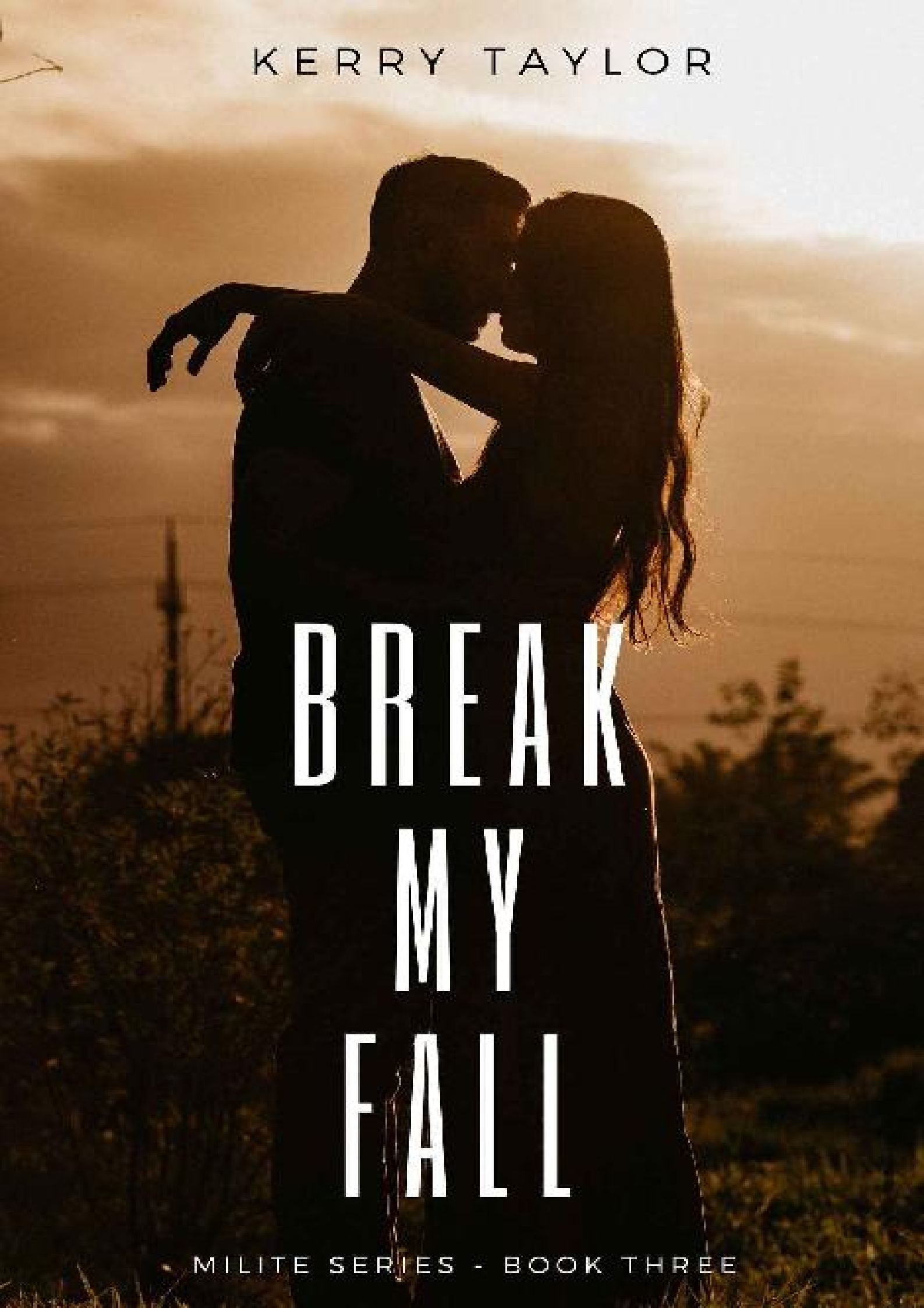


KERRY TAYLOR

A romantic scene featuring the silhouettes of a man and a woman embracing. The man is on the left, with his arms around the woman on the right. They are positioned in the center of the frame, set against a warm, golden sunset sky. The background shows a blurred landscape with trees and a fence line. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

BREAK
MY
FALL

MILITE SERIES - BOOK THREE

Break My Fall
Milite Series - Book Three
Kerry Taylor

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For Jacob.

*Some people only dream of Angels,
We held one in our arms.*

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[THANK YOU](#)

[COMING SOON!](#)

['BREAK MY FALL' TRIGGER WARNING](#)

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TRIGGER WARNING

The trigger warnings for 'Break My Fall' can be found at the very end of the book as they contain **major spoilers**.

PROLOGUE

MADDIE – 15 years old

“Don’t even start that!” I uttered under my breath as I clenched my fists. I was talking to myself – or to my hands, to be more specific - which had begun to shake the closer I got to my most recent foster home.

I knew it made me look crazy, walking down the street talking to myself, but it was a habit I had developed over long years of having no one else to talk to, and one I was struggling to break.

I had been hoping to avoid a stop at the house after school that day. I had plans, which I had happily thought would keep me out until late that night, but that was before the bitch squad interfered.

To say I was unpopular at school was a serious understatement. I was a way too skinny, milky white skinned, foster kid with a head of frizzy, wild, bright red hair. Puberty seemed to have skipped me altogether, leaving me completely flat chested and with the frame of a ten year old boy. I had spent the entire fifteen years of my life so far, being passed between group and foster homes, so I lacked any note of self-confidence and rarely spoke to a soul unless I had to. Add to that the fact my clothes were ill fitting, tatty and threadbare and you got the biggest target ever for the jocks and the bitch squad.

That day, at lunch, they had delighted in ‘bumping’ right into me with a full lunch tray, leaving me sprawled on the ground, covered in a mixture of Coke and whatever sauce covered option they had selected, the entire cafeteria watching on in fits of laughter.

I had been forced to spend the remainder of the day with stains all over my favorite band t-shirt – which I had worn especially because I wanted to look the best I could when I met the guys that night. Now I needed to get home and change it as quickly as I could before I went to meet them. Hence, my hands shaking.

“Just get in. Change, then get out,” I psyched myself up as I neared the front porch steps. “Easy.” *Yeah, right.*

I had lived with Clive and Julie Travers for almost eighteen months now, and it was, by some distance, one of the worst places I had been dumped in my life. Clive worked construction, or at least he used to. He had an accident while he was on a job, four years ago. He injured his back, and hadn't worked a day since. As far as I could tell, all that was actually wrong with him was his inability to go longer than a half hour without a drink, but his wife Julie was sure he was disabled and would never be able to work again. As a result Julie worked every single hour she could, to pay the bills and supply Clive with all of the beer and cigarettes he demanded. She worked two jobs – a server in a diner during the day, and she worked late shifts at a gas station. I was pretty sure she opted to work so much to keep herself out of Clive's company, and who could blame her?

Clive was a complete asshole all of the time, but when he'd had a drink he turned violent. I'd seen him hit Julie countless times when she dared to make an appearance, hence the fact we rarely saw her. I wasn't even sure she returned there most days. So that left me. I had no idea why they chose to foster, but I guess the weekly paycheck they received for doing it had to be the main motivator. Thankfully, I was the only kid they had living there at that time. Had another one been placed there, I would have been forced to report Clive to spare any other kid suffering my fate.

I tiptoed up the porch steps, knowing exactly where to put my weight on each one so they wouldn't make a sound. If I were lucky Clive would be passed out by this time, surrounded by empty beer cans with some trashy show on the TV.

