



Come to Head (Darkest Desires #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: He promised her ten years.

But now her time is up.

All Izzy wanted to do was escape her forays with vanilla men and delve into her darkest desires.

Instead, she is thrown back into a life she was supposed to have no part in.

Confronted with her past, she's forced to remember.

A promise is a promise.

A pact is a pact.

And ten years later?

He's here to collect.

Except...Oliver and Maddox won't let her go without a fight.

This is a dark MFMM why choose romance novella. This means Izzy will not choose between her men. Please check the TWs.

This is book 2 of the Darkest Desires Duet and will wrap up Izzys story. This does NOT end on a cliffhanger.

If you would like to read Yaras story continue on, it is the next in the series.

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Emilio did his best to quietly creep into the room, for he knew his precious Isa slept soundly inside. Just as he knew that when she awoke, it would be to him. Inside her. Filling her up, fucking her, and fulfilling her darkest desire. Again . He might just have to fight off two men in the process.

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Chapter 1

Izzy

Over Ten Years Ago

Shock. Denial. Anger .

I shot at a man. I was almost raped. By my teacher.

Emilio Castillo saved me? With a gun ? What the fuck?

And now I was shoved into a room lined in velvet and darkened tones in what was essentially a mansion. On the second floor. Waiting for him.

Why am I not leaving?

I was a fucking idiot. That was the only excuse I had. I clutched the gun tighter to my chest; the safety was still off.

I heard the front door open and close downstairs, followed by footsteps.

I tensed, squaring my shoulders, unsure of what to expect.

Emilio burst into the room, searching for me. The shock from the door banging open caused me to squeeze. The gun went off, shooting into the wall to our left.

“Fuck Isa! Gun safety is important. Put the goddamn safety back on.” Emilio wasn’t an intimidating guy; he was a senior just like me. He was tall but lanky, and my guess was that I weighed more than he did. But his white shirt was sprayed with what was discernibly fresh blood .

“What happened?” I did my best to not let my voice break. “Isa? Do we know each other?” He looked vaguely familiar but not well enough for him to have a nickname for me.

Emilio followed my attention to his shirt, looking down, and his face shuttered. “An altercation, but everything is okay.” He completely ignored my last question as he pulled the same gun I had seen him holding before from behind him, gently setting it down on his dresser. “Are you okay?”

I wasn’t.

That one question deflated the last of my reserves. I put the safety back as he had shown me and set my gun down gently, mirroring him. As soon as it was out of my grip, Emilio surged forward and hauled me into his warm embrace.

He began stroking my back, and I became overtly aware that all I wore was his half-zipped jacket and a pair of leggings.

I was self-conscious. I was distraught.

I felt.

Raw .

A thousand painful prickles of what-ifs littered up and down my skin as I allowed myself to find solace in Emilio’s embrace.

“He tried to—” I couldn’t say it aloud. Speak it into existence. It would make it real. It would make me face the countless decisions I made that allowed that to happen to me.

“I know.” Emilio swept my hair back and wiped away the tears I didn’t realize were steadily pouring. He cupped my cheeks in his large hands. “I can see it in your face, but Isa? None of that was your fault. That man was— is —a predator.”

I stared up into Emilio’s caramel eyes and lost myself in the softness that swirled in their depths. There was evidence he wasn’t a good man, that even though he was my age, he had seen and done more than I hoped to ever, but I needed comfort. I needed something to fill me. Anything besides this pain. I almost lost my virginity to a horrible man.

Who better to give it to than a practical stranger?

Why not take back my control? I’m going to remember this night anyway, I might as well rewrite it the best I can.

Trauma did strange things to people.

“Fuck me,” I rasped out, staring unblinkingly up at him.

Emilio stiffened. “Isa, you don’t owe me anything. You don’t need to prove something. You just went through a horrible event and aren’t thinking clearly.”

Once more, self-consciousness gnashed its sharp teeth into my gut.

Other people’s words ricocheted in my head.

I had too many curves. I wasn’t a typical beauty. No one would ever love me.

I redirected my gaze to the room—the opulent space, the dark velvet colors, the two guns on the dresser, a window with the blinds pulled shut. I was on the second floor, but maybe I could make my escape through it?

Emilio squeezed my face with his large, sturdy hands, the pads of his thumbs stroking my cheeks gently. “Stop whatever is going through that beautiful mind of yours. I want you more than anything. But you just went through something traumatic, and I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Those were the words he said, but I felt his length stiffen against my belly, pressing into me.

His arousal ignited my own.

“Please?” With renewed confidence and just the right amount of bravery, I raised onto my tiptoes, stretching up and yanking him down.

I could tell I had shocked him, that he hadn’t expected it.

It was the only reason my move worked.

I smashed my lips to his .

He tasted metallic. Bitter. With a harsh bite.

I love it.

He was still for a moment, but then his soft lips moved against mine. His hands exploring.

One found my hair, tangling into it, pulling me closer.

The other to my ass, gripping it tightly, causing sparks of electricity to shoot directly to the heat furling in my belly.

I dove further into him, willing him to take away the pain that still flooded me, the uneasiness that wound so tight in my heart I could barely breathe. In this moment, I delivered everything I felt into the kiss, and he accepted it. He allowed me to seize control, to create this moment the way I needed to, to alter my first kiss.

If anyone asked? This would be it. My first sexual encounter.

He would be the permanent marker I used to black out Sebastian York.

The desire and pleasure I felt, the warmth of his hands as he held me to him, the way he let me dominate.

The odd feeling that this was where I belonged, the passion that engulfed my heart, the inferno threatening to light me on fire.

Emilio didn't push back; he just allowed me to take. And take. And take. Our tongues danced an entire song before I separated breathlessly.

"Please?" I begged again.

Darkness shrouded Emilio's face, but he jerked his head in a nod. "Yes, but I can't promise you anything. My world isn't safe for you."

My attention again found the two guns, a testament to his warning. However, we were graduating in two weeks, and after the summer, I was determined to move away. This incident solidified that.

"Until the end of summer?" I asked, watching him carefully .

Unmistakable agony etched across Emilio's face, his lips curving downwards into a frown, his forehead creasing, a wrinkle forming between his brow, but he nodded his agreement.

He untangled himself from me, stepping back, and his frown twisted to a confident smile. His hypnotizing eyes held mine while he shed his clothes. In a flash of motion, he ripped his crimson-stained white T-shirt off. While he was lanky and his face hadn't lost all of its youth, it was easy to tell that he was unmistakably muscular. Especially shirtless. My hand advanced on its own accord, tracing the tattoo over his heart.

A burgundy moth.

His bulky hand covered mine, rough digits stroking my skin. "My sister's favorite animal." He cracked a slight wistful grin before dropping his grip on my hand, leaving a trail of tingles in its wake.

Before I could blink, he moved back and tore off his remaining clothes, completely distracting me from his tattoo.

His impressive cock bobbed up towards his stomach on full display and stole my attention.

Is this even a good idea?

I gulped, suddenly unsure, before moving my gaze upwards. Studying him.

There was clear, unmistakable interest—key in on his hard cock—even still, he wasn't pushing me. He wasn't trying to take anything from me. He was just observing me with a soft expression and a lopsided grin.

I expected to feel uneasy at the attention. At the similarity to Sebastian's attention.

Except, Emilio wasn't watching me as Sebastian had. When Sebastian was on top of me, I finally noticed what I had ignored before. The evil glint, the predatorial behavior, the manipulation. The signs had always been there, I'd just ignored them .

I felt in my gut that being with Emilio would be a safe encounter, but could I even trust that?

"We can stop, Isa. You don't have to do this." He shifted, picking up his clothes to put back on, and it pierced through my nerves.

Emilio wouldn't hurt me. This was my choice.

"I do." Have a choice.

He chuckled softly, dropping his shirt back to the ground and cocking an eyebrow.

I want to do this.

I needed to wipe away the memories of Seb—

My line of thought was cut off as Emilio moved back into my space.

"Then it's your turn, my Bella Isa."

There he went with that nickname.

He gently, gradually reached up, unzipping the borrowed jacket and letting it fall to the ground, allowing me plenty of time to shove him away.

I didn't.

With the clothing discarded, my breasts were freed; the weight of which instantly pulled at my back.

I went to wrap my arms around my chest to cover the stretch marks painted there, but Emilio tapped them gently.

“I am going to fuck you, Isa, but first, you're going to let me see you.”

“I—”

“We all have our imperfections sweet Isa, but what is an imperfection to some,” he paused to yank down my leggings, “is stunning beauty to another.”

I struggled a bit against my own self-consciousness, my cheeks flushing, embarrassment coursing through my veins .

“You are so beautiful. You would bring nations to their knees. Please never hide yourself from me. I want to see everything there is of you. Anything you are willing to offer. You are my Bella Isa.”

My face heated at his compliment. It felt sincere. I hadn't received too many of those over the years—besides from Yara.

He pressed lightly against me, forcing me to step back until the backs of my knees hit the bed. Gently, he laid me back on it, my legs still firmly planted on the ground.

“Just like that, let me see you. Touch you. Taste you . And if you need me to stop, just tell me and I will.”

His words washed warmly across me.

In this room, with this man, there was no space for insecurity. Instead, I shut my eyes and allowed myself to fall into this moment.

Sturdy hands found my thighs, spreading my legs apart.

“Just like that, relax for me, Isa.” Rough fingers skirted along the apex of my thighs. “Guide me.”

With my eyes still closed, I extended my hand, placing one of his over my clit. I had never been touched by another person before like this, but I knew what I liked doing to myself.

“Please,” I murmured.

That was all he needed to start.

He began to work circles on the spot. At first, it didn’t feel good. It was too dry, and I voiced that to him. My skin heated at the awkwardness, but then he moved to my entrance stealing some of the wetness there before returning to my clit. He didn’t seem overly experienced, but his willingness to listen and do as I asked was making up for that.

“Like that,” I moaned out, arching off of the bed as he rubbed it.

He grunted. “Good, keep telling me what you like. What you want.”

I hummed my agreement .

“And then...” He slowly pushed a finger into me, just one.

The sudden intrusion was too much at first, and it startled me, but then I found myself bucking onto it. Wanting more.

“Curl it,” I commanded.

He chuckled, a deep, heady baritone, but did as I requested.

Pressing into a spot that I had used my own fingers on before. But with his? The feeling was ten-fold.

How could I go back to a stagnant level of pleasure after this? He was taking me higher than I had been before.

“You look fucking beautiful like this. Let me play with you a bit longer. I want to try something else too.” He removed the hand on my clit, and I wanted to protest, but then his wet hot mouth replaced it. Licking, biting, sucking.

He added another finger, and it slid easier than the first.

“Fuck!” I exhaled, my hands digging into the sheets below as I undulated up into him.

He was speedwalking me to a point that I had only been with my vibrators.

“Mmmm.” The noise from him was muffled as he continued his ministrations.

The pleasure made it hard to guide him now, but he didn’t need it, he was using my body to tell him what I needed. Every time I made a particularly loud moan, he would pull back, frustrating me again and again.

Eventually, after he brought me to the edge with his fingers and mouth for a third

time, he removed them and lifted my legs over his shoulders.

I heard the sound of plastic tearing.

My eyes shot open to find him staring at me as he slid a condom into place. My face heated at his attention. I knew it would hurt, but even still, I was going to go through with this. I was more than halfway into the ride; I wouldn't turn back now. I couldn't.

“Are you ready?” His soulful eyes sparked something profound inside me, and I was already regretting our agreement to separate. This man was an addiction I never wanted to kick.

“Fuck, please.” I was a needy mess; he had muddled my mind, electrified my body, and lit fire to my nerves. In the beginning, it had been awkward and uncomfortable, evidence that he wasn't overly experienced. He hadn't touched me the way that I wanted him to. But he had quickly picked up on my cues and followed my guidance. His willingness to learn was almost as addicting as his touch.

Why didn't he find me first instead of Mr. York?

That thought was knocked firmly from my mind as he slowly began to push into my body, stretching me. I hissed past the searing pain, and he pitched forward, placing butterfly kisses across my face and neck.

“You are doing so well, just a bit more.” He reached down, rubbing my clit softly, and the stimulation allowed him to sink the rest of the way into my body.

I moaned out and began to enjoy riding the cusp of pain and pleasure.

Emilio rolled his hips softly and gently into me, and I could feel his adoration as he pulled me taut.

He kept the same soothing rhythm for a bit longer before he was satisfied I could handle more.

He bent over me. "Just a bit harder, you can take it, " he whispered into my ear, nibbling it.

The moving of his hips turned to hard snaps, and the tension that had already built boiled over; with one last pinch to my clit, I came with a whimper.

A few more thrusts, and he stilled as he filled me .

When he slowly pulled out from me, I immediately missed the feeling of him.

At the sight of blood, he shuddered. "Did I go too hard?" His eyes searched mine.

I shook my head. "I was a virgin," I murmured, suddenly embarrassed again.

Emilio's face did a one-eighty, turning as bright as it could, the dark confidence vanishing. "Me too."

His words didn't fully sink in until he returned, tugging me up.

"Let's shower, the hot water should help the soreness."

I let him lead me to it as his words sloshed around in my head. "You were a virgin, and you let some random girl take it?"

Emilio stepped into the shower, wrenching me in before turning his full attention to me. "You are not some random girl. You are everything that I have ever wanted, and I will spend the next few months showing you what it means to be loved by a guy like me. I will show you what you deserve. All I ask is that you never accept anything

less.”

Emilio kept his promise until the end of summer, and I felt more loved than I thought possible. But I didn’t keep my promise. I continued to make horrible choices, always chasing the high of the man that I first gave myself to—body, heart, and soul.

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Chapter 2

Emilio

His Isa

Exactly Ten Years Ago

Emilio watched his Isa sleep for the last time. She would be leaving for New York with Oliver tomorrow, and he would be stuck here. Forced to continue his family's legacy. Forced to be the head of his family.

He absentmindedly rubbed the tattoo on his bare chest. He couldn't save his sister from this life, but he would not let the same fate befall this precious woman. Emilio stroked Isa affectionately as she breathed heavily in her sleep.

A noise startled him from his contemplations. He extended, gripping his gun under the mattress as the door to his bedroom was silently nudged open.

He loosened his hold on the weapon when he saw who it was.

"Kazi. You're here." He acknowledged the man, unwrapping himself from Izzy.

He crept off the bed, scrutinizing the man who stood in the doorway. Kazi was clearly aggrieved, hands clenched into fists, shoulder squared, lips flattened into a line.

“Sir,” the newcomer clipped out .

It was almost comical hearing older men call Emilio sir, but he was used to it by now.

His sister’s death, followed immediately by his father's death six years ago, had caused a shift in power, and he had been forced to grow up quickly.

Too quickly.

“You have your orders?” Emilio questioned, his attention flickering to Isa to ensure she still slept soundly.

Kazi was newer to their fold, but Emilio trusted him.

He had shown promise, and Emilio needed the right person for this...job.

Kazi took a moment too long to respond, and Emilio stepped further from the bed into the man’s face.

Looking down at him, he examined Kazi’s expressions critically.

Kazi heaved a sigh, relaxing out of his tense posture. “I just don’t want to move to California, but I guess if it’s only temporarily.”

Emilio smirked caustically; he didn’t have the heart to tell Kazi this would be his permanent assignment.

Emilio might be letting Isa leave his side and move away, but that didn’t mean he didn’t plan on keeping tabs on every piece of her life. And Kazi’s job? Well, that would be to watch over her best friend, Yara.

Isa cared about Yara more than almost anything else in the world and that meant Emilio needed to ensure Yara's safety, if only to keep his Bella happy. He didn't trust the precocious Yara to stay out of trouble and that was where Kazi came into play.

Isa shifted behind him.

"Go, " he ordered, shoving Kazi back and shutting the door.

"Emilio?" Izzy's husky, sleep-laden voice swept across the room to him .

"Coming, Bella. Are you ready for another round?"

He walked carefully back to the bed, finding her bright eyes in the otherwise darkened room.

Fuck, she was a sight. Her bare chest was on display, hickeys adorning her alabaster skin. His marks. "Soon enough, I'm going to wake you up on my dick, or would you prefer to wake up on my fingers?"

"Fingers," Izzy laughed lyrically, but he watched as she subconsciously rubbed her thighs together.

He wasn't joking.

"Can you..." Her voice turned unsure, putting him on edge.

"Can I, what?"

She was sitting up in his bed now, and he moved his rough fingers, skating along her soft lips.

“Can you just hold me, please? I’m scared. What if I fail?” Isa whispered the words against his skin.

He immediately shifted, wrapping her in his arms.

True to form they had spent as much time as they could together in the past several months, but tomorrow she would be leaving for New York to start up her business with Oliver.

Oliver had been home for a few days at the end of their summer together. Emilio was afraid she would run back to him, but instead she came up with the idea to leave altogether. At her request, Oliver had immediately left for New York with the promise Isa would follow him in a week.

Oliver. Oliver. Oliver.

Emilio was tired of hearing the other man’s name and knew Oliver wasn’t the nice selfless man Isa claimed him to be.

He already had plans to infiltrate her life, even as they lived so far apart, but he didn’t voice that.

“You are going to succeed.” He stroked her back, tugging her to him tightly.

Her face found the crook of his neck, and she burrowed there.

He felt the tears as she began to cry, but he didn’t mention them. Instead, he continued to hold her, rubbing gentle circles on her back.

After a bit, she pulled back from him, her glistening eyes the only evidence of her distress.

“Emilio, this doesn’t change anything, but I need you to know.”

Emilio reached up wiping her tears away with the pads of his thumbs, keeping his attention on her the entire time. “What is it, Bella?”

“I... This started as using you. As a way to escape the pain of what almost happened.”

Physically Emilio attempted not to react. But internally? A fire pilfered across his skin, darkening his vision, pounding into his heart, infiltrating every part of him. Molten rage. Emilio stamped down the anger that threatened to crawl up his throat. It wasn’t directed towards Isa.

The pedophile.

He had shot Sebastian. Sebastian should have died, but he hadn’t. Instead, he was gone by the time his family’s clean-up crew arrived to clear the body.

Sebastian hadn’t been found since. It was Emilio’s main regret. It was his excuse to never let Isa out of his sight.

Isa paused, unsure of his silence.

“Go on,” he pressed gently, dipping forward to pepper her face in soft kisses soothing his own soul with each brush against her skin.

“I know I’m too young, and I probably don’t know any better, but Emilio, I do—” An unexpected hiccup cut her off, and her cheeks turned pink. The hiccups hit her hard and she puffed her face as she held her breath aggressively .

No matter how adorable she looked, Emilio knew better than to laugh right now.

She let the air whoosh out and waited just a moment before shutting her eyes and squeezing them. “Fuck. I love you, dammit!”

Emilio dropped his hold on her in shock.

No. That wasn’t—

No. Emilio didn’t deserve—

No. Isa couldn’t—

His brain short-circuited as all his plans swirled in his mind.

In every scenario, he hadn’t accounted for her to actually care about him. To love him.

“But don’t get the wrong impression. I’m not breaking our promise.” Her eyes were open now, and they were boring into him.

He snapped out of his stupor. His brain switched gears.

He wouldn’t keep an innocent woman tethered to him.

But if she loved him? If she was willing to? What if she returned to him on her own accord?

Maybe this didn’t have to be good-bye. Maybe he could get what he wanted most. Maybe she could be his .

The spiraling questions and maybes piled up as an unhinged plan formed.

“Isa. I want to make a new promise. A pact.”

“What is it?”

He jumped on her, forcing Isa flat to the bed, his hands landing on the mattress on each side of her head, his lips centimeters from hers.

She let out a cute squeak of surprise. Her hair was a disheveled mess, her eyes coated in sleep, her body marred with bruises.

Perfect. She was absolutely perfect .

“A marriage pact.” He pushed his lips to hers for a brief, searing connection. “In 10 years, if we’re both single, we get married. To each other.”

She spluttered, “What? I—that’s silly! That’s what kids who don’t know any better say! And what about the danger? ”

Isa didn’t even know the beginning of the danger , just that it existed. In 10 years, he would tell her. She didn’t need to know now, she wasn’t ready.

Especially of her own ties to it.

“Well, Isa,” Emilio pressed his forehead to hers, his lips curling cruelly, “you said you used me, and now you say you love me. You hurt my feelings, Bella. And what’s the harm? In 10 years, I’m sure you will be settled down.” Not if he could help it. “And it won’t be dangerous for you then. I will make sure of it.”

