop the words. And that flash of vulnerability I saw, it vanishes, along with his soft caresses.

ATLAS

Punish her. Break her. Steal all that damning light.
FUCK!

What the fuck was wrong with me!? I was fucking showing her my damn broken spots unwillingly. How could she see them when I'd buried them so far into my soul that only I had to suffer.

As much as I wanted to punish her for making me *feel*, I didn't need to show her the horror that was my soul.

I abruptly stand from the shower, causing her to slip to the tiles on her bare ass and storm from the bathroom, leaving wet prints and puddles across my floor as I make my way to the spare bedroom. I hadn't had the foresight to put her in one of them because I was too damn worried about hypothermia to think straight at all. And now the girl was naked in *my* shower, and I was running away.

Please stop.

My fingers curl into my palms. It wasn't a surprise she didn't want me. No one did.

I itched to break something, to put my fist through a wall, to scream until my throat was bleeding and raw. Too much. It was too much. I was burning hot and icy cold all at the same time and my stupid heart was beating too hard. I slam my hand over my chest, clutching the damning organ as if I could stop the fucking thing from beating.

What was she doing to me!?

I rid myself of the wet clothes and dry off, grabbing myself some gray sweats and a white t-shirt and then grabbing a larger t-shirt for Emery. She didn't want me touching her and that meant she wouldn't want to be naked around me either.

I can still hear the shower going when I make it back to my room, so I dump the t-shirt onto the bed for her to wear and make my way back downstairs. I hear Jinx moving around in his kennel, which was actually an entire room near the back of the house that had a door that led to the back yard. I supposed it should have been a dining room or office, but I'd never used it as such.

The boy needed his space purely because of his size but also, he deserved it, he deserved his own room and comfort. In a way, he was just as broken as I was.

The rottweiler was a little over three years old, but he had been battered, used in fighting rings since he was big enough to bite and was covered in scars because of it.

When I'd found him in one of those back-alley rings, bloody and almost dead two months ago I'd lost my ever loving mind and destroyed the place along with everyone in it. He had a temper and was mostly afraid but we'd bonded in the month after I'd rescued him and while I had originally planned to rehome him, I couldn't do it. Not when he looked at me like I wasn't broken and leaned on me when he needed some safety.

I reach over the gate that keeps him in the room and scratch behind his ear. While he was good with me, other people didn't fare so well. He didn't trust easy, much like me and attacked first.

"Let's get you outside," I murmur, using it as a distraction, and usher him back as I open the gate to go inside. He follows with a wag to his tail, licking at my hand. The moment I open the door, he darts out, his black coat disappearing into the night though I could still track him with my eyes because of the florescent collar around his neck that managed to catch and reflect the light from the house.

He was a good dog, just misunderstood and used in a terrible way.

I step out into the garden, breathing in the fresh air and welcome the kiss of the cold, letting it wash away some of the tension in my shoulders.

I don't know how I didn't hear her but then there she was, eyes wide and watching the rottweiler who had also spotted her and was quickly heading this way, "You have a dog!?" She says at the same time I was telling her to get back while calling to Jinx to heel.

Shit!

"Well, aren't you the most beautiful boy I've ever seen," Emery coos.

Jinx lunges, I'm too late to stop him.

"Jinx!" I yell.

Emery laughs.

It'll take two seconds for him to rip out her throat. It wasn't his fault and we were still training but Emery was a stranger and he'd kill her for it.

His paws land on her chest and she catches him, managing to keep her balance and then my heart drops down into my stomach and confusion draws down my brows as he gives her a big, sloppy lick up her face.

She laughs, patting him, "Oh good boy."

His tail is wagging furiously, breaths huffing from his open mouth, tongue lolled out to the side.

"You didn't tell me you had a dog?" Emery meets my eyes over the dog's head and then frowns, noting the look on my face.

Jinx finally returns to four legs and sits at Emery's feet.

"Are you okay?" Emery asks, absently keeping her fingers moving on my dog's head but I still couldn't move. I was frozen staring at her.

"How?" Is all I manage. It didn't take a lot to stump me but this... yeah this had my brain addled.

Jinx had never welcomed anyone and yet here he was, sat like the world's most obedient dog watching her with big eyes. I shake my head, "Anyone ever told you not to pet strange dogs?"

"Several times," she smiles, "but how am I supposed to refuse a big softie like this?"

"Softie?" I choke out, "Jinx isn't a softie."

"Oh I don't know, he looks like an oversized puppy to me, isn't that right, Jinx?"

He wags his tail in answer.

"Jinx doesn't like people, Emery. He had a bad upbringing."

Her eyes soften, "I can see that. You rescued him?"

"I did."

"I've seen more dogs in the same state as Jinx at the shelter and every time it breaks my heart. People don't like to take the scarred dogs, the frightened and defensive ones because they don't look or act the part but what they don't understand is that most of these dogs are the most loyal ones, once they find the right owner. He's defensive because that's how he was raised, and he still has the fear, give him time and stability and a little bit of training. He won't be like this forever."

I knew she was right.

"The shelter means a lot to you."

"My whole world," she whispers, her eyes suddenly glazing before she clears her throat, "Anyway, thank you for the shower and the—uh—t-shirt, I'll get going now."

As if only just remembering she was wearing my clothes, my eyes drop down her figure. She looked too good in my shit, the shirt hanging off her frame like a dress, the hem of it brushing the tops of her thighs.

"I need to borrow your phone, to call a cab." Her words stir me from my perusal and my eyes bounce back to her face, noting the faint pink tinge to her cheeks, a reaction to my obvious appreciation.

“You’re not leaving.”

Her eyes widen, “Excuse me?”

“It’s one in the morning, you can sleep here tonight, I’ll take you back in the morning.”

“I can’t stay here, Atlas.”

“No?” I step up to her, close but don’t touch, “Tough luck, firefly, because right here is where you’re staying.”

“Atlas...”

“Would you like a drink before bed?” I ask, cutting her off, shutting and locking the back door before I head for the kitchen. I double check Jinx’s food and water bowls before I leave, listening for her to follow.

“Sleep tight, boy,” I hear her whisper to my dog before she follows behind me. I relock the gate once she’s out of the room and head to the kitchen. Her silence has my back stiffening.

“Drink?” I ask.

“What do you have?”

“Water, beer or whiskey.”

“Don’t get many women over huh?”

I smirk, “I have plenty of women here, firefly, just none stay long enough for refreshments.”

“Oh.”

“What’ll it be?”

“Um a whiskey,” she says, “Do you have ice?”

I nod and get to work pouring our drinks, dropping a few rocks into each glass before I pass it over, watching her over the rim of my own as she takes a healthy sip.

“Plenty of women drink beer and whiskey you know,” I tell her.

“I know but most men prefer a woman who’ll drink a cocktail or a gin and tonic, the whiskey and the beer are for the men.”

“No, that’s just the men you’ve been around. I much prefer my woman to drink whatever the fuck she likes.”

She nods, taking another sip as her eyes take in more of my house. I hadn’t lived here long, I’d bought it to be close to Asher and Gabriel and I liked the house plenty, even if it was a bit too big for one person. I needed my own space after spending so long trapped in a house growing up that didn’t want me or my brother there. I welcomed the silence, found peace in the darkness and appreciated the isolation so I could hide my demons from those around me. I didn’t have visitors often, I hadn’t exactly lied when I told Emery I’d had women here but perhaps not as many as she probably thought I did. I kept *those* types of meetings strictly to hotels or their beds, not mine.

Emery would be the first woman to sleep under this roof.

“Thank you,” she says quietly, “For bringing me back here, I’m not sure I would have made it home.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

She scoffs and shakes her head, staring down into the glass as if it holds all the answers she needs.

“How’s your hand?” She takes said hand and tucks it against her lap.

“Fine.”

“Tell me why you’re doing this, sweetheart. Why are you marrying him?”

“It isn’t any of your concern, Atlas.”

“It is if I make it so,” I snap.

She doesn’t bite, instead she sighs, “I don’t want to fight you Atlas, I’m tired.”



I show her up to the spare bedroom, not lingering to check she was okay. She had checked out for the evening, and I was in

no mood to play games tonight.

I lock myself in my bedroom, heading across to the drawers that sit opposite the bed and pull open the top one, pulling out the lace underwear and her bottle of perfume. She was so close to me here, so close and yet not close enough. I'd been semi hard since I left her in that damn shower, even after she told me to stop touching her. I guess I had a thing for rejection because here the fuck I am like a damn teenager, bringing those panties to my nose. Memories of her body, of her moans, they ignite my blood some more, hardening my cock until it strains painfully inside my sweats.

I fist myself in my hand, her panties still held to my face as I jerk myself off knowing she's only a few doors down. I fuck myself to the memories of her parted thighs and glistening cunt, letting my groan of pleasure out loud enough that I know she can hear me.

"Emery, Emery, Emery," I chant her name, my cock jerking in my fist, feeling my balls start to tighten, a spike of pleasure tingling down my spine. I bring her panties down, holding them to my dick as I continue to jerk off and as if conjured by memory, I swear I hear a soft, breathy little moan from the room across from me and it has me undone. I come hard into the red lace, moaning, all my muscles going tight with my release.

I place her underwear in the hamper to be washed and quickly clean myself up before I head to my bed, her bottle of perfume in my hand. I spray it once on the spare set of pillows on the side of the bed no one has ever slept on and then climb in, inhaling that fragrant scent of Emery and sunshine.

EMERY

He showed me up to the spare bedroom and then left without a single word. I'd stayed rooted to the spot at the door, the room spread out before me, clean and sophisticated, much like the rest of the house. The large bed was nothing like the one I'd spotted in Atlas's bedroom, this one was simple with a flat headboard and clean, gray bedding whereas his was a four posted bed big enough to fit several bodies. I'd thought I'd spotted hooks on them but I was too afraid to snoop further and had instead got dressed into his shirt and went to find him but now I was curious... why would he have hooks on the posts?

Did he use them for something?

My mind wheeled through scenarios and then my cheeks heated at the realization. Rope. Or chains or whatever but that had to be why, right? He used them on the *plenty* of women he had coming into the house.

The spike of jealousy made me uneasy and my curiosity threw me off balance. What would it be like to be restrained by him. To be used and fucked with limited mobility. Was that what he liked?

I swallow and take a step towards the bed, feeling an uncomfortable heat blooming at my core that wouldn't be satiated tonight. Except my feet halt at the sound of a deep, masculine groan that seems to echo inside my head long after the sound has ceased. There was no mistaking the sound for what it was and having heard it before I knew exactly what was causing it. And that just made me that much hotter, wetter.

I press my thighs together, hoping to stifle the need to touch myself, to relieve the ache.

And then I hear my name.

Emery. Emery. Emery.

A prayer. A curse.

The moan slips out of me, breathily and wanton and I hear it as he finishes.

I knew the sight of his pleasure, felt it and the images make me so wet it leaks onto my inner thighs. I stifle my groan this time and climb onto the bed, shuffling under the blankets as I stare at the door to the room. The light leaking from beneath it turns off and my own room is now completely dark. No light or sound penetrate the room as if this house was in a completely different city, far, far away from anyone and everything.

I lay there in the darkness for what feels like hours, the heat coiled and tight in the bottom of my belly, between my legs. He was right there.

I shouldn't...

I shouldn't...

But fuck, I wanted him.

I found myself out of bed and at the door, found myself turning the handle quietly as if afraid I'd wake him but wasn't that the plan? Wake him and let him soothe this ache?

I didn't know. My feet pad silently across the hall, and I stop at his closed door. I was trying to control my breathing, trying to stop the ragged sound of it but it was loud, nonetheless.

What was I doing?

I shake my head, this was so stupid! Who goes to someone else's room in the middle of the night because they're so damn turned on it hurts?

Just deal with it yourself, I chide myself, moving to step away but then the door opens and he's right there.

Tall, broad shouldered and shrouded in shadow and dim shafts of light coming in from the windows. The peaks and valleys of his abdomen look harsh, hard, his muscles tight with tension.

His chest heaves with his own breaths.

“Atlas...” I whisper.

“Inside and on your knees, Emery. Now.”

I blindly follow the order, swallowing down the fear that swells in my chest. He doesn't say anything as the door closes with a deafening click behind me and soft lighting suddenly illuminates his bedroom.

“On your knees,” He orders with more bite this time.

I drop down to my knees as requested, turning my face to watch him as he walks to the bed and sits. He was still in his sweats, his cock pitching the front of them.

“Did you listen to me, firefly?”

“Yes.”

“Did it make you wet?”

I swallow and nod.

“Do you want to be my dirty little slut, sweetheart?” His voice is edged in roughness, drenched in desire. The degradation swims through me and I wanted to be mortified that his words only caused a dull throb to start at my center, my pussy clenching around nothing.

He grins knowingly.

“And here you are, Emery. The perfect woman, so pure and innocent, coming to her stepbrother's room like a little whore.”

A whisper of a moan parts my lips and my fingers curl against the tops of my thighs where they rest.

He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth and smiles cruelly,

“Did you touch yourself while you listened to me?”

I shake my head, “No, I didn't.”

“Oh, you must be aching right now,” he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees as his eyes drop to my legs, to the space between them that truly hurt with how aroused I was, but was covered by the hem of the t-shirt.

“Show me how wet you are.”

My fingers hesitate.

“Don’t be shy, firefly, show me how hot you are, how wet you are for me.”

Blowing a breath from my lips, I lift the hem of the t-shirt, watching his eyes darken as he takes in the state of me.

“Touch yourself.” He orders.

Swallowing, I let my hand slide between my legs, my fingers tenderly parting my folds to sweep through the wetness gathered there. He follows it like he’s hypnotized, his breathing hard. I sweep up, circling my clit and my hips buck involuntarily, I was so tightly strung it wouldn’t take long to come.

I moan as pleasure tightens my pussy, but I move away from my clit to slide my fingers down and to my entrance where I then push inside. I was so wet I should be embarrassed but with the way Atlas watches, lip caught between his teeth as he follows my glistening fingers pumping in and out of me, I couldn’t find it in me to be ashamed.

My confidence grows as I watch him readjust his hard cock, jaw clenching and twitching. He barely looked in control of himself.

“That’s it, Emery,” he praises, “show me how you fuck that cunt.”

I bend my wrist slightly and widen my hips, allowing the heel of my hand to grind against my clit and then I’m rolling against it, fucking my fingers and rubbing my clit, watching him watch me. I moan with the sensations, with how wet I was, how soaked my hand was getting and when he makes that pained noise in the back of his throat, I detonate.

I cry out with the release, slowing my hips as I drain every last ounce of pleasure I can bring myself.

My eyes lazily lift to meet Atlas's heated gaze. "Beautiful," He mumbles, "You're so fucking beautiful."

I open my mouth to speak but he shakes his head, "Come here."

He hadn't been so controlling the last two times we were together, but I didn't hate it. I liked it even, liked that he knew what he wanted and would bend me to whatever he desired.

He grabs my hips when I stop in front of him, bunching the material of the t-shirt that had fallen back into place after I'd stood. He pushes it back up and then grips the back of my thigh, forcing my leg up. And then his mouth descends and my head rolls back at the fresh wave of ecstasy coursing through my blood stream.

"So fucking sweet." He grumbles against my pussy, "So fucking perfect."

"Atlas." I moan.

He laps at me, licking the seam of me, tasting every inch and drawing my wetness into his mouth. He groans against me and then stops, fingers biting where they hold.

"I want to fucking punish you!" He growls, standing abruptly, "I want to hear you scream."

I swallow, "Why?"

"Why?" He laughs without humor, "Because you're under my skin!"

He circles around me and then presses his large self against my back, his hard cock pushing on the swell of my ass. His hand comes to my shoulder, and he pushes gently, a request...

I bend and adjust, placing my knees on the mattress, leaving my ass in the air and my chest to the mattress.

He growls something but I don't hear, not past the pounding of blood in my ears. I was vulnerable and yet I was willingly in

this position, hot and still wet and still aching despite the release.

“I’m going to redden this ass, firefly,” he pauses.

I open my mouth, unsure what to say when I don’t immediately want to refuse it. I could feel his anger pulsing at the edges of his desire, his lust and he was angry at me. But I couldn’t grasp why.

“Tell me you don’t want me to do this,” He rasps, “Tell me now, Emery.”

I could stop this, but I found I didn’t want to. I wanted this which should have scared me, yet I was more excited than I was fearful, “No.” I answer, “I want this.”

His hands squeeze both cheeks, firmly yet not roughly but then he moves, pressing one hand down on the base of my spine, the other...

Slap.

I cry out and groan at the same time, my eyes squeezed closed.

“Widen your thighs, let me see what my punishment does to you.”

I do as asked in time for another strike. This time it’s a pure moan that leaves my lips, the delicious sting of his palm forcing my core to clench and drench me.

“My dirty little slut,” he growls as he strikes again and then massages the area, caressing the red skin. Then he’s right there, the crown of his cock nudging into my pussy, teasing an inch before pulling it back out and repeating the motion almost as if torturing us both.

“Fuck,” He groans low, “Fuck you’re so tight.”

He pulls out and flips me, forcing me onto my back before he drags me down, lifts my hips and sinks in with a hard, deep thrust.

I scream, head pushing back into the mattress as he begins his rough pounding, thrusting over and over, not necessarily fast, but deep and true. He stretches me full of him, and I force my

eyes open, I force them to focus on his face. But he isn't looking at my face, he's looking at where our bodies are joining, at where his cock is spearing into me, disappearing into my body.

His neck muscles strain, eyes burning. His hands hold me firmly, his arms pulling me onto him as he moves his hips forward, adding more power behind each thrust.

"Fuck, Emery," He groans, kicking his head back as if the pleasure is all too much, "firefly."

He was erotic and sexy and so damn beautiful.

And it felt like heaven. And hell. And everything in between. A collision that was ripping me apart in the most beautiful way.

"Yes," I cry out, "fuck, yes!"

His hand slaps down onto my clit, hard, hard enough for a bite of pain to cause a whimper from my lips but then he's caressing it, soothing it, working me up, higher and higher, tighter and tighter and then I explode. The orgasm crashes through me so violently I swear I see stars behind my eyes and feel the sting of tears, my scream echoing through the room.

He follows me over the edge, hips jerking without rhythm, cock throbbing inside of me as he groans out his release, filling me with him. He settles me down onto the mattress and then collapses down at my side, our breath ragged.

"Is this where you regret it again?" He whispers, almost vulnerably.

I shake my head but then notice he isn't looking at me, "No Atlas," I whisper back, "No."

EMERY

He'd cleaned me up, walked me back to my room and then tucked me in, lying his own body down beside me. "Sleep," He'd ordered and now fully satiated, I was able to, not even sparing enough energy to question why he'd sent me back to this room rather than laying us both down in his own bed.

I'd slept peacefully, falling into such a deep slumber not even my dreams could touch me and when I woke the following morning, I was alone in the mammoth bed, the side Atlas had been in only hours before now cold and empty. I climb out of the bed, straightening the t-shirt I'd worn to sleep in and wince at the soreness between my legs, a delicious dull throb that made me revisit what had happened the night before.

With my lip caught between my teeth, I head out and down the stairs, finding Atlas, dressed in a finely pressed suit standing at the kitchen island, facing me as if he had been waiting there the whole time. He was clean, beard trimmed and groomed, leaving only a shadow of hair around his impeccable mouth. Fiery hazel eyes peruse my body, lingering on my bare legs before they reach my eyes, and he smirks.

"Good morning," he pushes a fresh cup of coffee towards me.

Lip still trapped between my teeth, I take it from him, sipping it gingerly. I don't know why I felt so awkward, maybe because this was the first time there was a morning after perhaps?

"I—uh—" I stutter, "Thank you for last night."

“Which part?” Heat begins to simmer in his gaze, “The part where I saved you from hypothermia or the part where I fucked you so hard you screamed yourself raw?”

Heat floods my cheeks, “Both?”

He chuckles and I realize for the first time that any other laugh I’ve heard from him hasn’t been true, because that chuckle, while not a full laugh had the hint of amusement in it, a rumble that sounded from deep within his chest and it sent chills racing down my spine to warm my stomach. When he notices me staring, he stops and sighs, “I’ll take you home, I don’t have anything for you to wear other than some sweats.”

“That’s fine,” I smile, “I’ll get them washed and sent back to you.”



He pulls his Audi up to the street outside my building, the rain hadn’t stopped since the night before and was coming down in heavy torrents like sheets of water. Atlas doesn’t say a word as he opens my door and then gathers me against his chest, covering me with his own jacket as he hurries us across the street to the safety of the building.