The house was old and in serious need of some maintenance, so every inch of it creaked, especially the porch as I crossed it, but I stepped as quickly and as lightly as I could. Clive would be way harder to deal with if I woke him up.

The screen squeaked a little as I opened it just enough to slip through, then the door creaked as I did the same, sliding my body through the tiniest gap and into the house.

As soon as I was inside, I heard Clive's loud snoring and allowed myself a small sigh of relief. Glancing around I found him exactly as I expected – passed out, laid on the sofa.

I moved silently through the dump of a house and into my room at the very back. It was a tiny space, just big enough for the twin bed, but it was tidy and clean – unlike the rest of the place. I tried not to dwell on the fact my only decent t-shirt, and most prized possession, which the guys had gotten for me at Christmas, was ruined. I'd find a way to get the stains out, I assured myself as I pulled it off and placed it with my laundry.

I didn't deliberate over which of my other t-shirts to pull on. They were all as ugly and tatty as each other, so it really didn't matter.

I stuffed my backpack from school under the bed, just in case Clive got into one of his rages later and trashed my room, as he had several times before. Trying to explain to your teachers

why your books were torn to shreds, without revealing the shitty home life you were trapped in, was not fun.

I slipped back out of my room as quietly as I had entered it, closing the door behind me, then tiptoed back down the hall, freezing halfway when I heard movement from the living room.

Clive's heavy footsteps were moving through the house, probably towards the kitchen for more beers, his drunken ramblings echoing behind him as he cursed Julie for something I couldn't make out.

My heart was pounding so hard I feared it would give me away and my hands were truly shaking now as adrenaline surged through me. I needed to get out of there without him seeing me if I had any hope of meeting the guys as planned.

I waited until I heard the refrigerator door rattle open, then, knowing my best chance was when he was in the kitchen, I ran for the front door, zigzagging in an attempt to not make a peep as I went.

My hand was on the door handle, my freedom imminent, but it wasn't to be.

"Hey! Where'd you think you're going?" Clive yelled, his words slightly slurred. I took a breath in a desperate attempt to calm myself as I slowly turned just enough to see him, not taking my hand from the door handle.

Clive was a big guy. He towered over my gangly five foot nine frame as he stalked closer. He was stocky, his huge beer gut hanging over the stained sweat pants he wore. His hair was down to his shoulders, greasy and dank, and his face was red

from all that he drank. I knew he and Julie were both in their forties, but Clive looked considerably older.

“Out,” I answered weakly, trying hard to tense my body so he wouldn’t see me trembling.

“Out where? You got money you ain’t telling us about?” he asked as he glared at me with his cold, terrifying eyes.

“N-no,” I shook my head. “I’m going t-to the library...t-to study.” My words wouldn’t seem to come out, my mind pleading with my body to just move! To run!

Clive moved way faster than I expected him to be able to, based on how drunk he seemed. He lunged forward and grabbed my forearm, wrenching me away from the door and closer to him. I fought to remain on my feet as he twisted my arm behind me and down, until I cried out in pain, sure he was going to break it.

“You lying to me, girl?” he hissed as he grabbed my hair and pulled my head until we were eye to eye.

“No!” I cried as tears filled my eyes.

“You goin’ to whore yourself out?” he roared.

“No! Please...my arm!” I struggled to get free, knowing things could go very badly for me. *I should have run!*

This was definitely not the first time Clive had turned his rage on me. I had received regular injuries and a few beatings from him in my time there, but this was really bad timing. I wanted

to make it to the meeting I had planned with the guys desperately, and if Clive beat me I wouldn't. There was no way I could let the guys know what Clive was capable of. They would make me report him to my case worker, then I'd be moved and that wasn't an option. My guys were the only friends I had ever had, and I didn't want to leave them. I had endured a year with Clive just so I could stay close to them and I refused to lose them now.

“Nah,” Clive scoffed as he tossed me down to the ground, finally releasing me. My arm throbbed as I cradled it to my body and got to my feet as fast as I could. I knew he'd take his chance to kick me if I stayed down. “Don't suppose anyone'd pay to touch you, would they?” he sneered as he looked me up and down with disgust.

I took my chance and backed towards the door, not taking my eyes from him the whole time. As soon as my hand touched the door handle I ripped it open and fled through it, not even bothering to close it as I went. Clive was yelling after me, but I couldn't make out what he was saying over the pounding of my heart in my ears.

As soon as I rounded the corner and was out of sight of the house, I stopped and took in some much-needed oxygen between sobs. My arm was still throbbing and it hurt to move back and forth. I hoped it wouldn't bruise where Clive had been holding it, but I was pretty sure it would. Tears ran down my cheeks as I fought to calm myself down, but the thought of two more years of dealing with that was hard to process. Could I really handle two more years of fear like that?

I was weighing that question in my mind as I walked to the park where I had agreed to meet the guys. I had cleaned my face up as best I could with the corner of my t-shirt and I was much calmer, on the outside anyway.

All of my fears, worries, and questions stopped the moment I spotted them, sat under *our* willow tree, in a quiet, lesser walked portion of the neighborhood park. Hunter spotted me first, glancing up from whatever he had been doing on his cell. He reached his hand up and waved as a smile crossed his handsome face. He was dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt – his trademark look. His dark brown hair needed a cut and was flopping into his eyes,

“Hey!” he greeted me as I got closer. That made the others all look up too. They were sat in a circle under the tree. Kai, who had been on his cell too, slipped it into his pocket as he jumped to his feet and hurried towards me.

“About time,” he told me with a smile. “You’re late.” He instantly wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into a hug the second he got close enough, just as he did every time I saw him. I sighed happily, tears once again battling to fill my eyes as a feeling of safety surrounded me for the brief minute he held me.

“Sorry,” I whispered as we pulled apart from each other.

“You okay?” he asked as he studied my face way too closely.

“Yep,” I lied as I looked away from him before he saw too much. I set off towards the others and Kai followed.

“Mads! Just in time. We totally need your help,” Everett announced. He and his twin, Cameron, were sat working on what looked like history homework, the both of them with a notebook resting against their backpacks on their laps, and a text book on the grass between them.

“He’s right. We’re screwed if we don’t finish this project and the revolutionary war is kicking our asses,” Cameron agreed dramatically. They were identical twins, both almost carbon copies of each other, with sandy blonde hair, trimmed short and neat, and the palest blue eyes. They were both tall and built, but Cameron was more heavily muscled – the only difference between them.

All four of them were handsome and stacked with muscle. They played a lot of football and spent much of their free time working out in a gym on main street that allowed them to use it for free – some scheme to keep kids out of trouble. They told me once it was how they dealt with their issues, but I still couldn’t work out a damn thing about any of them that wasn’t perfect.

I had met them just after arriving with Clive and Julie, at a youth group. Clive had thrown me out of the house because I didn’t have any money to go and buy him some beer. It had been raining heavily, and I was so cold and soaked through. I had wandered into the youth group, hoping to just get warm and dry off a little. My case worker had told me about it when she left me there, advising me to check it out and meet other kids like me. The idea had not appealed until I needed a roof to shelter under.

The guys had been there, also just looking for somewhere dry to hang out. They were foster kids too, all placed together with a couple who lived a few streets over. They had been living there together for almost five years and had become tight in that time – like brothers.

I had been a little scared when they had approached me with a towel, and smiles on their faces, and at first I hadn’t trusted them, sure they were going to make me the butt of some joke they were playing.