He just needed to kill a few pesky men, find a pedophile, and conquer a town. He could manage that in 10 years.

And even if he couldn't...

He leaned back just a bit. He wouldn't pressure her too much, he would let her decide on her own.

But did she know this was her last chance to escape him?

If she agreed... Well, he would allow her 10 years.

But not a day longer.

Her eyes flickered between his. He could tell she wasn't convinced, but then, to his surprise, she nodded softly. "Okay, Emilio."

He couldn't help the joy that pilfered through him. "I love you too, Bella Isa," he susurrated into her ear before rolling off her.

She reached over, pinching him on the head of his dick. "Nothing is ever easy with you!" she huffed.

He ignored her protests as he hugged her against him. He needed as much of her as he could have. Her fingers on the tip of his dick had only caused it to harden and he grinded it into her luscious ass from behind .

His Isa let out a breathy mewl.

The previous depression was replaced with determination.

Tonight was their last night.

For now.

But in 10 years, he would return, and she wouldn't be settled down.

Emilio would make sure of it.

She would be his wife.

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Chapter 3

Izzy

Present Day

My head was throbbing, and nothing made sense. I had dreamed that Emilio would return to my life one day, but not like this.

And who was this man in place of the teenage boy I had given myself to all those years ago?

I hadn't even recognized him at the reunion for fuck's sake.

I wiped away my tears and turned in the seat to him. "Where are you taking me?"

Emilio didn't meet my eyes immediately, reaching behind him instead. "Sign this NDA first, and then I can answer your questions."

I glanced down at the paper as he thrust a pen into my hand. I scanned it cursorily before signing. He took it and replaced it with a similar form.

I signed the form, only for him to replace it with another, and so on, for 10 more pages. The shock of what had just happened with Sebastian was wearing off, and in its place, annoyance grew. "Emilio, what is this?"

"I can't have you in my life without this. It is just precautionary." He leaned forward,

pressing his forehead to mine. “You trust me, don’t you? You know I would never hurt you? Don’t you, my good girl? My Bella?”

Something about his words mixed with his guttural tone sparked a memory to the forefront of my mind .

“You? It was you! You met with Yara? You were the one, you...” My face flushed in embarrassment. I should be angry, but instead, I was happy . Relieved that it had been Emilio. That it wasn’t some stranger but a man that I was already intrinsically connected to.

“I fulfilled your darkest desires and woke you up on my fingers? Yes Isa. It was me. Now, there’s one more thing we have to do before you reunite with the two annoyances that have infiltrated your life.”

I fell back into my seat. The leather was sticking to my bare thighs, and I was acutely aware I was fully dressed in other men’s clothes.

Maddox’s boxers and Emilio’s shirt.

Emilio followed my attention, leaning forward to survey me. His eyes darkened as he found the fresh marks left on my body and then stopped on my bottom half. “I suppose this outfit will have to do. I need to get you back to Maddox and Oliver shortly.”

My hands fanned my lap, gripping the material uncomfortably and wiping the sweat away. I was doing my best to stay calm, cool, and collected, but I was, in fact, not any of those things.

There was a hummingbird in my heart fluttering its wings and a typhoon in my stomach rolling with the vehicle. The only reason I hadn’t completely dissolved into a

puddle of irreparable mush was that I knew Emilio. I trusted him. At least I did at one time.

I didn't bother to ask how he seemed to know Maddox and Oliver. "Where are we going?" I chose the most pressing question instead. The moon shone through as the primary source of light as we continued down an area I wasn't familiar with.

"Boss, you need to tell her." The voice came from the driver's seat. "Yara won't be happy about this."

"Yara is dealing with her own mess." The warmth in Emilio's voice prior was gone. His tone was short, curt, authoritative .

"What do you mean?" Panic shot through me. Was she okay? The bump bump bump as the vehicle skirted off the road was jarring, but the driver quickly adjusted.

"Kazi, you should know better than to try to hide anything from me. We will discuss this later. There's a reason I made you stay behind, but Mateo will keep an eye out for her. Don't worry too much."

"How do you know Yara?" I pitched forward in my seat, trying to catch the man's face in the mirror, but it was shrouded in shadows.

"Isa, you didn't think I would leave your friend unprotected, did you?" Emilio tugged me back and over to his side, wrapping his strong arms around me. His muscles hardened as he secured me in a tight embrace. His head fell to my shoulder, burying his face there.

"Emilio." I struggled for a moment against his hold, but then the memory of our recent night together and of the summer all those years ago edged their way into my mind.

My body relaxed on its own accord, heat pooling between my thighs. My reaction had me once again questioning my sanity.

I had just seen a man's head explode into pieces.

Why isn't that bothering me?

"That's it, I'm not going to hurt you, and you instinctually know that, don't you? You're wet for me, aren't you? I bet I could easily sink my cock into you right now. Your body is always ready for mine."

I grumbled in attempted disagreement. But he was right. I was anxious and on edge but beneath that was unmistakable neediness. A comfortability.

I wanted this man again. My body recognized his.

But what about Oliver and Maddox ?

He moved my hair aside to lay a single kiss on the column of my throat, directly over the mark he had left behind. "It's been 10 years, my Bella Isa, surely you haven't forgotten your promise."

Promise. Promise ?

I wracked my brain, trying to catch up with the information overload.

The vehicle slammed to a stop. Squirming out of Emilio's embrace, I looked out the window.

A church?

“I was hoping for it to go a bit differently, but your two friends threw a wrench into my plans. No matter, a pact is a pact.”

Promise? Pact? Ten years.

Realization flushed through me. “Emilio, you can’t be serious.” I attempted to fling myself out the other door, furthest from him, but he caught me by the waist.

In my stupor, Emilio was able to manhandle me into his arms, and that is where I was wrapped as he carried us up the chapel’s steps.

It was a huge building that appeared to be hundreds of years old based on the design, but it wasn’t falling apart at all. On the contrary, it was clearly well taken care of, even the small patch of grass in the front was well manicured.

For a moment, I thought I might be in some type of fever dream, but when the driver, Kazi, opened the door, I could no longer deny I was seated in reality.

The pews were lined in rows and eerily empty, cast in shadows by the candles.

This was a scene straight out of a nightmare.

Why wasn’t I running? Screaming?

There were also hundreds of rainbow fairy lights adorning the walls, fresh flowers at the ends of the pews between the candles, and beautiful crimson stained glass moths hung from the large windows. It turned the nightmare into something...oddly soothing. Comforting. Someone had put a lot of effort into this chapel, but why?

Emilio tightened his grip on me, the rough pads of his fingers digging into my skin, as he walked us down the aisle. “Come on, Isa, it’s past midnight. I waited the full 10

years as promised, but now it's time to follow through on our pact. We're getting married."

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Chapter 4

Izzy

His words bounced around the chapel before landing across my skin. They burned me, bringing me to my senses.

My mind was a muddled mess of confusion, chaos, and apprehension.

He couldn't be serious.

"I'm not signing anything or agreeing to this," I argued, attempting to escape the confines of his arms.

Except he was much stronger now than he had been in our youth. I could barely budge.

Before, he had been a comfort—a salve needed after a traumatic night—but now I wasn't so sure. I knew Emilio lived a darker lifestyle, that his family owned most of this town, but he had always made me feel safe. Protected. Loved .

Emilio remained silent, but the chapel suddenly roused with an eerie tune.

A wedding march.

We were only half a dozen steps from the altar at this point, and he wasn't slowing his pace or loosening his grip.

“Emilio, you aren’t thinking clearly.” My heart pounded into my ears.

This isn’t happening.

My head swiveled, searching for anyone to come to the rescue. But there were only the four of us here and Kazi was not going to be my ally. I found the priest’s attention, but he quickly looked away, clutching a bible to his chest. He was muttering under his breath and his wiry gray hair was disheveled. Upon closer inspection, I noted he appeared to have been freshly pulled from his sleep. His garb was littered in wrinkles and his face still had the indents from a pillow.

Is he even here of his own free will?

“Emilio.” I put as much oomph into my voice as I possibly could. “I am not agreeing to marry you.”

“Kazi, give him the form to sign,” Emilio barked out the order, his voice held none of its previous warmth.

Kazi came up from behind and handed the priest a single piece of paper to sign. Kazi shifted uneasily from foot to foot, his charcoal eyes flashing around in anxiety, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Emilio and I had made it to the altar now too.

“Son, this isn’t right.” The priest cast me a cursory glance, scribbling on the form, nonetheless.

I could just make out what the top of the paper said before Kazi wrenched it away.

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT.

It looked eerily close to the documents Emilio had me sign in the car.

What the actual fuck is going on?

“Neither are your ties to that abuser. Stephen . Or is it Steve now? You were given grace in our family, but you chose to go against our wishes. This is your salvation,” Emilio snarled the words out, pushing the priest off the altar. “You have until this wedding is over to leave this town. Go !”

The priest’s face turned ashen, and he didn’t hesitate a moment longer before running for the door. I watched over Emilio’s shoulder as the priest made it outside.

I was able to see two men in black suits grab him by the arms as the doors closed shut .

“Emilio, what are you doing?” My anxiety was hammering against my chest painfully. My unease weaved synchronously with my curiosity.

Emilio finally lowered me gently to the ground, keeping his much larger hand wrapped around my bicep. He turned to face me. His caramel eyes met mine. At that moment it wasn’t as if time had stopped, but it was as if nothing else mattered.

We were transported back to when we first met.

When he saved me.

When we spent the summer together.

When I fell in love with him.

My resolve softened.

His free hand came up to cup my cheek, the pad of his thumb finding my lips. He pressed against them, forcing me to kiss it.

Emilio bent down until his lips were centimeters away from mine and spoke in his soft and comforting tone that he used to use exclusively with me. “Bella Isa, I love you. I have loved you since the moment I saw you all those years ago. There are a million things I could tell you, a thousand pretty lies, but here is the truth of the matter: I will spend every last breath showing you what it means to be enough. I will make you my priority in all that I do. I will ensure there is nothing left for you to fear in this world. I will keep you by my side through it all, I won’t let you go again. All I need from you is to take a leap, to trust me. Can you do that?”

“I can, but—” Oliver and Maddox’s faces slid into my mind. I couldn’t do this to them. They were a part of my heart, too.

Correctly guessing where my mind had gone, Emilio’s lips flattened, his voice turned guttural. Harsh . “I was almost too late, but you aren’t with them. And if having those two in your life is what you need for your happiness? I won’t keep you from them. But if they hurt you? If they lie to you? I make no promises. ”

My eyelids fluttered shut, and I squeezed them tight.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Was I really going to do this? Was I going to make this leap with Emilio? A man I hadn’t seen in 10 years? Did I even truly have a choice?

“I do.” Have a choice.

Just like I did all those years ago.

I could recognize that Emilio had planned all of this. From the burgundy moths to the rainbow lights. He clearly wanted to give a delicate side to this moment solely for my sake...

I didn't open my eyes as he sealed the promise with a kiss.

Now that I knew it was his lips pressing against mine—the familiarity , the comfortability —I couldn't help but think how stupid I was for not realizing it before. For not knowing he was the one that Yara sent to my hotel room.

That it was Emilio. It had always been and would always be him. I had always loved him, I had buried it, stamped it down, but it was there. A steady thread that pulsed along my nerves.

I owed him a large portion of my soul, my innocence, my mental health.

I may need to go to therapy, but I hadn't actually lost it yet. And that was because of Emilio, because he had saved me all those years ago. Because he had instilled confidence into me. Because he had always shown me my worth.

A million thoughts swarmed around my mind, but then he slipped something into place on my finger.

My ring finger.

“Mine.”

Crash! Bang!

Behind us, the church's doors slammed open.

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Chapter 5

Oliver

His Isobel

“I have located Isa. She is safe. I will bring her to you both. ETA two hours.”

Oliver’s knuckles whitened as he clutched the steering wheel aggressively. He sped down the back roads of their town, a specific destination in mind. The words from Milo echoed around his brain.

Why would it take two hours to return? Something wasn’t right.

There was one place he knew he could go. One man that ran this town. He could help them.

The man owed Oliver after all.

“You’re going to break it,” Maddox stated, looking up from his phone.

“I don’t care . She’s missing,” he bit out. “Why did we let her go out into the hallway? Why didn’t we do anything to stop her?”

“Because she asked us not to, and we respect her wishes.” Maddox shifted in his seat; he was almost comically oversized for the small vehicle.

“Emilio will find her for us.” Oliver would be reunited with his Isobel.

No matter the cost.

“From what you’ve told me, that man is the literal devil of this town, and you haven’t seen him in over 10 years. Who’s to say he’s even the man in charge anymore?” Maddox grunted out, readjusting again, his knees squeezing against the dashboard.

Oliver turned the corner, whipping the vehicle dangerously close to the sidewalk. Up ahead, the moon shined brightly onto a church that he was intimately familiar with. It was where he went for Sunday service his entire childhood. Where he first met the young Emilio.

Where his dad died .

“Something doesn’t seem right. Why is it lit up like that? Isn’t their business usually conducted under the church?” Maddox cut through Oliver’s anxiety. The words ricocheted around the confined space of the vehicle.

Oliver wasn’t sure what was stabbing at his psyche, but without thought, he swerved up onto the lawn of the church and jumped from the car.

Just as he made it to the steps, he heard movement behind him.

“State your business.”

Oliver paid no mind to the unfamiliar voice; he didn’t pause as he flung the church doors open.

He blinked his eyes a few times to adjust to the sight before him.

“Isobel!”

Panic. Anxiety. Turmoil.

Confusion.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Oliver was sprinting now, ignoring the candles on the ground and the familiar rhythm he couldn’t quite place. The voice in his brain screaming something wasn’t right.

His attention focused on Isobel’s tear-stained face. On the man that held her, the man from the plane, from the reunion.

Was this the man who took her? Had Milo lied when he had said he’d found her?

Her eyes widened in surprise. He couldn’t hear her, but he could see as she mouthed his name in horror.

He didn’t understand. Nothing made sense .

Isobel stepped out of the man’s embrace as Oliver reached them.

Oliver didn’t pause; he raised his fist, pulled back, and swung it directly into her captor’s gut.

The man made a satisfying grunt of pain, bending over, before Oliver was restrained, his arms pulled uncomfortably behind him by firm hands. The cool metal of a gun was pressed to his temple.

“What are you doing?” Isobel shrilled. “Let him go!”

“Boss?”

The captor stood back up to his full height, brushing off his clothes and turning the severe intensity of his gaze to Oliver. “We need to talk,” he stated brusquely before reaching out and tugging Isobel back to him.

Rage percolated through Oliver’s veins as he took in the stranger who held his Isobel hostage.

This must be who took her. A fucking stalker.

“You sick freak!” Oliver yelled the words, spit flying from his mouth as his chest heaved in and out. He wasn’t in control, and his mind was unraveling. His good boy persona liquefying.

“You really don’t recognize me? I’m hurt.” The freak’s smile was all teeth as he tightened his grip on Isobel.

Oliver had a moment of shock to see she wasn’t fighting back before a new voice broke into the space.

“Ellie?”

Oliver turned to the voice, the pistol following his move.

Maddox was being pushed into the church, two goons at his back.

“Is this really necessary?” Isobel’s soft voice was static with concern. “Oliver, Maddox, I need to say this first. I haven’t made a choice, but I need you both to understand. And if at the end of it you want to leave me? You don’t want to deal with this? I understand, but just know that I do care about you both more than words can

express. ”

Her hand came up to cup Oliver’s face.

One of the candles reflected off of a ring on her finger.

“What have you done?” It took a moment to realize it wasn’t his own voice.

Maddox was no longer the docile prisoner as he fought back against the two captors. Swinging one into the other.

Without further delay, Oliver did the same. Reaching up to grab the gun from his temple and twisting it away.

He pivoted, delivering a bone-crushing kick to one of the men’s faces. It was the man who had been holding the gun and it bounced against the ground a few feet before sliding underneath a pew. Oliver only had an instant of satisfaction before the stranger that had his Isobel launched off the podium at him. A fist finding his cheek, the shock causing him to take several steps back.

After that it was a chaotic mess of fists, kicks, and yelling that Oliver couldn’t keep track of.

He was delivering as much violence as he could, allowing his anger and confusion to power him through.

That was, until a gun shot pierced the room.

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Chapter 6

Izzy

“B utterscotch!” I yelled out as I lowered the gun from the air, my chest heaving.

Nothing was going right, this day was in fact pulled directly from a fever dream.

“That’s enough.” I manifested my most inner bitch, pulling from years of Yara’s energy. I clenched my jaw, straightened my spine, and looked down my nose at the idiots.

“Isa, give me the gun back.” Emilio lifted a hand, staggering from the foray of violence.

The rest of the men all paused.

“No! You fucking psychotic lunatics! All of you!”

My heart was beating rapidly in my ears as I took in the scene before me. From my vantage point, I could see the bloodied noses, bruised faces, and busted knuckles.

I was exceptionally aware that these men were brawling in a church.

I pointed to two of Emilio’s men. “You two, go blow out all of these fucking candles before we go up in flames.”

They didn't move until Emilio inclined his head just a bit. "You are to listen to her now, too."

They didn't hesitate a moment longer.

Is this what my life would be now ?

I knew back in high school that Emilio wasn't a good man, that no typical teenager owned a gun, had a driver, and lived in a gated mansion.

After our time together, when I moved off to New York, I decided I wanted to know more about the man that had stolen my heart. It didn't take long to find the articles on his family's sordid past and their ties to the cartel.

"Ellie, who is this man?" Maddox's soothing voice sent waves of calm along my skin even from across the room.

Flicking the safety on the gun, I set it down behind me. As I sidestepped Emilio, elbowing one of his men aside, I found my way into Maddox's embrace. His familiar scent enveloped me.

Maddox was safety. Sanity. Rational .

His bulky arms extended out wrapping their way around me. He lifted me up, and I latched onto him. A needed life vest amidst a sea of chaos. My hands raised on their own, going to his face, holding him in place. Other than a split lip, there wasn't much evidence of his previous altercations. Meeting his gaze, we communicated for a moment in silence. I narrowed my eyes, raising one eyebrow. In turn, he sheepishly lifted up his shoulders and quirked his lips.

I pressed my forehead to his.

“You’re sweaty,” I stated attempting to ignore the embarrassment and insecurity that were squirreling their way into this moment.

“Isobel.” Oliver’s tone was harsh, unyielding.

“Dad is mad,” I whispered to Maddox.

“Livid,” Oliver grunted out, but he didn’t move.

The only movement was of the men slowly blowing out the candles along the aisle. It was almost comical to watch. If it weren’t also a stark reminder of why they were there in the first place .

Was I aware that I was in Maddox’s arms in a church that I had just married another, admittedly dangerous, man in?

Yes.

Was I going to pretend like that wasn’t the case?

Also yes.

“I think it might be time for a healthy dose of communication before we all kill each other. Besides, isn’t that what is needed as the foundation of a healthy relationship?” I laughed the words out nervously.

“You’re right, Isa. After all, Oliver and I have quite a bit to catch up on,” Emilio responded before turning his attention to Oliver. “I can’t believe you didn’t recognize me, though I guess I was a lot smaller when we strung your dad up in this church.”

What does that even mean?

My head jerked from Maddox, finding Emilio.

The latter was staring up above at the rafters.

“Emilio?” In all my years alongside Oliver I had never heard the absolute terror that saturated his voice before. “You’re Emilio?”

Emilio didn’t answer for a few minutes, his eyes focused above.

I tried to find what he was looking at, but there wasn’t anything there.

Finally, he lowered his attention back into the here and now. “Oh, thought I saw a ghost,” he said. “Isa, guide us little girl. Take us where you want before I slice Maddox’s hands off for daring to touch what’s mine.”

Fuck .

What have I gotten myself into?

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Chapter 7

Emilio

His Isa

Emilio thrummed his fingers against his pants in agitation. Seated back in his SUV, he wanted nothing more than to rip his Isa from Maddox's grip.

But he couldn't. He promised her that she was free to have these men in her life.

"Where are we going?" Oliver asked from beside him.

No, Emilio didn't get to hold his Isa. Instead he was leg to leg with the bane of his existence.

One of his first and most trusted allies.

The man that helped him to exact his revenge.

"To Emilio's house," Isa murmured out as she melted further into Maddox's arms. Emilio watched her in a haze.

It didn't look particularly comfortable to Emilio, but contrary to his thoughts, it was only a few minutes of uncomfortable silence later that Isa was fast asleep.