I expected him to follow me up, expected some more time but no, he drops me at the elevator and departs without a single word and does not turn back.

I wasn’t ashamed to admit I deflated a little at that. I watch him casually stroll out of the building, pausing on the sidewalk as the rain lashes at his expensive suit covered body and he turns his face to the sky, letting the rain pelt his face without an ounce of expression on it. I stay in the same spot until he climbs into his car, hoping for him to just cast his eyes my way once but he doesn’t. He drives away leaving me with nothing more than the ghost of his hand on my back as he ushered me into the building and the throb between my legs.

Shaking it off, I head up, attempting to leave those memories in the puddles left by his wet body on the foyer floor.

The week after the gala passed with little to no activity, I didn't see or hear from Atlas or Jack for that matter, it went by in a flurry of time spent at the shelter and hours consumed by me pouring over the reports on the shelters finances and trying to think up anyway, any possible way I could raise enough funds and keep them up to not have to rely on my father's money to keep it standing.

But I hit a dead end.

I'd called every sponsor the shelter still had, begged them to up their donations but was met with refusals, I reached out to new partners, potential new donors but was turned down on every corner. There was no one left to turn to.

My father and Maria had me by the throat, their nails digging in and drawing blood and they knew I was in a corner.

My father needed this marriage to keep his own business alive and Maria, oh, I saw through whatever ruse she had going on. I knew she'd orchestrated the whole thing, got my dad to approve of it claiming some unknown reason why it was such a good idea.

She didn't care about my father, just the money and the power. She would have a decent social standing as my father's wife but with me marrying the Governor's son? Oh, that would give her access to a whole new circle of people, the good, the bad, and the ugly. That's what she was aiming for. That little shadow behind the Governor's name, that little hint of extra power, extra control.

I hated her more than I hated Jack.

But what choice did I have in marrying him?

Could I walk away knowing what would happen to those animals? My father would sell the shelter, he'd sell it to the Jacobson's and those animals would have been rescued from awful situations only to be thrust into something even worse.

I couldn't live with myself with that knowledge.

I'd sacrifice myself for those animals, they were all I had left.

I lost my mother, I've now lost my father even though he was still very much alive and this—they were all I had now. And I'd save them.

Pressing my fingers to my temples I rub the tension in my brow, my eyes burning from the amount of time I'd spent staring at a screen.

Despite the horrible situation, we'd had a good number of adoptions this week, even my boy Loki was a potential for a couple who lived in the suburbs of the city with a big garden and copious amounts of time they could spend with the dog.

It would break my heart to see him go but it was bittersweet because he deserved it.

The small reprieve from literally *everything* else was welcomed but I knew it would only last so long and I should have anticipated the blow I'd get when I woke to a fresh day the following morning.

EMERY

“You’re expected to move out in a week,” My father says gently, “The property has been sold.”

“No,” I whisper, horror filling me. I needed time, more time than this, “Where am I supposed to go!?”

“You’ll be moving in with Jack.”

Bile rises in my throat as fear grips my heart, “Dad, please, don’t make me do this.”

“It’s already done,” my father sighs, “Jack is a good man.”

That’s it, I snap, “No dad, he isn’t a *good man*. He threatened me. Twice. He hurt me. *Twice*. How long before his abuse leaves physical marks? How long before I end up in the hospital? And please bear in mind we’ve had *two* meetings, and all this has happened already!”

“Emery—”

“No, fuck you, dad. Fuck. You. How could you do this to me? To the shelter mom worked so hard to keep alive. *How could you?*”

“I’ll have a word with—”

“The Governor?” I scoff, “Tell him about his violent son? Tell him how he expects me to be seen and not heard? To eat what he tells me, to drink what he tells me to? It doesn’t matter what I say, does it, *dad?*”

“It’s for the good of this family!”

“You won’t have any family left if you let this happen!”

“What are you talking about!?”

“What happened to you?” I ask quietly. “You weren’t like this. You wouldn’t have done this, what would mom say?”

“Your mother is dead, and this is what she left behind. A Godsend if you ask me, your mother would never have dealt with the stress. The business is failing, this is the only hope to keep this family alive!”

“To keep it on top you mean? To keep your precious Maria happy and comfortable?”

“Don’t speak like that, Emery, its unbecoming of you.”

“You know what’s unbecoming of me, *Simon*?” I hiss angrily down the line, feeling my anger pricking every area of my body.

“Don’t,” my father warns, “You’ll ruin this family and embarrass the Harris name. Be good. Behave. You will do your duty, or you’ll lose that shelter, Emery, mark my words. I will take it from you.”

“I’m well aware of the power dynamic here,” I seethe, “I don’t do as you say, harmless and innocent animals will suffer because you’ll refuse to help them anymore.”

Silence greets me.

“I hate you.” I whisper, “you’re my father. I will always love you, but I hate you, dad. So much.”

I hang up the phone and crumble to the floor in the middle of my kitchen, knees unable to keep me up any longer.

There were no tears left to cry, no gut curdling, soul shaking sobs to be had. It was done. It was over.

They had successfully sold my apartment, successfully backed me into a cage and thrown away the key. Part of me wished I didn’t care. Didn’t care about that shelter or those animals, didn’t care what happened to my mother’s legacy but I cared too much. Too deeply.

It was on the living room floor, staring vacantly out the windows to the skyline of Redhill when Maria finds me, Jack

close behind her.

Ice fills my veins at the sight of them both.

“Get off the floor, girl,” Maria snaps as she looks down her nose at me, “Make yourself presentable for your fiancé.”

My lip curls up in disgust but I unfold myself from where I’d been sat with my knees to my chest and my arms curled around them.

I was still in my pajamas, not having even had a chance to change when my father had called this morning to warn me of the sale.

“Maria,” I snap out, not even bothering with a greeting to Jack. It’ll piss him off, but I’m way past that now.

“What are you doing?” Maria asks with a bite.

“I’m going for a shower, what does it look like I’m doing?”

“Emery,” Jack’s voice, harsh and commanding, sends a warning shiver down my spine.

Kneel.

There was a difference between Atlas’s commands and Jack’s. A huge difference.

One promised pleasure. One promised pain.

And I had enough wits about myself to know which one was which.

“I take it you have spoken with your father.” Maria says.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak the words that confirmed it.

“Good, then you’ll begin you’re packing today and have a bag ready to move in with Jack tonight. I have arranged for a company to sort the rest.”

“I have a week.”

“Oh no, darling,” Maria coos, sickly sweet, “You don’t even have a day. Jack has insisted you move in with him, *today*, he was quite keen on having you all to himself.”

“I have a week,” I repeat, “You don’t own me yet.”

“Quite the contrary,” Maria laughs, “we own you quite thoroughly.”

I hear footsteps approach and I turn, preparing myself, neither of these people were safe, neither of them were good.

Jack remains by the door, a gleam in his eye that promises to deal on the threat he had issued but he wasn't doing anything now. He was reveling in my powerlessness, dancing in my pain whereas Maria was ready to show just how much power she had over me.

“Your mother was just like you,” she spits, “sweet, and kind and giving and where did that leave her?”

“Don't talk about my mother,” I hiss.

I was suddenly gripped by the chin, thrust back against the wall so hard my head bounces off the hard surface. I hold in the wince and refuse to drop her eyes.

This bitch.

“A lot of good it did Nora,” Maria continues, “In an early grave, dead, not even a kind heart could save her from her illness. It doesn't matter what you do in this life, it all ends the same way and I plan on draining it dry.”

“So what?” I speak even though it's hard to, even though the tips of her painted red nails dig into the soft flesh at my cheeks, “You'll fuck and scheme and work your way to the top because you're not smart enough to make it on your own?”

Her nostrils flare with her annoyance but she doesn't respond.

“You tried it once,” I hiss under my breath, “You fucked a Saint, the most powerful men in this city and what happened to you, Maria? Oh, that's right, they didn't want you. Your child didn't want you. You were left while they thrived without you. That must sting.” I was baiting her, winding her up and I knew it in the rage that flashed through her face. “Poor little Maria, the washed up nobody, destined to die a nobody.”

I don't know why, but I hadn't anticipated the strike or the second one, not until my head whips to the side with the force

of her slap, splitting my lip and I'd barely recovered when the second one landed, in the exact same spot. It was a back handed slap so her bony knuckles whacked me first, bruising my skin and cutting it enough that I felt blood trickling from my lip down my chin.

She hit me a final time, this one across my cheekbone which burst with a firework of pain, and I knew the rings she wore had cut into me there too.

I kept the pain to myself and drag my eyes to Jack who watches the whole thing with glee on his face and then I realized it...

My father wasn't the only one who could help.

I could sell my soul to the devil himself and that would be better than this... than letting these people win. I'd rather risk it there than here. This would always be my weakness, my vulnerability and giving that to anyone other than these people would be a gift. I was always going to lose but it didn't mean Maria or Jack had to gain anything from me.

I square my shoulders and meet Maria's eyes.

"I'm not doing this."

"Excuse me?"

"Have the apartment. Take away my money, I don't care. I'm not doing this."

I was banking a lot on something I had no way of knowing could happen, but Atlas was right, I couldn't let these people win.

My blood was hot on my skin, the pain a bright spot at the front of my mind but I'd deal with that away from here.

"There will be no marriage. No moving in. I am not giving you what you want, either of you. You can go fuck yourselves with a lead pipe for all I care. You're not having me."

Maria laughs, finding humor in my words, underestimating how very serious I was right now.

“Come, Jack,” she steps away from me, “Let Emery sort her things, a car will be here to pick her up at five as requested. She’ll be with you by the evening.”

I want to wipe the smugness from her face.

They truly believed I would do this, despite my words. No. No, I wouldn’t.

I quickly pack a bag, grabbing my laptop and keys and any other items that related to the shelter and call a cab. My car was in the garage beneath the apartment building, but it was my father’s money paying for it. I’d memorized Atlas’s address and give it to the driver as I climb into the back, ignoring the worried look the elderly man throws at me as he takes in the wounds on my face.

I didn’t have Atlas’s phone number, but I had to hope he was home when I arrived, if not I’d have to wait for him until he showed up and then I’d have to beg him for his help, even if it meant getting down on my knees to do so.

ATLAS

I pull the door open, eyes widening at the sight of Emery on my porch. Her eyes are a little feral, clothes askew but my eyes are locked onto the blood on her face, the bruising that's shadowing her cheekbone and lip. My heart drops and then kicks into overdrive, pounding inside my chest like the beat of a thousand war drums and rage, rage that blinds, consumes my every thought.

I hold my breath, counting inside my head in the hopes to control this anger, and reach forward, curling my hand around the large bag she holds and then gently bring her inside, my composure hanging by a thread.

"Stay here," My voice doesn't betray the deadly storm raging inside of me, "I'll be back."

"It wasn't Jack." She whispers.

My head cocks, I scan her injuries again, the dried blood leaking down her face. I assumed it had been him who did this.

"Who? Who the fuck hurt you, firefly?"

"Your mother."

My eyes close.

"I need your help, Atlas," she says it so quietly it's barely above a whisper, "Please. I don't want to do this."

Revenge would have to wait. Justice would have to wait.

I drop the bag, take her shaking hands and haul her into my chest. It seemed that she'd been holding it in, holding in her

emotion until right this minute because the sob she unleashes, it crushes me. I cup the back of her head and she holds on tight as her body shakes with her tears. Slowly, I take her to the ground, pulling her into my lap and I just hold her, I hold her until her sobs quieten and she takes a deep breath.

“I need you to tell me what happened, sweetheart, explain it to me.”

“The shelter,” she whispers, “it belonged to my mother, it was her life’s work, her dream and mission to help animals, it’s all she cared about other than me. She was so good and pure and she just made it work. She had this charm, you know? She could talk anyone into helping, she gathered so many sponsors for the shelter that we expanded it within five years and our success rate for adoptions...” she trails off, “when she died I took it on fully, I’d always worked there but I didn’t want it to fall to anyone else, it was always supposed to be mine and I love it as much as my mother did.”

I stay quiet, listening to her speak. I knew she worked at the shelter, how much it meant to her but what did this have to do with her current situation?

“The shelter has been struggling to bring in new sponsors for a while now and since my mother died, we’ve lost a lot of the big ones who never renewed their contracts at the end of their terms. I’ve been trying,” her voice cracks, “so fucking hard to get it back to the standing my mother had it in. I am able to keep it going at the moment and able to pay my staff but I’m running out of time. Out of money.”

“Your father sponsors the shelter, no?”

She nods, “But he’s been pulling money because his own business is failing.”

That, at least, I did know. I’d looked into his company that day I’d given him a visit and it wasn’t just struggling, it was on the verge of complete destruction. It wouldn’t last another year, that much I was sure of, not without that backing from the Governor in exchange for Emery as his son’s wife.

“He told me he would pull his support if I didn’t agree to marry Jack.”

I tense at her words. That motherfucking scumbag. I’d kill him too!

“I didn’t see any other choice.” Emery continues, ignoring my sudden stiffness, “But if I marry Jack, he’ll kill me. Maybe not soon but eventually. He’ll kill me. I don’t want to do this. And now the apartment has sold and they’re telling me I have to move in with him, and I just... I just can’t.”

I should have said something then, told her about what I did but instead the words that come out are...

“You’re not moving in with him,” I growl, tightening my arms. Mine. *She was fucking mine!* “You want my help, Emery?”

She nods subtly, “I don’t have anywhere else.”



The car stops in the circular courtyard beside the fountain in front of the large clifftop house Gabriel called home with Amelia. The view was astounding, with miles upon miles of the ocean available for your eyes to feast on at the front of the building, and then like a sea all on its own was the city of Redhill. This house was the castle that looked over it all. There was a reason the Saint’s owned the city and had done so for a very long time.

“Where are we?” Emery stares at the house and then the view, hand clasped around her throat. I’d cleaned up the wounds on her face a little but I wanted Devon, the family doctor, to have a look at them.

“This is Gabriel and Amelia’s house.”

“Gabriel?” Her eyes widen with horror.

“You want my help, Emery, this is where it starts. Starting with getting your face checked out.”

“Then why come here? Why not go to the clinic?”

I grab her hand and gently coax her behind me and she follows reluctantly, scuffing the toes of her shoes on the gravel, “The clinic doesn’t have Devon.”

“It’s not that bad,” she murmurs, “I don’t need to see a doctor. I don’t think I should be here.”

The door opens before we hit the top step and Amelia stands there, holding Lincoln to her chest with her eyes narrowed. I kiss her cheek and move past her further into the house, finding some resistance from Emery.

“Inside, Emery,” I order softly.

“It’s okay,” Amelia smiles at her warmly, “I’m Amelia.”

Emery’s wide eyes dart to mine and I add, “Gabriel’s wife.”

“Uh, Emery,” she shakes Amelia’s outstretched hand with the one I’m not still clutching. Amelia hadn’t missed that fact. A coy smile tugs on her lips, “Devon is waiting in the den,” she tells me.

She follows me through, taking in everything she sees, the men stationed around the house, the grand foyer and long halls, the scent of home cooked food coming from the kitchen. “Take a seat,” I tell her, nodding to Devon who waits on the couch with his supplies.

I couldn’t see this place from a newcomer’s perspective. This is what I’d grown up with and it had taken some getting used to, but it was all I knew now.

She sits stiffly, hands balled into fists on top of her thighs.

“Who is she?” Amelia whispers.

I smirk, “My stepsister.”

A gasp sounds next to my ear, but I don’t turn to look at the expression of shock I know would be on Amelia’s face nor the accusations that would surely be there too. They couldn’t understand, couldn’t understand that when she was with me, I didn’t feel like I was drowning. I didn’t feel like I hated myself so thoroughly I could barely sleep at night.

Inside my head was a dangerous place to be and the pain, I deserved it. I wanted it, to remind me of what I had done but I

wanted this too, I wanted the reprieve when it felt like I couldn't breathe on my own.

"Atlas, are you—"

Emery's hiss of pain has me moving, cutting off Amelia before she can finish her question. Devon was washing out the cut on her lip with some kind of strong smelling liquid and Emery had her eyes squeezed closed. Devon simply quirks a brow, noting the aggression rolling through me.

"She's fine," Devon says, "Just a little sting."

"Does she need stitches?" I ask.

My mother. My fucking mother—Maria—had done that to her face. She had told me the story and the why, told me what she said to push her into lashing out like that. I'd be paying my mother a visit.

"No," Devon says, concentrating on the cut on her lip and the swelling around it, "They're not deep and should heal without any scarring but it'll hurt like a bitch for a while."

Emery nods, "Thank you." Devon searches her face, softening in a way I didn't fucking like. I might think she's mine, but was she truly? No. No she wasn't.

She gives him a tender smile and before I do something stupid, like claim her right there on the couch I storm from the room, brushing past Amelia in search of Gabriel. I find him in the office, reading something on his laptop.

"I'll kill them," I growl out, the door slamming with a loud thud behind me.

Gabriel simply stares at me before he slowly lowers the lid of his laptop and stands, going to the liquor cabinet and not saying a single fucking word. He pours the Macallan into two crystal tumblers and hands me one.

"Sit down, Atlas."

I don't, instead I pace the room, my anger now boiling rather than simmering. "I want to know what Maria has on the Governor to get him to agree to that marriage."

“The marriage to Emery Quinn?”

I nod.

“It could be a love match,” Gabriel says.

“It’s not a fucking love match, *brother*, not since I have the girl half beaten sat on your couch with Amelia and Devon!”

“You brought the Quinn girl into my house?”

“They were forcing the marriage, blackmailing her. What the fuck could Maria have that the Governor could want so badly? Enough to agree to a union like this and fund Simon’s business?”

“We don’t involve ourselves in family matters like this, Atlas. What they do with each other isn’t our concern.”

“I’m not sending her back.”

“You care about her?” Gabriel accuses.

“No,” I scoff, feeling a sickness roll through me, “She has a purpose, but I won’t watch my bitch of a mother win.”

“Are you fucking your stepsister?” Gabriel asks.

“Not currently,” I smirk, deflecting.

“Did you?”

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with this.”

“It has a lot to do with this, Atlas, getting involved with the Governor’s affairs can leave this family in a tough spot. You know how long it took to get him corrupted enough not to worry about our secrets being spilled.”

“The Governor won’t risk your anger, Gabriel. Not for this.”

“You’d be surprised at what a man will do when backed into a corner.”

“And who’s backing him into a corner?” I ask, “Maria? Don’t you think we should figure this shit out before she gains more power? What if she’s the reason Asher did what he did?”

It was the first time I’d said it out loud, the suspicion I had that Maria had gotten to Asher somehow. He was content for the

most part, what had made him turn so drastically he betrayed his only family? What lies had she spilled for him to do so?

I'd killed my own brother for his betrayal and if I find out she had something to do with it, had something to do with his plans, I'll kill her too but this time, I won't feel guilty for the death at my hands.

"Asher was working for himself," Gabriel says almost gently as if afraid I'd flip out.

"Was he?"

"What are you expecting to do with the girl?" Gabriel changes the subject, but his finger is tracing his bottom lip, a tell I'd picked up from growing up with him that he was thinking about something.

"I'm going to help her."

"Is this your way for atoning for Asher's death?"

My head kicks back, "What the fuck? What do I need to atone for, Gabriel? He betrayed us, betrayed the family, he got what he deserved."

That familiar pain stabs me in the gut, the memories flashing behind my eyes of the gun at his head, of my finger pulling the trigger and ending his life.

"How do you suppose we help Emery, Atlas?"

EMERY

Devon finishes cleaning up my face, the mafia doctor surprisingly gentle as he tends to the cuts on my cheek and lip. The swelling had gone down a little but catching a glimpse in the mirror earlier showed the shadowing of bruises already forming across my face.

The woman Atlas introduced as Gabriel's wife stands casually in the doorway, her groomed and arched brows pulled low over the most stunning pair of blue eyes I'd ever seen. The woman was gorgeous, dark brown hair, sun-kissed skin, and this softness about her that I felt didn't match the woman within.

I felt uneasy being in this house, with these people even though they'd done nothing but be hospitable to me since I'd arrived.

The click of clips being refastened draws me from my musings and I see Devon packing up his things. He hands a bottle of some type of ointment to me, "Use this twice a day, keep them clean."

"Um thank you," I look at the white pot in my hand, "I did tell Atlas it wasn't worth the bother."

"He cares about you," Amelia steps into the room, her words hinting at her curiosity as if she couldn't quite believe she was saying it.