But they didn't give up. They stuck with me through the evening, trying to draw me into games of air hockey and foosball that they were playing. Eventually, swayed by their charm and kindness, I gave in and agreed to play foosball with the twins. They were kind with me, and patient with the fact I really didn't speak much. We talked a little about the fact we were all foster kids and it bonded us, I guess. That night, as they insisted on walking me home from the group, we exchanged cell phone numbers. They texted me all week, until we met up at the youth center once again.

We quickly became friends after that, and started meeting up at other places, since the youth center really sucked. I still had no idea why they had taken me into their group, but they did and for the first time in my life I had somewhere I felt I belonged.

As time passed they became more than just friends. They looked out for me, made sure I ate when I was with them, since I got very little to eat at home. They made me smile and laugh for the first time in a really long time, and most of all they made me feel secure and cared for – things I had never truly had. They were the reason I put up with Clive's abuse. Nothing he could do to me was bad enough that I would be taken from the guys I had come to consider my family. I needed them. They were the only light in my dark depressing life.

"I suck at history too, but I can try t-to help," I offered as I sat down in the grass beside the two of them and glanced at the textbook they had open.

"Let's eat first. We're starving, but we were waiting for you," Hunter suggested as he opened his backpack and pulled out a paper bag, from the sub shop he worked at after school and on weekends. He got a discount there, so he often bought dinner for all of us on his way to our spot under the old willow tree.

I loved it there with them. The willow tree was huge, and its branches hung down over us, creating a canopy and giving us a feeling of privacy. It was the beginning of summer, and the branches were covered in luscious green leaves, creating a little shade for us. It was my safe place. My sanctuary – though I think that may have been because of the guys more than the tree.

“Sorry. I had to go home first,” I apologized again.

“It’s fine, sunshine,” Kai assured me with a gentle smile. His jet black hair shone in the sunlight and I wanted to run my hands through it, knowing how soft it felt from the times he had allowed me to do just that. He was part Asian – probably Chinese, he had told me - in heritage, though that was as much as he knew about himself. Like me, he had been in the system since birth and had no idea who his parents actually were. Most of the guys were the same, in fact. Hunter’s mom had gone to jail when he was three years old, and he had been left in the system ever since, and the twins lost their parents in a car wreck when they were five years old. They had a grandfather who remained alive, but he had refused to take them in due to some family issues, and they too had ended up in the system. They, just like me, had been bounced around from home to home until they came together in their current place.

My problem was, they were older than me. Hunter had already turned eighteen, and the others were close behind. Their foster parents had agreed they could stay until they all turned eighteen, when they planned to move out and get a place together, and that was just months away now. They would all graduate soon, and I was terrified I would lose them in the coming months.

“Here Maddie. Plain old turkey, just like you like,” Hunter teased as he handed me a wrapped sub.

“I told you not to get me anything,” I argued.

“And I told you I’m not listening,” Hunter retorted with a smug grin. I always argued with them over things like this. They all had jobs that they worked after school and on weekends. They were trying hard to save up enough to get their own place and I knew that was a struggle for them, so I hated it when they spent money on me. “Eat!” he ordered as he opened his own sandwich up and took an indecently huge bite of it.

I looked between the others as I held my sandwich, feeling terrible they felt the need to take care of me in that way.

“Mads, it’s just a sandwich,” Cameron sighed.

“Have you even eaten anything today?” Everett asked as he locked those pale blue eyes on mine, looking for the truth.

“Yes,” I replied lamely.

“Not enough,” he argued. “You never eat enough.”

“I’m fine,” I tried to reassure them, but they didn’t buy it. Even though they had no idea about the abuse I faced in my current home, they had a good idea it wasn’t a good placement. It was obvious from the clothes I wore and how thin I was, that I wasn’t exactly living in luxury. They worried about me more than I would like, and they were constantly bringing me food. “How was practice?” I asked, hoping to

change the subject. To appease them I opened up my sandwich and took a bite.

“Tough. That new coach is a grade A asshole!” Kai groaned. “We’re leaving the team.”

“What?” I gasped. “Why? You guys love football!” I had never actually seen them play since they went to a school on the other side of town, but all they ever talked about was the team they played for, and games they had coming up. If they weren’t in such a shitty situation I was sure they’d have all gone on to college to play in some big, important team.

“We need more time to work. We have to get a security deposit and first month’s rent together for a place. As soon as the twins turn eighteen at the end of summer we’re gonna be out on our asses,” Hunter explained.

“Maybe I could help?” I offered. “I could get another job too.” I already worked on Saturdays stacking shelves at a grocery store. It didn’t pay much but it was enough for me to keep my cell topped up so I could speak with the guys and to buy the basic toiletries I needed and the odd snack to keep the hunger at bay.

“We appreciate that, sunshine, but we got this,” Kai assured me. I took another bite of my sandwich and attempted to work up enough courage to ask them what I hadn’t yet dared to.

“W-where will you go? Will I still see you?”

“Of course you will, crazy girl,” Everett laughed as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side.

“We’re staying close, Maddie. We’re going to find a place in town and we expect you to be there a lot,” Hunter added.

“We want you to come and live with us when you age out,” Kai added.

“If you want that, of course. You might want to go off to college,” Cameron said.

“Yeah right,” I scoffed. College was not going to be an option for me. I wasn’t stupid, but with so much chaos in my life, my grades at school weren’t great, and they certainly wouldn’t be getting me any scholarships any time soon. I planned to finish school and get a job, with the possibility of some community college classes somewhere in my future.

“You’re so smart,” Cameron told me as he looked around his brother to meet my eyes. “You can do anything you set your mind to.”

“I’d like to come and live with all of you,” I told them with a sigh. That was way better than anything I had ever dared to hope for. I couldn’t believe they had even offered, but I wasn’t going to turn them down.

“Then that’s what you’ll do. We’ll take care of you, Maddie, always. We’re family,” Hunter assured me. I smiled and nodded as tears welled up in my eyes. Family. It was a concept that was completely alien to me, but one I very much wanted. I looked between them all emotionally. I was so lucky they had come into my life when I needed them most and I knew it.

We ate in a comfortable silence for a few moments then. I was lost in the relief that they weren't leaving me. The fear that they would had been eating at me for months, ever since they told me their plans to move out together.

“So, about your birthday tomorrow,” Hunter said, cutting into my thoughts. I looked up to him, shocked he even knew it was my birthday the next day.

“What about it?” I asked.

“It's your sweet sixteen. We need to celebrate it in style,” Kai said.

“We don't have to,” I argued. I hadn't really celebrated a birthday with anything I cared to remember in a really long time, and it was no use starting now. “How did you even know?”

“It's on your Facebook profile,” Cam reminded me. I forgot I had even set that thing up. The guys had wanted me to do it so we could chat through the message app, but that was the only reason I even had one.

“We *will* be celebrating,” Kai said more firmly.

“We will,” Hunter agreed. “You're going to meet us here and we're taking you out for dinner, and then to the movies to see that action film you wanted to see.”

“No. That's not necessary, you guys. I don't want you wasting any more money on me. We can just hang out here, like we always do,” I assured them.

“It is necessary. Stop arguing. We want to do something nice for you on your birthday,” Cameron cut in.

“Please, Mads. We’re all excited to spoil you a little, so just let us, okay?” Ev added as he squeezed the arm he held around me, pulling me even tighter against his side. I looked to the others and saw hopeful smiles on each of their faces.

“Fine,” I agreed, giving in. They were all way too cute to deny and I had to admit, the idea of dinner and a movie sounded exciting.