He didn't blame her, once the adrenaline wears off, all that settles in its dust is a bone

deep exhaustion.

Isa let out a mewling snore.

Emilio bent forward to stroke her face, ignoring Maddox entirely .

“Why are you wearing wedding bands?” Maddox grumbled softly; reaching up to brush Emilio’s hand away but Emilio was already settling back in his seat.

Emilio’s dick was hardened uncomfortably in his pants. He wanted nothing more than to wake her up on his fingers again, but first, he needed to set ground rules. Establish his newfound unwanted acquaintance with the other men in this car.

“Look.” He rubbed his temple and angled as far away from Oliver as he could, surveying both the men.

He was used to being the youngest, of others looking down on him for it, but that wasn’t going to happen here. If either of these men fucked up, or hurt his Isa? He would kill them with his own bare hands.

He didn’t care about the history he and Oliver shared. It wouldn’t matter.

“I think before we get into that there’s something else you both need to be aware of.” He lifted his lips as if to smile, before baring his teeth at them. “You two and Yara all ought to look into vetting your security teams better. I’m Emilio, but you also know me by the names of Milo or perhaps even Emil.”

They both opened their mouths in shock; Oliver’s face whitening, Maddox’s hold on Isa noticeably tightening.

“There is something else you need to get straight. Isa and I have history. She is, and

always has been, mine. ”

“This is what you were doing when I asked you to watch after her? Keep her safe from that asshole of a step-father? You were getting closer? Crawling your disgusting vines into her orbit? She is too good for you. You’re a fucking killer,” Oliver’s hushed whisper did nothing to dispel the obvious vitriol he spat at Emilio .

“Aren’t we all?” Emilio relaxed his shoulders, his head leaning back as he finally ripped his attention from Isa.

Everything Emilio touched turned into destruction. Bloody. Chaos.

That was why he told Isa he couldn’t be with her. Why he promised her a summer.

One summer.

But then she said those fucking words.

“She loves me.” Emilio didn’t bother to look at the men when he said it. Those words had shifted the course of his life, they had upended all of his previous plans, dissipated his need for revenge.

He knew Oliver and Maddox wouldn’t take it well, wouldn’t believe him. They would have to continue this conversation when Isa was awake to tell her side.

“Bullshit,” Oliver barked out. It was a harsh noise. Nails against a chalkboard.

Except, maybe it was just Oliver’s voice. It irritated Emilio. Because Emilio knew Oliver wasn’t a good man. Oliver hid behind his suits, his false smile, his pretty boy features. But Emilio knew the truth.

Had witnessed his depravity firsthand.

“I don’t care if you believe me or not, it’s the truth.” He finally looked to the men, his hands going to his knees, he tipped his head forward as if to share a secret. “And let’s get one thing straight here. You may not have known it was me, but I have been helping you ‘handle’ Isa’s issues for years. Or have you already forgotten? The ex-boyfriends? The cameras? The tracking? All of it. I am Milo, remember? I know your dirty fucking secrets, and maybe you told her part of it. But does she know the lengths you two went to? The men that you had removed from her life? That you set up each and every one of her relationships for failure? Sure, I was happy to help, but you two were the ones calling the shots. Are you going to tell her about Harry ?”

The last decade had been exhausting. Living between New York and Florida. Keeping tabs on his family and Isa. But it had all been worth it.

He hadn’t managed to conquer the town, but he was already one step closer.

“You wouldn’t , it would implicate you too.” Oliver’s eyes met Emilio’s.

Bright blue, like a robin’s fucking egg. He was the boy next door, an assuming assailant. It pissed off Emilio.

“And? I’m not the one that wrapped myself in a pretty package and called myself a good man. She knows who I am. She searched for me after we were separated, discovered my family’s connections and indiscretions . I told her as much when we were together. Yet she still fell into my arms after I found her on that roof, just like I had all those years ago.”

“The roof?” Maddox finally spoke up again.

Emilio surveyed them both.

They didn't even know that much?

He bared his teeth, his nostrils flaring. "Does she even trust you two? Or have you forced her to? Isolated her from any other healthy relationship. Do you think maybe without the two of you in her life she might have been happy?" Emilio was applying pressure to their nerves, doing his best to poke and prod at Oliver. He didn't like this version, he wanted to see the one he had met all those years ago. The one coated in blood.

"And what about you? How long have you been watching from the shadows like a fucking creep? Why didn't you do something, say something? What were you waiting for?" Oliver's voice was a knife scratching a plate.

Grima. Emilio had heard that word a lot growing up and it is what he felt now. Disgust .

Emilio heaved a sigh. They were almost to his home now, and he watched as the front gate swung open to allow them in. He always wondered if the gate was for his protection or for the rest of the town's.

"I promised her 10 years. She had those years to find a healthier, easier, safer life. But instead, she stayed in the lives of a pretty monster"—Emilio turned from Oliver and finally took in Maddox—"and a brute with a chip on his shoulder who has a death count longer than my own."

Maddox narrowed his eyes. "It appears you did your homework on me. I'm guessing you know all of the bits and pieces of my despicable past. And I understand that you are threatening us. I get it, but I am offering you this. I will trust you for Ellie's sake, but the moment you hurt her—and I know you will hurt her—you will see exactly why my death count is so high. Did your background check show how many of those were done with my bare hands? Do you know how to kill a man without your gun?

Without a weapon? Don't play with me, boy. " Maddox's guttural voice was thick with rage.

Emilio couldn't help the laugh that burst from him. He had been underestimated for years by men older and scarier than Maddox. At this point, he found it hilarious more than anything else.

Maddox didn't have a chance to react before Isa shifted against him.

The noise startling her, and all of Emilio's previous annoyance from the men dissolved. Her eyes fluttered open a bit before she let out a yawn.

The cute soft noise cut through the tension of the car.

"Oh, hi there guys. You're all staring at me. Is there something on my face?" Said face was turning pink now. It reminded Emilio of when she told him she loved him all those years ago.

His heart beat painfully against his chest. He had missed her so much. The 10 years of being in her orbit, just out of her reach, were tortuous. Watching as she made mistake after mistake. But she needed to work through it on her own. Emilio owed her 10 years away from him and she had it.

But the two leeches she had contracted were not part of his original plan. No matter, he could pivot. While jealousy was crawling across his skin, an even deeper more visceral feeling was penetrating his veins. His body. His soul.

Love .

"Just discussing our future," Maddox reassured her, his beefy hand reaching up to cup her cheek as he placed a chaste kiss to her forehead.

Isa pushed into his lips, her features softening, a beautifully bright smile encompassing her face.

Emilio expected his jealousy to turn explosive, but he was shocked when something else entirely happened. His dick that he had finally gotten under control, grew to attention again.

Before he had time to truly put thought behind the nuances of what that meant, the car came to a stop.

“I’m calling Yara,” Kazi stated before exiting the vehicle and slamming the door shut.

Emilio didn’t acknowledge him. Yara was a pain, but he couldn’t do anything about her. Isa wouldn’t approve of that.

Emilio wondered if Isa would feel differently if she found out the secret Yara was keeping.

Because it was certainly going to change the course of their lives.

Chapter 8

Izzy

It was odd being back in the mansion I first truly became acquainted with Emilio.

Where I lost my virginity. Where we spent the summer together.

Where I told him I loved him.

My face heated at the thought as I relaxed into the couch, it was soft, plush, corduroy. A stark difference to what it was years ago.

Noticing my attention to it, Emilio turned to me on the couch, sliding closer to me. “You didn’t like the leather, I wanted to make your home more inviting.”

A shiver of need ran across my skin as his words tickled against my ear. As a distraction, I surveyed the rest of the space and noticed other subtle changes. Brighter colors, throw blankets, a pile of manhwas I’d read before on the coffee table. Before, his home had felt sterile, hardly lived in, but now it was warm. Welcoming .

Oliver, who was sitting in the armchair across from us, stood up in anger. It wasn’t often I saw him this bothered. He was a control freak through and through, including how he showed his reactions.

“She is not going to be living here.” Oliver threw the words at Emilio’s face.

Emilio placed a gentle kiss on my cheek before separating from me. He rose up from the couch moving until he was toe-to-toe with Oliver, practically the same height, but Emilio was noticeably bulkier .

“Come here,” Maddox grunted out from the other side of the couch tugging me back into the security of his arms. “They seem to have some history.”

That was new to me, but then again, I was recognizing more and more that I had been ignorant to several facets of my life.

“You are still the same asshole—” Oliver was slinging the words out, but I did my best to ignore him.

Their bickering was irritating. It seemed ongoing and it was beginning to make me really anxious.

It won't be like this forever, right?

I fucking hoped not, but I could acknowledge we were all on edge and life's curveballs were coming fast and hard.

Is this what happens when you keep burying your feelings?

“Here's your phone, we found it on the ground. You scared us baby girl.” Maddox handed me the device before burrowing into my neck. His next words were a breathy whisper, directly into my ear. “This is the man who left his come behind isn't it? Are you going to let all three of us wake you up on our cocks?”

I shivered in anticipation, rubbing my thighs together.

This was wrong, my reaction was wrong. But why did it feel so right? As if every

horrible decision and tear shed was to lead me to this exact moment. On this couch. Surrounded by these three men.

“That’s what I thought, but first we need to sort all of this out. Communicate as you said. But later?” His tongue lashed out against the rim of my ear as his hand moved to the nape of my neck, gripping me there.

An uninhibited moan left my lips.

“What are you doing?” Oliver’s anger cut through the desire that Maddox was building shovel by shovel along my nerves.

Burying me in his essence .

Maddox carefully disentangled, offering a quick searing kiss to my lips, before turning to Emilio and Oliver.

“Are you two done now? We all have secrets, we’ve all been lying. But as Ellie so elegantly put it, the best way to a healthy relationship is a solid foundation. So, let’s start with the elephant in the room. Why are you two wearing wedding bands?”

Emilio let out a long booming laugh, his head tipping back. “Isn’t it obvious? We’re married.”

Apparently, that was the breaking point for Oliver.

“You son of a bitch!” Oliver screamed as he lost the last of his control. His face red, a vein throbbing in his temple as he launched himself at Emilio.

Crash!

Where was the fucking gun when I needed it?

Chapter 9

Emilio

His Isa

Emilio's tongue darted out to lick away the blood dripping from his lip.

"Are you both done now?" Isa's aggravation was prevalent in her tone, as was her worry. Her eyebrows creased in concern, her adorable nose scrunched up.

"I'll be fine." Emilio offered her a toothy grin.

Her face whitened. "Bloody. Red. Crimson. Is that color going to be a running theme in this?"

Emilio licked his teeth next, wiping away whatever she was seeing there before getting on his knees in front of her, his head falling to her lap. "It might be, but I will do my best to keep it from you. Now where should we start, my Bella Isa?"

Her soft hands came up on their own and found their way into his hair, burrowing there and massaging his scalp. He hummed a noise of appreciation.

He had kept it short since the last time he was in her presence. He only started to grow it out six months ago. For her. He remembered all the nights of her fingers running through his long hair. Of his head in her lap exactly like this.

“I missed you,” he murmured adoringly .

Isa paused as if she hadn’t realized what she was doing. “It’s been years Emilio. And then you show up to collect on a 10-year pact, not offering much of a choice. And now it seems you and Oliver know each other? I am tired of being given half-truths, of being lied to, and deceived. I have been rolling with it because that is what I’ve always done. But now? I need honesty, Emilio.”

“What do you want to know?” Oliver’s grating voice came from behind Emilio, but he didn’t lift his head. Soaking up as much warmth as he could of his Bella Isa.

Isa’s hands started moving again, tangling further into Emilio’s hair. “Let’s start with how you and Emilio met.”

“Church,” Oliver said in a monotonous voice.

“Emilio, will you tell me please?” Isa removed her hands entirely, falling back into the couch as Emilio raised his head, watching her carefully.

He ignored the other two men in the room as he recalled one of the worst moments in his life; it was also the shifting point for him. He was 12 and following his sister at his father’s command.

Camila! Where are you? This isn’t funny anymore! He screamed the words in his head at his sister in frustration as he hid in a bush just outside a clearing deep in the woods.

Emilio had been looking for her everywhere. She had left a few hours ago to “meet” someone and his dad had sent him to follow her.

When he eventually caught a break, finding her car parked at the forest’s edge, he

made it just in time to see her stepping onto a trail.

For a while, he thought she was deranged, walking aimlessly into the woods, but then she had made it to a small clearing where a large modern house rested. When she let herself inside, Emilio shook with frustration.

What was she doing out here?

And why was he forced to follow her?

He tried to see her from the inside, but all the windows were covered with just a bit of light escaping around the curtains. At this point he hadn't delved very far into his family's business. If he had, he might have known better. Known that this was their enemy's territory, that he ought to call for help right away.

Emilio stayed at his spot behind the bushes just on the outside of the clearing, doing his best to stay awake. It was nearing midnight now and the moon shone in the sky, trickling through the foliage he hid in.

He heaved a sigh. This was pointless, she's probably meeting with a boyfriend.

He fell back on his butt, leaning against the tree to his left. He was exhausted; he had gone to school and then soccer practice and now he was out in the woods. He began to blink, long and slowly until his eyes stayed shut.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Emilio shot up from his resting place. He didn't know how much time had passed, but the moon's light still trickled down.

He shifted just in time to see the door of the house slam shut. He went to yell at his sister.

But it wasn't her.

Panic, concern, worry .

It was three men. One of them stepped forward surveying the area and Emilio was able to get a good look at him. He was wearing a suit that was incredibly disheveled and sprayed in red.

Jullian McKell?

The mayor?

Emilio's heart was beating rapidly in his chest as the second man walked into the moonlight. He blended into the night, dark clothes, cropped jet black hair, charcoal soulless eyes.

Christian York.

Emilio may not have known much of his family's affairs, but he knew one thing for certain.

Christian York was a dangerous man.

At this point, Emilio was terrified. He sat petrified from his vantage point when the third man moved into view. All of him remained in shadows, except his eyes.

His cerulean orbs found Emilio's.

Emilio had never seen the man before and watched in abject horror as the man moved into the moonlight, his lips curled up into a cruel smile before he gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

For a moment Emilio thought that the stranger would give him away, but then the man broke their contact, gesturing for the others to follow him in the opposite direction.

He didn't notice that he was sprinting across the field until he made it to the front door. It was unlocked.

Pushing it open, he crept into the house. His hands were clammy, his anxiety slithering along his skin, his panic tangible as he made his way inside.

He ran down a hallway straight ahead until the space opened into a living room.

He wasn't quite sure what he was looking at, his mind wasn't processing the chaos of the room. The knocked over furniture, the blood on the floor, the half-rolled rug.

"Help her." The voice came from his right and he spun on his heel.

A teenaged boy was tied to an armchair with rope, blood running from his nose. "Oliver?" Emilio had seen him at church before, but they hadn't spoken much.

"Help. Her." His head gestured to the rug.

There was a stain bleeding through it, and Emilio unsteadily moved forward. His nerves were on the fritz, and he pushed down the voice shouting "Don't do it!" as he bent down to unroll the rug.

"Camila?" He fell to his knees. "Camila?" The word was a desperate plea on his

tongue. His soul separated from his body as he took in the sight of her.

Naked, bruised, bloodied.

Shot.

“Wake up!” He shook her. She wasn’t breathing, she wasn’t moving, she wasn’t.

She wasn’t.

She wasn’t.

He was too late. This was his fault.

He shrugged out of his shirt, lifting her and tugging it over her body.

Her body.

A sob wracked through him, and his vision blurred.

“I told her not to come here. Told her it wasn’t safe. I’m sorry,” Oliver clipped out.
“There’s a new power in this town, she wanted to see the meeting. He wasn’t supposed to be here until tomorrow, but it was as if they were expecting her.”

Scratchy, grating. “Shut up!” Grima .

“Call your dad. They are planning an attack. They want to take down your empire.”
Oliver shifted a bit, struggling against his restraints.

“Why are you telling me this? Why shouldn’t I just kill you here and now?” Emilio reached for his forgotten phone in his pocket. Dozens of missed calls and texts. He

read the last one. It was the promise that his dad was sending his men out on a search mission for both him and his sister. “Fuck!”

He stood, turning away from his sister. He couldn’t look at her right now, he needed to figure out what was going on first. He looked at Oliver and stared into his eyes, willing himself to see any lies in their depths.

“She was my friend. My only true friend,” Oliver stated the words coolly. “The newcomer and Christian made my dad hurt her... It was to secure his trust and allegiance.” He heaved a shuddering sigh falling back into the chair. “They made me watch as she begged, as she called for me. I’m sorry.”

Emilio screwed his eyes shut; he couldn’t process this. “I am going to kill your father.”

“I’ll help.” Oliver’s eerily calm voice vibrated into the space.

Emilio’s attention snapped to Oliver, regarding him. “You don’t have a choice.” He wasn’t sure if he believed Oliver or not. But maybe Oliver could be bait.

After all, Oliver was left here tied to a chair. Emilio stared him down. He didn’t see any lie in his eyes. Only regret, grief, unending sadness.

Oliver cared about his sister. About Camila. It was evident.

Emilio dialed the number of the one man that could fix this.

“Young boss?” A deep voice cut through the line.

“Camila is dead. The McKells are planning an attack with the Yorks and a newcomer at their backs.”

“I will handle.”

“Thank you. And Mateo?” Emilio strode to Oliver to help untie him, his mind made up.

“Yes, young boss? ”

“Jullian McKell is mine. Bring him to the church. Uninjured.”

“Yes, sir.” The phone disconnected as Emilio finished untying Oliver.

Emilio knew Oliver wouldn't be an issue. Knew that he would need help to end this.

He couldn't look back at his sister. She would be laid to rest after her killers were delivered the justice they so deserved.

Emilio offered Oliver a hand. An olive branch. A promise. Oliver took it, standing carefully.

“You have my word.” Oliver finally turned to Camila, taking in her body. A broken sob escaped him. “I couldn't do anything but watch. I'm so sorry sweet Camila. You didn't deserve this.”

Emilio understood in that moment that Oliver meant it.

That Oliver had cared about his sister.

“Let's go.” He turned from the scene, ice settling deep in his gut.

He might not have known too much about his family's affairs, but he decided that night, it all needed to change. It wouldn't be long after that he went from “young

boss” to “boss.”

Emilio drew in a deep breath. “We did technically meet at church; his father was tied to mine, they had several arrangements in place. But Oliver and I didn’t become very close for several years after the fact.”

Oliver moved around Emilio and fell onto the couch on Isa’s free side. “When we first met it was at my dad’s gravesite, remember?”

“I do.” Isa’s voice was a melody, soothing Emilio’s nerves. He did his best not to think of the night of his sister’s death, but Isa deserved to know everything. Including what had first broken him, turned him into the cruel man he was today.

“Remember the date on the gravestone?” Oliver asked.

Isa nodded her head slowly.

“That is the day after Emilio’s sister died.”

Chapter 10

Oliver

His Isobel

“Well, then you tell her. The full truth, not the half-assed version. She can handle it.”

Oliver didn't particularly like being told what to do, especially not by Emilio, but he was exhausted and didn't feel like arguing with him.

Oliver let out a calming breath.

None of this was going according to plan .

It was still dark outside, but not for much longer. They had eaten the night away with bullshit after more bullshit.

Oliver flexed his hands, looking down at his wrists. They hadn't scarred, but he could still feel the ropes from all those years ago, could hear Camila's screams.

It was the moment that had finally detached him from this reality. After years of attempting, of trying to be normal, witnessing the cruelties they dealt her was the last nail in his dead heart.

“When I was 16, I had a very good friend. Camila. She was Emilio's older sister. And

without meaning to, I led her to her death. My father, along with two other men, tied me to a chair while they took their turns raping her. Each man fired a shot when they were done. Killing her. And that is where Emilio found me. Tied to a chair with his dead sister rolled up in a rug at my feet. ”

Isobel gasped, and Oliver felt as she leaned against him.

He looked down at her offering a smile, but it was in that moment he realized she wasn't wearing his shirt anymore. Oliver clenched his fists as a million scenarios of what had happened to her rolled through his brain. He had barely processed that he had to share her with Maddox. And now Emilio too?

She was meant to be his.

“Fuck man,” Maddox grunted from the other side of Isobel, pulling him out of his spiral.

Oliver hadn't told this story to anyone.