"I think you're mistaken," I say to her, keeping my eyes on the doctor as he says his goodbyes and retreats, leaving me alone with the mafia dons' wife.

Jesus Christ this was terrifying.

“I’m not,” Amelia laughs softly, “Atlas is,” she pauses as if searching for the right words, “Lost, I suppose. Trapped in his memories.”

“What happened?”

Amelia sits down next to me, leaning back and getting comfortable as she searches my face, “That’s not my story to tell. But he’s a good man.”

“I can see that, but I don’t mean anything to him, I assure you. Nothing more than a game.”

“You’re sleeping with him,” Amelia accuses without judgment.

“Only a couple of times,” I wince at how defensive it comes out, “I mean yes we have slept together but not since...” *A week ago.*

“Aren’t you engaged?”

“No, she is not,” Atlas snaps from the door, “Not anymore.” I hadn’t heard him arrive.

Amelia cocks her brow in amusement, “Is that so?”

“I left,” I admit, “Not that there was anything to leave in the first place. It was arranged I suppose.”

“Manipulated,” Atlas corrects, “Maria blackmailed her.” He turns his eyes to me, “Gabriel would like a word.”

“With me?” I squeak.

“Yes.”

Amelia chuckles, “He isn’t as scary as he thinks he is.”

“To you maybe!”

Atlas jerks his chin in a *follow* gesture, and I get up, clutching my hands together in front of myself to hide the tremor.

“I knew this was your life,” I whisper to Atlas, “But I guess a part of me didn’t believe it.”

“Scared, firefly?”

“I think I’d be stupid not to be.”

“No one will hurt you here, Emery.”

I didn’t know what to expect from Gabriel Saint, but I guess that wasn’t it. He was just as terrifying as I thought he would be, a looming dark presence that matched Atlas’s. But he listened to what I had to say, and I answered his questions but what good it will do me, I didn’t know.

Atlas promised me I wouldn’t have to marry Jack, that I wouldn’t lose the shelter either, but I wasn’t convinced. Maria hadn’t believed I would walk away, was sure on it so I supposed not turning up at the address I was texted an hour ago would be a shock.

“You can stay with me,” Atlas tells me on the car journey back towards his house.

“Are you sure?” I stare out the window, “I can get a hotel.”

“Let me rephrase that for you, firefly,” He growls, tightening his fists on the steering wheel. “You *will* stay with me.”

“Why are you doing this?” I finally ask, turning to look at him, thinking back to Amelia’s words. Atlas didn’t care about me and even if her words were true, he had his own demons to battle with, demons I figured were much bigger than mine.

He side-eyes me, brows pulling low over his amber eyes, “Do you need to go anywhere before we get back to my place?” He asks, changing the subject, “We need to plan the press release calling off the engagement.”

That was a request made by Gabriel, that rather than keeping it quiet, I release a statement to the city paper that the wedding would not be happening. He said it was fitting after Jack had publicly humiliated me at the gala which had made it to the papers the next day. But it also sent the message that I was serious.

“Can we stop at the shelter quick? I just want to check on things there.”

He nods and then silence settles between us, not necessarily awkward but not comfortable either. At the shelter I expect him to wait in the car while I run in and do a few jobs that required my attention, but he didn't. With the adoption event and fundraiser upcoming there were a few final things to sort, and I wanted to check in on Loki as I hadn't in a couple of days. With the possibility of his adoption, I wanted to put some space between us, so it didn't break my heart so bad when I had to say goodbye. Atlas follows me through the doors, staying close to my back which made my stomach do a little flip at the proximity of him.

He was such an imposing man, such a presence I could hardly be surprised that all eyes turn to him as we come into the main reception. Beyond the doors, I can hear the dogs barking, their claws tapping against the floors as whoever is back there plays with them.

“Just uh, wait here, I won't be long.”

He smirks, heading to the chairs to take a seat while he pulls out his phone and I get on with it. I visit Loki first and spend ten minutes in his kennel before I head back to the office to grab the mail. When I come back out, ready to go, something hot and painful alights in my stomach, forcing bile to rise in my throat.

Atlas is exactly where I left him except there's now a woman, a very expensively dressed woman, standing at his side, her manicured hand on his arm and a smile plastered on her pretty red lips. They're talking in hushed tones and there's something about her I recognize but I can't place.

And while Atlas wasn't touching her back, he was looking up at her with a slight smile and softness in his face.

I clear my throat, “I'm ready to go.” I'm not even sorry for the bite in my tone. It was jealousy I was feeling, no doubt about it, and I had no right to feel it, no right at all. He wasn't mine. We fucked. That was it.

I could feel myself get hot all over and my palms itched.

Atlas's eyes drag over me and this time, he grins before catching his lip between his teeth as his eyes flare dangerously.

"Emery, I'd like you to meet someone," He says, "Vanessa, this is Miss Quinn who I was just talking about."

"Oh!" Vanessa beams at me, removing her hand from Atlas's arm, "How lovely to meet you! Atlas was just telling me the story of this place, I find it amazing how successful you've been in your journey!"

I narrow my eyes, okay, so she wasn't a bitch and that just made me feel worse.

"Vanessa here has agreed to become a sponsor," Atlas says.

"I didn't know this place existed," Vanessa jumps in, "Otherwise I would have come a lot sooner! I have my own dogs and well, they're my babies and I couldn't imagine how tough some of these babies have had it. I'd love to support any way I can!"

"Oh!" My eyes widen, "Oh!"

"Vanessa is the CEO for the Redhill Press, she's also going to manage your press release."

It was too much information all at once. Atlas had done this? In such a short amount of time?

"Jack's always been such an ass," she says it lightly, but I can see something burning in her gaze when she speaks about him, "You definitely dodged a bullet there."

"You did this?" I ask Atlas.

"Don't think too much on it, firefly," he stands, "Vanessa, we'll meet you at the office tomorrow, Emery, if you can just hand over the paperwork for the sponsorship we can be on our way."

And that was that. We left and he didn't speak another word on it.

ATLAS

Confusion had kept her face twisted the entire ride home. Her brown eyes darted to me every few seconds as if she could look inside my head and pluck out the answers she sought.

Why?

How?

When?

The how was easy, the Saint's had connections and their connections had connections, the when, well, all it takes is a phone call and a few words and strings are pulled. The *why* however... that was a different thing all together because not even I was sure.

All I knew was that I hated my sunshine dulled by a stormy day and wanted to eradicate the darkness that had swept over her.

I couldn't break something already broken.

That's what I told myself.

That was easy.

She fiddles with the paperwork in her lap until we pull into the garage at the back of my house, and I climb out, her following quickly behind. Jinx barks when he hears us enter but the moment he sees me through the gated entrance to his room, his barks turn to excited whines and his whole body sways side to side with the enthusiastic wag of his shortened tail.

“Aren’t you a happy boy?” Emery coos over the gate, patting his head which he takes gratefully before she turns her eyes on me. “I don’t know how you did it, Atlas, or why, but...thank you.”

I dip my chin and stare at her, her tumble of blonde hair, the deep, passionate eyes and plump mouth.

Too good for me.

Too pure and innocent and good.

Because she was good, wasn’t she. She was one of those rare people who helped those in need, looked after thousands of animals as if each and every one of them had been raised by her hand, took their pain as if it were her own and then gave only purity back. She saw the good in everyone, wanted to provide the benefit of the doubt even if they didn’t deserve it. Jack, for example, had hurt her, twice, and she made excuses for him until she saw him for what he was. A man like Jack would have beat her until she was nothing more than a wilted flower in a field of blood.

Perhaps that was why I helped her.

I didn’t have to. I could have left her to rot, but I didn’t.

She was my opposite in every way.

Good to my evil.

A pure soul to my tainted one.

Where her hands were clean, mine were covered so thickly in death that I swear I could feel the phantom whisper of blood sliding through my fingers. I’d never thought twice about what I had to do as a Saint, I was raised that way, the killing, the corruption, the blackmail and strategy to conquer had been beaten into me until I knew nothing else and I didn’t think I could live without it now.

Especially not since I needed violence as an outlet.

It settled my internal rage and sated the demons that took up residence inside my head.

“Atlas?”

My eyes refocus on Emery, who had taken a step closer, lips pressed tightly with concern, “What just happened?”

“Nothing,” I snap.

I hate that she sees my weaknesses unlike anyone else. “I have shit to do,” I tell her, “The only rule I have about staying in my house is staying the fuck out of my way.”

Her head snaps back as if I’d hit her.

“I didn’t ask to be here, Atlas.”

I scoff, “Quite the opposite, firefly, you asked for my help, this is me giving it but don’t think for a second it won’t be *earned*.”

“Earned by spreading my legs?” She snaps, “Because that’s all I’m good for with you!”

“You wanna spread your legs for me like my own personal little slut?” My cock jerks at the thought of her being my little slut, my little fuck toy, “Lay your ass down right now and give me your cunt.”

“Fuck you!”

“I’m counting on it, sweetheart.”

I’m sure if she were closer to me right now, she would’ve raised her dainty little hand and slapped me across the face and I would’ve reveled in the sting. I was being an asshole, we both knew it.

Silence settles between us and when she says no more, I take my leave, heading through to the office on the first floor. I lock myself in there, sliding behind the desk to open my laptop and continue my digging on Jack, Maria and Simon. I’d uncover whatever the fuck they were hiding even if it killed me.

It was long past midnight when I exited the office. Emery had done as I asked and stayed away, in fact she’d been so quiet in the house I wondered if she were still here at all. But she was,

I knew it deep in my bones. The girl at least had a sense of self-preservation.

I was in a state of bone-weary tiredness, it had been so long since I'd slept a full night but even with sleep, I felt exhausted. I supposed being haunted every waking and non-waking hour would do that to a person.

Before heading to bed, I check on Jinx, finding him curled on his bed in the corner of the room. He opens one eye when he hears me approach and I swear, even he was judging me through his half lidded eyes before he harrumphs and drops his head once more, closing his eyes. "Yeah buddy," I mutter, "I know I'm an asshole." I don't even get gifted with a look from the dog, he remains facing the wall and doesn't open his eyes again.

At the top of the stairs, I hesitate.

Emery's door was slightly ajar but dark inside and if I listened closely, I could hear the soft inhale and exhale of her breaths. Against my better judgment, I go to her room and gently push on the door. The big bed was opposite the door and I could just make out her small form beneath the thick bedding that covers her. She sleeps on her side, curled up in a tight little ball, peaceful in her slumber.

I wish I was a better man.

Dropping my head, I trudge the few paces to my room and shut myself inside.

A few hours sleep, I begged, just a few...

But sleep was futile when memories ambush my dreams...

The thick scent of rot fills the air, there was no mistaking the stench of it. It shoves itself up my nose, a pungent smell of ripe flesh, of decaying muscle and skin. Death was a friend of mine and there was no mistaking that odor for what it was.

Someone had died here and their death marked these damp halls like a ghost. I was alone, my only companion was the sound of my heavy breathing through my mouth to try stave off the taste of death, but it did little because that shit still trickled in enough that I tasted it on my tongue.

I keep my eyes forward until the sole of my shoe hits a wet patch and my eyes drop down to the puddle of vomit. I couldn't help myself, a sense of morbid curiosity comes over me and I push at the slightly ajar door only to retch and threaten my own breakfast to meet that puddle at my feet.

The bloated body had been in this room for a long, long time, flesh peels from bones, eyes missing from their sockets and bugs and rodents had been using the carcass as a feeding ground. I could see bone through the torn skin, see where his eyes and nose and mouth used to be.

Lucas.

My half-brother.

If it wasn't for the large, silver ring on the middle finger of his right hand, I wouldn't have guessed it was him. But the ring was an heirloom, a ring that had belonged to our father and had fallen to Lucas upon his death.

I supposed some part of me had hoped my eldest brother still lived, some hopeless part still believing it but no, Gabriel had been right. Lucas was dead and had been for a while.

Gabriel... the reason I was here in the first fucking place.

He'd come after his woman, Amelia, and there was no stopping him. I was still pissed at him, so fucking furious because he sought to blame me for this whole fucking shitshow as if I had anything to do with the many attacks on the city. But I was on his side, I always had been even if I hadn't shown it.

Asher, my twin, he was jaded and couldn't see past the fact that the Saint's had taken us from our mother when we were only six, but I knew it for the blessing it was.

Camille, Gabriel and Lucas's mother, may have hated us—not that I blamed her, we were, after all, reminders of her own husband's infidelity—but the rest of them, our father, Gabriel, Lucas, treated us like family. Asher thought we were treated differently to our brothers, but we weren't. They were beaten and screamed at just as much as we were. Their methods were fucked up but eventually we turned into the heartless men the Saint's needed to be.

And I care for my family. Deeply.

Even little Amelia, who had only been in the family a few months and yet had grown on me with her bite and protectiveness of her son, my nephew.

And that was why I was here.

Following a tracker on a car I had been ordered not to follow by Gabriel himself.

But no, I wasn't following that damn order. I had this sense of foreboding that had me beelining out of the house ten minutes after Gabriel had left and I'd ended up here. I'd spent twenty minutes outside, scoping out the place but I found nothing, no noise, no movement... nothing, as if there was no one here at all. But that was Gabriel's car out front. He was here which meant Amelia was too.

And this, while I hadn't realized it at the time, was the end of the internal war.

I'm silent as I creep down the narrow corridor, further away from the rotting corpse of my brother and towards the final door. Inside I hear voices, muffled by the heavy door but there was a sense of recognition inside my head.

A scream tears through the space, so raw, so full of agony and despair, it almost takes me to my knees right there. I hear cries, male, female, a rasp of a voice begging and pleading and cruel laughter in response.

"I think her pain is much more beautiful than her pleasure."

Asher.

That was Asher's voice.

No, no it couldn't be. Not my twin. Not my brother.

"Don't look," Amelia's soft voice, soft even in her pain, "Don't let this be the last thing you see of me."

"Baby," Gabriel's voice sounds choked, clogged with emotion. "Asher please."

My whole world rocks under my feet so hard I honestly have a moment of truly believing the earth was quaking with the

severity of it. No. No, no, no, no, no, no.

Asher laughs at our brother's plea and I can't take it anymore. I could feel this numbness spreading through me, starting inside my head, moving through my body like the waters flow through a river. I straighten my spine, evening my breath and push the door open.

Gabriel spots me and anguish flashes across his features and then Asher turns to me, "Atlas?"

I take in the room, take in the blood snaking down Gabriel's arms as he fights the metal restraints, trying to get to his wife, his love, Amelia, I see the blood on Asher's hands, his arms, not his own, a mixture of Gabriel's and Amelia's and then I see Amelia...

Sweet Amelia...

With her dress trussed up, her panties pulled to the side and blood, so much fucking blood pouring from that intimate spot between her legs. Asher had done that.

My twin had done that.

No.

It was unbridled fury I felt in that moment.

I remembered every attack, every betrayal, the needless death, the threats... Asher had done all of this and for what?

He was not my twin. Not anymore.

I felt nothing as I took careful, precise steps across the space, dust and grit moving under my feet.

"It's about time," my twin gloats with a smile.

But I didn't smile. I couldn't remember my last smile and I supposed we took happiness for granted because after this, I'd never feel it again.

I withdraw the weapon tucked beneath my jacket, raise it and watch as Asher's brows knot in confusion.

There is no hesitation when I press the trigger.

The bullet slices through Asher's head, blood splatters everywhere, across Amelia, across me and the walls.

And internally I scream.

I scream and I scream, and I scream...

The pain of what I'd done was an iron brand on my skin, the loss of my twin was a fist inside my chest, and I felt part of my soul leave and in its absence, pain. Not physical.

It was soul deep, like I'd just ripped something of myself out.

I killed my own brother. My twin.

I killed him.

I killed him.

Death was a card dealt many times, death was a card I could play without remorse but this kill, this death, it would kill me too...

I killed him.

I killed Asher. My brother.

My twin.

EMERY

It was a pained grunt that woke me.

No grunt wasn't the right word, it was a cry, a deep, rough, agonized cry. I didn't think about what I did next, only that, that sound had tugged on some deeply buried string inside of me and I had to move.

His door was closed but I heard the sounds from within. I tug on the handle, expecting it to be locked and yet pleasantly surprised when the door gives, and I tumble inside.

Atlas thrashes on the bed, muscles straining with sweat glistening on his skin. The nightmare had him in its claws and was ripping into him, piece by piece but I knew Atlas didn't have much left to give. He was broken and those nightmares were taking more from him, claiming more pieces.

I rush across the room, he had fallen asleep with a lamp on, and it was casting a soft glow across the room which left eerie shadows everywhere, even across Atlas. His beautiful face was a crisscross of darkness and light, his head thrown back, neck and back arched as his strong hands curl into the sheets beneath his body.

"Atlas?" I whisper.

He jerks in his sleep.

"No," He whispers softly. "No please, no."

My heart cracks inside my chest.

"Atlas?"

I climb onto the bed, crawling towards him, "Atlas, wake up."

He thrashes, teeth gritted. I watch a droplet of sweat roll down his temple, disappearing into his thick hairline and he jerks once more, as if startled by a loud bang.

“No!” He bellows and lashes out.

I move, unable to stop myself, compelled to do something, anything to ease the evident pain etched into every line of his body.

“Atlas, please,” I beg on a whisper, holding onto him, giving myself to ground him.

I’m suddenly on my back, a hand around my throat constricting my airway enough that I cannot breathe, and the other hand pins my wrists above my head. If there was any doubt in how much bigger and stronger than me he was, this would settle it. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe.

My mouth forms his name soundlessly.

Atlas. Atlas, please.

He wasn’t there. His eyes were lifeless, a dark void filled with terrors, his skin pale, flushed with sweat and he looks at me like he was prepared to kill me.

His fingers press in harder at my throat, pressing down on my windpipe enough it feels as if he might crush it. I buck my hips, thrashing in an attempt to throw him off, but it was no use. He would kill me, right here.

Jack wasn’t the most dangerous threat, it was Atlas.

Somehow, somehow, I croak his name, “Atlas.”

Those fingers falter.

Was he still asleep?

He looked awake, moved like he was awake, but he didn’t behave like he was. He barely behaved as a human at this point.

“Atlas.” The syllables are a rasp, a wet, hot sound that burns my throat, “Please.”

His eyes clear a half second later and then his hand releases me immediately.

I roll to the side, choking, gasping, sucking in air. My throat burns and tears sting my eyes as I suck in large breaths, my hand lightly clutching to my own neck around the ring he'd left me with.

I feel his presence, but he doesn't move.

Rolling onto my back, I stare at him, he stares right back, eyes wild. There was remorse, guilt, regret, it all swims together to create this haunted painting.

"Firefly," He croaks.

"Atlas," My voice was a mere wet rasp.

"I'm so sorry," He lunges then, and I was helpless to stop it, I couldn't even flinch, "I'm so fucking sorry."

His head rests against the top of my stomach, at the section between my ribs, arms curling around me to hold me tight. His lips move but I hear no words, not until his head lifts and fiery eyes meet mine.

"Forgive me," He begs, eyes dropping to my throat, "I'm sorry." I didn't know what damage he had caused, what marks he had left but the guilt and regret that stitches its way across his face was enough to tell me it was bad.

"It's okay," I whisper even if I wasn't sure I was okay, "I'm okay."

The lies spread so easy I should be alarmed at it. But I needed him to be okay. I needed him to feel something other than fear, that pain and guilt and anger.

I didn't blame him for what happened, dreams were fickle beasts, but did that mean I didn't *fear him*? Of course not.

"Firefly," He murmurs burrowing his face into my flesh, "My firefly."

His hands hold me tenderly, gently, as he strokes my skin, my body, like I was the most precious thing in the world.

"Do you know why I call you firefly?" He whispers.

“No,” I breathe, my hand brushing down his sweat soaked hair, keeping the thick strands out of his face and away from his eyes.

“When I was little,” He begins, “After me and Asher were taken from Maria, we used to visit this place, I suppose you can call it a glen. The house Gabriel lives in now was never the family estate. Lucas, Gabriel’s brother sold the estate long before Gabriel ever took over.”

“Okay?”

“We lived in a beautiful mansion,” He says it almost wistfully, “A place that seemed so far from civilization that it was hard to believe Redhill was only a few miles away. That’s where I was taken when I was six, to this house, with miles and miles of land. It had horses, and cows, and dirt tracks but every night after ten, Asher and I ventured out past the pasture towards a forest that seemed to be the absolute opposite from the sea that we could always see.”

“We explored it day after day, until one day we found a small little glen, the grass was so long it touched our waists. We were nine when we found this place, but it wasn’t until we both hit thirteen years old that *they* came out to play. I don’t know what changed, but something did...”