“That’s our girl,” Kai grinned. *I wish I could be their girl*, I thought to myself, but I couldn’t. They didn’t see me like that. They saw me like a kid sister and I wasn’t stupid enough to ruin that by admitting I had feelings that weren’t exactly brotherly towards all of them. Instead I kept my mouth shut and was grateful for what I had. All of them, in my life, giving a damn about me and seeing past the flaws. It was enough. As long as I had them to bring light into my life, I could get through the rest of the darkness.

The next day I stood under the willow tree at the same time, dressed in my favorite band t-shirt which I had scrubbed by hand the night before, my hair tamed into a style I had seen a girl at school with, looking the best I possibly could for my birthday evening out.

I was so excited as I waited for them all to come, so thrilled to spend an evening doing things other girls my age got to do. Nothing had been able to take the smile from my face that day. Not Clive lashing out at me before I went to school that morning, or the bullies in the halls between classes. Nothing

could dull my excitement for my time with my guys, on my birthday.

Nothing except them not turning up to meet me. I waited for an hour under the tree, but they never came. I called them, but their phones were switched off. Eventually, after ninety minutes and terrified something had happened to them, I went to their house.

They had made me promise never to go to the house they lived in, not wanting me near their foster father, who they said was a real asshole, but I had no choice. I had to know they were all okay. I was terrified they had been in some kind of accident.

Tears were running down my face as I stood pounding on the front door, but there was no answer. They weren't there. No one was.

I tried for two weeks, constantly calling each of them, reaching out through Facebook and every day after school I went to the house to knock on the door, but no one ever answered. They were gone without a word and wherever they went to, they took a huge part of me with them, leaving a void inside me I knew could never be filled.

CHAPTER 1

MADDIE

13 years later...

“Hey, what are you still doing here?” Nico asked as he stopped by the reception desk.

“I know! I’m going. I just wanted to get these filed,” I told him as I held up the small pile of case files I was trying to get locked away in the filing cabinets. I had worked at *Milite Security* as their receptionist for just over a year and I enjoyed it. Nico was one of five guys who owned the company. All ex-military, they were damned good at what they did, providing security for private and corporate clients across Chicago. They were also good men to work for and I was so grateful that they had taken a chance on me when they hired me with very little experience to offer.

“Do you need to pick Willow up?” he asked as he leaned on the counter opposite me.

“Yeah, but I have time as long as I hurry,” I assured him. I tried not to allow my thoughts to wander to how damned good the man looked draped across the counter before me. Nico was a work of art and there was no denying that, all tall dark and handsome, with rippling muscles and tattoos up both arms. His piercing green eyes ensnared me every time he was close, and it took everything I had not to just stare and drool. The problem was, he never missed a damned thing, and I had much I wanted to keep hidden.

“I can give you a ride, if that would help?” he offered. He was so kind. They all were, but Nico seemed to give me extra

attention, always checking in with me and making sure I didn't need anything. He was a good man, and in another life I would have loved for the chance to know him more personally.

"Thanks, but I'm good. You have a client coming in anyway," I reminded him.

"You going to this charity thing tonight?" he asked.

"The Children's hospital fundraiser?" I asked. "You're going?"

"Yeah. Usually Mia and one of the others would handle it, but they're not here," he sighed. Mia, or Emilia as I knew her, was Nico's younger sister. She was in a relationship with three of the other owners of Milite – Lincoln, Jax, and Parker, all of whom were currently on a holiday in Miami. Emilia worked the reception desk with me, the both of us covering it part time, and she was the closest thing I had to a friend.

"Having to dust off your tux?" I laughed.

"I fucking hate suits," Nico grumbled and I found myself fighting away an image of how damned good he would look in a tuxedo. "Please tell me you'll be there so I at least know one person who isn't an asshole."

"I'll be there," I replied, enjoying his grumpiness immensely. It was just the way he was and I had come to like it in the time I had known him. I found it endearing. It was a stark contrast to my husband, Edward, who was filled with bitterness and anger all of the time.

"Thank fuck for that," he sighed. "Just a shame about your asshole husband."

“Nico...” I sighed.

“The guy’s an asshole. I have no idea why you don’t just leave him.” He made no secret of the fact he hated Edward. That was my fault, because he had seen some of the marks on my arms one day when I stupidly pushed up the long sleeves of my shirt when I got hot. Nico had been enraged, despite me lying and assuring him it was a onetime thing that would never happen again. Since then there had been other instances when he had found me teary eyed after a call with my husband, or when I had needed to rush out because Edward refused to pick Willow up as planned, that had made his dislike, of the man I was married to, greater.

Then they met, three months earlier at a charity party we were all attending – Edward because he was expected to by his father, who was the district attorney, and Nico by one of his biggest clients. That had been a disaster.

Edward hated the fact I had a job. He wanted me at home at all times, playing the dutiful little wife, but I just couldn’t live that way.

We married when I was young. I had barely been surviving on the wage from my waitressing job, living in a slum of an apartment in the city. Losing the guys had devastated me in a way I thought I would never recover from, and in some ways, I was pretty sure I hadn’t. But Edward walked into my restaurant one night and sat in my section. He was handsome and funny. He was studying law and he just seemed so far removed from the life I was trapped in. I fell for him fast and we were married and living together six months later.

At first things were good. Edward was under a lot of pressure from his father to graduate law school, but he handled it all

pretty well. I started taking college classes in business and graphic design, hoping to one day find a path in life I wanted to take, all while finding my feet as the wife Edward needed me to be.

His father was a lawyer too, and working his way up the ranks. He put major pressure on Edward to shape his life in just the same way, and as such Edward needed a dutiful wife who would keep a nice home, always have dinner on the table and who would look good on his arm at functions. So that's who I became, but I maintained my own dreams too, and put my foot down when Edward tried to make me quit my classes. Eventually I graduated and started looking for a job.

By then we had a child – our beautiful daughter Willow. She was the light of my life and my only reason for dragging my ass out of bed every morning. I named her, giving myself that small piece of what I had once had under our willow tree with those guys who made me feel so cared for.

My life with Edward was small and controlled, by both him and his father, Frank. Our lives were governed by the fact we could never set a foot wrong in case it created bad press and effected Frank's reelection as district attorney.

Edward controlled every cent of the money we had. I didn't have a car and I wasn't involved in any decisions made about our life. He always knew where I was and what I was doing. Friends were not allowed and the only reason I got to keep my job was because his father felt it looked good that I was a 'modern working woman,' whatever the fuck that meant.

Edward was bitter and angry at the control his father held over every aspect of his life, and he took that out on me most days. He liked to lash out with his fists and any love there had once been between us was long gone. If his father would have

permitted it, Edward would have let me go and divorced me years earlier, but that wasn't allowed. Frank needed his only son to play the part of doting husband and father.

I knew I should get out. I knew it wasn't a good environment for Willow to grow up in and I was constantly in fear of the day Edward went too far with his temper, but getting out was tough to do when I literally had no money to do it with, and a child to feed and take care of. Now I was pregnant again and the idea of running just seemed impossible.

So I was trapped, clinging to my daughter and my job to get me through each terrifying day. Edward hated and resented me for tying him down, and he wasn't afraid to show that. Still, it didn't stop him from forcing himself on me when the mood took him.

Worst of all was the way he treated Willow though. He had no love for her, and ignored her for the most part. If she made a peep around him, he lost his temper and screamed at her, to the point where she ran from him and hid, any time he walked into a room. When she was forced to be in his company, like family meals, she remained silent, never making a peep and always on her absolute best behavior. She, like me, lived in fear and I despised it for her. She was a happy, smiling child, full of joy and mischief when we were alone, and I wanted that for her all of the time.