“Due to my father's choices, Emilio and I agreed that he couldn't be in a position of power in this town anymore and when all was said and done after the fact, Emilio and I strung him up in the church. The official cause of death was suicide. The other two men had too many connections, we couldn't hurt them.”

The irony of the mayor's death being less important was not lost on Oliver. His father had been larger than life. An abusive asshole that wanted more than he deserved.

Oliver didn't miss him. Didn't regret killing him. If anything, he wished he had done it sooner. Before Camila was murdered.

He took a few calming breaths focusing on Isobel's heat, the warmth of her skin. She

was okay, she was alive, she was breathing. She didn't appear to be in distress. If anything, she seemed to be at peace. Or as much as she could be considering the story he was telling.

“This town was owned by two families. The Castillos”—he gestured to Emilio—“and the Yorks.”

Isobel stiffened beside him, but he plowed ahead, filing it away in the endless questions he wished to ask her .

“That night when Camila was murdered, a third family was pulled into the fray. It was a necessity to secure my father's support. To show who would win if it came down to it.” Oliver had played this conversation out in his head, a thousand different scenarios, each one with a different outcome. “That family was the Landons.”

He had never expected Isobel to headbutt him with all her might. His eclectic Isobel never ceased to surprise him. It was why he loved her.

Maddox and Emilio started yelling over each other to admonish Isobel for injuring herself. Oliver didn't even bother, he knew she wouldn't listen.

Knew his words had upset her past her breaking point. Knew that the news of what he shared would not be taken well. Knew she needed to let some of it out, even if it was on him. Even if it hurt her a little.

“The Landons? My step-father? You fucking asshole! Why didn't you tell me?” she screeched, rubbing her forehead.

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Chapter 11

Christian

“ W here is he?!” Christian screamed at his men. He turned around and, in a rage, swiped everything off of his long desk. A picture frame bounced against the marble ground, shattering, before landing at his feet.

Using the bottom of his shoe, he moved the glass away to better see the image. It pictured three men—his brother, himself, and a friend of theirs. “Somebody clean this shit up!”

He heaved in and out, turning back to his five most trusted men.

Five . And not one of them could find his brother. Could tell him where the idiot had gone off to this time.

His brother, Sebastian, had just returned home and now he was gone again, off doing whatever the fuck it was he got himself into.

His phone rang, interrupting his explosive rage. It was their friend. “What did you find?” Christian snarled into the phone.

“A body.” The voice spoke the words slowly, in his usual calm off-putting tone.

“Whose?” Christian reached behind him for the item tucked inconspicuously in his pants.

“Your brother. I just managed to take pictures before a crew was sent to clean it up.”

Christian’s heart pounded against his chest, he did everything to smash down the frenzied energy that was wrapping tendrils around his black heart. There was no love lost between him and his brother. But it was his blood.

Only one family in this town would dare to touch a York.

Even if the treaty stated otherwise.

“The Castillos,” the voice on the phone confirmed.

The egregious disrespect would need to be dealt with. He had called off the war due to the severe losses on all sides, and they had come to an agreement. Clearly that was now null and void, and he would need to act, but first...

Christian disconnected the call; he had heard enough. He appraised his men. “Who saw Sebastian last?”

Four of the men stepped back, leaving one behind.

Christian lifted the gun in his hand that he had pulled from his suit.

The lone man did not snivel or cower. “Sir, I did as directed.”

“You did,” Christian agreed before shooting the remaining four men.

His last trusted man did not flinch as the shots rang out, nor did he react as their blood pooled beneath his feet.

“Now figure out why he went off on his own,” Christian snarled, his attention

returning to the picture frame on the floor.

Chapter 12

Maddox

His Ellie

This had been a rollercoaster of a night for Maddox. He couldn't decide which emotion was outweighing the rest but currently it seemed to be shock .

Oliver had given him bits and pieces of this town. Of the depravity, the lawlessness. How the former mayor, Oliver's dad, was corrupt and it sent the town itself into a downward spiral.

He knew that the Castillos were washers, cleaning cash to then push out across state lines. He knew the Yorks were importers and exporters of different substances. What he didn't know was much about who the Landons were. Or their relations with Ellie.

She never spoke about her step-father, or her mother for that matter, and Maddox knew better than to push her on those topics.

"Her step-father? You left her with a known criminal. And what? Assigned a watch dog? How do the Landons play into this?" Maddox wasn't enthused with this new information.

Oliver didn't answer him, it was Emilio that chimed in. "Sex, they sell sex. Strip clubs owned by the Landons popped up, but they were a mask for a much darker agenda. It wasn't long before I had to step in. Isa, you haven't seen your step-father

much, have you? ”

Ellie was not back in Maddox’s arms where she belonged. “I’m tired. This is too much. I need to get away from it. Take a nap.”

“I understand. The bedroom from before is made up for you.” Maddox had previously noticed that Emilio’s voice was much softer when he spoke to Ellie than anyone else and that was solidified now. It wasn’t hard to tell that Emilio was a goner, that he was wrapped up in the web that was Ellie.

Maddox didn’t wait for Oliver, he readjusted his grip and tugged Ellie with him up off the couch. This time when he lifted her, it was bridal style. “You may not have married me, but I am going to be the one to carry you over the threshold of the bedroom.”

“Maddox,” Ellie grumbled, but there was no heat in her voice.

She was noticeably exhausted, dark shadows materializing under her bright eyes. A crease had formed between her eyebrows earlier this evening and it hadn’t smoothed. Maddox reached a free hand up to it.

“It’s okay. Everything is going to be okay. No matter what happens, you have us. All of us. Now lead the way Ellie.”

Ellie rolled on the bed to face him. They were in a room lined in bright colors, but with a blackout curtain in place. They had just made it into the bed after showering and changing into fresh clothes. Ellie was donning a sleep dress courtesy of Emilio, and Maddox was borrowing sweats. Now that they were finally stationary, he felt the weight of events settle on him.

“I love you, Ellie. I should have said it before everything happened, but it’s the truth.

And I'm not going anywhere. I hope you know that you're stuck with me. I promise to be the sane one as the other two make irrational decisions." The words almost felt misplaced, but he needed to speak his truth. It was his main regret when she went missing, that he hadn't told her.

And now she was married to a different man.

The thought sent vines of pain to wrap around his heart.

He didn't realize she was crying until that very moment. He reached out, tugging her against his chest.

"I love you, too," she hiccupped out.

The words solidified every moment that led up to this point. Oliver had been right, if all of this had come to light too soon, he doubted Ellie would still be here, in his arms. She would have run for the hills.

"Maddox, I can't fault you all. I understand why he kept so many secrets from me. I always knew certain things were off. I knew my step-father wasn't a good man. I knew there was more to this town than met the eye. But there's something I never told either of you." She was practically hyperventilating at this point and it took everything for Maddox to just allow her to vent. "My teacher, Sebastian York, he... he..."

Maddox heard the door to the bedroom open and close, but he was too far gone to care. "He what?" The room had turned a reddish shade as his anger filled him. York had hurt her? His Ellie? How? When? His mind was going a mile a minute, and he almost didn't hear her. And why in the ever-loving fuck was a York her teacher?

"He tried to rape her," Emilio's voice supplied as he sat on the foot of the bed. "On

the roof of the school over a decade ago. That's how she and I became closer. I was already watching her for Oliver's sake, to keep an eye on her step-father, but then I saw she was becoming entangled with a York. I know that one stayed off the radar, but even still, I didn't trust him."

"That's why you avoid rooftops." Oliver was leaning against the door, his arms folded across his chest .

"Yes," Ellie sniffled out. "And I need you to know, that was when I fell in love with Emilio, when I promised to marry him after 10 years. He was there for me; he kept me safe."

Maddox had a million things he wanted to argue on that, but he kept silent.

"Safe ," Oliver snorted sardonically. "Sure."

Oliver may have bonded with Emilio over Camila's death but they never became friends. If anything, they were enemies with a mutual tragedy that brought them together to retaliate, to commit murder.

After all, it was Oliver's dad that killed Camila.

"Sebastian's the one who took her from you two. But don't worry I made sure he was dead this time; he won't be rising from the grave again," Emilio confirmed, ignoring Oliver entirely.

Maddox breathed in and out a few more times, his mind spiraling in overdrive, so much had happened in such a short time. He readjusted his hold on Ellie, pulling her even closer into him.

She was his sole purpose for living, the reason he looked forward to every day.

Before, he was an empty shell that had watched a child die in his arms. Lost in a world that didn't react kindly to broken men.

But now? He was happier than he had ever remembered being. Ellie had breathed life into every moment since he met her.

He would accept every piece that came with her. Even if it meant another man. Even if it meant two.

His mind was made up, he would be by Ellie's side no matter what.

Chapter 13

Izzy

I was hot, too hot .

“They wouldn’t even let me claim a spot next to you after ten years apart.” Emilio’s voice cut through the darkness, but it took me a few more moments to gain my bearings.

Arms were wrapped around me on both sides, and I was in an unfamiliar space.

Before I could put much more thought into it, I felt the bed shift and then Emilio was maneuvering me up and off of it.

“You’re going to hurt your back,” I whispered hoarsely into the darkness.

“Shush with that.”

Fully extricated from the bed, Emilio took my hand and hauled me through the darkness until he opened a door.

Instead of back into the main part of the house, it was to an outside opulent patio. The muggy air hit me, a slap to the face.

“I don’t miss this Florida weather,” I commented looking around.

The sun was rising and I guessed I had managed at least a few hours of sleep. This mansion was on the outskirts of town and all I could see in every direction was woods.

Emilio moved in my periphery and I took him in. He was only wearing a pair of boxers and his barrel chest was on display, ripples of muscles, broad shoulders, thick bulky arms .

He wasn't the same teenager I had been with so many years ago.

He was sexier, cockier, bigger .

But underneath that, he was still the soft sweet man I had fallen in love with. He was just in a harder package. I wasn't sure how to feel about it all yet.

"Come here." Emilio sat down in an oversized chaise chair and patted his lap.

I hesitated, but only for a moment before taking a single step towards him. It was all he needed.

In a swift motion, he reached forward and tugged me onto his lap so I was forced to straddle him. His strong hands burrowing into my hip bones, igniting a flame in my belly and keeping me steady. My knees dug into the scratchy rattan of the chair below as I settled onto him.

"This is crazy, isn't it? And your sister..." I examined him, my eyes taking in his face. It had hardened; all of his soft boyish features were now worn with age and it made him even that much more handsome. "You never told me what happened to her."

He didn't respond. Instead, in an impressive move, he bucked me up and shifted me

so I was now lined up with his cock. I was bare underneath the Mumu I wore and I could feel his length straining against his boxers.

His lips pushed against mine.

They were fierce, unyielding, treacherous .

Addictive.

I had wrapped myself so far into a world of dangerous men that I wasn't sure what was up or down. I knew that everything I was doing was wrong. That this wasn't what others would accept in "polite" company.

But who fucking cared? I couldn't go back to my vanilla life. To the monotonous day-to-day. Not after all of this.

Consequences be damned .

It was time for me to live, to stop shaking in fear, always moving so safely.

Tedium had gotten me nowhere.

But here in this house with these three men?

I felt alive . As if I was not just going through the motions, but as if I was truly doing what I wanted to for the first time, ever .

I wasn't exactly sure how it would work. This had all been so fast, so incredibly jarring, but I was going to live in the here and now. Embrace every moment that I could.

I pressed against Emilio, further into the kiss. His tongue darted out as he claimed me, stamping himself into my skin.

One of his impressive hands found the nape of my neck, squeezing on just the edge of pain while the other made its way to my ass, underneath my Mumu. His hot hand against my bare skin, the rough pads of his fingers digging in, gripping me and tugging me even closer to him and further against his hardened cock.

I let out a moan, willing for the piece of cloth to disappear. Willing him to sink into me. I wanted to feel him again. Was our electric night just a one-off because the experience was new and exciting? Or was the way he had made me feel real?

Had I really stayed in love with him for the past 10 years?

After a few moments his hold on the back of my neck detached my lips from his, and I grumbled in protest.

“Listen Isa, I am going to fuck you. But first I need you to hear this.”

Self-consciousness took this moment to scrape its ugly teeth into me, and instead, I shifted my focus to a spot over his shoulder.

The trees in the forest were swaying in the wind as the sun’s rays slowly climbed to touch just the edges of their leaves. It made me acutely aware of how hot I must be, how it must be too much, and I moved as if to stand .

Emilio let loose a growl, a noise pulled from the depths of his body as he held on tight, not letting me budge a muscle away; it shook my attention to him. The vibrations from it went directly to my core and I unconsciously grinded my hips against his length that still pushed at me through a thin layer of cloth.

His caramel eyes were critical, striking. Analyzing me as if he could see my inner insecurities, my wants and needs. And maybe he could. He certainly had in the past.

He rolled up to meet me, his cock rubbing against me and I let out a soft moan. He was distracting me from the negativities that wormed their way into my mind.

“My sweet, Bella Isa. You always thought you didn’t deserve the world, always felt the weight of other’s attention and shortcomings. But not anymore.” His sharp jaw ticked in anger. “We were apart for too long, and I was forced to watch as the men you allowed into your life hurt you. I may be the villain in some stories, but in yours? I will be your hero. I will be someone you can rely on. It’s the world that isn’t enough for you. And I pledge to spend everyday fixing your world until it fits you exactly as you are. I love you Isa. Every single piece and part. Never fucking change, not for me or anyone else.”

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. Of how all of this was happening too fast, but then the realization that maybe this was exactly where I belonged. But how would this work, how could I possibly be with three men?

In spite of it all, there was one thing for certain, time may have left its ugly mark on my heart, but even so, Emilio still took up space inside of it.

I cared about him, wanted him, loved him .

I always had.

Emilio shifted underneath me and it took only a moment to realize why .

I hadn’t noticed how wet our interaction had made me, how needy I was for Emilio.

Not until his now free cock slid up and into me in one plunge, fully distracting me

from my thoughts.

“Fuck!” The word was a garbled mess.

“That’s right, take it, take all of it.” He bit his bottom lip as he used his firm hold on my neck to physically bounce me on his cock. Electricity streamed across my nerves as desire furled deep in my belly.

My hands moved on their own to hold onto his bulky shoulders enjoying the feel of his rough skin there as he pumped hard and fast into me from below. His eyes never left mine. The adoration is clear in their depth. It was edging just on the side of too much.

But Emilio’s intensity was another aspect of the man I hadn’t realized how much I missed. Another reason I should have known the man that Yara sent was him. He wrapped me up in every single moment, leaving me a needy and discombobulated mess in the best possible way.

I was a thousand tangled threads, and he was able to find exactly which ones needed to be tugged on.

“I”—thrust—“fucking”—thrust—“love”—thrust—“you!” Emilio growled the words out, not pausing his relentless assault. His hand on my ass squeezed tighter, just on the edge of pain. He readjusted his grip on my neck to the front and applied just a bit more pressure before his thumb came up to push between my lips.

Behind me was the unmistakable noise of a door opening and closing.

Emilio slowed his pace but didn’t stop.

“Just like that, let me watch as you fuck her. I want to see her stretched out.”

Maddox's gruff voice was still coated in sleep.

Embarrassment and shame filtered through the desire.

"He likes it, Isa, just enjoy the fucking ride. Big man, show me what you can do while I fuck her."

"Turn her around." Maddox's voice was closer now.

Before I could truly understand what he said, Emilio was moving his hands to my hips, withdrawing from me and lifting me up simultaneously.

I glared at him. "What the—"

My words were cut off as he turned me on his lap, my knee awkwardly moving across him until I was now facing Maddox and he used his grip on my hips to impale me in one thrust.

"Just like that." Maddox ate up the remaining space between us before ripping off my Mumu. "Fucking beautiful." He fell to his knees at my feet, taking me in. We were, for once, at eye level.

I didn't even need to push down the stupid self-consciousness that I expected to wash through me. Instead, I simply enjoyed the weight of his attention on my entirely naked body in the light. By now I should know these men accepted me. Wanted me, every single piece and part, but it was still new. My brain wasn't quite on the same page as my heart, but it was almost there.

"Ellie." Maddox's rough hand found my skin, cupping my breast. His other moved to his mouth, wetting two fingers before moving it to my clit. "Perfection."

Maddox rubbed the sensitive spot as Emilio continued to pound into me from below.

Emilio used my hips as handles, his strong fingers digging in with bruising force.

“She is.” Emilio’s voice was a rough baritone in my ear as he continued to drive into me .

The desire that had started as an electric pleasure was building, the two of them working me like an instrument. Each man with his own part. Together they were shoving me to the peak, faster and faster.

Maddox pinched my nipple, hard, garnering my attention. I opened my eyes that had fallen shut in bliss and looked deep into his. They were swirling with thousands of promises, of a hundred unspoken words, of a future together just like this.

“Now!” Emilio growled the word out as his pumps became erratic.

Maddox focused his attention to my clit, rubbing heady, delicious wet circles on it.

Emilio’s hands lifted me and impaled me.

Once .

Fuck.

Twice .

Fuck! Fuck!

And third times the—

Fuck! Fuck! “Fuck!” I screamed the word as I came.

Maddox pressed his firm unyielding lips to mine capturing the sound.

Emilio shifted behind me, moving my hair before peppering my neck with kisses.
“Such a good girl.”

“Mmmm,” I moaned into Maddox’s mouth before he pulled away.

Maddox’s hand came up to cup my face. “I love you, Ellie.” The words came out a fervent whisper, and I wasn’t sure if Maddox even meant to say them.

Before I could digest my feelings and what had just occurred, a throat clearing pulled my attention.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Boss man is mad,” I squeaked out, causing Maddox to chuckle.

Chapter 14

Izzy

The hot water from the shower was a necessary reprieve from an otherwise crazy day. Few days? I could barely keep track of time at this point. Oliver had not been entirely enthused to find me freshly fucked between Emilio and Maddox, but he had simply turned and left without any argument.

My heart beat anxiously inside my chest.

What if my worries came to fruition? What if by crossing the line I would lose the only three men I had ever felt such a connection to?

Emilio assured me he wasn't going anywhere, as did Maddox, but what about the inevitable jealousy? What about the fact that I was married to Emilio? Certainly, a rift would form and what about me?

My job? My life? Emilio had apparently followed me to New York, but his entire family lived here. I couldn't make him stay in New York forever and he even said that he made this place my home.

My apprehension was broken through by a vibrating noise. Shutting off the shower and toweling dry, I found my phone I had left on the counter.

Unknown caller .

I hesitated for just a moment before answering the call.

“Hello?” I asked with hesitation.

“Izzy.” Yara’s familiar voice was coated in relief. “I was so worried, nobody would tell me anything. Oliver said you were safe but then he wouldn’t give specifics. What’s going on?”

The background noise was off . Machines beeping, chaotic voices calling out. “Who is Kazi?”

Yara didn’t speak for a few minutes. “How do you know Kazi?” The relief was replaced with paranoia. Suspicion.

I had never heard Yara sound so critical before. “Yara, where are you?”

Yara heaved out a sigh. “I’m okay, but I’m at the hospital. There’s something I really need to tell you. It’s important. But I need to say it in person, okay?”

“Aren’t you back in California?”

“Not anymore, I’m here. Izzy–” A sob wracked through Yara. I had never heard her so heartbroken before, and I became incredibly concerned. “I’m so sorry, about everything.”

“Hey girl! Hey! It’s okay you have nothing to be sorry for. I love you, mamacita,” I half joked, trying to calm her down.

It had the opposite effect, and she began to sob uncontrollably. “Please...please don’t call me mamacita anymore. I’ll see you soon, I promise.”

On the other side of the phone I heard the distinct word DNA , before the line went silent.

“Yara? Yara!” Now my own concern was settling into place.

After a few nauseatingly worrisome moments, noise cut through her phone again. The machines beeping. “Izzy, I”—her voice broke—“I fucked up. Please believe me when I say I love you and nothing I do is to hurt you.”

My mind raced with the endless possibilities of what had happened. Why was she at the hospital? What was going on? But at the end of the day, it didn’t matter. I trusted Yara. “I love you Yara. No matter what it is, we can get through it together. And besides, I have a whole wild story to tell you as well.” And I meant every word, but I knew in my gut that even though nothing I was doing was normal, Yara would support me. Just as she always had.

“Thank you girl! I will call you soon, I promise.” That was the last she said to me before disconnecting the phone.