“They?” I prompt when he falls quiet for a minute, fingers tracing patterns against my body.

“The fireflies.”

I control my breathing, stopping the shocked inhale of breath so he could continue.

“Until this point, I never felt like I was living.” He laughs without humor, his head nuzzling into me a little further like I was a tether and if he let go, even for a moment he’d lose whatever thread was keeping him here. His warmth and scent surround me, his words whispering on my skin and burrowing into me. I could picture it, that glen with the little lightning bugs that had captured the awe of a young boy.

“What thirteen-year-old didn’t feel like he was living, huh? Anyway, we ventured into the glen, it had long gone wild in

the heat of summer, flowers sprouted everywhere, the sun shone down on the grass and animals could be heard from the forest that surrounded the small meadow.

“But it was at night when I truly felt at peace. There was a new moon, only stars speckled the sky, and I sat there, Asher by my side, when the first light illuminated from the grass.

“*Asher*, I had hissed at him, *Asher look!*”

He sucks in a breath, remembering.

“He looked but he didn’t see what I saw. It was right there, this floating ball of starlight and sunshine. And I felt it inside my chest, like that little bug had burrowed under my skin. And it made me feel, *feel* like I hadn’t before. We kept going back to that little glen, not often, but enough to give me hope. I’d stopped going after a while, but I went there three months ago.”

“Did you see them?” I whisper.

“No. They didn’t come back.”

“Maybe it was just the wrong time,” I say gently, feeling the warmth of his words brushing on my skin. He calls me firefly because I make him *feel*.

Then why did he act like he hated me half of the time?

“No,” he murmurs quietly, “No they didn’t come back because I’m no longer worthy of their light.”

ATLAS

Weak, I was so fucking weak.

Here she fucking is, comforting me after I had my hands around her throat, choking her. If I hadn't come to, I have no doubt I would have killed her. Crushed her windpipe with my bare hands.

But instead of backing off like I should have, instead of kicking her out and locking my door I held onto her, telling her something from my past only Asher knew and he was dead now.

She remains stiff beneath me, even if her hand strokes down my back where I lay across her.

I had admitted she made me feel but she's not said anything in return, and I felt like a fucking idiot. Of course, she wouldn't say anything. I was a good fuck.

She didn't want me.

Swallowing the bile that rises in the back of my throat, I rise off her.

"You can leave now." I tell her with a bite.

Her brows tug down, "What?"

"Get out."

"Atlas..."

"Don't worry about me, Emery. Stay in your room, the rule still stands, stay out of my way. You hear shit in the night, roll over and ignore it."

“I can’t do that,” she whispers.

“Then you’ll be out on your fucking pretty little ass quicker than you can think.”

Her eyes widen, “What is wrong with you!?” She hisses.

“Something wrong would imply I had something right in the first place. I’m exactly as I should be. Now get out. Don’t make me tell you again.”

I open the door for her, watching her expectedly, and reluctantly, she stands, head cocked to the side as she walks towards me.

“Do you know what injured animals do when they feel vulnerable, even if someone is trying to help them?”

My nostrils flare as I look down my nose at her, muscles tensing as I sense her next words.

“They lash out, they fight to protect themselves and have a tendency to hurt even those who are there to save them, to help them.”

“I’m not an animal.”

She scoffs, “No? Because you certainly act like one.”

“I’m not some broken toy you can put back together, firefly.”

“Perhaps not, but you are broken, Atlas, and instead of embracing something good you shatter it so you’re not alone in your own destruction.”

“Wise words coming from a homeless woman. How’s it going for you embracing all that goodness?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

She doesn’t wait for me to respond, she shoves past me and slams her bedroom door shut behind her. I could still see the red markings around her throat like a band, hammering home just how fucked I was. No good. *I was no fucking good.*

The guilt I felt over hurting her, even in sleep made me feel physically sick but her seeing through all the bullshit, yeah that fucking stings.



The following morning, I find Emery waiting for me in the kitchen, she's dressed in a high-necked blouse that has a ribbon secured at the front, hiding whatever potential marks might be there from my hands the night before, and a black, knee length pencil skirt. Dark shadows line the underside of her eyes but are covered mostly by her makeup which was done so expertly it even covered the cuts and bruises on her face. She doesn't meet my eyes when I join her.

She's ready to go, her bag hanging from the crook of her elbow and her phone clutched tightly in her dainty fingers. She'd placed an extra scarf around her neck which only reminded me harder of my hands wrapped around them.

"I, uh, fed Jinx and took him out this morning."

I nod but stay rooted to the spot, guilt sitting so heavy inside my stomach it felt as if I was carrying a ball of lead. I reach forward for the scarf, memories of the first time I did this hitting me, except she was hiding the bite mark I'd given her, not the bruising from my hands.

"Don't," she whispers, stepping away from my hand. "I'm fine."

"Show me," I demand.

"It's okay, Atlas."

"Show. Me."

"Atlas..."

She sighs when I don't budge and gently unravels the scarf before tugging at the collar of her shirt. My finger marks bruise her soft skin, these dark shadows that leave a ring around her dainty throat. My teeth clamp painfully together.

"It's okay, it doesn't hurt," She lies, replacing the scarf, "I'm fine."

"You need to stay away from me, Emery." I stare at her beautiful face, her doe eyes and blonde hair, "Stay far away

from me and save yourself.”

“But—”

“We’re late, let’s go.”

EMERY

He didn't look at me, talk to me, even acknowledge I exist more than to show me through the door to the studio and guide me towards Vanessa's office.

The bruising made it look worse than it was, I was lucky there wasn't more damage other than the marks but that's not how Atlas saw it. He looked at those marks and his hands clenched into tight fists, nails biting into his palm but I don't even think he noticed he'd done it to himself. He'd left red welts in his skin and bit down, making those muscles in his cheeks pop with each clench. He was *eating* himself alive for actions he did while he was asleep and in the midst of a nightmare.

It terrified me but I didn't blame him. I wanted to climb inside of his head, witness his demons, see it for myself so I knew how to fix him. How to pick up all those broken bits and fit them back together.

Pain wasn't always a physical thing, sometimes it was our own minds, our own memories that beat us so thoroughly it left us with invisible wounds that only we could feel and see. His mind was fragile but I'd do what I could, I'd hold him together, even if he didn't want me to. He needed me though he would never admit it.

"Emery," Vanessa smiles brightly, standing the moment we enter her office. She shakes my hand warmly, covering my hand within hers with her other and gives me a smile. With Atlas though, she presses up on to her tiptoes and kisses his cheek, hand lingering on his body far longer than what was professional. I have to stamp down on the jealousy that swarms to the surface.

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood on my tongue and look anywhere else other than them.

“You look great, Emery,” Vanessa finally releases herself from Atlas and peruses me, frowning a little at the heavy makeup I’d applied to hide the marks on my face, “The scarf was a nice touch,” she approves, “gives you this air of innocence.”

I swallow and risk a glance to Atlas who was staring at the scarf as if it had personally offended him and his look alone could burn it, but I knew better than that. It wasn’t the scarf.

“So we’re recording rather than letting this go live and we will release the statement across social media and on our website. I thought you might be more comfortable with that.”

“Yes, thank you,” I say, “Are we sure this is the best way to do this? Should I not just call him?”

“You will not have contact with Jack,” Atlas growls, “Ever.”

Vanessa widens her eyes at the tone, at the possessive quality it holds but I just nod.

“It would be best to send a message,” Vanessa says, “Calling Mr Harris would welcome him manipulating you. This way you tell the whole city at once and he’ll just have to deal with it.”

So kind of like poking the bear... I think to myself as I follow Atlas and Vanessa down a long, quiet corridor of white walls and black and white photographs of the city.

We enter a small cube like room with pristine white walls but the back wall, where it looked like everything had been stationed, was 3D lettering, REDHILL was positioned directly in the middle, and then beneath it was the name of the station. A camera was facing it along with several bright lights.

“Okay, so I’ve taken the liberty of drafting your statement, the words will be on the monitor in front of you.”

“Are we doing this now?”

“No time like the present, don’t be nervous! You’ll do great and plus, you have a face made for behind the camera, you’re stunning, and people will love you!”

“That’s not the goal,” Atlas grunts.

“It helps, Atlas,” Vanessa shrugs, “Everyone loves a pretty face.”

I follow directions as I’m positioned behind the camera, a team of people suddenly entering to get it all set up. My make up is touched up and my hair groomed and then I’m standing behind that camera, the words on the screen in front of me but all I see is the fiery eyes of Atlas staring at me. It burns where his eyes touch, leaving both a chill and heat in their wake.

“Okay, are you ready, Emery?” Vanessa says, holding up three fingers. I don’t know why she bothered asking because then she’s counting down and someone points to me to go.

My voice comes out with a shake, my nerves rattling me, but no one stops me as I read the words. It was fairly basic, with me introducing myself, who I am and what I do. But then we start getting to the Jack situation and I feel the air change.

Instead of looking to the camera, my eyes lift and I see Atlas, his eyes are soft as he looks back, encouraging me to continue.

“There was a recent announcement of my engagement to Jack Harris, but I wanted to take this opportunity to address the situation. There will be no wedding. There is no relationship. While I had been engaged to Mr Harris, the relationship has now broken down and will not be continuing. I am making a public statement to ensure this situation is not opened again. The reasons for the break down are private and I will not be answering questions or accepting interviews. This is a mutual agreement.”

I stutter over that last statement, at the lie and the way it tastes on my tongue but then Atlas is nodding, supporting me and it surprises me how much better it makes me feel.

“Thank you for your time and your respect for my privacy.”

“See!” Vanessa laughs, “a natural! You need a job? I could take on a new presenter.”

“No.” Atlas says.

“Am I missing something here?” Vanessa asks with a quirk to her brow and a smirk, “Are you two...?”

“We’re leaving,” Atlas demands, “Thank you for your aid in this, be sure the recording is published today.” His fingers curl around my wrist gently, giving a tug and command for me to follow. My thanks are rushed and quiet as I’m ushered out a door to shocked eyes and gaping mouths watching us go.

“That was rude,” I grumble.

“I will not let them whore you out for the entire city.”

“Excuse me?”

“You think they wanted you for more than that?” He scoffs, “No, they want to dress you up and parade you for the men of this city to drool over and the women to be pissy about.”

“Okay, but last I checked, Atlas, you told me to stay away from you. What I do with my time is down to me.”

“You want to do it, firefly?” He stops dead and I almost collide into his back, “Go show some tit and ass and have every man in this damn city lusting after you, because that’s what’ll happen. Vanessa knows it too.”

“Yeah, and what about all the women that lust after *you*!?”

“Jealous, firefly?” He smirks, stepping up close, the order to stay away seemingly forgotten in this moment. “The difference between me and you, Emery, is that I’ll do something about men looking at you, wanting you, but what will you do, hm? Look away and pretend it didn’t happen while it eats you up inside and you burn with the anger to claim something that is not yours?”

“You give me whiplash, Atlas.” I admit, “You don’t want me but no one else can have me either, is that it?”

“I’ve never said I didn’t want you, firefly,” He declares, “I’ll admit it, I *want* you. More than I should and certainly more than I am allowed. You are everything I am not and that—*that*—is why you should stay away from me.”

“But what about what I want?”

He laughs without humor, “you want me to use you, firefly? Because that’s what this is. You’re a damn drug I cannot get enough off but all good things come to an end and you and I? We were never built to last.”

My finger stabs into his chest, nail sinking into the fabric of his fine suit, “Nothing for you is built to last, not because it has to come to an end but because *you* destroy it.”

“You’re right, firefly, everything I touch *dies*.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Atlas.”

“Yes,” he sighs, “It does.”

We climb into the elevator in silence, the air charged with heat, tension and anger, so much so it was pressing in on my skin and making me sweat.

“I have work to do,” Atlas says when we get back to the car, “Do you want to go to the shelter or home?”

“The shelter,” I say immediately, “Thank you.”

When he drops me at the building, he keeps his eyes forward and hands clenched around the steering wheel, so I don’t say goodbye and the moment I’m out of the car and a safe distance away, he floors it and disappears around a corner.

EMERY

I spend a few hours in the shelter, busying myself with the dogs, walking, grooming or cleaning out their kennels. I wasn't dressed for the occasion but that had never stopped me before and I'd worked up a sweat in doing so. The scarf around my neck had grown damp in the hours I'd spent in here, but I didn't dare remove it.

Fuck this week. Fuck it all.

The post had gone live an hour ago and so the announcement that mine and Jack's very short engagement was now over had reached the city. It was a relief. And with the check and the new sponsorship from Vanessa, I was breathing a little easier.

I'd ignored every call from my father and Maria, deleted texts and voicemails before I'd looked at them. They were not convincing me to walk down that aisle with a man that would kill me.

It's early evening when I decide I need to shower and eat but I grab an uber back to Atlas's house rather than call him. He hadn't spoke to me since he dropped me off and if he was 'working' I didn't want to bother him. He'd given me a key so if he wasn't home, it wasn't a big deal, I could probably use a bit of time for myself anyway.

Except he was home when I got back to the house. His car was here but it was the noise that gave away his position. Grunts and thuds sounded from deep within the house and after a quick greeting to Jinx who wagged his butt happily and licked my hand I went in search of the source.

There was a small home gym and Atlas was currently occupying it. Shirtless and covered in sweat, a pair of black shorts hanging from narrow hips, he pounded a leather bag with the focus of a lion hunting a gazelle. Blood pours over his knuckles, his breath sawing from his lungs, but he did not stop.

The anger he was producing was palpable, his rage this physical, dangerous thing I felt against my spine.

But he was going to hurt himself.

More than what he already had.

“Atlas,” I say calmly even if I felt anything but calm, “Atlas.”

He didn't respond to me, so I say his name again, crossing the space between us.

He was falling apart, I could see it, in the hard lines of his face, in the bloody ribbons that snake around his knuckles, his fingers, and he was lost to me. He would beat that bag bloody and would continue still. He grunts with every punch, teeth clenched so tight I don't know how blood wasn't also pouring from his mouth.

He was fighting his demons, his nightmares. I feel his pain like a physical blow. And he was lost to it, lost inside his head, lost to his nightmares. I didn't know how to reach him because screaming for him wasn't helping.

I'm so close now I see the veins protruding in his neck, his own blood splattered across his face.

I should turn around. Leave.

“Atlas,” I say gently.

He found comfort in me. In my body. I was his drug. His remedy.

Between my thighs, drinking from my body, he found a peace he didn't get any other time. I didn't know what else to do.

Swallowing, I remove my clothes, kicking off my shoes, “Atlas,” I say, reaching around to unclasp my bra, “Atlas.” I

slip my underwear off my legs, leaving me in only the scarf that covers the bruising at my throat.

I force myself into his eyeline, almost standing between him and the bag and I swear fire snaps through me as those hazel eyes finally hit me. He bares his teeth, eyes running down the naked length of me. Eyes wild, breathing heavy, he seemed more beast than man right now. Wild. Untamed.

Blood drips from his fingers in a steady drip, drip, drip, to the floor, the only other noise that accompanies the heavy pants of his breaths.

“Use me.” I whisper, “Use me. Take your pain out on me, Atlas.”

His eyes widen momentarily but the shock wears off and then he’s moving, lunging. His bloodied hands grab me from behind my thighs and then I’m lifted. He moves us quickly and with focus to a bench before he slams me down onto it hard enough the wind is knocked out of my lungs, but I never take my eyes from him, even if the fear edges in at the borders of my mind and threatens to beg for him to stop.

He wouldn’t hurt me, not willingly.

When I am spread for him, he drops harshly to his knees, the crack of his bones hitting the unforgiving floor so loud I flinch but Atlas, he doesn’t react to it as if the pain is welcomed. A relief. His eyes do a second sweep of my body, a feral gleam alighting in those fiery depths when he looks to the space between my legs but then hardening at the scarf around my throat. He rips it from my neck at the same time his hand lands between my legs.

I cry out at the sudden sensation, back bowing off the bench.

“You want me to treat you like a whore, firefly?” He growls, “Do you want to be my own little fucking slut? Let me take this all out on you!?”

“Yes!”

“Do you like it, firefly? When I call you, my whore?”

He circles my clit teasingly, an alarming amount of wetness pooling between my thighs at his words and actions.

The fear didn't exist now, only this, only us.

"Yes," I admit, feeling my cheeks burn.

"I'll treat you like my own little slut, baby," He whispers, "My little pet."

"Oh god!" I breathe, my hips pressing down for more.

"I'm going to use you how I want to, Emery. Remember you offered this."

I nod. Gone was the anger, the rage and violence and in its place was a burning desire, the intensity of it searing me through. It was for me, that look, the lust, if I was unsure about it before, I certainly wasn't now.

I cry out when he takes his hand away from me but then he's moving up my body and grasping my wrists, pulling my arms up until my hands are above my head and he's securing them with the scarf. The knot is firm but not so tight it hurts and while I can't see what he is doing, it feels as if he is tying the end to something. That theory is confirmed when he moves away, and I try to move and cannot.

"Look at you, all tied up and at my mercy." He rubs his thumb across his bottom lip, admiring my prone body, restrained.

"Open your legs firefly, show me that pretty cunt and how much it's dripping for me."

I widen my thighs, swallowing.

"Do you feel dirty, Emery?" He asks, "do you like that you and I shouldn't be doing this? The taste of the forbidden is just too good, isn't it?"

"Atlas, please."

"Ah, ah," he walks around me, perusing me as if I was on display in a museum only for him, he ignores the raging hard on tucked beneath his shorts, instead he chooses to let his eyes devour me, hands staying at his sides even as his fingers twitch. "So fucking pretty," he rasps, "You look beautiful like this, Emery, so damn pretty at my mercy."

“Please,” The plea slips from my lips as a breathy moan. I ache and I *needed* him to stop this dull throb that was pulsing in my core.

“Earn it, firefly,” he growls, “Don’t fucking beg.”

I didn’t know how I was supposed to earn it, tied up and stuck on my back but then he’s walking towards me, hand slipping into the band of his shorts to take out his cock. He strokes himself, eyes burning into mine.

“Open your mouth,” he demands. My lips part and my eyes bounce between his fiery hazel ones and his dick that leaks precum which he smears over the crown with his thumb. He bends until his face is above mine and then spits.

The shock of it has me closing my mouth but he’s quick to grab my chin, forcing my lips to part and then his cock is widening them, his thick shaft stretching my mouth. I cry out but all he does is grab the back of my head, turning my face to take more, until he’s pushing in and touching the back of my throat.

His groan echoes through my body and my pussy clenches, gripping nothing as the wetness of my arousal soaks my inner thighs. My hips roll, trying to find any sort of relief.

Fuck. I was so turned on by this it hurt. The degradation, the spitting, the domination and control.

He fucks my mouth and I move my tongue, lapping up the salty taste of him and when he pulls almost all the way out, I let my tongue lick over the seam of him, wanting to taste his precum, swallow it down.

He moans and when I let my eyes jump to his face it’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen. One hand tangled in my hair, the other wrapped around his own throat, head tilted towards the ceiling as he pumps his hips and fucks my face.

I wanted him to finish this way, I wanted to have that glory on my tongue. He was undone and it was because of me.

I chased away his demons, gave him something more.

“Fuck Emery, that’s it,” he growls, eyes squeezing closed,
“Take my fucking cock like my own little whore. Such a good
fucking girl, sucking my dick like this!”

I groan at his words and the vibration of it has his cock jerking
in my mouth.

“Do not fucking swallow,” his eyes are suddenly on me,
burning and then hot jets of his climax hit my tongue and his
moan forces my whole body to shiver.

He continues to pump, using my mouth as he spends himself,
emptying onto my tongue.

“Good girl,” he growls, fingers untangling from my hair only
to cup the back of my skull and lift my head, “Now show me.”

I part my lips and push out my tongue a little, showing him
what he wants to see.

The growl that leaves him can only be described as approval,
especially when he slides his thumb onto my tongue, pushing
through his come, “Swallow now, firefly.”

My lips close around his thumb and I swallow down the salty
flavor.

His eyes narrow in on my lips but then his eyes are on mine
once more, “We’re not fucking done, firefly. You want me to
treat you like my whore, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

ATLAS

She looks so fucking pretty, her wrists bound by the scarf in front of her body as I lead her through the house, skin flushed, a sheen of sweat dampening her skin and hair. Her eyes are a little wild, her chest heaving.

I shut the door of my bedroom with a soft click and remove the scarf from her wrists. “Stay there.”