I had to get out, but first I needed to get me and my unborn child safely through this pregnancy. Once this child was safely in the world I'd find a way to get us all out of that hell we lived in.

Until then I had to play my part, attending functions like the one we were due at that night. I had to smile and play the dutiful wife, and do whatever it took to keep Edward happy so

he would keep his hands to himself. I was in my second trimester already and I knew a beating from my husband could be catastrophic. I couldn't risk that.

“Maddie? You okay?” Nico asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yeah. Sorry. I need to get going,” I grabbed my purse from the drawer I kept it in, “See you tonight,”

“Yeah, okay,” he nodded and I left before he could say anything else about Edward. There was nothing he could say that I didn't already know. I had been a naïve fool to ever marry the man and I was paying for that mistake now. I could live with that, but I couldn't live with my daughter paying the price too. That was the part that was really destroying me.

I arrived at the hotel, where the charity event was being held, by cab later that evening. The traffic into the city had been terrible, but thankfully I had been prepared and ordered a cab thirty minutes early, knowing Edward would be fuming if I arrived late.

He was going directly from the office, so when I walked into the lobby he was waiting there for me impatiently, storming towards me angrily the second he saw me.

As much as I hated him, I could still appreciate his handsome looks. He was tall and toned, his light blonde hair coiffed perfectly to the side. He looked good in his designer tuxedo and he carried himself with an elegance I had never quite managed to fake. But the anger contorting his face, as he

looked me up and down, destroyed all of his good looks, revealing the evil, I knew only too well, that lurked within.

“You’re late!” he snapped as he grabbed my arm and wrenched me to his side. I fought the urge to check the time, knowing I wasn’t late. I had been watching the time on my cell the whole drive in, constantly assessing how much time I had left to get there, so I knew I was at least ten minutes earlier than we had agreed to meet, but I didn’t argue. It wasn’t worth it. I could never be right. “What the hell are you wearing? You look ridiculous!” he hissed as he tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow and escorted me towards the ball room like nothing was wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I replied instinctively, but I didn’t understand what was wrong with what I had chosen. It was a floor length, emerald, green ballgown, with an empire waistline which allowed for the bump I had rapidly grown over the last few weeks.

“You look fat! Surely you could have done more to hide that!” he waved a hand at my stomach and spat his words with disgust. It was hard to believe he was talking about his own unborn child. If only all of the other guests, who he was sending charming smiles to, could hear the venom he was spitting.

“I’m sorry Edward,” I apologized again. I was too tired to argue and making a scene in that moment would end very badly for me later. I had to do all I could to keep the peace, for my sake and for that of our child he had no desire whatsoever in coming into this world.

He led us both directly to his father, Frank. The man was an older replica of his son, holding court amongst several other high ranking guests at the event, over by the bar. He was

charismatic, I gave him that, but he was just as much of an asshole as his son behind closed doors, maybe even worse. Edwards mother had killed herself with an overdose when he was seven years old and I was pretty sure I understood why.

“Ed! Madeline!” he said animatedly when he saw us approaching. “How wonderful you could join us!” He leaned in to kiss my cheek and I fought not to recoil, instead plastering a pleasant smile on my face, as was expected. “Excuse us,” he said as he threw a charming smile at the group he had been chatting with. “I just need to introduce my son to a few people.”

“Sorry we’re late, father,” Edward told him as soon as we were out of earshot.

“Do you have any idea how it looks when my son can’t get here on time?” Frank hissed angrily.

“I’m sorry Frank. The traffic...”

“Oh stop, you stupid girl!” he snapped, cutting me off. “I don’t want to hear it now. Just get out there and start mingling. The election is coming up this year and I need you to win hearts and minds,” he told us.

I knew my part as Edward led me around the room. I had been playing it for some time now. I smiled at the right times, made small talk, but for the most part kept my mouth shut and allowed Edward to play his part too. It was exhausting, and the heels I had worn were agony to walk in. Two hours in and all I wanted was to slip off my shoes and collapse in a corner.

This pregnancy wasn’t like my first with Willow. This one was draining me of all I had, it seemed. For the first three months I

had done nothing but vomit constantly. When that passed this bone deep exhaustion set in, and it was persistent. It didn't help that I had never slept very well. As a rule I got around three or four hours a night. I figured it was a side effect of the many unsafe places I had lived in as a kid, never daring to sleep more than absolutely necessary for fear of what would happen to me when I was out, but whatever it was, it had stayed with me for life. Usually I managed just fine, but with this life growing within, I was worn out and run down.

"Excuse me a moment," I asked politely, looking to the police chief's wife who I had been chatting with. I slipped away, headed for the ladies room. I just needed to sit down for a few moments and I'd be better, I was sure.

I was almost to the ladies' rest room, off to the side of the ball room, when a huge body stepped right in front of me. I only just managed to stop short of ploughing into him.

"I'm so sorry," I hurried to apologize as I looked up, praying I hadn't almost collided with someone Frank would deem important.

"Maddie?" The voice came just as I met those dark brown eyes I knew, but hadn't seen in so very long. With a gasp I took a step back, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from those beautiful chocolate depths. "It is you," he said softly.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I asked as my brain reeled and tried to take in who stood before me. .

"I had a meeting with the chief of police and he invited me along. It's so good to see you. I didn't believe it was really you when I saw you across the room," he told me.

I didn't know what to say as I took all of him in. Hunter Coleman. One of the guys who had abandoned and destroyed me so many years before. He was even more handsome than I remembered, his hair the same dark color but now neatly cut into a longer-on-top style. He was dressed in a tuxedo that fit him like it was made for him, and underneath his body was broad and very obviously toned. He had to work out a lot to look that good, I thought to myself.

Every feeling I had ever had about him flooded me at once. He was still so handsome and attractive, and instantly I felt the crush I had always had on him – on all four of them, actually – hit me hard. I felt the comfort and safety, that having any of them close had always made me feel, flood right back in and I wanted nothing more than to have him wrap his arms around me and comfort me. Then I felt the anger and hatred that had brewed within me since the day I actually accepted the fact they had left me behind without a word,

“How are you? It really is so good to see you,” he told me, his face filling with that smile that had comforted me after some of the worst moments of my life. He had a strong angular jaw, covered with stubble I was sure he styled just so. It made him look older than I remembered him, but not in a bad way. No, there was nothing ‘bad’ about the way Hunter had matured.

“Is it really?” I asked as I lifted my chin and glared at him, deciding it was my best option to stick with anger.

“Of course it is. We've been so worried about you. We hated leaving you...”

“Then why did you?” I demanded, cutting him off. “In fact, don't even answer that! I don't even care anymore. Just leave me alone, Hunter!” I snapped as I stormed past him, but he reached out and grabbed my arm, stopping me.

“Maddie, please. Just let me explain,” he started, but before he could go on someone else appeared at my side.

“Maddie, everything okay here?” Nico asked. I looked up at him, so handsome and suave looking in his black tuxedo. It was straining over his wide shoulders, which just made him even sexier. Even in the chaos of my thoughts on seeing Hunter so unexpectedly, I couldn’t deny the attraction I felt for Nico as I took him in.

“Not really,” I admitted as I fought not to allow any more emotion out before Hunter. No way I was going to let him know how much he and the others abandoning me had destroyed me.

“I suggest you take your hand off of her, Hunter,” Nico growled.