Chapter 15

Oliver

His Isobel

“ Y ou’re an idiot.” The voice cut through the darkness as Oliver stepped into the bedroom and watched his Isobel sleep for the umpteenth time.

It had been a week since he’d caught her between Emilio and Maddox.

Maddox he had accepted if only just barely, but Emilio?

The scoundrel was supposed to protect her when Oliver didn’t trust himself to anymore. Instead, he had stolen Isobel’s virginity.

It had only taken Oliver a few minutes to do the math, to figure out who it was. He knew someone had while he was away overseas, she had told him as much. But he thought it was a nobody classmate.

Not his supposed ally.

And to top it all off. Emilio didn’t even keep her safe, she had almost fallen victim to one of the York scum.

It was that and the blatant disrespect that had caused him to spiral into his own mind. The darkness that typically lived there overcrowding the light that Isobel shined into

it.

He was afraid he would hurt her, that he would say something he didn't mean. He needed time to wrap his mind around the fact that it wouldn't just be him and Maddox with his precious Isobel.

But Emilio would be joining the foray, too .

Maybe he should have taken her wings and locked her away years ago .

“Whatever you're thinking, no, just no. You have that sinister look on your face,” Maddox whispered in a hushed tone.

“How did you—” Oliver protested before stopping himself.

Maddox always knew, even in their days together in the military. It was one of the reasons Oliver trusted him. The reason he allowed Maddox around Isobel at all.

“But what about the asshole?”

Said asshole was off for some work purpose but he would be returning in the morning. Ready to disrupt Oliver's carefully laid plans again.

All Oliver had ever wanted was Isobel and while he could acknowledge that he wasn't enough for her, that didn't mean he wanted to share her with two other men.

“Emilio is good for her. He pushes her past her point of comfort. Makes her feel good about herself. And besides, I don't know if you've forgotten, but they're married.”

Oliver did everything in his power to control the surge of rage that rolled up his body, filling him. “They are not married in my eyes. Maybe by some stupid fucking piece

of paper, but she is not his.”

Maddox heaved a sigh, disentangling himself from Isobel’s sleeping form, placing a soft kiss on her forehead before exiting the bed. “You’re going to lose her. She has been on edge for a week. She already went through something traumatic and then a series of life-altering revelations. She hasn’t touched Emilio or me since you saw us. She’s scared, she hasn’t said as much, but I can tell. Ellie was just starting to come out of her shell, to feel good about herself, and then you iced yourself out from her. You two have been friends for over a decade. Get your shit together.”

Oliver clenched his fists and turned to leave .

“She loves you.” Maddox stepped into his space and placed a hand on his shoulder.

There was just enough light in the room to make out the intensity of Maddox’s stare. It was unnerving. “Yes, as a friend.”

Maddox let out a humorless snort. “You’re an idiot. Pull your head out of your ass before you miss out on the last remaining happiness in your life. What are you without her? Who are you?”

Oliver griped, “But that’s the point isn’t it? Emilio isn’t good for her, but he can keep her secure with his army of men. He was her first love for fuck’s sake. Her goddamn husband as you so aptly noted. And you? You’re safe, you don’t have any ties to the underbelly of this town. You’re who she runs to when she needs comfort. But what about me? What is my role in this happy little family ?”

Maddox dropped his hold before pulling his arm back and punching Oliver in the shoulder.

Oliver narrowed his eyes, his nostrils flared. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“There it is. Sometimes I think you forget the mask you wear. You’re what Ellie craves. To have her control taken. To be bossed around and told what to do. To challenge her. Are you going to ruin the only possibility of happiness in your life? Because I remember you on our tour together. You were a lost fucking puppy. Isobel this and Isobel that . You were goddamn annoying.” Maddox smirked, stepping around Oliver and quietly pulling the bedroom door open. “But you weren’t wrong. She is worth it. The obsession, the other men, all of it. I would kill for Ellie. Hurt anyone that hurts her. And that includes you.”

Oliver expected the man to throw him out, but instead, Maddox walked out of the bedroom.

“Make her feel good.” Maddox tossed over his shoulder, shutting the door behind him.

Oliver looked at his Isobel as she slept peacefully in the bed.

His beautiful butterfly. His darkest desire. His reason for life.

He stepped further into the room.

Chapter 16

Christian

Christian paced his office impatiently waiting to hear news. His friend had been residing in California for the last year, but he was remaining here for a bit longer in light of this emergency.

Christian knew that the treaty put in place after the mayor's death was a mistake, but they all needed to keep under the radar when he showed up dead. The cause of death may have been officially suicide, but the small town spoke.

A buzzer sounded on his freshly organized desk before his secretary's voice chimed through.

"Mr. Landon is here to see you."

Fucking finally.

He smashed the button. "Send him up."

Tugging the picture out of his back pocket, he stared at the image again.

His stupid fucking brother. His dead stupid fucking brother. This picture had been found in his effects. It was one of thousands. They all had one center of focus. One person circled. Two words scrawled out.

My Bel.

Christian recognized the girl, he hadn't been around her much, but when his friend got married to sell the image of taking up roots and being a family man, Christian had done his research. Just like he knew his friend's daughter, Hallie, was adopted, he was also aware of his friend's step-daughter, Isobel. Why had Sebastian been obsessed with Isobel? Why did he have thousands of photos of her? There was nothing particularly attractive about her. She was too much for his taste and her face was boring, plain .

"Christian." The falsely jovial voice cut through his thoughts, and he shoved the picture back into his pocket.

"Steve," Christian acknowledged his friend, stepping forward and taking his hand. Part of him always regretted allowing this leach into his town, but it was too late now.

"It's Stephen now." The man's soulless cerulean blue eyes glinted in the fluorescent lighting. His features were practically angelic; a chiseled jaw, perfectly sun-kissed skin, blonde hair with not a single piece out of place.

It was at odds with who Christian knew him to be. Evil incarnate. Christian knew his grimy past, it had come out years ago. How he was on the lamb for harming his first family. Stephen had killed his first wife and abused their daughter for years before she was found and taken away.

Stephen's inherent immorality was one of the main reasons Christian wanted him around.

"Of course, I forgot you had changed it again. Is it still Landon?" Christian wasn't unaccustomed to the man changing names, Stephen did it just as he changed clothes.

“Hah, no. I’ve decided to go back to my first name, my birth name if you will, as I will be reuniting with my first family soon. I’ll be going by Stephen Wick.”

Christian decided not to question the eccentric man. The photo was burning a hole in his pocket, and he weighed the pros and cons of bringing it up. “Your step-daughter,” he began.

Stephen’s lips curled up, a disgusting replication of a smile. “Ah yes, your brother’s obsession with her. ”

Christian slammed down the outrage that threatened to spill into his tone. He didn’t want to get on this man’s bad side. No matter how much he wanted him dead, Stephen was more useful alive. “Yes. Do you care what happens to her?”

“No. In fact, I have a wonderful idea.” This time the grin on Stephen’s face was real, but it was no less terrifying.

Christian’s lips tightened at the corners, resolving to once more work with the monster. Christian’s only remaining family—his brother—was dead. What more could he lose? “Do tell.”

Chapter 17

Izzy

Warmth spread along my arms and legs. I felt wet. Sensual.

Familiar.

This time in my sleep-addled state I knew exactly what this was. My brain wasn't fully awake yet, but my body was being brought to life by the hands that were massaging along it.

I didn't open my eyes or try to wake up, instead allowing the hands to explore me.

One moved to cup my cunt, large fingers pushing just at the edge of the entrance but not entering. The other stroked along my thighs, my hips, my sides, my breasts.

Both hands were being too careful, they weren't pressing into me or gripping me the way I wanted them to.

I rolled myself into the fingers that still teased at my cunt, willing them to thrust into me.

"You really like this, don't you?" the voice growled against my back, the vibrations shooting to my core in anticipation.

The person was wrapped around me from behind, their hard cock pressed into my ass,

but still they did not take things further.

They were teasing me.

After a soft chuckle, the long fingers finally plunged into me, and I moaned my appreciation .

Keeping my eyes firmly shut, I willed them to push me to my limits. To take what they wanted.

I had told Maddox that this was okay, I had given prior consent to any of the three men in my orbit to wake me up this way, and I wanted this. I needed this.

A necessary escape from the realities of my world. From Oliver shunning my existence.

“Are you even awake or is your body just mine to play with?” His thumb moved to rub my clit as two fingers hooked into me.

Explosive shockwaves surged along my sleep numbed nerves. My body reacted to what it needed, to what it wanted.

In the darkness, half-asleep, was where I was the most comfortable.

There are no insecurities here, there is only want. Need. Lust.

Chapter 18

Oliver

His Isobel

He thought perhaps the first time they had woken her up, it had been a one-off. Maybe she would wear off of the novelty, but no .

She was enjoying this. Enjoying him taking what he wanted from her as she slept soundly.

Did she know what this did to him?

To be allowed free reign of her body while she slept? To be permitted to touch her how he wished?

Intoxicating.

But that's what Isobel was. She was meant for him. Every single piece of her. Awake. Asleep.

He knew that he would join her little harem of men, but he had needed time to accept it.

To realize it was Emilio who had taken her innocence.

Married her.

When it could have been him. He had come so close years before.

But he had discerned to give her a choice. Had promised himself to let his butterfly keep her wings. But what if she was offering them to him? What if she ripped them off and thrust them into his hands?

His fingers pressed into her wet cunt, reveling in how even half-asleep her body was ready for him. Willing him to slide into her.

She was partially awake now. Before, in the silence, it had just been him with his thoughts and an unsettling urge.

He had wanted to be quiet , careful. He had wanted to skirt the lines of what she had consented to entirely. Wanted to take from her more than she was willing to give. Wanted to fuck her without her waking up until his seed was inside of her.

For her to come to with the dull ache between her legs and unassuming soreness.

For him to leak down her legs as she began to realize what he had done.

But then she roused against his fingers, and the voice in his head shouting at him to break her softened.

Her moans overpowered it.

He hadn't even stuffed his dick inside her and he was already coming undone.

The thought served to both anger and empower him.

This was her fault.

He moved his fingers further inside of her, hooking into a spot he knew she enjoyed.

A soft mewl left vibrated out of her, and she stirred against him, furrowing back into him even further. He had discarded her clothes before this even started and the soft skin of her back was a stark contrast to his chest as she rubbed against him.

That fucking Mumu .

She had nearly pavloved him, now every time he even saw a fucking sleep dress he couldn't help but to picture her in it. His dick immediately stood at attention.

“Maddox,” she murmured in her sleep.

Did she say his name to goad him? Surely she knew who he was. She should recognize him by his fingers alone .

He shifted his hold on her.

He had lost his very finite patience. He maneuvered, flipping her onto her knees in the bed, not concerned if she woke up or not.

“Wha—” She wasn't able to get the full word out.

He plunged his cock into her primed cunt. He had readied it for himself . Not for her. She didn't need to enjoy this.

But even as he thought the words, one of his hands found her clit, and the one soaked from her?

He carefully pressed against her rim of muscle. He had taken her virgin ass for his and he needed to remind her. That she was his. That everything about her was his .

Even if he was forced to make space for two other men.

“Oliver.” His name was smothered by the pillow her face was pressed into, but he heard it.

“That’s better.” Maybe he would make her come after all. He sped up his pace, beating into her with reckless abandon. “You”—he pinched her clit—“will call me by my fucking name when I fuck you. Do you understand?” He wasn’t sure when the monster had escaped his cage.

But here in this bedroom. With the moon cutting through the window as the only source of light. His beautiful Isobel filled with his cock, his fingers playing with her, she wasn’t being fucked by the man she called a friend. She was being imprinted by the shadows that coated his soul, and only once his darkness had chewed her and swallowed her down would she be his.

Her moans had turned to screams, and he listened for her safe word. Because even a monster knew not to break her trust, knew to adhere to her wishes.

If only just .

“Oliver! I knew it was—” The words cut off by an incomprehensible noise leaving her lips.

It was hedonistic . It was his signal that she was almost there. He considered removing himself entirely, to punish her, but he didn’t have the self-control for that.

Instead, he slowed his pace changing to deep thrusts. It took five before she

convulsed around his cock.

His own pleasure was just within his reach, static licked against his spine all the way to his fucking balls. And the pressure that had built against the dam? Her vice grip around him? Her broken voice as she cried out his name? It was his undoing and a moment later; he was filling her.

She tried to squirm off of him, but he held onto her, leaning over her back. “Oh sweet Isobel, I tried to let you free. Tried to keep you out of my web, but you’re stuck in it now. Are you scared?” His clean hand caressed her cheek from behind before moving to her neck. He gripped her there, pulling her up to him by it.

“No.” The word washed a sense of relief across his skin.

Anxiety that he hadn’t been aware existed dispersed into the room. Her one word unfurled years of doubts, of questioning whether she was ready for him—the true him—or not. “Good, now let’s get you cleaned up.”

Chapter 19

Izzy

This was a two-shower kind of day. Waking up with the soreness between my legs, my hair still damp, and stuffed between Maddox and Oliver had been mildly shocking.

But not nearly as surprising as the night had been. I knew it was Oliver by his voice, his touch, his hands.

Except.

My hands reached back, turning the water to a cool spray across my skin. It was helping to wake me up.

Yara's warnings came to mind, how Oliver had always been too close, too much. Too everything. How the way he acted wasn't normal.

Thinking back with a fresh set of eyes, I could finally see it.

Every coincidence, every happenstance, every time I felt eyes on the back of my head.

Oliver had already admitted as much, they all had. That they had been watching me, protecting me .

Is it bad that it makes me want them even more?

What did that say about me exactly?

I could joke that I really needed therapy, but I had a strong sense to realize that no amount of spewing my deepest pains to a stranger would help this.

I was obsessed with these men. Hyper-fixated.

I wanted their attention, it brought me to life, it sucked away every mean word a stranger had placed into my mind before .

Emilio's confidence—it built up my own.

Maddox's calm—it soothed my soul.

Oliver's control—it kept me in check.

They were re-writing my brain chemistry in a way that most certainly wasn't healthy, but I fucking needed it.

I wanted it. I wanted their attention.

The good, the bad, the stalkerish .

After all, if it weren't for their obsessive manner I would have fallen victim to Sebastian, not once but twice.

The name brought me out of my thoughts entirely.

Enough of that .

Shutting off the shower, I wrapped myself in a towel before going into the bedroom.

All three men were off on errands.

Emilio for his family .

Maddox for me.

Oliver for my company.

We had employees that had been calling Oliver incessantly, concerned by his sudden lack of appearance.

I was able to run most of what was needed from afar, but sooner or later, we would have to return home.

And then what?

My phone vibrated against the wooden nightstand just as I pulled my clothes on, I went to put back on my wedding band but paused mid reach.

“Yara?” I asked hesitantly. It was another unsaved number but not the same one from before. I wouldn’t normally answer it except I hadn’t heard from her in a week, and I was beginning to worry.

“No, it’s your mother. Or have you forgotten entirely about the woman that broke her body to give birth to you? ”

Mother.

Her voice was a siren in my ear, painful and loud. The last time we spoke was when

she was admonishing me of my role in Harry's unfaithfulness.

"Laura," I acknowledged said mother.

"Back on that I see. I really wish you would make more of an effort after all the time I spent on you." She heaved a sigh as if this entire conversation was a tedious box she needed to check off.

She wasn't alone in that feeling.

"Well, I am calling with bad news." Her tone turned oddly passionate. "Your step-father and I are getting a divorce, and I need to see you today to discuss some matters in person."

Red flags and loud sirens started going off in my mind. My step-father. One of the "families" in this town. Had my mother known that she slept next to a killer, a human trafficker? It hadn't been hard to read between the lines when Emilio explained it.

"He left a year ago on business, and I was happy to just keep it casual, you know how it is, right? The house was a bit lonely, but I had my girlfriends at least. Now, here he is, back in town and demanding I leave. Threatening me. Telling me I need to vacate. The scandal. "

At this point I really couldn't discern what she was upset about, nor did I particularly care.

"Look, Laura, I need to go." I practiced my inner bitch using as much firmness behind my words as I could muster.

"Isobella Wright."

I stiffened as my mother called me by the name I hadn't gone by in over a decade. When I met Yara and I found out her last name had also been changed from what she was born with, I thought maybe it was normal to just change your name when you moved .

By the time I realized that wasn't the case, it was too late. I was buried so deep into my new life that I didn't want to look back.

"When you find a good man, don't let money get in the way. Maybe one day he'll do better," my mother sobbed the words out.

It was the first time I had heard her cry for as long as I could remember, but what she was saying didn't make any sense.

At this point the conversation had turned my emotions into a washing machine and everything she said was smashing the cycle button.

"What are you talking about?"

"Your father, James."

I sank back onto the bed; she hadn't spoken his name since she told me he died. Since we crossed state lines. Since she changed my name and made me promise to never talk about him. Never look for his family.

"What about him?"

"There's more to his death than I told you, but I need to see you in person. Show you the truth, or you won't believe me."

It was the only subject I would willingly meet my mother for. I rubbed my chest as

the grief hammered its way into my heart.

I had never truly processed my father's death, she hadn't allowed nor helped me to.

Maybe this could be my goodbye.

To my mother and my father.

Because after this? My mother deserved no space in my life.

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Chapter 20

Maddox

His Ellie

M addox leaned against a concrete wall in what was most decidedly a dungeon. He didn't particularly enjoy this part of Emilio, but he could acknowledge the necessity.

Yara was missing, and they needed to follow any leads they could. So far there had only been one they could track down and she was ten feet from Maddox, hanging from a hook.

ELLIE: I'M MEETING MY MOTHER, SHE SAYS SHE HAS INFORMATION ON MY DAD. I'M TELLING ONLY YOU, I DON'T TRUST THE OTHERS TO NOT HUNT ME DOWN.

The text pinged through and Maddox did his best to keep his emotions off of his face as he pushed off the wall and directed to Emilio. He tried to call her but it went straight to voicemail.

Fuck!

Maddox was too far from her, he shouldn't have joined Emilio down here under the church. He should have stayed behind with his Ellie.

"I'll be back," he grumbled out.

Emilio stepped back from the woman that was dangling upside down from the ceiling, the one he had been interrogating for the last hour. The knife he held dripped blood slowly onto the floor as he turned to Maddox. “Where are you going?”

Maddox weighed his options. He didn’t want to break Ellie’s trust, but she didn’t know the circumstances of what was going on. He hesitated for a moment too long.

Emilio moved swiftly, deftly maneuvering the knife to Maddox’s throat. “If it has to do with our Isa, I suggest you speak. Or would you prefer I take the information from you?”

In this moment, Maddox could clearly see how Emilio had become the leader at such a young age. Emilio was naturally intimidating, his harsh voice eerie and off-putting.

Maddox’s phone remained in his hand as he put it in the air in a mock of surrender.

Emilio’s eyes landed on it. “Ah, I see.” He didn’t turn or loosen his grip on the knife.

Maddox could feel the blade dig into his neck, but he didn’t flinch. He held Emilio’s eyes, willing him to read his mind.

“Logan, get his phone!” Emilio barked the orders.

One of his men lurched out of the shadows to take it from Maddox before handing it to Emilio.

It took less than a minute for Emilio to find the message; it was clearly written across his face when he did.

“Her fucking mother?” Emilio snarled out at the captive. “Did you know about this? Know what he had planned?”

“You can fucking die! All of you!” The woman’s screeching voice was only a bit wobbly.

Maddox stepped back from the knife before Emilio hurt him in a psychotic rage. He trusted Emilio... mostly .

“I know. I didn’t expect her either,” Maddox muttered, lifting a hand to rub his temple.

He was beginning to suspect their lead was just a means to get him away from his Ellie.

It had worked.

“I’ll call Oliver so you can keep her trust. Who knows when she’ll do something like this again.” Emilio flung Maddox’s phone back at him.

“She’s going to be dead before you get there! I told him to use her mother. I hope she dies, she’s a fat cow. It’s not like you can kill me! My father wouldn’t allow it, now let me go!” Those were the last words Hallie spoke before Emilio whipped around and threw the knife at her.

It landed in her throat, and with her hands tied together, she didn’t have much she could do as she began to bleed around it.

“You weren’t going to tell us where Yara was, were you? And now you have sent for my Isa? You want her dead? I knew you were evil, I knew you helped your adoptive father lure women into his clutches, but I thought you were a victim. It doesn’t seem that you were, does it?”

Hallie spluttered, but Maddox couldn’t make out what she was saying. He would

have almost felt bad for the girl if he didn't know the lengths she had gone to for her adoptive father .