She nods, eyes tracking me as I make my way to the bedside cabinet, pulling out the items I need. When they’re laid out on the bed, I turn back to her. Her eyes are wide on the ropes I have just got out.

“Hands and knees,” I order.

Her eyes bounce to mine, nervousness flashing in her expression.

“If you want out, firefly, go now. I won’t stop you.”

With a tilt of her chin and a deep breath, she lowers herself to the floor and I grin, “Good girl.”

I don’t miss the shiver my words send through her body.

“Now crawl to me.”

“Crawl to...”

“Come on baby, show me how much you want it.”

Her teeth capture her bottom lip and with her eyes on mine, she moves towards me, ass swaying as she crawls across the soft carpet of my bedroom and stops at my feet.

“Such a good little whore,” I praise, walking around to her backside and getting to my knees, “Lower your chest to the floor and lift your ass for me.”

“Atlas,” her voice shakes.

“You earned it baby, let me make you feel good.”

With a whoosh of breath, she lowers her chest and I lift my hands, spreading her open before I swipe my fingers through her hot flesh. She was dripping, her thighs were soaked and her cunt, fuck it was glistening and swollen and so fucking ready to be taken. By the time I am finished, she’s not going to be able to stand up straight or move without remembering what I’ve done to her.

Slowly, I slide a single finger into her wet heat, pumping it gently and taking pleasure in the soft whimpers she lets out and the sound of her flesh moving, so damn wet.

“All of this for me,” I rasp, removing the finger to bring it to my mouth, lapping up her arousal like it was the air I needed to breathe.

So damn good.

Lowering my face, I bury myself between her thighs, licking up the seam of her, flicking the end of my tongue against her clit. It didn’t take long, she was so tightly strung, so damn needy, her orgasm explodes through her, her cunt clenching as I drain her of every last ounce, wringing the pleasure from her body as she cries through it.

And like the good little slut she is, she keeps her ass in the air, even though I see the tremors in her thighs. I massage her ass cheeks, reveling in the way her softness yields to my grip.

“On the bed, firefly,” I help her stand, guiding her back but before her knees hit the edge of the mattress, I capture her lips with my own, pushing my tongue into her mouth. She holds onto my shoulders, pulling me closer, needing me as much as I need her.

Dangerous. She was so damn dangerous.

I give her a gentle push, forcing her back onto the bed and separating us.

“You’re so good at being my little toy, Emery. This perfect girl dirtied by me. By the time I’m done with you you’ll never want another man.”

“I only want you,” she breathes, lids hooded with arousal, breasts perky and heaving as she breathes heavily.

I follow her body onto the bed, settling myself between her thighs as I capture her mouth again, nibbling on her lips, her words giving me something I thought I’d lost a long time ago.

Hope.

Hope for me.

Hope for happiness.

She wants me. *Me*.

I kiss her hard and urgently, tongue and teeth clashing and then I’m peppering my lips over her jaw, her throat, over the light bruising on her neck. I kiss there for a long time, wishing I could heal them, to take away these bruises. Bruises my own hands gave her.

And that’s where that hope shatters...

I rip myself away and grasp the first set of ropes, working quickly and easily to secure the knots around her wrists to the hooks on the bedposts. I pull and her arms lift, secured.

“Atlas?”

Her ankles are next, and I secure them in a similar fashion, leaving her stretched out open for me on my bed.

“You wanted me to use you, Emery,” I shove out of my shorts, my cock aching once more even if I had only just emptied myself down her pretty throat, “This is me using you.”

She tugs at the ropes, testing their strength, “What are you going to do?”

Climbing up between her legs, I lower my head and take a nipple into my mouth, the stiff peak rolling between my lips as

her back bows and she moans.

“I’m going to fuck this tight little cunt until you scream, firefly.” I whisper against her breast, teeth scraping threateningly over the mound, “I’m going to fuck you raw and hard, and you’re going to lay there and take me and beg me for more.”

She writhes, stuck in her restraints.

“And then when you think you can’t take anymore, I’m going to fuck you again.”

I bite down on her breast and her cry is like music as I suck her flesh into my mouth, marking her. “You wanted to be my little slut, firefly, and that’s what you’re going to be. You’re going to realize just how fucked I am and then maybe you won’t offer yourself up like a damn snack.”

“Atlas, please,” She whimpers.

Stroking my cock, I line up with her cunt, pushing the crown of it through her soft folds, the heat of her shooting tremors down my shaft.

“Look at me,” I order, slipping down to the tight entrance, “Look at me when I fuck you firefly.”

Wide eyes meet mine and I sink in an inch, pulling out before I go deeper on the second stroke. Torturous minutes pass of me simply teasing, listening to her breathe, listening to the soft moans as I tease her. She keeps my eyes but then her head snaps back and spine arches as I thrust in hard, our bodies joining, touching, my cock so fucking deep and yet I wanted deeper.

I balance on my knees, looking down at the space where we join and press down on her lower abdomen, holding her still as I thrust hard and fast, the slickness of her pussy drenching my cock, dripping down between us.

“Goddamn,” I growl out, “So fucking good. You feel how good this is, Emery, how tight your pussy is gripping me.”

The restraints are pulled so tight I wonder if she hopes to snap them, but these knots aren’t budging and she takes it, takes all

of me.

“My pretty little whore,” I praise, “So good.”

“Atlas!” She cries.

“Are you singing for me, pretty girl?” I commend. “That’s it, give it to me.”

“Oh god,” she cries, her cunt throbbing on my dick. I slow and move myself, keeping myself buried deep but now my pelvis is grinding up against the swollen nub of her clit and I roll my hips in a slow grind, pushing in and rolling and when she shatters, her tight little pussy spasming around my cock, I feel my own balls tightening, the threat of a climax right there. Rearing back, I pound into her, holding her hips off the bed and her one orgasm rolls into two which triggers my own. I groan as I spill into her, hips jerking as her pussy clenches tightly around my shaft, draining me of every last drop.

Collapsing down on top of her, I hold my weight, my face falling into the crook between her head and her shoulder. We breathe hard, skin slick with sweat.

Gently, I untie one wrist and then the other, massaging the red marks left behind, soothing the ache before I move to her ankles. She was languid and sated, her eyes lazily watching as I untie her and gather her up into my arms, holding her to my chest to give her that comfort I knew she would need after that.

She rests her head on my chest and I could feel myself leaking out of her, but I don’t move us, not yet.

“What happened to that promise?” She asks as my hand smooths down her hair.

“So eager for more?”

Her head tilts up and she wriggles against me, “I like the lack of control.” She admits in a quiet voice.

She was so fucking right for me. So perfect. So good.

Would it be so bad if I kept her?

ATLAS

She lays curled up next to me, still damp hair from the shower fanned out behind her. She breathes deeply and evenly, her naked skin, peppered with little love bites all on show to me. I hold her.

I can't seem to let her go.

Lashes flutter against her cheeks as she dreams and all the while I just watch.

Was this how Gabriel felt with Amelia? If that was the case, I was fucked. I'd seen Gabriel in a lot of states before but in love? The man was unhinged and crazed, he'd do anything, even burn the entire world for his wife and a part of me knew, for Emery, I would too. Was that normal?

To feel this damn obsessed so early?

But then the guilt, the guilt of continuing when my own twin could not. And that was because of me.

And even though that guilt gnaws at my soul, I cannot bring myself to let Emery go. Not now, as she curls up like she trusts me, needs me, and not in the days or weeks or months to come.

I smooth a hand down her naked spine, and she sighs, nuzzling into my side further.

No. I couldn't let her go. She'd have to leave. Leave me. But even then, could I stand being without her?

I hadn't lied when I told her she was a drug but there was no getting over her. No stopping, no cure.

I was the poison, and she was the antidote, my opposite in every way but my equal in more. She took me when no one else could, chases my darkness and soaks in it with her light.

She was everything I needed.

She was my survival.

I could protect her, give her what she needed...



Emery

Something had changed. Something monumental.

Atlas stands close to my side, his hand on the base of my spine as we watch people filtering in through the doors of the shelter. Everything had been set up as planned for the adoption day and while I hadn't expected Atlas to be here, he insisted he join me for the day.

He watches with a scowl, but he never leaves my side. He'd also insisted I sleep with him every night since that day I found him in the gym. The sex was intense every time, incredible and awakening but intense. But then that was Atlas himself.

The looming shadow that when you caught his attention there would be nothing stopping him from taking what he wanted.

I knew I was just a body for him to chase whatever pain he was in away and I knew I was going to end up broken just like him. He'd warned me of such and yet my heart wasn't getting the memo that we needed to keep our wits about us.

We couldn't be together.

"Have you heard from your father?" He suddenly asks, the hand that was on my spine now moving around to my hip where his fingers give a gentle squeeze.

I shake my head, "No, not since the release. They stopped calling."

“Good.”

I turn back to the steady flow of people and almost choke on my tongue.

Gabriel Saint walks through the door with his wife on his arm, both looking deadly and regal in a way that seemed impossible and yet there they were. That man was terrifying but the one stepping in behind him, the one I recognize from the gala who had accompanied Atlas, he was fucking heart stopping. A combination of beauty and death.

“Breathe, firefly,” Atlas whispers, “They’re here for the event.”

“Why?” I stutter.

“Because I asked them to be.”

“Okay but that doesn’t explain why they would come here,” I hiss out, watching the ruling family of Redhill take in the space around them, the sound of dogs barking and laughter. I don’t know when I’d stopped being so afraid that Atlas was also a part of that family, but it all came rushing back now.

Stiffening, I step away from him, my hands curling into fists, but he doesn’t let me get far, “You sleep in my bed, I fuck you raw and you scream my name, but you don’t want to be seen with me?”

“It’s not that,” I flush all the way to my toes, “I’m not like them.”

“Neither was Amelia.” He whispers before he lets me go to stride towards his brother. They share a one-armed hug before he kisses Amelia on the cheek and shakes the big man’s hand. There were several others too, a petite girl with long black hair and dark skin followed by the one I recognize as Devon, the doctor who had patched me up after the incident with Maria.

I stand to the side while they talk among each other, looking as normal as anyone else and yet otherworldly in a sense too. Their power was palpable, the danger they possessed easily sensed when looking at their tight shoulders, their assessing eyes.

I supposed there was a reason they were the highest on the pecking order.

Amelia spots me and instantly smiles, grabbing the black-haired girl before beelining towards me.

“Emery!” Amelia smiles, dressed in a thick knitted jumper dress and boots that on anyone else would appear casual and yet she made it look sophisticated and elegant. The smaller girl to her side beams at me and much like Amelia, she had this sense of regality to her, but I hadn’t seen her at the house that time Atlas had taken me.

“This is Sierra,” Amelia introduces her, “by all the standards, the best seamstress in the city.”

Sierra rolls her eyes, “She’s just biased because I make all her dresses, nice to meet you!”

“Uh, you too,” I smile awkwardly, catching Atlas’s eye from behind Sierra.

He quirks a brow, almost playfully and my heart practically stutters inside my chest, what the hell was going on? Was I dreaming?

“I’m going to assume you have something to do with *that*,” Amelia smiles approvingly.

“*That*? What ‘that’?”

“Atlas,” she grins, “He seems lighter in recent days.”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with me, Amelia.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she shrugs, looking over to her husband and Atlas, “I haven’t seen him like this before.”

“Like what?”

Her face softens when she looks back at me, a gentle smile on her mouth, “Like he wants to live.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, but I stewed on it the entire day. It had been a successful event, with nearly half of the dogs signed over to forever homes or in the process of being so and even now, as I watched I couldn’t help but keep playing over Amelia’s words.

What had happened to Atlas that he didn't want to live?

I see him now, speaking with Devon in the corner while Amelia tries to convince Gabriel that they needed the puppy she was currently holding in her arms.

"But look!" She pleads, "Tell me this isn't the most adorable thing you've ever seen."

Gabriel quirks a brow and whispers something low in her ear and I have to stifle my own blush as I guess what he had just said to her, especially when her own cheeks flush and she glances around, checking to see if anyone heard.

"You want the dog, *leonessa*," Gabriel says seriously, "I'll get you the dog."

I laugh quietly, they'll be adding a new family member today. Leaving them to it, I head out of the large hall we use for training and had converted to a meeting ground for today and head through to the front desk to check on the paperwork for today. Della is perched there, filing it all away and adding details to the computer.

"Hey, Della." I smile at her, picking up the wad of paperwork, "Great turn out today."

"The best!" She beams, "oh this was left for you." She hands me over an envelope and goes back to typing, her nails clacking on the keyboard.

Frowning, I stare at the name handwritten on the front and then open it gently, pulling out a check with a total of five million on it and addressed to the shelter. I suck in a shocked breath, choking as I realize who the check is from.

My head snaps up and there he is.

He stands at the end of the corridor, hands buried in his pockets and watching me, a soft smile on his mouth and when he beckons for me to follow, I do not hesitate.

ATLAS

Her hands curl into my shirt, pulling me closer, tongue pushing through my lips with an urgency that told me exactly where this was going.

“I can’t accept it,” she breathes, kissing, pushing me further into the room as if she had control of this situation. She should know by now, when it comes to sex, it’s me that owns it.

But that wasn’t the bigger issue here though I wasn’t going to let it slide. Gripping her from the backs of her thighs I lift, her legs wrapping around my waist and turn us until her fine ass is deposited on top of the desk.

“Lay back, firefly,” I order.

Her chest heaves but she obeys the command, laying herself down on the desk, “Firstly, it’s not a negotiation, the check is a *donation*. Secondly, it’s cute you think to control this situation.”

“Atlas,” she tries to rise but I cover her body with my own, forcing her back to the desk.

“I own this,” I rasp, “I own you in the bedroom.”

“We’re not in the bedroom,” she quips with narrowed eyes, “but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“The donation is non-negotiable. You will accept it.”

“I can’t.”

“The Saints are your newest sponsor, Emery, I will not see you marry someone else to keep this place alive.”

Her eyes widen, “What?”

My finger traces the curve of her cheek, down to her jaw until I'm whispering the tip of it against her trembling bottom lip.

"Why?" She whispers.

I search her deep eyes.

Because you make every minute worth living.

I don't say this, instead I drop my mouth to hers and grind against her. Letting my body do the talking when words fail. I couldn't admit it out loud.

She could never know those demons because if she did, she wouldn't want me. And right now, she's mine as much as I am hers.

I will pour every penny I have into this to keep her with me. The relief I've had is indescribable, and it was selfish and greedy but damn, if I had to sin to keep her here I would, not like I hadn't lived a life of corruption up until this point.

She opens her mouth to say something but the door slams open with a violent bang. I'm moving in an instant, dragging her with me and positioning her behind my body as I turn to face the intruder. My blood turns molten as my eyes meet that of my mothers, her face twisted with disgust and behind her, Jack Harris, his father and Emery's father.

They would have seen the position, seen her hands on me, my body between her legs and known instantly what was going on.

I didn't give a fuck, but Emery would.

"What are you doing?" Maria shrieks.

"Emery!" Simon pushes through, "This is why!?"

Shit.

I step forward, ready to speak but it's Emery who gets there first.

"This?" She laughs, "This isn't why I won't follow your fucked up attempt to save *your* business."

"You're fucking your brother!" Maria gasps.

“Stepbrother,” I correct.

“As if that makes it better.”

“Not illegal,” I shrug.

“Get out,” Emery says in a low voice, stepping around me to stand at my side, “None of you are welcome in this shelter.”

Maria gives her a cruel smile, “Simon,” she says in a sweet voice, “Care to remind your daughter exactly who it is that finances this place to keep these mongrels fed?”

Jack and his father remain quiet, but the former was staring at Emery with a burning rage while the Governor, he looked sick, eyes darting back and forth between all the parties. I cock my head, studying him, the pretender, the fake... we all knew who really called the shots in this city.

“Emery, you know the deal,” Simon says gently, carefully, eyes darting to me.

“She no longer requires you.” Gabriel says from behind them. I hadn’t seen him step up, hadn’t sensed him with the threat before me but there he was, with Enzo and Devon at his side. “The Saints are now taking over full financial responsibility of this shelter.”

Emery tenses at my side and out of instinct I reach for her hand, taking it in my much larger one. For the moment, she accepts it, takes the comfort but then Jack is staring at where we are linked and she’s moving away from me, her face paling much like her fathers and my mothers.

“Maria,” Gabriel greets her with a sneer, slowly tucking his hands into the pockets of his trousers as he looks her over and finds her entirely *lacking*.

“Mr Saint,” Simon says with a shake, “With all due respect, you do not have that authority. This shelter is mine until Emery turns thirty.”

“Is that so?” I cock my head, “Are you sure about that?”

I’d been working tirelessly with lawyers after having found the contracts tucked away in Emery’s belongings. It isn’t like she

hid it and I'd guessed she hadn't scoured over the documents like I had.

Gabriel smirks.

"She's mine," Jack snaps, "I was promised."

"Jack," his father warns.

"No, fuck you, she's mine. You forced me into this and what, you're just going to let her embarrass me like this?"

"Governor Harris," Gabriel says, "Good to see you again."

"Gabriel," He nods.

I look over to Emery who looks like she might actually be sick all over the floor. She was scared. And I realized it wasn't me she was moving away from when I took her hand, it was them, *him*.

I hadn't had my revenge against him for laying his hands on her, for hurting her or scaring her but I was going to make sure I had that opportunity. Maybe not today, but soon, real fucking soon I was going to make him pay for what he had done.

Such a short amount of time and a lifetime of damage.

She deserved better.

Maybe not me, but *better*.

"Here's how it's going to go," I say, "Mr Quinn, you're going to sign over the shelter, without argument or demands. It rightfully belongs to Emery and you, and I both know it. If you don't, I can promise you the fight will be lost by you. Not only will you make *me* an enemy but that failing business you're already struggling to keep afloat? I'll take every damn penny. Maria, whatever agenda you're hoping to achieve, forget it and Jack, I don't give a fuck who you are, I suggest you leave this city in the next week because I'm coming for you and the shit you did to Emery? I'll make it look like a walk in the park."

"What did you do?" Governor Harris whispers.

Jack sneers.

“You have no right,” Simon steps forward, “None!”

He makes a move towards Emery but I’m quicker and so is Enzo, I have him by the collar a second later, smashing him back against the wall as Enzo presses his gun against his temple. “Once the papers are signed, you will never talk to her again. She belongs to the Saint’s now, do you understand?”

The stench of ammonia stains the air, and a glance down shows the dark stain blooming on the front of Simon’s khaki pants.

I lean in real close, my nose an inch from his as my lips pull back from my teeth, “I said, do. You. Understand?”

“Y-yes,” he stutters.

“Tell me,” I demand.

“I’ll sign over the shelter. I won’t contact her again.”

“Simon!” Maria shrieks.

“You can shut your fucking mouth,” I growl at my mother, “but don’t worry, you and I will be having a chat. Real fucking soon.” I don’t even glance at her but her intake of breath and the sound of my brother closing in was enough to know she’d be shitting herself.

If only she’d stayed the fuck away. If only she’d stayed in the trash where she belonged, she might be safe from the Saint’s.

“Emery,” I feel my whole body soften towards her, “Are you ready to leave?”

ATLAS

“**W**hat have you done?” Emery asks in the car, the city quiet all around us. A storm was blowing in, the promise of snow turning the air to ice and the seas, turbulent and raging, crashing against the shores.

“What I needed to.”

“But what is that?” Her face was still a little pale from the confrontation, she had yet to mention my order for her father to stay away from her or the claim I staked but I was sure it would come.

“Did you ever read the Will your mother left you?”

“Of course,” She scoffs.

I smirk at the darkening road ahead, “I mean, read it down to the small print?”

She frowns, “I read what I understood.”

I nod, “Your mother placed a clause in the Will, firefly, you would inherit the shelter when you turned thirty, she did that so you could enjoy your life without the burden of keeping the place running. That was down to your father, and he had agreed, they signed a contract on it.”

When she opens her mouth to speak, eyes wide, I reach across and place my hand on her thigh, feeling the ease in which my demons settle at just a touch, “Shh, let me explain.”

At her nod, I continue, “There was a contract between her and your father that had him agree that, if anything were to happen to her then Simon would take care of the shelter and all needs

until you turn thirty and it becomes your responsibility. That means all financial aid, the general running and administration was his burden to bear. He broke that contract and your mother made sure that something was added to the Will should that ever happen.”

“What was it?” She whispers.