“You know him?” I gasped as I looked to Nico.

“Yeah. We served together and his company supplies all of our body armor. What’s going on?” Nico asked as he grabbed my other arm and pulled me closer to him. I didn’t argue, since I felt better with him at my side.

“Are you two together?” Hunter demanded as he glared at Nico.

“He’s my boss, not that it’s any of your business!” I threw back angrily.

“What’s going on? Do you guys know each other?” Nico asked.

“No!” I said, at the same time Hunter nodded.

“Maddie!” Edwards angry hiss had me turning to face him as he stormed towards us. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? You walked away from the damn police chief’s wife!” He stood at my side then glared down at where Nico was holding my wrist loosely between us.

“I’m sorry. I just needed a moment. I wasn’t feeling well,” I hurried to explain as I pulled my hand free of Nico, and fought not to look at Hunter again.

“Don’t even start that bullshit! We don’t have time for it!” Edward spat angrily as he grabbed my arm and squeezed it hard. I tried not to show the stab of pain on my face, knowing Nico would be watching.

“Don’t speak to her like that,” Nico snapped as he glared at Edward. “She’s pregnant and she feels unwell. Don’t you think you should be taking care of her instead of being a dick?”

“Nico, it’s fine. I’m okay.”

“No you’re not. You’re pale and your hands are shaking,” Hunter cut in. “How far along are you?”

“Who the hell are you?” Edward demanded.

“Hunter Coleman. Who the hell are *you*?” Hunter threw back.

“This is her asshole husband, Edward Foster,” Nico told him.

Fearing this was all going to escalate into a scene that Frank would definitely disapprove of, I turned to face Edward and put on my best smile.

“We should get back to the police chief and his wife,” I suggested. “Your father is headed their way.” I nodded behind him to his father who was stalking across the room, and that got him moving, thankfully. His father would be outraged if the police chief told him we had abandoned them mid conversation, and Edward knew it.

I chanced one glance back to Hunter as we moved away from him. His eyes were fixed on me, all of the intensity I remembered him having focused on me.

I had waited and wished for so long to see him and the others one day, and now there he stood. I looked around a little, hoping the others were with him, but saw no sign of them.

I knew I was supposed to hate him for leaving me. And I had, for a long time. I had hated all of them for abandoning me that day. But that hatred had never stopped me from missing them all and it had never fixed the huge void left inside of me the day I lost them. Nothing ever would.

CHAPTER 2

HUNTER

“That motherfucker is Maddie’s husband?” I growled as I glared at the back of the fucker who was dragging Maddie away from me. The way he had spoken to her was one thing, but I hadn’t missed the way he had grabbed and squeezed her wrist painfully. She had tried hard to hide her flinch of pain, but I knew her too well.

“Yeah. He’s a prick, but she won’t leave him. How do you know her?” Nico asked. I knew the guy pretty well. We had worked together on a couple of overseas ops when we were serving, and I trusted him almost as much as I trusted my brothers.

“We knew each other when we were kids. She was like our little sister for a few years, but we left her behind when we had to split,” I explained. It was the biggest mistake we had ever made and we all regretted it. We had tried to track her down in the years since, but we had never found her. Now here she was. And she hated me, it seemed.

“Well maybe you should try and reconnect. God knows she needs someone to get her the hell away from that motherfucker,” Nico said bitterly.

“He hurts her?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so. I’ve seen bruises on her and he’s a real piece of work. When I pushed her though, she said she’d quit and I didn’t want that. At least I can keep an eye on her and be close if she needs someone as long as she works at Milite,” Nico explained.

“Who is he?”

“D.A.’s son, Edward Foster. He’s an attorney. They’ve been married for years. They’ve got a little girl too, Willow. She’s about three or four now I think, real little sweetheart,” Nico went on, but all I heard was the name.

“Willow?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Maddie brings her into the office occasionally. Such a smart little thing. My sister, Mia, adores her.”

“Willow,” I repeated. That couldn’t be a coincidence. Had Maddie named her daughter after our tree? Was she holding onto some memory of us, just as we had all been for her?

“What’s wrong with you, Hunt?” Nico asked.

“Sorry. It’s just a shock seeing Maddie. Me and the guys have been looking for her for years. We always regretted leaving her behind. As soon as we got settled we started searching for her. I can’t believe she’s actually here,” I explained.

“You think you might be able to get through to her? I hate her being with that fucker,” Nico asked.

“I hope so, but I need to talk to the others. It would be better if we could all speak to her and apologize for all that happened together,” I replied. “I’m flying home tomorrow morning. I’ll talk to them and we’ll come back together as soon as we can. Can you look out for her? Let me know if anything goes down with her bastard of a husband? We’ll get back as soon as we can and try to set up a meeting with her.”

She hated us all, and with good reason. We had abandoned her after promising we wouldn't leave her, but we had a good reason for it, and she needed to know.

I didn't expect it to be easy to get her trust again, but we needed to try. We had been searching for her for years and now we had our opportunity to make up for all we'd done. We had to try. Being apart from her had only reinforced just how much she meant to all of us, and we had already lost too much. We couldn't lose her too.

She was so beautiful as she stood across the room laughing with another, slightly older woman. She had changed so much since we last saw her. She was a woman now, curves and all. Her body was thin, but there was the hint of a curvy ass in that spectacular dress she wore. Her hair was still the same fiery shade of red, but now it hung down her back in glistening curls, the various shades of red shining in the lights of the ball room. Her eyes had been just as I remembered them when she stood right before me, glaring with anger, that beautiful pale brown, almost like caramel. She was everything the guys and I had imagined, and so much more.

We needed to get her the hell away from that no-good sonofabitch she was married to. The idea that he was hurting her had my blood boiling and I was fighting not to storm over there and take the piece of shit out.

"Of course I'll look out for her, man. I always do. She's a nice girl and I hate what she's dealing with. Not so sure about telling you everything though. She didn't exactly seem friendly with you," Nico pointed out.

"I know and I totally deserve that. We left her behind and we never should have done that," I sighed. "We have a lot to make

up for, but we really do care about her Nico.”

“Fine,” he gave in with a nod. “I’ll keep you in the loop, but hurry the fuck up with whatever you’re planning. There’s only so long I can hold back from kicking that fucktard’s ass,” He added as he nodded toward Maddie’s husband, who was laughing smarmily with a group of other assholes at this bullshit party I’d been dragged to. But I couldn’t complain when it had brought me back to the girl I had been in love with since I was seventeen years old. She belonged with us and nothing was going to stop us getting her back.

MADDIE

It was after one A.M. by the time we got back home. I paid our babysitter, Kiri, with the money Edward had given me in the car on the ride home, for just that purpose, then showed her out as I thanked her, watching her walk down the street until she was safely home. She was a young teaching student who lived with her parents down the street and babysat for extra money. She was a nice kid and Willow loved spending time with her.

As Edward stood in the kitchen pouring himself a glass of red wine, I bypassed him to check on Willow. It was never a good sign when he continued drinking after a function like the one we had attended, so I planned to leave him to it and slip into bed. I was exhausted and feeling lightheaded, having barely eaten that day. I just hadn’t had time, and now I was way too weary to start making anything.

I smiled when I slipped into Willow’s jungle themed bedroom and found her fast asleep with Mr. Roar, her stuffed lion, which she carried everywhere with her. Her bright blonde hair was wild as always and she was snoring just ever so slightly. She looked angelic as I placed a gentle kiss on her cheek.