Emilio had explained the girl's role in her father's industry. How she had made "friends" in New York to bring them back home to Florida, only for them to go missing.

Maddox watched in silence as Emilio stepped to Hallie, retrieving his knife before plunging it into her heart.

Maddox hoped Ellie wouldn't be hurt by Hallie's death, that she would understand .

And it was in this moment that Maddox realized exactly how grateful he was that Emilio was on their side. Because when said man turned around? His eyes were lit up in amusement.

Maddox shuddered, he might have killed more than his share of men, but not once had he ever enjoyed it.

"Let's go, I can't believe they're using her fucking mother, or that it worked. They're going to take her, just like they did Yara," Emilio raged as he retrieved his phone from his pocket, calling Oliver as he climbed up the dungeon's solid steps.

A few days prior, Emilio had heard of Yara's disappearance through his men. Emilio had apprised Maddox and Oliver but they all knew better than to tell Ellie.

At least not until they could find Yara.

Maddox felt guilty in hiding it from Ellie, but he also knew she would just panic.

Except maybe they should have. Maybe then she would have been more careful.

More diligent.

Regret pierced his heart.

Maddox spared the dead woman one last look, her corpse swaying in the air before following Emilio.

Surely his Ellie would be safe. She was technically Landon's family after all.

They wouldn't hurt her.

Would they?

But then again Hallie had been a more integral part of his family, and she had been left a sitting duck for them to take. In fact, it really seemed like she was used as bait...

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Chapter 21

Izzy

My head felt fuzzy with a dull ache as I tried to piece together where I was this time.

I am tired of waking up in an undisclosed location, bound and blinded.

I tried to find humor in this situation, but how fucked up was it that I snuck out of Emilio's house to meet my mother and the next thing I knew, I was getting thrown into a van and my world went dark. That this had happened so shortly after Sebastian took me...

I didn't believe they were coincidences. But why would my mother lure me here? Had she lost her mind? Was she that bad of a person to kidnap her own child? And to what gain?

What in the ever-loving fuck is going on?

While I was most assuredly blindfolded and tied to a chair, my mouth was surprisingly uncovered. "Hello?" I called out softly.

"Izzy?"

That was not the voice I expected to hear. Confusion hit me in the temple.

"Yara?"

“Fuck, why did he take you too? Why are you here?” Yara’s voice was coated in a deep unsettling sadness. Hopelessness.

“Who? Who took us?”

A door opened and shut to my left, a waft of cold air slapping against my skin.

“Ladies, now that I have you both. It’s time for the reunion to begin!”

My blindfold was ripped off and I was suddenly face-to-face with a man.

A man I recognized.

“Him,” Yara snarled from next to me.

I turned my attention to her. She was on the ground, her arms and legs chained to the wall. Her typically blonde hair was cut nearly all the way off in haphazard chops. And the bruises. Her face, her arms, her legs.

I wanted to scream, to cry, to run to her. My vision shaded red as anger pulsed through me, heating my blood and causing my heart to patter aggressively against my ribs.

What had they done to my best friend?

How dare they?

I was so caught up in my anger and indignation that I almost missed her explanation.

“My dad is back.”

I whipped back to the man before me. What does my step-father have to do with her dad?

Confusion dug its way against my temples, the headache ramping up a notch as I tried to make sense of it all.

"Steve?"

"How do you know my dad, Stephen?"

It didn't make sense. How was this possible? This couldn't be true.

I wanted to deny it all, but the truth was literally staring me directly in the eyes.

It had been a while since I had seen Steve, but there was no mistaking it. He was Steve Landon, my step-father.

Chapter 22

Izzy

“ H ow?” Shock was the predominant feeling that I found as my brain muddled, followed shortly by disbelief.

“How indeed?” the man hummed, stepping back to survey me. He brought a finger to his lips.

He looked like a typical late 40s working class man. There was nothing about him that screamed violent . Except Yara had said it was her dad and I had met her parents. Her adoptive parents that is. But this man? Now that I knew they were related, I could fucking see it. In their eyes, the shape of his face. I hadn’t noticed before, because the similarities were subtle, but they were there.

But the tone that Yara had?

It was terror that this man induced. Her father .

It made my protective instincts latch on two-fold. This wasn’t a good man; I had learned that much from Oliver.

What had he done to my best friend?

“I needed a family to settle in this town. To go unnoticed.”

He swooped his hand towards me, and I wanted to flinch back, but I couldn't, I was trapped in this chair. I swallowed down my terror as it threatened to choke me.

“Why did I want to settle here? To keep an eye on my dear old daughter of course. Make sure she didn't forget my trainings, my teachings. She is my flesh and blood; therefore I have a duty to watch over her.”

My thoughts were racing a mile a minute. My emotions were not keeping up as this horror played out before me.

Yara had never met my step-dad. She never came over to my house as he didn't permit guests. He hadn't really been around that much to begin with. I had probably seen him a grand total of 10 times throughout his and my mom's marriage. But I chalked that up to his job.

Except I had never really known his job, never cared to.

“But Hallie? Is she Yara's—” I don't know why that's where I landed, but I wanted to grasp onto something that made sense.

“No, that bitch is a falsified adoption. I needed a good cover, easier to lure a wife in with a daughter of my own. Though I don't think your mother would have cared either way.” He pitched forward his finger, pinching my chin painfully. “I told her to teach you better. To whip you into shape. But you always were a cow. A disgrace. I was almost at the point of discarding you, but then you left town, saving me the time.” He jerked back suddenly, slapping me across the face.

My cheek stung and the impact pushed my skin into my teeth. Copper filled my mouth, but I stared at him unblinkingly.

Hallie. Adopted?

My own mother... After all the vitriol she had spit my way over the years. It wasn't even that surprising to hear she had married a literal monster.

Except if they both hated me so much, why was I even here? What could they possibly want from me?

My mind was a fuzzy mess.

I wanted to scream, to rage, and spew every curse I had ever known, but it wasn't only my life at stake. Yara was here too. I had to think of her. If we could just hold on a bit longer...

Emilio, Maddox, and Oliver would be here soon. I had no doubt about that. I just needed to keep my cool .

Because Yara? She was scared.

She had been there for me for so many years. Did we keep secrets from each other? Yes. But I trusted her with my life and in this moment I would be strong enough for the both of us.

Even if every nerve in my body was willing me to scream, to melt into a puddle of anxiety.

I wouldn't. I couldn't.

I needed to be strong for the both of us.

"But even a cow can be a whore can't they? Sebastian York took a fancy to you, didn't he? And then he got killed. But no matter. Today we can all exact the revenge we deserve."

My step-father, correction—Yara’s dad, correction—Steve, correction—

Fuck, the stranger, Stephen , stepped back from me. During his entire spiel he had never raised his voice, it had been an eerie monotone. And even now, he wasn’t frowning, instead he had the remnants of a smile in place.

It was disconcerting, but I pushed it along with my uneasiness to the bottom of my pile of concerns.

“Bring him in.” Stephen didn’t turn, his eyes watching my face intently. “It’s time for your reunion.”

Chapter 23

Emilio

His Isa

“S top pacing,” Maddox grumbled out to Oliver.

Emilio looked up from his computer as he flipped through the security cameras of the town. He had a team of men scouring for sight of Isa too, but he didn’t trust others to find her.

He would recognize her even if her face was covered, even if only parts of her were visible.

Emilio reached into his pocket, clenching the ring in it.

The tracker in her wedding band was working, except she had taken it off.

He would need to fix that feature soon. The ability to remove it made it practically useless in his mind. Just as ineffective as Maddox and Oliver tracking her phone. The device had been found only a bit further on their search, on the street in front of their house.

“I need to tell you both something, I was giving Yara time to do so, but then she was taken.” Emilio didn’t look up from the screen as the two men squabbled amongst each other. While they were seemingly useless at this moment, he knew when the

time came, they would risk their lives for their girl.

Because, after all, she was all of theirs. They would all do anything for Isa.

She was more important to each of them than anything else. It was the only reason this “relationship” was going to work. It was why Emilio allowed them in her orbit.

Sometimes, like now, he would need help to keep her safe, and he couldn’t trust just anyone to the task.

“What?” Oliver seethed the word, stomping to just on the other side of the computer screens.

Grima .

Emilio ignored him, hoping one day to grow accustomed to Oliver’s grating voice. Or perhaps it was the trauma. That the first time he had truly heard Oliver’s voice was after those men had killed his sister.

He would not let the same fate befall his Isa. He would not fail her.

Smothering the anguish that squeezed his lungs, he refocused on the task at hand, clicking to shift a specific camera for another angle at the street. He had just seen a plate-less van drive by in the image. It was approximately two hours ago, so the lead might be cold, but it was a start nonetheless.

“As I told you, I sent one of my men to watch over Yara, and I also secured my spot as head of her security in order to have access to her database.”

“We know,” Maddox confirmed in his calming voice.

Emilio hadn't quite gotten a read on Maddox, but he had witnessed his devotion to Isa. How comfortable he had made her when she was in distress. How he had resolved the issue with the idiotic Oliver. And that was what was important. Keeping Isa happy.

"Recently I sent another to help combat a stalker that had set his sights on her. In the meantime, she met a man through her dating site. At first, I didn't think too much of it, but then I realized there was an odd familiarity to the man. And then I discovered what my men, what Kazi and Mateo, were hiding from me." His men thought he wouldn't be happy with Yara's choice in a lover, they were afraid Emilio might lash out, might hurt their girl.

They were wrong.

In fact, he was very pleased with who they had found in California.

Emilio clicked through the images, finally finding what he was looking for.

A man being shoved into the building. His eyes staring directly at the camera.

Now that he knew the connections to everyone, it was easier to find a trail.

The captive's familiar sage green eyes; his Bella Isa's eyes. They didn't even need to be on her face for Emilio to recognize them.

"Spit it out."

Emilio read a message from Logan before sending one off to Kazi and Mateo.

LOGAN: FOUND YARA'S ORIGINAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE AS REQUESTED
- FATHER LISTED AS STEPHEN WICK - ASSUMED DEAD - HERE IS PHOTO

Just as Emilio had suspected. The photo Logan sent was unmistakably that of Steve Landon. They were one in the same.

It was all coming together now.

Proof.

Emilio finally gave his attention to the men, standing up from the desk and walking around it.

Emilio wasn't exactly sure how to say it. "In California, Yara became entangled with a man. His name is James, and he's Isa's biological dad."

He didn't pause for a reaction, securing his gun and handing one to each of the men .

Oliver's mouth was open in shock as he took the weapon, but Maddox's brow was furrowed as if it made sense to him. He stepped around the men. There was no time to spare.

"And Isa's step-dad? Steve Landon?" Emilio cast over his shoulder, divulging the news his second in command, Logan, had just informed him of. "That would be Yara's bio father."

He didn't want to think what that meant for his Isa, how she wouldn't be his target, but how she could easily be his collateral.

Just as he didn't want to think about how Christian York was angry, alone, and on a rampage for his revenge .

Chapter 24

Izzy

My step-father—no, his name was Stephen. He turned to the side, allowing me an unobstructed view of what was behind him.

Of the newest prisoner to join our foray.

“Dad?” my voice broke.

I can’t be strong. This isn’t happening. This can’t be real.

He can’t—

How is—

But that means—

I grieved for my dad for more than half my life. He can’t be alive. I didn’t even look for him. I didn’t even try to find him. I just trusted my mother. A fool I was, a fucking idiot.

My ears pounded painfully as regret sliced through my brain attempting to break me apart.

I couldn’t let it.

Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!

“Isobella?” James, my dad , broke through the chaotic noise of my mind unraveling. He attempted to escape his restraints, but the two men holding him overpowered his attempts. My dad’s voice was a memory that pulsed to the front of my mind.

A hundred times he said my name in that exact way after I had hurt myself. When he came home from work and found me crying. I never told him how mom was when he was gone. I didn’t want to worry him.

And then he died.

That hadn’t been true?

My mother had lied to me? About my dad dying? What kind of sick, fucked up—

My mind unraveled as every excuse I told myself about my mother fell apart. She didn’t love me, she didn’t do anything for my sake. She was evil , selfish , a raging fucking cunt.

She had taken me from my dad. From the man that had raised me. Had loved me. Had taught me to be strong.

My vision blurred as tears fell on their own accord.

I didn’t want to cry here, I didn’t want to show weakness.

I wanted to be strong.

But seeing my dad in this situation after years apart was my undoing.

“Finally, together at last. Are those tears of joy? I can’t believe your sweet mother isn’t here for the reunion.” Stephen snapped his fingers and rattling echoed around the room. “When she drunkenly told me what she had done? I grew curious. How could I use this secret? Because that’s what it was—a dangerous and powerful secret. I think I did the best I could with it. But imagine my surprise when I sent James to lure Yara back to me and instead? He falls for her. He fucks her. He—”

“Stop it!” Yara, who had been uncharacteristically silent, broke, interrupting her father’s speech.

Through it all, I stared at my own father, at James. At my long-lost dad. As the confusion marked his face. A mix of a furrowed brow and his lips pressed into a harsh line.

He had aged, but he was still unmistakable. His mannerisms. His voice. His eyes.

They were a mirror to my own.

Stephen’s words eventually processed .

My dad and Yara?

I broke my stare down and diverted my attention towards Yara. The wall behind her was opened up. Before, it was panels, but now, it was a glass pane that I could see through.

My mother stood on the other side.

I couldn’t hear her, but I recognized her expression. She wasn’t scared, she was livid. Her temple pulsating with rage, her eyebrows raised to her hairline, as she began to wave her hands above her.

It was clear she couldn't see us, though, as she kept turning her head. She didn't focus in any direction as she continued her tantrum.

I flinched back, years of being on the receiving end of her anger had left a wound. Another reason I kept my distance.

Was it weird that I was grateful for the wall's separation?

Except... What was this? What was Stephen's angle?

I did my best to stamp down the shock of the series of events that had played out, I would process this. When I wasn't being held captive. When all was said and done.

Shifting back, I refocused on Stephen. Examining him, I tried to garner any information I could.

"Well, this hasn't been quite as amusing as I wanted it to be. Maybe it's time to spice up the party. Isobella. Who do you love better? Your mom or your dad? We always have a favorite don't we?"

Even now, knowing that the man speaking was a tangibly bad man.

I couldn't tell.

Stephen was a blank wall. An empty palate. A Skinwalker.

I didn't want to answer his question, but my eyes flickered to my dad. To the man who raised me into my early teenage years. To the man I had missed more than I realized.

To the man who I had an endless list of questions for .

“That’s what I thought. I don’t blame you, your mother is rather difficult.”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I knew exactly what gun shots sounded like.

I braced, willing myself to turn towards the noise. It came from behind me, from Yara’s direction.

My dad snapped at me. “Isobella, do not look. You don’t need to see it.”

I instinctively listened to him, but I needed to make sure my best friend was okay. “Yara?”

“I’m fine,” she murmured. I could barely make out the “for now.”

My step-father huffed, gesticulating into the air, and a moment later, the same rattling from earlier filled the space. Two of his men stepped forward, one of the beefy goons kept a tight hold of my shoulders while the other untied me.

“Since you’re a coward, I’ll just rip the bandage off. Your mom’s dead, she was just shot because you chose your dad over her. Now time to say goodbye to your dad and Yara. This will be the last time you see them both alive.” There wasn’t any inflection in Stephen’s tone. He could have been discussing the weather for how he sounded.

I didn’t acknowledge his words. I didn’t process them. I needed to emotionally detach from anything else he said.

My mother wasn’t dead.

I swallowed down the bile that came up my throat.

My dad wasn't alive.

I breathed in the musty air.

My best friend wasn't in grave danger.

I squeezed my eyes shut, scrunching my nose.

I whipped my head back and forth as I shook it, emptying my mind of anything and everything I could .

I repeated the lies in my mind, attempting to believe them.

"I'm sorry!" Yara screamed. "I'm so sorry Izzy. I love you!"

Her terror, her agony, her sadness. It broke through my mantra. It ate me alive. I wanted nothing more than to save her at this moment.

But I was helpless. Just like I had been with Sebastian.

I knew Maddox, Oliver, and Emilio would come for me. But would it be too late?

My dad grunted in pain and I whipped my eyes open.

James fought against his captors, but just like before, it was fruitless. "I will see you again, we both will. I love you, I never stopped looking for you."

"I love you too." I spoke the words to both of them, turning to get one final look at my best friend.

"Oh shut the fuck up!" Stephen lost his cool and the last I felt was the hard metal of a

gun hitting me against the back of my head— that's going to leave a mark —before the world went dark again.

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Chapter 25

Izzy

A gony. I am in pain. Everything hurts.

It was in this moment, on the cusp of being awake and still asleep, I realized how much I enjoyed waking up on fingers as opposed to...

Whatever the fuck this was.

That's it Izzy, cope through your trauma with humor. Laugh so you can't cry.

Because all I wanted was to break down. My head was throbbing a beat to my heart, my mouth tasted like tuna salad that had been left on the counter for a week, and my arms were numb , tingling with phantom pain.

They were tied down again. Except this time, it was just my wrists tied, extending on each side of me, and instead of on a chair, the surface beneath me was soft.

A bed.

Fuck . Fuck . Fuck .

The mattress shifted before a hot weight pressed down onto my chest, constricting my air.

It was time, I couldn't delay this reality any longer.

I opened my eyes.

And I screamed.

Sebastian? How?

“Hear that men? She's scared at just the sight of me. Or perhaps it's because you think you're seeing a ghost? ”

Black treacherous eyes, hair just as dark but touched in grey that fell in waves into his face as he swooped down, his mouth centimeters from mine. He paused before touching me, his lips tugged up into a sinister smile before leaning back and headbutting me with all his might.

The pressure was a thousand explosions of fireworks ricocheting around my skull. Lights danced throughout my vision. I felt the heavy tendrils of subconsciousness pull me back into its depths, but I couldn't allow it.

I didn't want to wake up to these men fucking me or doing whatever the fuck they would do. Or what if I didn't wake up at all? What if I just died?

Shutting down that line of thought, I tugged at my restraints again. My right wrist didn't budge, but my left one?

Moving my fingers around, I felt a frayed part of the rope.

Hope infiltrated my panic.

I could do this.

I would do this.

“I’m not a ghost. Just the brother of a man that died because of you.”

Of course it fucking was. Sebastian is dead. I watched his head obliterated in front of me.

I still haven’t even had the time to process that yet.

“So how about this weather?” The question escaped me raspily before I could take it back. The line my father had instilled into me. It was a coping mechanism. I had used it countless times prior in anxiety, and now here I was spewing it at my would-be killer.

I had one moment of satisfaction where absolute confusion flickered across his face before it settled back. His lips quirked at the corners in a smug grin.

He bowed down, whispering into my ear, “The forecast doesn’t look good.” His disgustingly hot breath was slimy as it fanned me. “At least not for you. ”

I wanted to lose my cool, to dissolve into a useless puddle, to scream and cry, but that wouldn’t help.

Yara needs me , my dad needs me . My men. They will kill each other without me . I need to be okay for them. For my job. I'm going to kill this mother fucking asshole, just like I should have killed his brother.

It wasn’t my time to go, I had just found everything I needed to truly be happy. And I was determined to be fucking happy . I fucking deserved it.

I would make it out of this alive.

The smell of cigarettes permeated my nostrils and I surveyed the room as best I could. What I needed to do was come up with a plan. Because it was time for me to save myself.

Emilio had taken care of Sebastian for me, but now it was my turn. Maybe this was the universe's fucked up way of giving me a do-over. Of letting me exact my own revenge. I would be strong, I would escape this York brother on my own.

If only to prove I could.

Chapter 26

Christian

Why couldn't Sebastian stalk a less connected woman?

The step-daughter of a Landon with ties to the Castillos and the McKells.

Christian stared down at the woman. She was... weird .

She wasn't crying, or asking for help, or screaming.

She was fucking humming and it was annoying the shit out of him.

"You can leave now; I will call you back if needed," he directed the three men in the room with them. He could manage one girl by himself.

What was she going to do? Kill him with her off-key humming?

He waited for them to leave before refocusing his attention on the woman below. He still laid atop her, his weight compressing down onto her body.

"You are the reason my brother died," he reminded her, grabbing her by the throat and pressing her further into the bed.

He pushed his lips to her. They were soft, but otherwise, not noteworthy.