“It’s stated that should Simon ever neglect, use, or abandon the shelter it would automatically fall to you. That means his blackmail and bribery is a direct breach of the contract. His lack of funding, regardless of the state of his own business is a breach and by the legality of the contract, the shelter is already yours. He had planned for you not understanding the legality of the deal, hid the fact that he had a contract in place with your mother and would have continued to do so until you were thirty. He would have seen you marry Jack and taken the money Governor Harris offered.”

“So, it’s mine?” She asks.

“Not quite yet, there needs to be a formal sign over and evidence of the breach which we have, and Simon knows it. He’ll sign it over without the need for lawyers.”

“You’re so sure?”

“I am.”

“And exactly what did the Governor gain from this?”

“That I don’t know but Gabriel does, and I plan to find out soon. Maria has more to do with this than anyone knows.”

“Your mother is a real piece of work.”

“She’s a real bitch if that’s what you’re saying.”

Emery laughs, relaxing a little more into the leather upholstery of the car, “I like you like this.” She murmurs.

I risk a glance towards her, “Like what?”

A shrug, “When we’re like this you don’t seem like the world is crushing you.”

My teeth clench, “That’s because it isn’t.”

“You know what I mean, Atlas,” She weaves our fingers together, “You have shadows,” her words are but a breath of air, “they follow you but when we’re like this it’s almost like someone has opened a curtain and let in a little light. You seem, I don’t know, *free*.”

It was those words that resonated inside my head as the clouds finally let loose the snow, as the wind picked up and the temperature dropped, and they continued bouncing around my skull the final stretch home.

If she knew...

If she knew what I had done. The sin I carried. That light I carried would be extinguished because she was gone.

She steps from the bathroom, her robe knotted around her waist and her hair loose, face free of makeup and cheeks flushed from the heat of her shower.

“You want me to stay in here again?” She asks a little unsure, just like she did every night as if expecting me to kick her out like I have before.

I don’t answer her, instead I stroll towards her, my sweats hanging low, the bedroom warm against the snow falling heavily outside the window. Hands raised, I cup her head, adjusting it until her chin is tipped and her deep brown eyes are staring right into mine.

“I made a statement earlier today,” my lips press into the corner of hers, “A claim I suppose.”

“You did?”

“I told a room full of people that you belonged to the Saint’s now.”

“That’s right,” A beautiful blush steals across her cheeks.

“I might have lied.”

“Oh.”

The way her face falls, emotion brimming in her eyes almost guts me.

“It’s not Saint’s” I kiss her cheek, “It’s Saint. Singular. One.”

“Is it?”

“You belong to me, firefly, mine. Not theirs. Not his. Not anyone else but me.”

“Am I a possession?”

“No baby,” my thumb traces her bottom lip, “You’re you but you are mine.”

“Does that mean you’re mine too?”

“Everything I have left is yours.”

It was a strange sensation, this feeling inside my chest, this burning ball of light that made my heart beat faster, my stomach drop. It was her. All of it. I couldn’t get enough but I couldn’t give her enough either.

“And what of your secrets, Atlas? Are they mine too?” The question was spoken softly, probing but gently as if she would let it go if I wanted her to.

“Do you trust me, firefly?”

“Always.”

“I want to try something with you.”

“What?” She breathes as my fingers trail down her pretty throat, parting the robe to reveal naked skin beneath.

“I know how much you like to please, firefly,” I whisper, fingers now at the knot keeping the two sides together. A gentle tug has it opening and then parting to show her delicate little nightgown, “did you wear this for me?”

It was silk, an emerald green to match the dress I’d given her for the gala, the one that had been ruined by the rain after she had walked almost half an hour in it, though this was much better. Short in length with cut outs from the hem to the ribs made up of black lace. Skimpy little straps keep it in place but the thin, silky material hid nothing from my view. Her nipples

were peaked, the material molding to her breasts, her waist, and hips.

She nods with a swallow, a flush spreading across her cheeks.

“And here I thought you were my innocent little firefly but really, you like being my little slut, don’t you?”

“Atlas,” her lips part, “Yes.”

“Should we get you a pretty collar?” I ask, fingers curling around the now mere shadows of bruising on her throat, “So we both remember you like being my little pet?”

“Only here,” she whispers, “Only us.”

“Only us,” I agree, gently caressing her neck, “On your knees pretty girl.”

Without question, she gets down to her knees, chin tilted up to maintain her eyes on mine.

“Such a good little slut aren’t you, firefly?”

“Yes.”

My cock jerks at the sight of her obedience, at her willingness to submit herself completely to me. The trust it took and yet, how we had come to achieve this astounded me.

“Lift the nightdress, Emery, show me what’s underneath.”

Her hands hold steady as she pulls at the hem, the material whispering on her soft thighs as she raises it, up and up until one hand holds the bunched material against her stomach and her other, fingers twitching in anticipation, resting on her thigh.

She was bare for me, her cunt open and ready.

I feel the muscles in my jaw go tight with all the praise I want to dish out, my hands tightening as my restraint slips. Fuck I want to touch her, to devour her and taste her and *worship* her.

“Show me how much you want it, firefly, part that pretty pussy and soak your fingers with all that you have to give me.”

I step back and sit at the edge of the bed, watching as her free hand slips between her legs and she parts herself, her pink,

swollen flesh glistening with her arousal. She circles her fingers, working herself before her hand dips lower and she penetrates herself.

“That’s it,” I praise, “Show me how much you want it.”

“Please,” She begs.

“You trust me?” I repeat.

“Yes.” She breathes.

I help her to stand and slowly, like she was a piece of art to be worshiped, I slip the straps from her shoulders, helping the nightgown down her body until it pools around her feet. Naked and aching, I guide her to the bed, sitting her down and then position her in the center.

“Pain has as much need in the bedroom as pleasure,” I explain, “There’s a fine line between them, it doesn’t take much before one becomes too much and it turns into the other.”

“You like it?” She asks, “To cause pain?”

“I like to punish,” I admit, “Mainly you.”

“Why?”

“Because you make me feel.”

She nods as if she understands, keeping herself relaxed as I restrain her hands together by the wrists and secure them to the hooks installed on the bedposts.

“Hold very still Emery,” I tell her, tying her ankles and then positioning a blindfold across her eyes, fingers tracing down the curve of her face, “Be my good little whore.”

At her subtle nod, I step back from the bed, admiring my work and a smirk pulls at my lips.

Mine. All fucking mine.

EMERY

A sharp gasp escapes my parted lips, and my body stiffens as a quick burst of pain radiates through my left breast, starting from my aching, peaked nipple. It was a pinch, a shock more than anything but then it changes, morphs into this agonizing pleasure that confuses and addles my brain.

I feel Atlas's hands, fingers whispering over my pebbled and overly sensitive flesh, and then I flinch as a cool metal runs across my breast, biting into my nipple, that same shock occurring on my right. I gasp, my back arching at the pain and pleasure of the clamp.

"How does that feel, pretty girl?" He whispers.

"Good," The word comes out on a shaky breath, sounding unconvincing.

"You have to tell me if it gets too much, you have to tell me to stop."

I nod, blinded by the thick swatch of material he had placed on my eyes. It left everything heightened and a part of me wanted to freak out at the loss of my sight *and* lack of mobility, but I hadn't lied when I said I trusted him.

"I have to hear it, firefly, you have to tell me, do you understand?"

"Yes," my voice trembles, "I understand."

I feel my muscles twitch as his fingers trail down the center of my abdomen, "Seeing you like this, firefly," he rasps, "I can't get enough."

“Atlas,” I breathe, “Touch me, please.”

His deep chuckle sends a warming sensation through my stomach, a tingle down my thighs. I loved that damn chuckle.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” He presses a kiss to my stomach.

“What?” I screech.

“Patience, firefly,” are his parting words.

I hear my own breathing in my ears, my blood pounding like the beat of a thousand war drums. Knots form in my stomach, a tightening in my chest. He wouldn’t leave me like this, right?

“Atlas?” I ask after what feels like several minutes have past.

There was only silence.

Somewhere close to the door a floorboard creaks and automatically, my head turns to the sound, my other senses taking over now I had no sight. “Atlas?”

Quiet, lazy footsteps sound towards me, the gentle rustling of clothes sending the hair at the nape of my neck to standing.

When no words are spoken and more silence drags, I swallow, fear tightening those knots.

“Atlas?”

Something is placed gently on the unit beside the bed, a glass by the sounds of it with something that clinks inside.

I feel his presence, close, closer and then lips whisper against mine, a fleeting pass that has me fighting the restraints to chase after Atlas’s familiar taste.

He doesn’t reward me with more of his mouth on mine, instead he moves away only to come back a second later and something ice cold touches the curve of my breast, so cold I cry out at the sensation of it against my heated skin.

Ice. That was ice on my skin, melting against my flesh as Atlas moves it around one breast, teasing at the nipple and the clamp, the coldness giving me a sense of relief at the dull throb there. But he’s constantly moving it, around one, then the other, up to my collarbones and down between the valley of my breasts, over my sternum until it dips onto my stomach,

my naval. The coldness makes me gasp, muscles jumping at the shock of the chill. He moves it over my body, wetting my skin with each pass of the melting cube.

But when he dips it between my legs my spine arches from the mattress, the sensation a whole different feeling than anything I'd ever felt before.

"Keep moaning, baby," he rasps as he climbs onto the bed, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. "The noises you make," Atlas groans, "they make me so fucking hard."

The ice slides through my pussy, cooling the heat I feel there but doing nothing to quench the burning hot arousal that makes my whole body shake. My nipples throb in a delicious ache, every nerve ending seeming to catch on fire, one after the other. He moves the ice until I feel him pressing it against my entrance and my body automatically clenches as he pushes it inside.

I cry out, unable to stop myself, "Look at you, my perfect dirty little whore," He follows the ice cube with his fingers, sliding only a single digit inside, "Only ever for me, you understand?"

"Oh god!" I whimper when he adds a second.

"Answer me." He demands roughly, pumping his fingers through the now melted ice that makes everything wet, my thighs, and the bed beneath my ass.

"Only," I breathe, trying to press my hips down, needing more, "for you."

"That's right." I've lost all sense, all coherent thought.

I feel a hand between my legs, pumping into me, his fingers curled to swipe against that sweet spot inside, teasing it to leave me a whimpering mess. And when a sudden gush of ice cold water hits me, I'm thrust into a sudden orgasm that pulls everything tight, my pussy clenching wildly around his fingers and then his mouth is on me, tongue pushing through the ice cold water, heating it as his tongue expertly flicks against my clit, fingers never stopping that rhythmic thrusting, in and out. Somewhere I hear myself screaming, screaming for more,

screaming for mercy but he pushes me through the climax, lapping at me, tasting me before he slowly brings me down.

Blinded and weak, I feel him unhook one of my legs, cupping me behind the knee to bring it up until it hooks against his bare hip. I was so gone I couldn't tell you when he removed his clothes, but he had, and his rock hard cock was now pushing into my sensitive flesh, my pussy throbbing and clenching around him, more than ready and willing to take him.

He groans as he sinks in, his whole body tight with tension, fingers flexing where he still holds my leg up, opening me up further to take his considerable length.

"Goddamn," He growls, "Fuck. You feel so good, firefly, you were made for me."

"Yes," I cry, hooking my leg around his back to draw him in further. I wanted to see him, to look at him while he fucked me like this. As if reading my thoughts, he suddenly rips the blind fold from my eyes, the light shocking them closed but he doesn't stop.

His hips buck into mine, our bodies clashing before he pulls out and thrusts in again, over and over, he fucks me into the mattress, my body jolting with each deep push. It was wild and beautiful, it felt like sin in the holiest way. I'd worship this man. Worship him in all the ways he doesn't think he deserves, I'd kiss every crack on his soul and hold those pieces together. Let him use me, feed off me if he so much as wanted it.

I felt tied to him in ways that didn't seem possible, like our souls had always been destined to meet.

We needed each other.

His lips suddenly press on mine as his hips slow but deepen and I could feel myself tightening once more, the promise of an orgasm right there with each thrust and roll of his hips.

I hadn't expected it to happen like this.

Falling in love with my stepbrother was the worst thing I could do and yet, I couldn't help it. He held my whole heart inside

that unforgiving fist of his, owned me completely and irrevocably and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

And as he drives into me, his mouth fused to mine, holding me as close to his body as I can physically get, I can only feel our ties binding tighter and tighter.

My body soars with pleasure, my skin alight as he brings me to the peak, his cock sliding in deep, his tongue kissing me with the heat of a thousand suns.

“Atlas,” I whimper into his mouth when he finally comes up for air.

Fiery hazel eyes clash with mine and while I know he would never admit it, never speak the words, there’s something in his gaze that reflects my own but the difference between us is that within those soulful eyes is years’ worth of pain, of heartbreak and longing. Years’ worth of suffering.

“I know,” He rasps against my lips, “I know, firefly.”

He was never going to give me his heart, not the way I wanted it, and I was going to have to settle for all the broken pieces instead.

Everything I have left is yours.

But what was left of him?

What had happened to make him like this? What had caused that pain?

“Come for me, firefly,” He whispers, “My firefly.”

He reaches between our bodies, pressing his thumb to my swollen clit and I detonate around him, head thrown back in pleasure and his body follows, spilling into me, cock jerking as he empties himself, his groan of pleasure echoing throughout the room.

The realization of how deep my feelings for him have burrowed only becomes heightened when he releases the restraints and takes us both to the shower, sitting on the tiles beneath the spray and just holds me. Holds me like I’m the most precious thing he has ever touched, his hands smoothing over my now cooling skin, easing me down from a high that

had taken my breath. He rubs my back and whispers against my hair, words I cannot hear but yet they warm me.

And once the sheets are changed and clean, he holds me in the bed, hand pressed to my chest, over my heart while his face is buried against my neck and he sleeps.

It was the first time I'd seen him sleep so peacefully and so quickly but he rests there, that hand never straying from my heartbeat, and I watch him knowing I'll never get over him.

I won't be able to keep him.

He'll never allow it.

And I will never meet another man like Atlas Saint.

ATLAS

All good things come to an end.
I was told once that those that you care for, you shouldn't keep trapped. I'd even lived that saying the one time Asher had come home from the glen with several fireflies trapped in a mason jar. I'd immediately told him to release them, that it wasn't fair on the bugs to keep them caged in a jar when they had the whole world to explore.

And my own firefly, she would be burdened with me.

I won't deny I recognized the look she gave me last night. I've seen it before, on Amelia's face when she looks at my brother, I saw it on my father's face when he looked at his wife.

Love.

She loved me.

This pure, beautiful girl loved a monster.

And that—*that*—was why I would let her go.

Because loving me would damn her. And if I loved her back... there would be no escaping me.

Or perhaps this feeling in my chest, this tightening, it was already that deep rooted feeling of love and that was why I would let her go.

I didn't know.

She sits at the breakfast table scrolling the news while eating a bowl of cereal, looking so relaxed and content, her cheeks flushed, blonde hair still slightly mused from sleep. She was blinding.

Devastating and the pain inside my chest? It was like nothing I'd experienced before. Not in any of the years after we'd been taken in by the Saint's and ultimately rejected by most, not in the years after at the constant dismissals and distrust and not when I put a gun to my own brother's head and pulled the trigger.

This was a different type of pain.

A pain that crumbled whatever was left of my heart and turned it to rubble and the sharp shards were now burrowing into my bones, into my marrow.

It was like saying goodbye to the sun.

With the grief over my brother and the guilt, it almost seemed physical, and this was anything but that.

Swallowing down the words I desperately wanted to speak instead of the ones I was about to, I reach into the drawer at my hip, fingers curling around the set of keys I'd stashed there.

If I was a better man, I would never have made her endure my presence this long. I would have never let her fall in love with me.

I throw the key onto the counter, watching as it skids across the top to stop only after it clinks against the side of her bowl.

With a frown she glances up from the news article she was reading, eyes bouncing between the key and me.

I was doing this *for* her.

"Atlas?"

"It's time for you to leave."

"Excuse me?"

"That key," I tilt my chin, gesturing to it, "It's your penthouse."

"That was sold."

"I know. I bought it."

"You...what!?"

“Are you purposely acting dense?”

Her eyes widen, “I don’t understand.”

“The promise still stands,” I turn my back on her, tasting bile on my tongue, “You are under the Saint’s protection. My protection, but your family, they won’t bother you now anyway. My brother called this morning, the papers for the shelter have been signed. It’s yours.”

“But you said...” her voice is a whisper, I hear the crack in her tone and refuse to turn around, “You said I was yours. That you had feelings for me.”

“You were mine,” I agree. “To fuck. Now? I got what I wanted. I told you I’d break you, Emery.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t!” She suddenly shouts, the chair scraping out from beneath her, “You’re just saying it because you’re scared of this! Of what we could be.”

Inhaling deeply, I turn to her, “Haven’t you learned your lesson by now, Emery?”

Tears shine in her deep brown eyes, her bottom lip wobbling but mixed in with that sorrow is anger and anger was good.

“Men like me, we break things. We do it for fun. Because we can. I told you this, I was honest and yet, sweet, naïve little Emery still went and fell for it. You should have been stronger.”

“No,” she snaps, “I fell for *you*.”

I stifle the flinch.

“I fell in love with you Atlas, I know you feel it too.”

“I told you, you had everything I had left,” I recall my words, “Well this is it. This is me.”

“No. No it isn’t.”

“Time for you to go.”

“You’re a coward, Atlas,” her brown eyes clash with mine, “A fucking coward. What’s so fucking bad that you push away anything good in your life, hm? What could possibly be so fucking devastating it’s left this... this *shell*.”

“You want to know what’s devastating, Emery?” I keep a cool head, she was lashing out and that was good, it was better she hated me, “I killed my own brother.”

She freezes.

I pull out the gun I have concealed beneath the suit jacket and lay it in front of me, “This gun right here, I placed it against my brother’s head, and I pulled the trigger.”

It was a reminder of who I was, what family I belonged to. She may be under their protection, but she could stay far, far away from the chaos. From me.

She swallows thickly, “I’m sure there was a reason.”

I laugh without humor, “That matters?”

“You don’t scare me.”

“Okay, how about this, Emery? I don’t want you.” I lean forward, “You get that? I do not want you. A spoiled little rich girl who’s only good to play with dogs all day and spread her legs for her stepbrother? Can you even do anything for yourself?”

The words are acid on my tongue, burning as they come out. She was the most selfless person I knew, kind, happy. She’d light up a whole room with a smile but this face, I could see that light leaving. Feel it cracking through my chest.

“Fuck you, Atlas.”

She rushes from the room and disappears up the stairs, her door slamming. For ten minutes I stand in the kitchen, listening to her soft cries and the sound of her packing and when she returns, her long blonde hair pulled back, tear tracks on her cheeks, I just stare at her, keeping the emotionless mask on my face.

More.

Better.

She deserved everything good.

“I hope you heal, Atlas,” she whispers, plucking the key from the side, “I do. I hope you find someone who makes everything brighter for you, so you don’t feel like this anymore.”

I say nothing.

“I will stay in the penthouse for a week, just until I find something more stable, and then I’ll be gone.”

“It’s yours.”

Her eyes dip to her feet, “I don’t want anything else from you. Thank you for your help with the shelter. But the apartment, I don’t want it.”

“Emery,” I say her name as she reaches the door, the sound almost a plea on my lips but then I stop myself when a look of hope flashes in her eyes as she looks back at me.

She shakes her head with a soft, humorless laugh, “Bye Atlas.”

And it’s when the door clicks closed that I allow myself to sink to my knees, allowing the darkness to swallow me down.

Goodbye, firefly.

EMERY

It was quiet.
Empty.

My apartment was unchanged, all my colorful furniture remained where I had left it, but a thin layer of dust had settled over the space. I should have been angry that Atlas had had access to my home this entire time but after this morning I had nothing left to give.

I knew why but it didn't make it hurt any less.

I trusted him. He wanted me to trust him.

And now look at the mess he's made.

Broken people could only be fixed if they wanted it, if they weren't afraid of what the world might look like after they've released their pain. He killed his own brother. But I don't think it was just that which made Atlas who he was.

But hidden beneath that beautiful pain was a soul aching for another. I almost had it, I could have helped him but no, he was too far gone in his destruction.

Atlas wasn't bad.

He wasn't a villain.

He was misunderstood, morally gray, someone who did bad things for the people he cared about. There was a reason he did what he did to his brother, just as I knew he cared for me after he worked to get the shelter for me, how he donated and retrieved his brother's aid.

The Saint's didn't terrify me like they used to, I mean they *were* terrifying but being with Atlas, seeing their dynamic, how fiercely they love and protect, how they weave their power through the city, manipulating and controlling to see it and themselves succeed.