“Night, night, peanut,” I whispered as I pulled the blankets up over her shoulders, before slipping out of the room.

As soon as I got into our bedroom, I slipped off the long dress and laid it on the bed, then headed for the bathroom to wash up.

Glancing in the mirror as I washed all of the makeup from my face, I hated the person who looked back. She looked old and exhausted, with too pale skin, dark smudges under her eyes, and a gaunt look to her face. I didn't recognize myself in that woman and yet I knew it was me, or who Edward had turned me into anyway. Day by day, week after week, month after month, and year after year he was chipping away at me. I feared he would erase me completely before I was able to escape him.

Unable to look at myself any longer I turned my back on the mirror as I brushed my teeth. I didn't have time to dwell on it all. I had to get some sleep before getting up at six the next morning to start the day all over again.

Once I was finished with my nighttime routine I returned to the bedroom to hang up the dress, ready to be dry cleaned, then I pulled on some black leggings and a baggy t-shirt that comfortably fit over my baby bump. They were more comfortable than my pajamas and I really needed some comfort after being tortured for hours in that dress and heels.

I was pulling back the comforter, ready to collapse into bed, when Edward appeared at the bedroom door. His suit jacket and bow tie were gone, his shirt sleeves now rolled up to his elbows. He had a large glass of red wine in his hand as he casually leant in the doorway and glared at me.

“Who was he?” he demanded, his words a little slurred.

“Who?” I asked on a sigh.

“That fucker at the party!” he yelled.

“Nico?”

“No! Not fucking Nico! I know who fucking Nico is, don’t I?” he snapped as he stormed into the room and stopped at the foot of the bed. “That other fucker you were making googly eyes at!”

“I wasn’t making g...” my words were cut off when he threw the full glass of wine at me, the cold liquid shocking me into silence as I recoiled back. It landed right in my face and ran down my t-shirt and onto the white bedding and cream carpet below.

“Don’t even fucking bother denying it. I watched you with both of them. You’re a whore!” he yelled as he threw the glass at the wall behind me, the loud smash echoing through the room. He took a menacing step closer to me and grabbed my arm in a bruising grip.

“Edward, please. Nico...he’s my boss and I d-don’t even know the other guy,” I cried as he wrenched me into his front.

“You’re a damned liar!” he spat as he turned me around violently, keeping a hold of my arm in the process until I felt something in my wrist pop. I cried out as pain shot up through my right arm. It was unbearable for a few moments, and I panicked he had broken something, but Edward wasn’t done, and as he shoved me forwards as hard as he could, I used my

good arm to try and catch myself on my knees before my baby bump hit the ground. The pain that ricocheted through my wrist had me crying out again, as did the kicks to my ribs Edward quickly followed with. I did all I could to protect my stomach, but he was wild, hitting and kicking anywhere he could reach and I feared for my baby and myself.

“Edward please!” I cried. “Th-the baby!”

“I don’t want that fucking thing!” he sneered as he shoved my exhausted throbbing body down onto my side. I curled into a ball and he laid into my back. “It’s probably not even mine!”

Then my worst nightmare happened.

“Mommy!” I heard Willow scream as my bedroom door crashed open against the wall. I looked up panicked, but I was too late. Willow ran right over to me and got into the way of Edward’s attack.

“Get out you stupid little brat!” he roared as he grabbed her and shoved her hard at the wall. She cried out in fear, then screamed in a way that told me she was hurt badly as she collided with the wall.

“Willow!” I cried as my heart seemed to freeze in my chest. Ignoring all of the pain of the movement I got to my knees and crawled with my good arm over to where she was crumpled in a ball on the floor where she had landed.

“Fucking whore!” Edward raged as he stormed from the room, but I didn’t care where he had gone as I finally reached my daughter. She was crying and cradling her left arm in much the same way I was cradling my right. It was clear there was a

break in her forearm, from the odd angle it sat at, and tears filled my eyes as the horror of what I had done set in.

“Mommy,” she cried hysterically. “My arm h-hurts.”

“I know, peanut. I’ll make it better, I promise,” I whispered as I gathered her up and forced my battered body to get me upright. I had done this. I had been holding off getting away from Edward again and again, and now Willow was hurt because of it.

“Daddy hurt you. Why’d he hurt you like that?” she sniffled as tears tracked down her face.

“I’m okay, sweetie. Right now we need to take care of you, okay?”

“I need Mr. Roar mommy.”

“We’ll get him,” I promised as I tiptoed from my room and next door into hers. I grabbed Mr. Roar and a blanket from the bed, wrapping it around her as best I could with one mangled arm and a child in my other. She settled a little once she had the stuffed toy tucked against her and I marveled at how brave she was being, knowing how much pain she was in.

As I passed through the house I realized the crashing and smashing I could hear was coming from the kitchen, which is obviously where Edward had gone to vent the rest of his rage. It meant I had a clear shot to the front door, if I hurried.

Willow pressed harder against me at the sound of smashing and Edward’s enraged rants, so I just held her tighter in an attempt to reassure her as I ran across the living room and

straight to the front door, only slowing once to grab my cell from where I had left it on the side table beside the front door.

I slipped out, closing the door as quietly as I could behind me, hoping Edward wouldn't even notice we had left for some time.

"Mommy, where are we going?" Willow asked as I ran down the street and away from our house as fast as I could.

"To get your arm fixed, peanut. I know it hurts, but we'll find a doctor to make it all better, okay?" I gasped as I continued running.

"And you too, right mommy? You gots some owies too," she pointed out. She was shaking hard in my arms and her voice was hoarse from crying.

"Right. Me too. We're going to be okay, honey. I promise. We'll be just fine."

Eventually I made it to the park where I brought Willow every Saturday morning. I collapsed down on a bench, my feet raw from running down the road barefoot, and my whole body screaming for relief from the pain I was putting it through. Willow was quietly sobbing against me as I settled her in my lap and used my good hand to pull my cell from where I had stuffed it in the top of my leggings as I ran.

My hand trembled as I unlocked the screen and searched for the one person I had to call. I hated doing it, but I had no one else and we were desperate.

“Maddie?” Nico answered after two rings. He sounded half asleep and I knew I had woken him.

“Nico,” I gasped, breathlessly. “I...I’m so sorry, but I didn’t have anyone else to call and Willow...she’s hurt and we don’t h-have anywhere else to go. I don’t know what to do,” I cried down the phone all at once.

“Maddie, take a breath and slow down for me, sweetheart. Where are you? Can you tell me that?”

“We...we’re at the park...sunny side park, n-near my house.”

“That’s good, Maddie. Just keep breathing. I’m headed to my car. I’m going to come and get you. Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Yes, and Willow. He...he hurt Willow,” I whimpered.

“Is she conscious, Maddie?”

“Yes, but I th-think her arm is br-broken,” I replied as I fought to keep it together for my daughter.

“And you? Did you hit your head? Are you bleeding?”

“No. I’m okay. I’m just scared he’ll come looking for us,” I admitted in a whisper, hoping Willow wouldn’t hear.

“I’m in my car now. I’m going to be there in less than ten minutes, Maddie. Just hold on, okay. Can you hold on for me?”

“I’m so sorry Nico. I just...I didn’t have anyone else to call,” I whimpered.

“Hey, enough of that. We’re friends. Of course you should have called me. I’m so glad you did,” he told me.

“Mommy, I’m c-cold and my arm is really, really hurting now,” Willow whimpered through her sobs.