“I don’t see the fucking fascination. A plain fucking woman. How did you attract my brother? He doesn’t typically go for women like you.”

“You mean women my age?” she coughed out, her throat moving against his hand.

He felt oddly calmed by the feeling of her skin on his palm. His grip on her, the complete control he had over her. He appraised her, trying to see her from a different angle, but he couldn’t. There was nothing special about her ... Except there was definitely something disturbing about this woman. He just couldn’t pin-point what it was exactly.

“You did know my brother.”

He relaxed his grip on her neck, allowing her to gulp in a few breaths of air. He leaned back, his knees digging into the mattress on each side of her hips.

He hadn’t expected to exact his vengeance so soon, but she wasn’t the revenge. She was a tool to it. Christian had learned of the depth of her ties to the Castillos, of who had really shot and killed his brother.

It was none other than Emilio himself.

“Answer my question.”

He watched her face, her cheeks were pink from her coughing, her lips puffed and swollen, but still she didn’t appear scared . And her eyes? They pierced into his, striking and clear . As if they could see through him. He didn’t fucking like them. He reached for a knife on the table next to them, moving the blade to her neck. He needed her to beg, to cry, to plead for her life.

But she just watched him with her unnerving eyes.

This wasn't fun like he had thought it would be.

"He was my teacher in high school," she spoke slowly, still staring at him.

Christian's mind raced. In high school? From what he had gathered, she was nearing 30. That's how long his brother had known her? And if that was the case...

"Do you know what happened to him 10 years ago?" His memory pulled forth the night from over a decade ago when Sebastian had called, and Christian had raced to him .

Found his brother shot and covered in blood on the school's roof. But his brother had never told him why, and then one day several years later, Sebastian up and left town.

Christian already knew at that point about his brother's proclivities. Had already started to clean up his messes. Tied up all the loose ends so that their image wasn't ruined. It was hard to make connections to prominent businessmen with documented transgressions.

They had to stay on the up and up for their empire to run smoothly.

"He tried to rape me, so I shot him. I moved away but then he followed me. None of this was my fault. You clearly knew who your brother was. It was self-defense," she stated the words matter-of-factly.

He thought he knew exactly who his brother was, but this woman was an outlier. Too old for his interests, and yet, Sebastian had been obsessed with her.

Sebastian, what were you thinking? You threw your entire life away for this woman?

Christian's mind was made up. While he could appreciate the woman's tenacity, she

wouldn't be allowed to live. He needed to wrap up the remaining unfinished business that his brother had left behind. Sebastian's one last living victim. Because if anyone found out his brother's offenses?

Well, Christian couldn't have that happening.

Chapter 27

Izzy

I could see the moment Christian decided to kill me. It was almost imperceptible, but I was looking for it.

It was the exact look Sebastian had when he decided to rape me the first time.

There was no denying their relation.

Except I had a plan, I wasn't sure if it would work, but while I hummed away and Christian interrogated me, I had managed to loosen the ropes on one of my wrists.

I had found where the smoky smell was coming from.

There was a crystal ashtray on the nightstand.

“—so you see, it's just a means to an end. No hard feelings right?” Christian's words cut through.

He shifted.

It was time.

I bucked up from below doing my best to displace his weight off of me. The knife in his hand clattered to the ground, bouncing a few feet along the hardwood floor.

“You bitch!” He swung his hand, slapping me across the cheek. It was the same side as Stephen had hit me, and I grit my teeth against the added pain.

He rolled off the bed to grab the knife.

It was now or never.

I tugged the rope, one last yank with my fingers before I pulled on my wrist as hard as I could.

The relief was instant as it freed, sliding through the larger hole I had managed to make.

“What are you—” Christian yelled, standing up, knife in hand.

I ignored him. Ignored my racing heart, my sweaty palms, my anxiety.

I couldn’t see him as I reached out, latching onto the crystal ashtray with my now free hand. It was heavy. I blindly swung it back in his direction.

It made a satisfying crunch as it landed against his nose. I heard a clatter as the knife tumbled to the floor again.

My eyes were on him now. His nose a bloodied mess.

“You stupid fucking bitch!”

I had free rein except for my one wrist still secured to the bed frame. I wasn’t going to lay down and wait for him to kill me.

This was my chance.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins, pushing my terror to the very back of my mind.

He wasn't thinking as he launched himself back onto me.

I wrenched my free hand back and smacked the ashtray into him again. This time it landed on a soft spot on the side of his temple. I was aiming for where the gun had hit me earlier, but I couldn't quite reach the spot.

I just wanted to knock him out. To be able to get away from him while I waited for my men.

But he didn't stop; his hands found my throat and he began to squeeze. Pushing me into the mattress.

Black dots marked my vision.

It was harder now, there was less range, but I managed to hit him with the ashtray again .

This time, the move stunned him and I kicked up again. It served to loosen his grip around my neck.

He was still awake. Conscious.

I hit the ashtray against him again.

The noise was a disgusting squish as it dug into his head, but I didn't stop. Couldn't.

My body separated from my mind.

I closed my eyes and swung again.

I was that girl who was just told her father died.

And again.

Thwap !

I was that teenage girl who was bullied for being different . Fat.

And again.

Thwap !

I was that high-school girl lured to the roof by her teacher and nearly raped.

And again.

Thwap !

I was that same high-school girl in love with a man she could never be with.

And again.

Thwap !

I was that woman who was heartbroken after another break-up from another vanilla man.

And again.

Thwap !

I was that woman who was back on that same god forsaken roof with my predator.

And again .

Thwap !

I was myself just hours ago with a dead mom and a father back from the grave.

And again.

Thwap !

I kept hitting him. His brain matter was now gracing the crystal, but I paid it no mind. He wasn't moving, wasn't yelling profanities my way anymore.

I took out decades of buried rage. Of indignation. Of sadness. Of grief .

My arm was poised in the air to swing again when cold fingers wrapped around my wrist. I wrenched away and attempted to smack the crystal against the intruder, but another hand stopped me.

“It's okay. We're here.”

I was that lost girl again, Oliver's voice cutting through an episode. I opened my eyes, finding his soft blue; a comforting color.

He had saved me from my own mind all those years ago at that cemetery, just as he was doing so now.

The crystal fell from my crimson fingers.

“Ellie.”

My attention found Maddox behind him. He was a beacon of light piercing through my turmoil.

“It’s okay Ellie. You’re safe now.”

“Untie her,” Emilio snarled out, stepping into the bedroom just behind Maddox. He surveyed the area, his harsh features turning soft as he met my eyes. “You did a good job, Isa.”

My men were here. I was safe.

I went to turn my head and look down. To see exactly what I had done, but Oliver finished freeing my wrist and swept me into his arms before I could. He blocked my vision with his hand .

“Take her to the car,” Oliver ordered, maneuvering me into Maddox’s waiting embrace.

Maddox’s calm aura wrapped around me as he quickly left the room. He held me as if I was a newborn. My head rested on one arm as he cradled me.

I loved Oliver and Emilio, but it was with Maddox that I finally could relax. That I knew no matter what, he would keep calm and sane.

“Yara...my dad?” I whispered out hoarsely, watching his face carefully.

Maddox’s lips tightened. A crease forming between his eyebrows. “Your dad is safe.

Yara is”—his arms flexed, tugging me even closer into his frame—“I won’t lie to you. She is hurt badly. ”

We were walking down a hallway now, and I squirmed against him, wanting to escape, needing to go to her.

“Stay still. She’s in the hospital. We found her first. You were taken to a different location. That’s why we were so late.”

He looked down as he stepped over something.

I followed his attention. A body. It was face up, but I didn’t recognize who it was since half of their head was missing.

Maddox covered my eyes as Oliver had, stopping me from taking any more of the carnage in. It wasn’t the only body in this hallway.

I found that I didn’t even care. My mind focused solely on my friend.

“You need to take me to her!”

Yara had to be all right. I needed to see her. I needed tangible proof that she wasn’t going to die. That she would make it through this.

She had to.

“I will, but Ellie”—his voice broke—“please, Ellie. Please don’t leave us like that again. This world that Emilio is in isn’t safe. I want nothing more than to take you away from both of those men. Neither deserve you.”

Maddox finally pushed open a door at the end of the hallway of death, and I blinked

my eyes at the onslaught of light .

How much time has passed?

“ Maddox .” The word came out shaky, raspily. My throat was sore from being nearly strangled to death.

Maddox paused, staring down at me before placing his forehead to mine. His was much cooler than my own, and I welcomed it.

“Don’t be mistaken. I am never going anywhere. And I won’t take you from either of them. I know how much you care about them. How much you love them. And that’s okay. You are worth it. I love you. But I need you to be careful. Please .”

I reached my hands up to cup his face but paused.

They were covered in a sticky red, something reminiscent of silly putty. “I killed him.”

Maddox walked to a vehicle parked on the road. We were on the outskirts of town, the industrial district, and it was the only visible vehicle I could see.

He maneuvered open the door and slid into the backseat, his arms still wrapped around me. “He was going to die one way or another. You simply sped up the process.”

“I should feel bad. I should feel distraught.”

“You’re in shock.”

I shook my head laying it against his chest, listening to the steady beat there. “No,

Maddox...I think...I think I liked it.” As soon as I spoke the words, I knew them to be true.

Maddox placed his chin on the top of my head as the front doors of the vehicle opened.

“To the hospital,” Maddox grunted.

“No, we need to take her home,” Oliver argued, settling into the driver seat .

“She needs to get looked at anyways. Let her see Yara,” Emilio countered, turning in his seat to examine me. “Your neck is already starting to bruise, Isa, but you’re going to be okay. You did a good job.” He offered me a soft smile which I returned.

“Fine!” Oliver snarled out. A moment later, we were speeding down the road.

The entire time Emilio watched me with his critical intensity. “You’re okay with it, aren’t you?”

“With what?” I asked, shifting against Maddox.

“She is,” Maddox confirmed.

Emilio laughed, a deep husky noise that shot straight through me. “You were meant for us, my Bella Isa. Maybe it’s time you two told her about Harry while all the blood and gore is fresh?”

The car swerved before Oliver corrected it.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” Oliver advised him. He found my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Look Isobel, you have horrible taste in men.”

“Ourselves included,” Maddox chimed in, squeezing me to him.

I had zero idea where this was headed, but I was preoccupied by my concern for Yara. “Sure,” I agreed.

“Well, we hired help to eliminate any worrisome men,” Oliver stated matter-of-factly. His eyes narrowed in the mirror.

“Eliminate?” I broke from his stare and glanced at Emilio.

He was turned in his seat, watching me.

“Yes, my Bella Isa. They hired a man named Milo to ‘help’ them deal with any problems that arose. Did they know I was Milo? No, they didn’t.” Emilio laughed.

My brain was a sloshy mess of confusion .

“We unknowingly hired Emilio to assist with separating you from the men you dated. Sending a text from, let’s say, Hallie’s number to Harry,” Maddox murmured into my hair.

Ice sliced through my skin. “Why?”

“Why?” Oliver sneered from the front seat. “Because they didn’t deserve you if they were going to be that easily swayed. You deserved better. And haven’t you realized by now? We’re not the ‘good’ guys, Isobel.”

Why did that send jolts of neediness across my nerves? What was wrong with me?

“So, what happened to Harry? Or was that it?” I wasn’t even mad. But why were they telling me this all now?

Except, I was almost grateful they were. Layer it onto me now while I'm in shock and then I would process it all later.

And I guess in some way, they had done me a favor. If it was that easy for my boyfriends to be swayed...

"I killed him," Emilio shrugged as if he was discussing the weather. "Just killed Hallie too, but she had a role in your step-father's empire. She deserved it, I promise."

He reached a sturdy hand back to cup my cheek.

"That turned you on, didn't it? That I would kill a man for you? You were made for us weren't you?"

I didn't want to admit he was right, so I turned my face into Maddox's chest instead.

This is my life now. This is my life now. This is my life now.

Discussing murder as if it's the weather all while my best friend is in the hospital.

I needed to focus on Yara. On making sure she was okay.

Everything else could wait. I would process it all in my own time .

Emilio chuckled. "Thought so. Now we need to stop to change, but then let's get you to your friend."

Chapter 28

Maddox

His Ellie

It had taken two weeks. Two weeks to finally convince Ellie to come home and sleep in her own bed. That she didn't need to be at Yara's side. That each of them would take a post in her stead.

The first up, much to his chagrin, was Oliver.

Oliver had drawn the literal short straw, had Maddox made them all short with the knowledge Oliver would demand to draw first?

It was a possibility.

But Maddox was aware he wasn't going to be able to play fair in this world. Not with three men vying for Ellie's attention. He had accepted the other two men into her life, hell he found it hot as fuck seeing them with her.

In fact, he had watched through Emilio's camera feed as Oliver had his way with their sleeping girl. Maddox told himself it was to make sure Oliver didn't go too far, and maybe that was partially the truth. But when she had woken up? When Oliver had slammed into her?

Maddox had tugged his own dick out at that point, thrusting into his hand, until he

came.

Ellie tossed in her sleep bringing him back to the present. He wasn't going to wake her up, this was the first time she had slept in weeks. She needed it .

They were back in Emilio's house, in their home . While Maddox didn't want to admit it, he knew that they would be relocating to Florida. It made the most sense. Ellie's company was easily managed remotely, and they had a crew of employees in New York to do the grunt work necessary to welcome potential new clients.

But Emilio was needed here. He was still cleaning up the mess that Christian and Stephen had caused in their wake. Both men were dead, but they left behind legacies.

They had all but run the Landons from town. Unfortunately, the Yorks were a different matter. While they didn't have any blood relatives left in town, it had only taken a few days for one to arrive.

Simon York. Maddox hadn't met him, but from what he had heard, he seemed a much better man than his predecessor. Only time would tell.

A quick agreement and understanding was formed. Christian had acted on his own volition without his family's backing, so it wasn't hard to put a new treaty in place. Simon agreed and the town was back to its falsity of peace.

The three families, now down to two.

"Maddox," Ellie murmured sleepily, taking his full attention.

For a moment he thought she might still be asleep, but then he felt her small soft hands creeping their way across his skin.

Her fingers traced upwards until they found his scar. Where he had been shot.

“This is where the bullet hit her too. It’s the same, so she’s going to be okay. She’s going to survive it, just like you did,” Ellie repeated the line he had heard her say a dozen times before.

That was true, except Yara’s situation was a bit different.

“Maddox,” Ellie shot up suddenly before rolling over to face him. Even in the dark he found her eyes. “She’s pregnant. What if she doesn’t make it? What if her baby doesn’t? What if the baby is my sibling? But if her dad is my step-dad and her baby’s dad is my dad—does that mean the baby would be both my sibling and my niece or nephew?”

Maddox hadn’t been ready for all of that and simply reached out, tugging Ellie onto him. He cupped her face in his bulky hand. “She’s going to be okay. The baby is going to be okay. And when all is said and done, you will get all the answers you need and find out if the baby is your sibling or not. But for now? You need to rest, sweetheart. You’re vanishing before our eyes. We’re worried about you, your bruises are fading, but you haven’t talked to us. Told us what happened in that room.”

Ellie fell forward onto his chest, he almost expected her to doze off again, but she was watching him instead; observing him. It put him on guard.

What is going through that brilliant brain of hers?

“I need to feel you,” she murmured.

That had not been what he expected, but his dick agreed with her sentiment.

She was no longer the woman he had watched for so many years, the one that had

been beaten down by the world's judgments. Here in this room, Ellie was the confident, beautiful, self-assured woman that he always knew her to be.

He hoped that she would continue to see how perfect she was, would continue to grow as the years progressed.

She bent down, gripping his hardened dick through his boxers. Tonight, she had fallen asleep in one of his shirts and nothing else. He was hoping he could slowly do away with all of her sleep dresses and replace them with his clothes. They were practically the same after all, but he wasn't going to push the matter.

Yet .

Wet . Warm. Swelling pleasure .

He was so incredibly wrapped in his own mind that the sneaky woman was able to free his dick and swirl her hips onto him.

"Ellie," he loudly growled into the room, the sound reverberating off the walls.

"You know," she hummed, placing her hands on his shoulders and driving him firmly onto the bed.

She lifted before falling down on his length.

Electricity snapped at him all along his skin, to his dick, to his toes, and back up to his balls.

"I found out who else you used to call Ellie."

He stiffened.

“Oliver was mad you played that trick on him to stay at the hospital,” Ellie grumbled. “My nickname came from your dog?” She jumped off of him, his dick pulling free.

She tried to roll off the bed, but he caught her.

“No, I don’t think so. Finish what you started.” He shifted to his knees, tugging her ass up. Her juicy fucking ass. “It was my favorite dog.” He swatted at her before he slammed back into her primed cunt.

“Fuck!” Her soft lyrical moan empowered Maddox.

He reached forward, rubbing at her clit furiously as he bent over her back. He found her neck.

Maddox had wanted to leave his mark there but wanted to wait for her to heal first.

He used his other hand to grab her gently by the neck to pull her upwards, he met her halfway his mouth latching onto the skin there. Sucking and biting as he went.

Her moan vibrated through his hand, through his mouth, through his dick. She was enveloping every piece of him. He pounded into her aggressively, losing control of his inhibitions, forgetting to dial it back .

He expected her to try to escape, to say her safeword, not to push back on him. Matching every beat he thrust into her.

A guttural noise that stemmed from his chest, left his lips as he unlatched from her neck. A moment later and her cunt clenched around him, the familiar feeling of her orgasming around him.

She screamed as he finished himself, imprinting his mark into her.

His sight blurred as he came deep inside of her, but he didn't pull free. He wanted to fill her, to keep himself deep inside of her. Remind the other two men that they may be a part of her life, but he already owned a part of her too.

"If you two are done, there's a certain woman that has woken up and is asking for you," Emilio's voice cut through the dark.

Maddox knew he had been there, but he realized Ellie might not have when she jumped underneath him.

"You asshole!" she squeaked out, but then his words seemed to land. "Yara?"

Much to Maddox's chagrin, she wriggled off of his cock. He turned back to Emilio baring his teeth in irritation.

Ellie hopped off the bed and Maddox followed the movement. Even in the dim lighting he could make out the mess he had made of her. The marks, his cum glistening between her thighs, her unruly hair.

He was incredibly satisfied, and all of his previous frustration dissolved.

"Go get cleaned up Bella Isa, you're leaking," Emilio stated calmly, only the hint of annoyance saturating his tone.

Ellie lifted a pillow off the bed, launching it in Emilio's direction. Maddox had to contain his laughter as it landed against the man's face.

"Overbearing men!" She stomped off towards the bathroom. "Five minutes and then we're leaving!"

"I love you, Ellie!" Maddox called out to her as she slammed the door shut on them.

He was immensely happy when he heard the soft “I love you too” through it.

“Put some fucking clothes on, I’m tired of staring at your ass.” Emilio’s tone was rough now, devoid of its previous softness.

Maddox ignored him. He would deal with all the assholes in the world if it meant at the end of it, he would end up with his Ellie.

Chapter 29

Izzy

A dull ache throbbed between my legs as I shouldered open the hospital door to Yara's room. Oliver was already inside, but Emilio and Maddox followed me in.

"Yara!" I screamed, rushing into the room, but before I could get to her, two men stepped into my path.

I recognized Kazi as Emilio's driver but not the other.

"Mateo," Emilio's tone was harsh. "Is this going to be a problem?"

"Yara is my top assignment, all others will be completed as directed," the giant of a man barked out. He was huge, even bigger than Maddox, and I craned my neck to meet his eyes.

"Yara is my best friend," I argued, stretching up to push against the goliath's chest.

He went to protest, but then Yara cut through. "Let her see me you fucking oaf. We talked about this. In fact, everyone out except for Izzy!"

Emilio stepped forward, kissing the top of my hair, squeezing my hand before directing his attention to Kazi and Mateo. "It seems we have some matters to discuss now that she's awake."

They gave him a sharp nod, offering Yara one last look before exiting with everyone.

Now it was just Yara, myself, and my dad in the room.

James sat in the hospital chair. His head was in his hands. He lifted it, offering a sad smile, before shifting to stand .

He and I had talked briefly right after everything had happened. He explained how my mom had taken me and left in the dead of night. Of his fruitless searches in finding me. How Stephen had sought him out. But he didn't dive into Yara—we agreed to wait until she woke up.

“You can stay if you'd like James,” Yara offered my dad a simpering smile.

My view of her was now unobstructed, and I finally took her in.