I would grieve the loss of my family, of my father and that relationship but not nearly as heavily as I would grieve something I'd only had a taste of.

Our short relationship was unconventional, a trial in itself, and yet I'd fallen so hopelessly in love with him I didn't know how I would ever move on from it.

How could there be another after Atlas?

I felt so incredibly lonely in this moment, in the large penthouse apartment, the sounds of the city drowned out to a soft muffle with me being so high up in the clouds.

And Atlas... he would forever remain this shell of a man hiding behind his own pain. He was punishing himself the only way he knew how. In isolation.

Perhaps I was making excuses, trying to come up with reasons why he didn't want me. Perhaps there was truth in his words, maybe he didn't want me...

That thought hurt.

I sink onto the couch, ignoring the musky scent of dust and bring my knees to my chest. There were no more tears to be had but the crack in my chest was debilitating enough that I wanted to crawl into a dark space and not come out.

I never understood the grief of a broken relationship, couldn't understand how someone could become consumed with their sorrow over a relationship until now.

There is no love without pain because if it doesn't hurt, was it even real?

ATLAS

“Again,” My words come out in a slur of noise, blood dribbling from my lip, “Hit me again!”

“Atlas,” Gabriel’s warning voice sounds from the edge of the ring, the noise of the underground fighting pit was loud, but he was close enough I could hear him. Enzo was at his side.

My body was slick with sweat and blood, knuckles swollen, face in much the same state.

The guy in the ring with me, a big mean looking fucker hesitates, his one eye which wasn’t swollen shut, darting between me and my brother. “Don’t fucking look at him, look at me!” I growl, “Come on!”

At the edge of my vision, I see the enforcer step up on Gabriel’s command. No one would dare take on Enzo unless it was an arranged fight, even if this guy currently facing me was almost the same size. Even the crowd packed in tight around the ring shuffles nervously.

“I think you’ve beaten yourself enough,” Gabriel says.

It wasn’t enough. Never fucking enough.

Three days.

It’s been three days since I sent Emery away. I’ve done what I needed, stayed away from her, let her move on and live a life she deserves doing the things she loves. But I’d forgotten what it felt like before she’d entered, and I’d underestimated just how much she had changed everything about me. I sleep a few hours a night and those are plagued with dreams and the

waking hours the pain I feel inside my body is enough to buckle me.

All I can see in my head is her smile, her light touches and musical laugh. Replaying the memories of her was like torture, remembering how she would smile at the dogs she works with when no one was looking, how she would talk to them like they were human. Watching her when she was lost in something, even something as trivial as a news article and how she would capture her lip in her teeth when she was concentrating. But mostly, it was the way she looked at me, her big eyes soft and completely unguarded, like I wasn't the monster in her story but the hero.

I replay my words, replay her tears, her *pain*...

So, no it wasn't enough because if I can still feel her then I'm not numb enough, not beaten enough. I just needed to replace the emotion with something physical, and this, this was physical, it was bloody and violent and good, so fucking good.

The guys I fight don't know I'm taking out the anger and the pain on them, they just know I aim to hurt them as much as I want their fists in my face, my blood on the mat beneath my feet.

My current opponent begins to walk towards the ropes.

"No!" I yell, "Fucking come back here and fight me!"

"Get him out." I hear Gabriel order.

There was no point fighting with Enzo when he grabs me, hauling me from the ring, my blood smearing against his hands. I could feel myself unsteady on my feet, from lack of sleep, food, well everything that was needed to keep me alive and knew I looked just as shit.

I couldn't stop the noise of my thoughts, even with the ringing in my ears from the punch I took to the side of the head in an earlier round. It was her and she was loud.

Louder than anything and everything.

Emery fucking Quinn.

My sunshine.

It wasn't the boom of a gun firing in my dreams, but her sob and it wasn't the blood streaks on the wall, or the sight of Amelia broken at the hands of my brother haunting me, it was the trail of tears, of the crumbled, pained expression on Emery's face.

"Three days," Gabriel says in the car, "Three days you've been doing this. What the fuck happened?"

"Nothing happened," I growl, wiping the blood from my mouth.

"How's Emery?" He asks.

I flinch at the sound of her name, "How the fuck would I know? We got what she wanted, she's on her own now."

Gabriel smirks, "Did she get what she wanted?"

"Money for the shelter and it signed to her name, yeah."

"Is that all she wanted?"

"It's all she needed."

Silence settles between us, the sound of tires on a wet road filling the space but then he laughs. My fucking brother laughs.

"You're an asshole," he chuckles, "You sent her away didn't you." It wasn't a question.

"There was no need for her to stay with me any longer. The engagement is off, Simon won't be able to touch the shelter."

"What about you?"

I scoff, "That's not important."

"You deserve happiness, brother," Gabriel says quietly, eyes forward on the road, "As your brother, I didn't do enough to protect you. Or Asher. Maybe if I did, the shit that went down wouldn't have happened."

"Asher tried to rape your wife," I snap, "are you really trying to blame yourself for his actions?"

"And are you really going to punish yourself for doing something that saved her? And me?"

I stay quiet. I couldn't handle the way it was excused. I should have done something different.

"I never thanked you for what you did," Gabriel continues, "For doing what you needed to do. I wish you didn't have to do it."

"It's done." I spit.

"It's not done, Atlas," Gabriel continues, "Not when you continue to shut down and close off from your family. We Saint's stand together, we always have and let's be honest, Amelia would have my balls if I didn't at least try to get through to you. Emery was good for you, we could all see it."

"I hadn't realized how soft you'd become, Gabriel," I say to him, "You sure you got the spine to do what is needed to keep the Saint's ruling Redhill?"

It was an asshole move, questioning the mafia don but he doesn't take the bait, instead he changes the subject though it still remains on the Quinn family.

"You should know, Simon filed for divorce from Maria."

"Good. I hope she ends up back in the ditch she crawled out of."

"You don't want to know why? Or why Governor Harris was so willing to go along with her terms to marry off his son and hand over billions of dollars?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me Gabriel."

The blood had stopped flowing from my nose and lip and my skin felt tight where it had crusted to my face.

"As it turns out, Maria had an affair with the Governor himself."

"Shocker." I huff sarcastically.

"She filmed it, now can you imagine the damage it would have done to his reputation considering he's a married man and his wife gave him the main funding during his campaign for office, if that tape was released?"

"So, she blackmailed him?"

“Mm,” Gabriel confirms, “Struck a bargain that once Emery and Jack were married and she’d secured the money she wanted, she’d delete it.”

“She just wants money and status,” I say, “She always has.”

“Yes, and she’ll do just about anything to get it.”

It was the reason she was all too willing to get rid of us when our father came knocking. She didn’t get what she wanted from him when she fell pregnant, instead she got lumped with twin boys and disappointment. When the opportunity had arisen for her to go back to what she was before, she took it. No more children to stop her climb to the top.

“Simon found out about the affair, apparently that was his hard limit.”

“She still wins half of his shit, even if his business is in the shitter.”

“No,” Gabriel smirks, “Simon had her sign a contract so she wouldn’t get a penny if she ever had an affair.”

“Maria loses once again. Where is she now?”

“Left the city last I checked.”

“And Jack?”

I still wanted to kill the motherfucker.

“Left the day you threatened him, the Governor disowned him after he received some ‘unsavory’ documents showing his abuse on the women he had dated.”

“I thought Harris covered for him.”

“No,” Gabriel shakes his head, “Jack did that by himself.”

They were gone at least and no longer a threat against Emery though I doubted they went without hard feelings. Neither got what they wanted in the end.

Emery could live her life now. Move on.

So why was there a lead weight of dread sitting in the pit of my stomach?

EMERY

I'd secured an apartment closer to the shelter, it was a rental but that was okay. I couldn't stay here any longer and so I had Amelia and Sierra here helping me pack up. They'd been quiet for the most part, leaving me to my thoughts as I packed away the clothes in my closet while they helped to tackle the living room and kitchen.

It was odd because we'd hardly spent any time together and yet they acted as if we were friends, like they cared.

I'd bumped into Amelia the day before in the Shopping district and had let slip about moving and she'd offered her help. Wouldn't take no for an answer actually and so here we were.

She didn't mention Atlas, but she didn't need to, I saw it in the pitying look she gave me when she thought I wasn't looking.

"Did you ever hear how Gabriel, and I came to be married?" She asks a bit later while we sit and have coffee to take a break from the labor. Sierra chuckles into her mug while I shake my head.

"He forced me to marry him."

She says it so nonchalantly that I wonder if I just completely misheard her.

"I'm sorry?"

"Mm," she cocks her mouth into a half smile, "my son, Lincoln, he's not Gabriel's, he's his brothers."

"Atlas?!" I squeal.

At this, both of the girls burst out laughing, practically holding their stomachs doubled over with their giggles.

“No, Lucas,” Amelia wheezes, “He passed away.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I frown, realizing I didn’t know a lot about Atlas and his family other than what I had seen.

“Anyway, the point is, Gabriel and I, we didn’t get off on the best of starts, I hated him more than anything else.”

“But you’re happy now?”

“Incredibly so,” she nods, “The Saints can be complicated.”

I quirk a brow, “I figured as much.”

“Atlas is probably the most complicated of them all.”

“He told me about his brother, the one he, um, killed.”

“He didn’t tell you why, did he?” Amelia softens, a kind of sadness entering her eyes, “It’s not my story to tell but he did it for the family. He’s not the bad guy.”

“I know.” I agree, sighing.

“You love him?” Sierra asks.

I nod, “Is that crazy? I barely know him.”

“No,” Amelia pats my hand, “You don’t get to decide who you love or how it happens, I should know. But don’t give up on him yet. You are the best thing for him, he needs you more than he needs any of us.”

“He’s been alone all his life, hasn’t he?”

“In a sense, I think he has.” Amelia nods. “He’s surrounded by people but he’s alone. He doesn’t let anyone in. Not until you at least.”

Sorrow clutches my chest, suffocating my heart, “He didn’t let me in, Amelia.”

“I assure you, he did, he may not have shown it in the way you know, but I’ve never seen him like the way he is with you.”

“You didn’t hear what he had to say to me. He wanted me gone, he didn’t want me.”

“Don’t give up on him,” she repeats, “He’ll come around.”

“And I’m supposed to hang in limbo until he does?” I couldn’t stop the snappy tone from entering my voice but was I wrong? I wanted to help him, to pick him up, I had literally fallen in love with every broken piece of him but how could anyone expect me to just sit around and wait for a man who didn’t want to be loved?

“Do you think a man like Atlas will just let you go?” Amelia challenges.

“He did.”

“No, he didn’t.” She shakes her head, “If he let you go, trust me, you wouldn’t be sat here with us right now talking about him. Atlas is like Gabriel, they’re possessive, jealous, protective, right now he thinks you’re better off without him but when he realizes that you’re his, he’ll be groveling at your feet.”

“And you know this firsthand?”

“Gabriel tried to let me go,” she laughs, “It lasted all of five minutes.”

“It’s been almost a week.”

“He’ll be back.” She shrugs.

“Am I pathetic?” I curl my hands around my mug, “That I wish you’re right? He hurt me, with what he said, how he’s acted, he hurt me and yet I’d take him back in a heartbeat.”

“No,” Amelia breathes, understanding filling her expression, “It makes you human. Fight for him, Emery.”

I thought long about the conversation between me and Amelia several hours after we had finished for the day. My old apartment was empty, and I was in the new place, boxes and bags scattered everywhere, the day now dark with rain and wind battering the city outside the windows. I still had the

keys to the penthouse, and I realized I still had a key to his house too.

What would he do if I just showed up?

Like right now?

I clearly wasn't thinking straight because I found myself piling on clothes to brace for the weather and grabbing my keys for the car. I pull up outside the darkened house twenty minutes later, the rain coming down in sheets.

All the lights were off, the street quiet but I make my way across the road, hands shaking as I put his key into the lock and open the door, stepping into the warmth and masculine scent that was Atlas's home.

"Atlas?" I whisper to the dark.

There's a warning growl coming from the kitchen, but I knew Jinx would be behind the gate that kept him in his room at night, but I go in that direction anyway to comfort the dog and let him know it was me.

I'm halfway there, the dark making it incredibly hard to navigate when I feel something hard press into the back of my skull.

I freeze, heart leaping into my throat.

"Atlas?" I breathe, hoping to all that there is that it was him behind me.

"Emery!?" He gasps, the gun instantly withdrawn, replaced by hands on my arms, spinning me around, "What the fuck!?"

He smashes a hand against the wall, apparently against a light switch and then his beautiful face is in front of me but fuck... he looked awful.

Dark shadows from lack of sleep, bruises and split skin from fights and there was a sort of madness in the depths of his hazel eyes.

"I'm sorry, I—" I cut off, why was I here?

"You what?" He takes a step back.

“I came to bring this,” I lie, holding up my keychain, showing the key to the penthouse, “I moved.”

“I know.”

“Well, I don’t need this anymore.” I say.

“And it couldn’t have waited?” He settles his face into a blank mask.

“What happened?” I blurt, unable to take my eyes from the marks on his face. My hand reaches forward and to my shock, he remains still as he lets my fingers trail over the cuts and bruises on his skin. His body leans to my touch, eyes shuttering closed as if all he has ever needed was my hand on his face.

“Firefly,” He whispers.

“I’m here,” I step in close, pressing myself to his chest, my hand cupping his cheek, “I’m here, Atlas.”

He tilts his chin down and for the first time in the week since he’d asked me to leave, I felt like I was home. His breath caresses my lips, his scent invades my nose, and I was truly home.

Fuck. I was so undone by this man. So goddamned fucked and I loved it. Even with the pain, the heartbreak and sorrow, I *loved* him.

I didn’t even care if it wasn’t normal. If it made me weak or desperate. I loved him.

His mouth parts from mine and a second passes, “Go.”

“Atlas,” I plead.

“Emery, no,” he whispers, “No.”

“You really don’t want me?” I ask, “Say it and mean it, Atlas. Tell me you don’t feel the way I do.”

“How could a man like me love a woman like you, firefly?” He asks sincerely.

“Because it works.”

“No baby,” he whispers, “It would be a sin for a Saint to love something so pure.”

“I want you.” I tell him. “Even after everything, Atlas. Please. Don’t leave me.”

We stare at each other, words forgotten but then he looks away, lets me go, “Go get the world, firefly, you deserve it all. Light up the darkness.”

“I don’t want the world Atlas,” I press my mouth to his, but he doesn’t respond, “I want you.”

“Don’t come back here.”

“Please.”

“Go.”

“Atlas,” I beg. Have you ever seen a glass break or a bowl shatter? You see how the parts separate, in jagged, chaotic pieces, some disappearing only for you to step on them later and shred your skin. That’s how I felt. “Please. This isn’t what you want.”

His hand comes up to cup my chin, not painfully but enough that I know it’s there, “Leave, Emery. And don’t fucking come back.”

“So, it’s over?”

“It never began,” He breathes.

“Okay,” I whisper. “But I loved you. *You*. Remember that, okay?”

ATLAS

It was cruel to let me see her again. Cruel to have to let her go. Again.

And when the house returns to the silence and darkness from before I sink onto the couch, the bottle of whiskey dangling from my fingers as I recall every moment spent with Emery. Every touch and kiss and caress. Every whispered word and desperate plea.

I couldn't be with her, and I couldn't be without her.

She *saw* me, all the jagged edges and didn't run away.

My salvation.

Fuck!

The bottle in my hand crashes against the wall, the shards of the glass hitting the floor and with it I realize the biggest fucking mistake I've just made.

My Emery. My firefly.

Mine.

She was mine.

And I was hers.

EMERY

“I ’m on my way!” I rush out, swiping at the tears on my face as adrenaline courses through my body. I make a U-turn on my street and gun it back the way I came, the call that had come through the in-car system now gone dead.

The roads were slick with water, melting away the previous snow fall, the rain incessantly beating on the city, but I don’t slow. Della’s panicked voice rings inside my head, she didn’t even need to say what was wrong for me to know something had happened.

I speed a few blocks over and slam my breaks on outside the shelter doors, jumping out the moment it was safe to do so.

We always have at least one member of staff working nightshifts, so it wasn’t unusual that Della was here.

“Della!?” I yell, skidding to a stop in the reception, searching for her behind the desk where she would usually be.

It was eerily quiet, only a few yaps coming from the kennels out back and the sound of rain tapping against the roof and windows. “Della?” I call again.

“Back here,” comes her shaky voice, thick with emotion.

A warning tingle shoots down my spine before something akin to dread settles in my stomach.

I pull my phone from my pocket, holding it tight as I take careful, quiet steps towards my office where Della’s voice had come from.

“Everything okay, Della?” I ask calmly.

“N-no,” she stammers.

“It’s okay,” I say, “I’m here.”

“Hello Emery,” A sickly sweet voice says from behind me just as something hard hits the back of my head.

Pain bursts behind my eyes and I go down, my knees hitting the floor. The phone slides out of my palm, across the floor and I squeeze my eyes closed to try and clear the fog. I hear Della scream and manage to open my eyes, vision blurry to see her shape, features distorted from the hit to my head but there was someone behind her, a bigger figure dressed all in black and they were holding her tightly. She whimpers and screams and struggles but she isn’t coming.

“D-Della,” I rasp out, turning my head to try and find my phone at the same time it lights up and vibrates on the floor.

Whoever it is behind me ignores the call.

“You couldn’t have just done as you were told, could you?” The woman says, no not woman, Maria. Maria was here. She hit me.

Groaning, I push up onto my hands and knees, “What are you doing?”

“I guess payback is a bitch,” she says nonchalantly.

Slowly, I edge across the floor, glancing over my shoulder to where she stands behind me, her smile fake and big, eyes shining a little manically.

“You and that fucking asshole took everything from me!” She yells. I reach the phone as it lights up again, Atlas’s name on the screen. I press the answer button as Maria’s foot rams into my ribs, kicking me back to the floor.

“Emery!?” Atlas’s tinny voice sounds somewhere close to my ear.

“Shelter.” I wheeze out, “Help me.”

Another kick and then Maria’s laughing, her foot stepping over the phone until I hear a crack and crunch as she crushes it.

Fear injects itself into my system, my heart speeding up. I needed to get out, away from her but I couldn't move, my breath was stuck in my throat and my head, fuck my head hurt.

"If you had just done as I asked, you wouldn't be in this mess," Maria says, crouching at my side. I shuffle away but it hurts so damn bad, the pain in my side stretching around my ribs, crushing my chest. Her fingers claw into my cheeks as she makes me look at her.

"W-what do you want?"

"I want to make you fucking pay!" She spits, "and as it turns out, I'm not the only one."

I rest my spine against the wall as she stands, trying to get myself under control. I wouldn't be able to save myself if I couldn't calm down and assess the situation. I knew this shelter better than anyone else, if I could just get to Della then I'd figure it out.

Maria stands and looks down her nose at me, "You're pathetic." She hisses.

"You shouldn't do this," I say breathlessly, "You know who Atlas is, what he does."

I didn't know if he'd come but I could use the threat of him and the Saint's to my advantage.

"What about my dad?" I continue.

"That spineless piece of shit is exactly where he belongs. And as for *my* son, I hope he comes because he's just as much to blame here. The Saint's don't scare me."

"Bring her in here, Maria," my skin goes cold at the voice, "This was my idea after all."

With a grin, Maria lunges for me. I kick out, nailing a foot in her stomach before I manage to get to my feet. "Della! Run!" I scream.

Hands grab me, nails biting as Maria continues to try to subdue me again.

“Stop,” Jack says, suddenly right in front of me, a bloodied Della held captive in his arms where he holds a gun to her temple, “Be a good girl and I won’t hurt her.”

Red rimmed eyes meet mine, panic and fear and regret churning deep within them. “It’s okay,” I whisper to her as I stop my fighting, letting Maria grab a clump of my hair tightly. She yanks my head back, exposing my throat and pulling strands, “He’ll be here any minute, won’t he,” She whispers, “and I’ll let him watch as I take everything from him like he took everything from me.”

“He’s your son,” I breathe through the tears.

“No, Asher was my son, that monster is nothing. Did you know he killed his own brother?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you still fuck him. Perhaps you’re not as sweet as I first thought.”

“Atlas won’t come,” I say, “We’re not together anymore.”

“He’ll come,” she laughs, “The Saint’s don’t give up their belongings that easily.”

We’re maneuvered into my office and forced to sit in the chairs, Jack keeping the gun trained on us while Maria paces.

“Just kill them both now,” Jack suggests with a cruel twist of his lips, “Let Atlas find them and then we’ll kill him too.”

“No,” Maria snaps, “I want him to watch.”

“What do you get out of this?” I ask Jack, reaching beneath the table for Della’s hand which is shaking so uncontrollably her whole body trembles and rattles the table.

“I told you not to embarrass me, Emery,” he shrugs.

“Pride, you’re doing this because I hurt your pride?” I say incredulously.

“No,” The voice that speaks doesn’t come from within the room, “He’s doing this because, much like Maria, he lost everything too.”

Atlas steps around the corner, hands in the pockets of his suit trousers looking so casual, as if he were here for a board meeting and not because someone was going to die.

ATLAS

“Shelter,” her voice barely sounds through the earpiece on the phone, “Help me.”

And then it went dead, and I tasted agony and then rage.

I can't remember the drive here, just the frantic calls to Gabriel as I sped through the streets of Redhill, the rain making the roads deadly. But I made it.

I enter the shelter quietly, listening, assessing... There was this fear inside of me, fear that I was too late. That something had happened, but I had to be sure. I needed to know what I was working with. I spot my mother before she sees me and then it's Jack's voice filling the silence.

“Pride, you're doing this because I hurt your pride?” I hear her sweet voice and relief surges.

Calculating, I decide to show myself, stepping into the room with my hands in my pockets, “No, he's doing this because, much like Maria, he lost everything too.”

My eyes meet Emery's and that relief I felt is soon burned away by anger as I take in the cuts and bruises on her face, the tears marking her cheeks.

“You should know better than laying a finger on her,” I address the two of them, “I'll kill you both.”

A gun fires so suddenly I'm momentarily shocked but then Emery's screaming, her hands covered in blood as she presses them to the oozing hole in the woman's chest that sits next to her.

“Nothing to lose, Atlas,” Jack sneers, “I have no problem killing them both right here.” He trains the gun on Emery.

“Don’t,” I warn.

“You took everything from me,” Maria says having backed up, “First Asher, now this.”

“You never had Asher, Maria.”

“Asher would have taken me in if you hadn’t stopped him from taking the city from Gabriel and Lucas. He didn’t tell you he contacted me.” The sly smile that pulls on her lips turns my stomach.

“So, because that didn’t work out so well you decided to manipulate the Governor and his son?” I smirk, “Creative but you should know us Saint’s don’t give in so easily.”

I could hear Emery quietly sobbing over the dying woman, and I wanted to go to her so bad. To wrap her up and take her away from the wreckage. To protect her. Always.

This wouldn’t have happened if she’d stayed, if I hadn’t made her leave.

Behind me I hear the door to the shelter slam open and then pounding footsteps, a lot of them and coming this way.

The room erupts into chaos, Emery screams and I lunge but Jack is quicker, he has her back to his chest, the gun leveled at her head. I freeze, my own gun wrapped tightly in my fist as my brother, Enzo and several men file into the room. Maria stands in the middle of it all, a sneer on her face.

“Put the gun down, Jack,” I demand, staring at Emery and only her. Our eyes locked. I try to portray all of my words into my expression, opening myself up to her.

I loved her.

I knew that now. This feeling, it was love.

And she loved me. It was a gift and I’d be damned to hell if I was giving it up. I wouldn’t lose her. She *had* to live.

Beside me, I see Maria shift and then Gabriel is moving, stepping between her and me, “I wouldn’t do that, Maria.”

It was a stand-off, silence fell like a heavy blanket, stifling us.

“You’ll kill me the moment I move this gun,” He grits out.

“You’re dead anyway,” I growl.

“No,” Gabriel intervenes, “Let her go and I will let you live.”

I stifle my smirk at his wording.

“I will let you walk out of here,” Gabriel clarifies, “You have my word.”

“And no one will come after me?” He asks.

“You’re nothing and nobody now, Jack. Your father disowned you, you lost your money, you’re not worth my time.” Gabriel says.

Emery breathes deeply, trying to keep herself calm.

That’s it, firefly. Good girl.

“Let her go.”

“You’ll let me live,” He repeats.

“I will.”

The gun slowly lowers and then he’s pushing her. She stumbles forward, relief tearing across her face, but she doesn’t rush.

“No!” Maria screams.

A gun goes off.

I lunge.

Pain tears through my back, sending me to my knees.

Emery screams my name, Gabriel shouts something but beyond her voice and the pounding in my head, I don’t hear it.

But then she’s there, her beautiful face above mine, bloodied hands cradling my face.

“Stay with me, Atlas,” she whispers her plea, “Stay with me, please.”

“Firefly,” I reach out and touch a strand of hair, my body weakening, heart slowing, the blood from my own hands

transferring to that tendril of hair between my fingers and staining it red. I feel myself falling but she's still there, helping me down. I could feel the blood, the hot liquid as it pulses from my body, but it surprisingly didn't hurt. There was no screaming or begging, it just was.

But she was there.

Her hands smooth down my hair, my face, touching, pleading, tears falling from her cheeks and onto mine.

"Please don't leave me, Atlas." Her mouth presses onto mine, "You shouldn't have saved me!" She screams, "Why would you do that, Atlas!?"

"Because you're my firefly," I whisper, "My light."

Drifting, that's what it felt like, like I was on a raft in the middle of a lake, a gentle current rocking me further and further across the water. It was dark but the stars were so bright, just like the fireflies.

"Please," she begs, "Someone help him!"

"Emery," Gabriel is close... there he is. My brother looks down on me, "Come away, Emery."

"No!" She screams.

"It's okay," I tell her, blood filling my mouth, the metallic taste of it sitting on my tongue. "I love you."

A sob cracks out of her, but I can't keep the darkness at bay, I can't stop it from reaching its claws in and dragging me down.

I hear myself speak. I hear those three words come from me once, saying them leaving something warm behind but then I'm falling and the last thing I hear before I die is a gut curdling, soul crushing scream.

EMERY

I felt it.
When he died.

I saw it. Witnessed the life extinguish from his eyes, his body growing lax beneath my hands and then his chest stopped moving but the blood kept flowing. A huge blooming puddle of crimson that stretched around his body.

Maria was dead. Enzo shot her.

Jack was gone.

But Atlas.

My Atlas.

I would have taken it all back, changed something, anything, if I could have taken that bullet.

Hands drag me away, I hear the screaming, my throat was raw with it, but they kept coming, these heart ripping sobs. I say his name, I beg for him to open his eyes, but he doesn't.

Atlas was dead.

A numbness spreads over me and I fall back, but there are hands on me, Gabriel, Enzo, they're helping me up, but I can't feel anything.

Someone's with Atlas though, I can't see what they're doing, and people are talking, loudly. Someone's pumping on his chest. There's so much going on, too much.

"Look at me," Gabriel commands, "Emery, look at me!"

I stare up into the hazel eyes, so similar to Atlas's, feeling another hot tear on my cheek. "The paramedics are here. They're coming. We're going to save him."

"He's dead." I whisper.

"I refuse to lose him," Gabriel growls, "You hear me? I am not losing another brother."

I glance to Enzo who isn't watching me at all, he's got his eye on Atlas, but I can't look at his body. It was impossible to get him back.

"I want you to go with Enzo," Gabriel says. "When the paramedics arrive, they're going to take Atlas and your friend, they're going to be okay."

I just nod because I couldn't do anything else.

I didn't know if Della was even still breathing after Jack had shot her but at this point, I felt nothing.

There was this chasm inside my chest, one where my heart used to be and now it was empty.

He left me.

And he took my heart with him.

GABRIEL

“**Y**ou fucking save him,” I growl out, watching the paramedics continue to work on my brother in the back of the ambulance.

He wasn't dead but he was close to it. Devon was following in the car while Enzo took care of Emery. The other girl was in a second ambulance on their way to the hospital too.

I wouldn't lose another fucking brother. When the ambulance arrives at the hospital, I follow but Devon stops me from going into the room they had him in.

“They're doing what they can,” Devon says to me, “But you threatening them every five fucking seconds isn't helping!”

I sit in the waiting room for hours, waiting, my clothes covered in blood. Amelia had wanted to come but I told her to stay and look after Emery. News of the other girl, Della, I found out her name was, had reached me and she had survived the shot she took so I let Amelia know who could tell Emery while we waited for more on Atlas.

It came just before sunrise, he was in emergency surgery to repair the organs the bullet had damaged and to remove it from his body but even so, they didn't sound hopeful.

It was limbo and I think that made it worse, not knowing if my only brother would survive. I couldn't stop him from jumping in front of that fucking bullet, not that I blamed him for it. I would have done the same for my Amelia.

I was only all too fucking happy when Enzo shot Maria the second she had fired on Emery, but it was just a little too late.

By the time morning had fully come and gone and silence had reigned, Devon found me. His eyes were heavy with fatigue, and he looked about ready to drop but he put his hand on my shoulder and sighed, “They repaired the organs and got the bullet out but he lost a lot of blood.”

“Is he alive!?”

“He’s in a coma, Gabriel and on life support. We need to be prepared.”

ATLAS

Beep... Beep... Beep...

B It sucks that even in death the noise doesn't stop. Never fucking stops.

Between that incessant beeping and muffled voices, there was no damn peace. Only darkness. And fucking pain.

I thought death was supposed to be peaceful!

There's a weight against my arm and hand, so much warmth I'm starting to believe that I might not actually be dead.

"Please don't leave me," comes a soft, feminine whisper.

"They say we should be prepared to lose you, but I watched you die once, I can't watch you die again. You've been off the machines a whole day and you're still here. You're still here and I need you to stay."

Emery?

"Can you hear me, Atlas?" She whispers.

Yes! I wanted to scream but I didn't.

"I'll never forgive you if you leave me," she says, "you hear me?"

Firefly...

"Watching those paramedics come in and start prodding you with needles, manhandling you, taking you away, it was the hardest thing I've ever had to watch. I wanted to get up on that gurney with you, but Gabriel had sent me to his home. Devon had sent a doctor to check me over and Amelia took care of me after he gave me the all clear."

She pauses and I hold my breath, waiting for more. For her voice to lull me.

“They said they got a pulse back at the shelter, but the bullet was still inside you and you needed surgery. Gabriel went with you.”

I was wondering if she realized I could hear her, even if I couldn't open my eyes. Was she talking to get it off her mind? To tell someone her thoughts...

“And when I got to the hospital after you had come out of surgery. They tried to send me home, but I refused. I've been waiting here for a week. I will always wait for you.”

WAKE UP! I demand myself, wake the fuck up!

“I love you, Atlas. I always will.” Her lips press to my skin.

Fuck this! *Wake up!*

Light stings my eyes as I finally open them, glaring white bulbs meeting my vision first but then I tilt my chin and there she is. Her blonde hair spills over my bed, face turned away from me as she leans over from the chair she's dragged as close as it can possibly get to the bed.

“Firefly,” My voice is rough from lack of use and quiet, but she hears it. Her body goes stiff and slowly, so fucking slowly, she sits up, turning her face with fresh tears in her eyes.

“Atlas?” Her eyes widen, “Atlas!”

And then she's moving, climbing onto the bed, jostling the tubes and wires, pain flaring in my body, but I don't dare stop her. She wraps her arms around me and then cries.

I lift one hand to rest it on her back, the other trapped beneath her.

I hated being so damn weak.

“I'd wait for you, too,” I tell her.

She cries harder.



“Good to see you awake,” Gabriel saunters into the room, Amelia and my nephew, Lincoln, following closely behind.

Emery busies herself by the window, posture stiff, eyes turned down. She’s been like this all day, quiet, withdrawn and I’d been just about to demand she tell me what was wrong when my brother had turned up.

It’s been three days since I woke, I’d be getting out of here real fucking soon and I couldn’t wait to have Emery to myself.

“I’m getting coffee,” Emery suddenly declares, “Anyone want one?”

She flees before anyone actually has a chance to answer.

Fuck this.

I throw the blanket off of my legs, the one that Emery insists I keep there, thankful I was able to wear sweats, so my ass wasn’t hanging out the back of the hospital gown and grab the pole that had all my IV’s.

“What are you doing!?” Amelia screeches but I don’t stop, I go after Emery, ignoring the pain in my back and the looks of annoyed nurses as I follow her fleeing frame.

“Emery!” I shout.

She freezes and then spins, eyes going wide before rushing back to me, “What are you doing!?” She hisses, panicked, “You shouldn’t be up yet!”

“Fuck that!” I snap, “What’s going on?”

She frowns, “What do you mean? I’m getting coffee.”

“No, firefly, you’ve been distant all day, tell me what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

She looks down at my bare feet and shakes her head.

Softening, I curl a finger beneath her chin and tilt her face back up, “Tell me, firefly.”

“I love you.” She whispers.

“I know,” I stroke her chin, “You’re sad because you love me?”

She huffs out a laugh, “No, I’m sad because you’re going to make me leave.”

Realization dawns on me and I don’t stop myself as I lean down and press my mouth to hers, “I love you.”

I capture her gasp, using her shock to bring her in closer, to fit her body against mine, ignoring the pain and the stares. My tongue invades her mouth.

“I couldn’t let you go now even if I wanted to, firefly. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Atlas,” she breathes.

“You’re mine. Now. Then. Tomorrow.”

“Always.” She nods, the tears on her face wetting mine as I kiss her once more. Fuck I couldn’t wait to get her home.

“Always,” I agree.

EMERY

I take Atlas home a week later with a bag full of meds. I hadn't left his side the entire time, even going as far as bringing my own bags to the hospital so I can change and remain somewhat presentable here, something the nurses let slide because I brought them cookies and coffee.

Della was recovering too. She'd been just as lucky as Atlas, and I was happy for it and felt a tad guilty because I didn't even think about her while Atlas was fighting to live.

I'd watched him die and I felt myself die a little too. Maria was dead but so was my dad, she killed him before coming to the shelter and just like that, I was the only one left. And even though in the end I hated my dad, I still loved him but mourning him was strange. It wasn't like the grief I felt for my mother, or the grief I felt over Atlas, it was like a tinge of sadness and regret.

"Come sit with me, firefly," Atlas says after I've let Jinx out.

"Do you need anything? Meds?"

"Just you," he lets his eyes drop down my body and I set on fire with the look alone. "I want to tell you a story."

"A story?"

"About my brother."

"Oh," I take the seat next to him, "We don't have to talk about it."

"No, we do, firefly, you want this, with me and you, you should know why."

“It won’t change my mind,” I tell him.

“I know.” He looks down at our joined hands, his thumb brushing across my knuckles, “Asher and I were inseparable as children. The Saint’s took us in when we were six and it was rough, but we got used to it. The life, the violence and everything that came with the last name. We knew what we would be getting into once we were old enough, but the Saint’s had all these rules. It was made clear to us that we would never be more than soldiers or pawns for whoever sat at the head.”

“Were you happy?” I ask quietly.

“Content,” he sighs, “it was better than being with Maria.”

My heart broke a little at that, content is not happy, and children should be happy regardless of who their family is. He probably had to grow up far quicker than he should have.

“I thought Asher was okay, I didn’t notice he’d changed. He wanted more and would do anything to get it. The day I killed him I found out he’d murdered our older brother, Lucas, and had kidnapped Gabriel’s wife. When I got there it looked like he was about to rape her. She was covered in blood and so was Gabriel and I don’t know, it wasn’t my brother I was looking at anymore. I didn’t think about what I had to do. I shot him and I didn’t think twice about it until I realized what I had done.”

Silence falls. I stare at Atlas, his grief and pain now a clear mask on his face. He wasn’t hiding from me.

“I’m not going to tell you, you did the right thing, I think deep inside your heart you know what you did was something that you had to do. But it doesn’t take away the regret and that is something you have to live with but that doesn’t mean you should punish yourself.” I tell him honestly, “My mother used to say something to me when I was a child,” I say, recalling her words, “Doing something good doesn’t automatically make you a good person just like doing something bad doesn’t mean you’re evil. There’s a balance. But I do see you, Atlas, and I love you just the way you are.”

With my words I pick up his broken pieces and I start to fit them back together. It didn't matter how long it took, if he never shared his demons with me again, I would stay here.

At his side. Looking at all the parts of him and loving every single one.

EPILOGUE

ATLAS

Three months later

I wipe my hands on the rag Enzo passes me, scrubbing hard beneath the fingernails in hopes to dislodge the blood that was buried underneath.

The body lay at my feet, probably a little more mutilated than what was required but it felt good to cut him up the way I had.

Jack had had this coming for a long time.

I was still recovering but life was returning to normal, and while there was discomfort and pain, I was done resting when this needed to be done. The physical drawbacks and rehabilitation weren't going to stop me. It had been my first mission to track the cunt down and end him after he had escaped that day back at the shelter.

Maria was dead. I shook Enzo's hand for that and now Jack was too. It was like burying the final pieces of a puzzle.

He needed to go.

So, I hunted him down and made him pay.

No one touches Emery and lives to tell the tale.

Somewhat clean of the blood, I pull my phone out of my pocket and text her.

Me: Get on your knees. Naked. Wait for me in the bedroom.

Emery: So demanding ;)

Me: If I get home and you haven't been the good little whore I know you can be I'll put you over my knee and spank you until your ass is red.

Emery: Don't tease me with a good time, Atlas. When will you be home?

Me: Fuck I want you so bad right now. I'll be thirty minutes.

Emery: See you soon.

My hands twitch with anticipation, a part of me hopes she's disobeyed me so I can spank that pretty ass raw but another part, a bigger part hopes to see her on her knees, body bared and ready. I was about to find out just which way this night was to go.

I say my hello to Jinx and the newest member of the household, Loki, who for some reason is the only dog Jinx has been near and cannot get enough of. To the point that if I separate them Jinx will whine and bark until I put them back together again. Emery was happy of course but then if she had her way this house would become a zoo. After Loki's adoption fell through and he remained at the shelter I knew I had to bring him home for her. It just so happened that my dog and hers were twin flames.

Leaving them, I head up the stairs, listening out for signs of Emery but all remained quiet and when I push the door to the bedroom open, I find her in front of the chair in the corner of the room, naked and waiting.

Her big eyes meet mine and she smiles up at me. My cock is instantly growing at the sight of her bare breasts and naked skin, at the flush that creeps up her chest, her neck, to glow at her cheeks.

"Hello firefly," I greet, stepping into the room as I unbutton the blood speckled shirt, muscle around the puckered scarred flesh rebelling at the movement.

She ignores the blood, instead she settles her eyes on my hands as I move down each button, her stare growing heated with each one that pops open.

“You look so beautiful right now.” I admit. “Lay down on your back for me,” I command, “Spread your legs and show me how much my little slut wants it.”

With a swallow, she shifts and maneuvers herself until she’s resting back on her elbows, maintaining eye contact and opens her thighs, spreading her legs to show me her pretty cunt.

A low rumble of approval works its way up my throat, and I cross the room to her, getting down to my knees.

“Tell me.”

She smiles, “I love you.”

It’s like hearing the words all over again. It hits me somewhere deep inside my chest, like a needle and thread, the words weave through the cracks in my soul, through the poison I’d injected into myself and the destruction I’d reaped only to slowly bring it all together, fixing all the broken pieces.

A part of me would remain fractured but with her, it didn’t feel so bad.

Just like I knew a part of her would forever remain cracked with the events that led us to this point.

“I love you, firefly.”

I’d never believed I’d say those words or have someone to say them to.

“I need you,” She whispers needily, spreading her legs as far as they’ll go, “Please.”

I didn’t need more than that to dive into her cunt, my tongue lapping up the wetness coating her pretty pink flesh. I work her up, pumping in with two fingers and my tongue strokes her clit and only once she detonates on my face do I free my aching cock and position myself between her legs, my body settling over hers.

Her eyes lock on mine as I slowly edge inside.

The light to my darkness, the sun to my storm.

I slide inside, her body stretching to fit mine, enveloping me, squeezing me tight and as I bury myself to the hilt I lean down to capture her mouth.

Home.

I was finally home.

Thank you

Thank you so much for reading All the Broken Pieces! I hope you enjoyed Atlas & Emery's story as much as I adored writing it! I won't lie and say this was an easy journey, it wasn't but my morally gray, misunderstood MMC has finally been created and he holds my heart!

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?

I've heard you all! Enzo is coming!

Pretty Reckless, a standalone dark romance is coming May 2023

[Available to preorder here!](#)

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.

This book really took it out of me but you kept me going, kept giving me support and now we're here!

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.

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 have 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!

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 Wilde is an author of dirty, dark and dangerous romance. A lover of filthy talking 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!