Bruised, battered, but smiling . As if this was just another fucking day at the office.

“No, you two need to talk. But Isobella, after, will you find me please?” James stood up, his hand moving on its own to brush away Yara's hair off her face.

He was looking at her with absolute devotion.

I expected to hate it. To get the ick. But I didn't. Yara had been alone for too long, she needed someone. Did I wish it wasn't my dad?

Well duh, but oh fucking well.

After the door shut behind my dad, I turned my full attention to Yara. “So, this is why you didn't want me to call you mamacita?” I chuckled awkwardly, taking the chair my dad had just been sitting in next to her.

She extended over and weakly punched me. “Shut up! You know you’re a bitch!?”

“Hey at least this bitch didn’t fuck your dad.” The joke fell flat between us, and I cringed a bit.

Her face whitened. “I’m sure you heard, but he’s dead. Stephen is finally and officially dead. Gone from my life.”

I watched her, we had been best friends for over a decade, but we clearly had kept secrets from each other. We both had our own sordid pasts.

“Yara... I’m going to tell you everything now. All of my secrets. Every piece that I have kept hidden from you, and I would love for you to do the same. But you don’t have to, you can keep anything you want from me. You know I’ll love you no matter what though don’t you?”

“I’m ready to listen. I’ll be the therapist you never went to, no matter how much I pestered you. Though I guess mine didn’t really work. But yeah girl, I think it’s time. No more fucking secrets.”

“Look what had happened was.” I joked, falling back in my chair.

“Shut up, you’re such an idiot!” She laughed a bit before coughing. It took her a few moments but eventually she caught her breath.

“You’re okay though, aren’t you? And the baby? Do you know whose it is? You didn’t lose it, did you?” I had not learned the ways of social etiquette and the questions blurted out one after another.

“Nuh uh uh, you first. But yes the baby is healthy, happy, and all that jazz. But everything else, I answer after.” She flashed her teeth before settling back on the bed.

I took that as my cue to start.

I wasn't exactly sure where, so I decided to begin with the story of my mother. She had heard bits and pieces before but not the whole of it.

"Your mother was a raging cunt, like god rest her fucking soul. But fuck!" Yara exclaimed when I was done with that portion.

She wasn't wrong. I loved my mom, I did, but it was hard to mourn her loss when she had truly been dead to me for years.

I then moved onto my ordeal with Sebastian.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there." Her voice was thick with emotion.

At the time, she was dealing with her own problems. Daniel, her first boyfriend, had not been kind. He was why I persuaded her to leave town, helped her change her name again, how she ended up starting her company.

Next was how Emilio came into play.

"You're fucking married?! And I wasn't invited? I am going to kill that man."

"Maybe don't, you know, since he's my husband and all." That still hadn't fully sunk in. We had been going nonstop since the impromptu "wedding."

I continued on with my story. The sordid pasts of all my men. Another run in with Sebastian. Christian's need for revenge. The murder I committed.

She stayed silent through it all.

“Emilio loved you so much he sent a guardian angel to watch over me,” Yara eventually chirped up, ignoring my confession altogether.

“What do you mean? And what about the murder I committed.”

She waved her hand. “He deserved it.”

What the fuck? Is murder just the norm now?

I had said I liked killing Christian, and while it had been exhilarating—taking back my power, saving myself—I didn’t think I wanted to kill again. But it had healed a piece of me I had tucked so far under a rug I wasn’t aware it was there. That it was broken.

“Kazi, he used to be his driver, but Emilio sent him to keep tabs on me.” Yara then explained how she had run-ins with Daniel again, stalker style, and her entire ordeal with Kazi and then how Mateo was sent, too.

Finally, she got to the point about my dad.

“I didn’t know, but Izzy. I love him. I’m in love with him. All three of them. But that’s crazy isn’t it?” she whispered, the machine hooked up to her began to beat more rapidly as her heart rate sped up.

“Yeah ... You know that I have my own harem now, I guess. Is this what it’s like when you’re a boss ass bitch?” I cackled, trying to pull the lightness back into our conversation. “And I’m not mad at you Yara. You didn’t know. But as long as you two don’t hurt each other. I won’t be able to side with either of you.”

She carefully sat back up on her hospital bed, her hand finding mine. She met my eyes. “I love you Izzy and I promise not to hurt him. And fuck if he and I don’t work out for whatever reason, you’re not going to lose me as a best friend. I promise.”

I smiled at her. “Agreed. Alright baby cakes, my side is done. Now it’s time for you to tell me your story. The whole thing.”

“Fuck, alright so it started one night at a comedy club...”

Chapter 30

Izzy

I leaned down to hug Yara carefully. “I’ll see you soon,” I promised, reeling from everything she had told me. “Get some rest.”

My poor best friend had gone through so much, but never again. Not if I could make sure of it.

Stepping into the hallway, my dad stood against the wall.

A sentinel.

For me? Or for Yara ?

“Do you love her?” I asked, staring into him.

His lips quirked at the corners, the crease between his brow smoothed out, and his eyes softened.

I had my answer.

“I do,” he confirmed.

“Okay, I love you dad, but don’t hurt her. She deserves the world. And listen...I’m sorry. I’m sorry I believed mom and never looked for you,” I rasped out.

“Sweetheart, it wasn’t you. And I know you’re all grown now, and that this situation is a bit different , but I will be here for you from here on out. I won’t question your choices, you always did have a strong sense of character. But even still, if you ever need to escape, I can make it happen, no questions asked.” He opened his arms for me.

I didn’t hesitate, I fell into his familiar embrace. He always smelled like the air after it rained and that was present even now. The nostalgia pulled forth a plethora of memories.

My dad and I had been close before my mother snatched me away. She stole years from us. It was hard to not be angry with her, but she was dead now. I couldn’t scream at her, I couldn’t question her choices. I simply had to accept it.

For a few moments we just stood like that. “I missed you, too.” I sobbed into his shoulder.

And I had. But now that he was here, I felt a piece of myself healing.

“I think a part of me always knew you were alive. I never accepted your death.” It was true, it was partially why I never looked for him. I didn’t want confirmation he was dead. It felt like I could play pretend without seeing the obituary. But now all I felt was regret.

“I failed you. I should have seen the signs that your mother wasn’t mentally stable. I just never expected her to take you from me.” He shook as he held me.

We stood like that for a few more moments in silence. Soaking up over a decade of loss, of a thousand missed events. My graduation, my company, my first boyfriend, my marriage .

“I got married...to Emilio.” I had almost forgotten in the chaos of the last few weeks.

My dad stiffened before dropping his arms around me and stepping back. He reached up, cupping my face carefully. “If he hurts you, I will kill him. Cartel boss or not.”

I cracked a smile. “I know.”

“Ellie!” Maddox’s voice came from my left down the hallway.

“Go join your men. I’ll be here when you need me. I’m not going anywhere, and from what Yara has said, it seems we might all be moving here.”

On that note, he stepped around me and back into Yara’s hospital room.

“Isa,” Emilio’s voice was a shock as he breathed the name into my ear.

“Isobel,” Oliver was next to join our reunion in the hospital.

“Why must you all call me different names?” I exhaled. “My name is Isobella, Izzy for short. Not Ellie, or Isa, or Isobel.”

“Is that right? She’s being feisty, isn’t she?” Emilio cracked out, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“She is,” Oliver agreed. Stepping in front of me a devious expression, darkening his face.

They were crowding me, making me all hot and bothered. I needed to get out of here.

“We’re in a hospital! Not a brothel. And when did you two start agreeing on anything?”

Though I was secretly grateful for it; their bickering hadn't been my favorite part of this arrangement.

"You heard her," Maddox grumbled, moving up next to us.

"See the voice of reas—"

"But there's an empty closet down the hallway." Maddox yanked me from between the two men and threw me over his shoulder. "Finders keepers!" He laughed raucously.

"Get back here! Emilio, don't just stand there! Help me get her from him!" Oliver barked out.

Is this what my life is going to be like from here on out?

Emilio caught up, tripping Maddox, but Oliver caught me before I could fall to the ground.

"Mine now! "

"I'm not a football!" I grumbled as I was jostled about.

Oliver spanked my ass before Emilio was there to take me onto his shoulder.

"My wife!" He cackled.

"We're going to fix that!"

I could get used to this life.

My face bounced against Emilio's back as he ran and I came to the startling realization.

I didn't think about my weight much anymore. The world's oppressive hand wasn't pushing me into the ground. I wasn't trapped with vanilla men.

I was absurdly and astoundingly happy.

It certainly took me a while and the help of a few men to rebuild my confidence, but I had finally hit a point where I accepted that I may not be everyone's type of beauty.

But I can at least be my own.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:09 pm

Three Weeks Later

“ I don’t want to go on vacation! Yara just got out of the hospital, and I need to be there for her!” I crossed my arms over my chest, staring Emilio down.

The barstool I sat on was the perfect height where I couldn’t quite touch the ground. Instead, I kicked my legs against the kitchen island as I continued my pouting.

Emilio turned from the stove, he was in the process of making breakfast. Oliver stood to his left.

“You’re going to overcook the eggs.” Oliver fully distracted Emilio from responding and gained a spatula in the side for it.

Oliver was still struggling with Emilio, but at this point it was mostly comical to watch them bicker.

Maddox wrapped his bulky arms around me from behind.

“You’re home.” I sank back against his chest, smiling softly up at him.

“Yes, Ellie. Your employees are all set and have met the new manager you chose. Uh—Susan?”

“Her name is Kathy,” I stated smugly. “She was always such a good worker bee, I felt she could handle it.”

“She wasn’t quite as enthused when I educated her on your part in the company, but she couldn’t say no to the package you offered her.” Maddox let go to reposition himself before placing something on the bar counter in front of me.

My sparkly stapler and pile of manhwas from my desk.

“You know you’re the best, right?”

Oliver broke from his squabble with Emilio. “Hey! I reminded him what items you wanted! How is he the best?”

I ignored Oliver, flipping through the manhwa pile instead, leaning to the side into Maddox. “Boss man is mad,” I whispered conspiratorially.

“Isobel,” Oliver griped. “You can’t call me that unless you want me to fuck you before breakfast.”

I gasped, mockingly. “Sacrilege!”

Maddox placed a brand-new laptop in front of me next. “Your work is all on this now. Everything you might need and all of the different programs you designed. Emilio backed it up and added extra security precautions.”

Oliver grumbled again.

“Oliver ensured all of your clients are on here and suggested the idea,” Maddox admitted.

Emilio pushed the laptop to the side carefully and set a plate of food in front of me—eggs, bacon, homestyle potatoes.

My mouth salivated a bit. “You are all the best,” I corrected myself from earlier before digging in.

Emilio propped against the counter just watching me, but I felt none of the typical self-consciousness.

When I was on the last bite of food, he spoke, “It’s our honeymoon.”

I choked, and Maddox knocked against my back.

Emilio sighed, glancing between the two men. “Go ahead. I know you have kept them on you. ”

I set my fork down. Emilio extended out taking my hand, before lightly tugging the band there off.

I was confused until Maddox turned my chair to him, he helped me off the stool, before getting down on one knee, ring box in hand.

“Ellie, nothing in our life is typical, average, or normal, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. Would you accept this ring as a token to represent the rest of our lives together?”

My vision blurred as tears formed, the whiplash from the playful to serious almost too much. “You’re all going to do this when I just ate, am wearing nothing but a T-shirt, and haven’t washed my hair in a week?” I joked before nodding. “Yes, of course I will.”

Maddox slid the band into place; it was thin, but uniquely shaped, as if it were missing another part.

He stood up, offering a chaste kiss before Emilio was there to yank me in his direction. He dropped to his knee.

“This time, I want your full consent. Will you be my wife? My person for the rest of our days?”

I jerked my head in agreement. “Do I even have a choice?” I quipped.

“No.” He slid the second ring in place, it went perfectly with the first, a soft click sounding as it was secured.

I grew a bit nervous. “Um, guys, did the ring just make a noise?”

Emilio’s lips quirked at the corners, his eyes darkening. He stood, kissing my cheek before I was yanked again.

Oliver gracefully landed on one knee, his curls falling forward in disarray.

This time I wasn’t sure I wanted the third ring, but Oliver whipped one out without giving me a choice, his long fingers wrapping around my wrist .

“I think you know how I feel about you. I hope you are ready to handle a lifetime of three men vying for your attention and that you’re aware there will unfortunately be no escaping our madness.” He shoved the third ring into place.

The click this time was clearly audible.

“Explain to her, she is going to panic.” Maddox’s warmth pressed against my back, his hands trailing forward and securing my wrist in place. “You can take the rings off, but you have to click this button.” He showed me on the side. “Each has GPS tracking, and if you take them off, we’re pinged an alert.”

Why is this explanation turning me on? What is actually wrong with me?

“But what about washing my hands? Showering?”

Oliver stood now staring down at me. His bright eyes at odds with the shadows that enveloped his face. “Then we’ll know.” He pinched my chin between two long fingers, turning my head side to side. “My vote was for a collar.”

I knew without a doubt he wasn’t joking and it caused my heart to beat even more aggressively in my chest.

“Now where are we going on our honeymoon?” Emilio cut through the tension.

I closed my eyes, falling further back against Maddox’s chest. I knew for a fact that Emilio would have agreed with Oliver, it was most likely Maddox that vetoed the collar idea.

“Somewhere secluded.” I heaved a sigh.

There was clearly going to be no escaping this honeymoon, and I could at least bring my work with me.

One Week Later

“Time to take off her blindfold.” Emilio’s voice stabbed through the darkness.

Being on a plane blind-folded had actually managed to nearly negate my fear of heights. I was hoping it would have dissipated entirely with Sebastian’s death, but no such luck. Trauma worked in mysterious and disgusting ways.

Plus, there was the fact they wanted this honeymoon to be a surprise.

I blinked rapidly as the darkness was replaced with the very bright glaring sun. For a moment, I thought we might still be in Florida, but then I turned my head side to side, taking in the view.

“When I said secluded—” I spun on my heel to face my three men.

Maddox at least had the decency to look sheepish, but Oliver and Emilio just appeared smug.

“I did not mean a fucking private island!”

A week on this private fucking island with my men, what could possibly go wrong?

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His Isa

Six Days Later

Emilio paced outside their bedroom door. Tonight was their last night, and he would be damned if he didn't do what he had been planning.

He went ahead and shed his clothes. Oliver, Maddox, and Isa should all be asleep. He just hoped they stayed that way long enough for him to sink into her cunt.

Emilio did his best to quietly creep into the room, for he knew his precious Isa slept soundly inside. Just as he knew that when she awoke it would be to him. Inside her. Filling her up, fucking her, and fulfilling her darkest desire. Again. He might just have to fight off two men in the process.

"She's fast asleep," Maddox murmured through the darkness, the only light coming from the moonlight that shone through the balcony doors. "Oliver is too. You might want to keep it that way with him."

"What if we wake him up with her on him? Do you think he would like that?" Emilio whispered, crawling on the bed.

Maddox had already pulled the blanket off his sleeping beauty.

She was a marvelous sight to take in, and he wondered not for the first time how he had found her. How he was deemed to deserve her.

He didn't, was the answer.

None of them did.

She wasn't wearing her typical sleep dresses that he had found her in all those weeks ago, she was in Maddox's shirt instead.

"Stop taking her fucking Mumus. They're my favorite," Emilio grumbled out. "And help me get this shirt off of her."

His excitement was surpassing new heights. The possibility of being caught. The thought of watching her stretched on all three of their cocks. The warmth and wetness.

He was insatiable. He needed to be inside of her, to bury into her.

Maddox tugged her gently into his lap as they both worked to carefully remove the offending article of clothing, ignoring Oliver entirely.

Emilio stared down at Isa again. At her round pale breasts, the pink nipples pebbled and awaiting his attention. Her full lips that he knew to be soft and yielding. Her legs shifted in her sleep, widening for him, showing off her bare cunt.

For a moment, he thought she might have woken up but then she let out a gentle cute snore.

Did she know he was here? Was she waiting for him?

Maddox trailed his massive hands along her skin, and Emilio watched in fascination as her body moved into his touch. Goosebumps prickled up as he trailed lower and lower until he found her clit.

“I’m going to start while she’s still asleep. See how far I can push into her until she wakes up.” Emilio’s cock jerked at the thought.

To fuck her before she even realized it was him doing so.

Part of him craved that millisecond of terror and then her instant relief. Her mind grasping what her body already knew.

That she was his .

Maddox let out a breath. “It’s no wonder she feels safest with me.” His words were at odds with how he moved to her cunt, lathering the wetness there before returning to her clit to rub aggressive circles.

Emilio reached down to find her...dripping. He used some for himself, lathering his cock. He could just jerk off and come all over her body but that wouldn’t be enough.

He had his mind made up.

He shifted between her legs, ignoring Maddox entirely, albeit grateful for the brutes’ help.

His cock touched her entrance.

Just the tip .

He thrust just a bit in, but then she suctioned him. Welcomed him there.

“Cover her mouth.”

Maddox listened just in time as Emilio impaled her the rest of the way.

She woke up with a scream, but it was muffled by Maddox's hand.

"Shhh, it's us, we've got you," he whispered hushed praises into her ear.

Emilio pounded into her, forgetting entirely of their plans to let Oliver sleep through it all. He needed his release. That one second of panic when her eyes had opened? Her body taking all of him even as he violently thrust into her?

It was an oil fire spreading rapidly across his nerves, burning hotter than he had ever felt before. His balls fucking tingled . His heart pounded maddeningly.

"I love you, Isa." And he did. She was perfect for him. Made for him.

She moaned, clenching around him as he filled her.

"Who's up next?"

His Ellie

Ten Years Later

Maddox sat on the porch of their new home, his Ellie sprawled across his lap. In the background, he heard the playful screams of children.

“Be careful with your cousin!” Ellie shouted, but there wasn’t a need.

Oliver was on child duty.

It was funny watching Oliver attempt to corral a herd of children, his hair a mess from the humidity and running around. At least he had help, and Maddox witnessed as Kazi ran across the yard grabbing hold of one of the kiddos.

Maddox squeezed Ellie tighter to him. They had gone through a lot over the years. Highs and lows. Deaths and births. Murder and mayhem. But through it all, Ellie had never lost her spirit, her charm, her soul .

“I think this new house is perfect, and now Yara is even closer,” Ellie yawned out. The sun splashed across her face, catching in her eyes. She readjusted, moving further into Maddox’s embrace.

He welcomed it, he never got tired of her.

“Dad! You have to come play with me!” their oldest, Henry, ran up to them yelling. His caramel eyes left no mistake as to whose DNA he had, but it didn’t matter .

He had three fathers. Just like their other three did.

Their youngest, a three-year-old girl, was the only one none of them could agree on. She was the spitting image of Ellie.

“Sure buddy, I’ll be right there.” Maddox offered an adoring smile before pressing his lips to Ellie’s. “You heard him. I’ll be back.”

Maddox cut his attention to Emilio who was stepping outside. Maddox was grateful when Emilio took his place without a word.

They had fallen into a very amicable friendship. Maddox, Oliver, and Emilio were family at this point. Oliver and Emilio still squabbled occasionally like brothers, but it was never mean-spirited as it had been in the past.

Maddox strode out into the yard, finding Henry at the very far back gate.

He walked briskly to him, wondering what had drawn him out there.

“Who’s that, son?”

Henry stepped aside.

Simon York and Logan Castillo.

Maddox didn’t balk. Perhaps a decade ago he would have, but times had changed. As did the families.

But that was another story, for another day.

“Are the others in the car?” Maddox grinned, opening the gate for them.

Simon held a baby carrier while the other carried the presents.

“Yeah, she’s still a bit skittish in crowds, but I think she’s going to be okay.” Logan cast a worried look back towards the street.

“Here, I’ll take the presents, go check on her.” Maddox ruffled Henry’s hair with his free hand. “Lead the way and then we’ll play?”

Henry bobbed his head excitedly, running towards the overflowing presents table.

“I’ll wait for them,” Simon advised.

Maddox shrugged before turning back to the house. “Suit yourself. ”

Maddox took in the huge yard as he walked.

Yara was sitting at the bench now with Ellie as they laughed. Emilio acting as Ellie’s pillow as she leaned against him.

Oliver played with their remaining three children off to the side with Kazi, Mateo, and...

James. He was holding his youngest.

Maddox was happier than he thought he ever could be.

They had all found unconventional love and maybe it didn’t work for everyone.

But it worked for them.

The End...