“I know, peanut. Nico’s on his way, okay? He’s going to help us,” I promised as I adjusted the blanket around her in an effort to keep her warm, then cradled her even tighter against my front. “Just snuggle Mr. Roar close and keep him warm, okay?”

“I likes Nico,” she sniffled.

“Nico?” I said as I lifted the cell back to my ear, and prayed he was still there. I felt better to have his voice with me.

“I’m here, sweetheart. I’ll be with you in a few minutes. How’s Willow?”

“In pain and cold. How could I let this happen?” My teeth were chattering, and my body was trembling from the mix of adrenaline and the cold.

“Don’t do that, Maddie. None of this is on you. You got her out. She’s going to be okay,” he told me.

I buried my face into Willow’s hair and silently cried as I fell apart. How had I made such a huge fucking mess of not only

my life, but my daughters and my unborn child's too? I was so stupid!

I panicked when headlights lit up the park from the road a few minutes later, sure it would be Edward coming after us, but Nico was quick to call out to me, assuring me it was him as he ran towards us.

“Hey cutie,” Nico greeted Willow as he crouched down before us and caught her attention. “You gonna come and get in my nice warm car?” he offered.

“I gots a bad owie, Nic Nic,” she told him as she tried to show him her arm then flinched and cried out in pain.

“Keep it nice and still, okay, princess? We’ll get you to the doctor and they can fix it up for you in a fancy cast.”

“And mommy too? Daddy hurted her and she’s sad,” Willow told him as she looked up at me where I was fighting to keep it together.

“And mommy too. I’m going to take care of both of you, okay?”

“Promise?” Willow pushed.

“I promise, cutie,” Nico agreed.

“Good,” Willow sniffled.

“Can you stand, sweetheart?” Nico asked as he carefully took Willow from me and cradled her against his chest in one arm.

“Yeah,” I assured him. “I’m okay.” He offered a hand, which I gratefully accepted and I was relieved when he pulled me to my feet and tucked me against his side, helping me across the park and to his car.

Once Willow and I were buckled into the back seat together, Nico jumped to front and started for the city.

“I’m bringing you to the private clinic, okay Maddie? I figure no one will think to look for you there,” Nico said as he made eye contact with me in the rear view mirror. I understood what he wasn’t saying for Willow’s sake. Edward or his father were likely to come looking for us when they realized we were gone, and the private clinic Milite favored, on the other side of the city, would buy us a little time.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I had no idea how I was going to pay for the treatment we both needed, but that could be a concern for another day. “Can you...will you make sure my next paycheck doesn’t get paid to my account, Nico. I...I’m going to need that money,” I admitted.

“You don’t have access to your bank account?” Nico asked, clearly shocked.

“No,” I shook my head tiredly. “I don’t have anything.”

“It’s going to be okay, Maddie. We’ll take care of you both. You’re not going back to him,” Nico told me firmly.

I didn’t say anything else as we drove through the city. My mind was overrun by the image of Edward throwing our daughter into that wall, playing over and over again. I hated

myself so damned much for allowing it to happen. It was all my fault, no matter what anyone told me. If I'd just have found the guts to leave the bastard this would never have happened. I would never ever forgive myself for this.

I couldn't stop my thoughts from straying to Hunter too. Seeing him that night was messing with my mind. 'What if' scenarios were playing in my head. What if they hadn't have abandoned me? What if I'd gone to live with them when I turned eighteen? What if I still had them in my corner as I did for the time that I knew them? What if they had loved and cared for me all of these years? What if I hadn't been so very alone in the world? Maybe I'd never have met Edward at all.

But they did abandon me. They broke me, and because of how messed up and alone I had felt as a result, I had made some seriously fucked up life choices along the way. It had to stop. I had to get it together. I was a mother, with a daughter who needed me and another baby on the way. I had to stop fucking up and get this shit right. I would not subject my children to a childhood as messed up as my own. It couldn't happen that way.

CHAPTER 3

MADDIE

Three hours later, Willow was finally asleep, tucked up with Mr. Roar in a bed beside me, in a private room at the clinic Nico had brought us to.

Her arm was broken, but the doctor had been able to reset the bones without surgery and place a plaster cast around it which she would need to keep on for the next six weeks. Nico had been great at staying with her and entertaining her to keep her distracted as she was treated.

Meanwhile I had been for an ultrasound to check the baby was still doing okay, and had my own arm encased in a brace. It wasn't broken – just a nasty sprain, thankfully. Otherwise I just had some bruising around my ribs and down my back. It was painful, but the doctor had assured me it would heal with some rest and icing. I had cried when the on call obstetrician assured me the baby was still doing just fine inside of me, so relieved to hear it.

Then the police arrived, called in by the staff at the clinic automatically because Willow had been hurt. I told them everything, knowing if I wasn't honest CPS could become involved and I really didn't want that.

The officers I spoke to were patient and understanding as I told them everything. They tried hard to disguise their shock when I told them who Edward was – the son of the D.A. - but I saw it, nonetheless. When they left they assured me Edward would be picked up and questioned, but I didn't hold out much hope that they would charge him and even if they did, his father would get him out of it. Still, at least all he had done was on record, along with photos of our injuries to back it up.

It would help me if Frank forced Edward to try and take custody of my kids, as they had both threatened to do in the past. No judge would give him custody after what he had done to Willow that night.

“Hey,” Nico greeted quietly as he walked into the room and looked to Willow. “She finally crashed?”

“Yeah. The doctor gave her some pain meds and she passed out.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he came over and sat in the chair beside my bed, handing me one of the coffees he had been out to get.

“Relieved the baby’s okay. Guilty Willow had to see any of that, let alone get hurt. Stupid for ever being with that waste of space in the first place,” I blurted.

“You’re out now, and none of what he did was your fault, Maddie. Don’t let him put this on you. He’s the asshole who hurt his own child. I hope they put him in jail and throw away the fucking key,” Nico hissed.

“They won’t,” I sighed. “His daddy will get him off any charges they bring.”

“I know,” Nico sighed as he looked down to his feet. “That’s why you have to get away from here.”

“Away? Where would I go?” I asked, looking to him with surprise.

Chicago wasn't home. It never had been. I was from Washington, and that was where Edward and I met. I had moved to Chicago with him when he finished his law degree, no question, but I had never really felt at home there. I couldn't return to Washington either though. I had no one I knew there and no money, place to live or job. At least here I had my job.

"I have my attorney filing for a restraining order against Edward on your behalf. That will allow you to take Willow out of state. While I don't want to let you go, I think you have to, sweetheart. You're not safe here. Frank Foster is going to hate the press this situation will create and who knows what he'll do to end it, not to mention Edward is a fucking psycho. You have to get away."

"I don't disagree, Nico, but I have nowhere to go. Right now all I have is my friendship with you and Emilia, and my job at Milite. I can't lose those things too," I pointed out.

"Mia and I will always be here for you, and if you really want to stay, I'll set you up in the Milite building and get you round the clock security to keep you safe. We'll protect you and Willow, whatever it takes," he promised, making me feel emotional with his kindness. "But you do have another option and I want you to really consider it for me, okay?"

"What other option?" I asked, confused. Nico held up a finger as he got to his feet and went to the door. He opened it and stuck his head out, then when he came back in, he was followed by the last person I expected to see.

"Hunter?" I squeaked as he walked into the room, now dressed in jeans and a navy t-shirt that sculpted to his defined body beneath. He looked from me to Willow and back, a look of anger filling his face. It was funny that despite how much he

had grown up and changed, I still recognized every expression that crossed his face.

Anger filled my own expression at that thought and the reminder of why I hated Hunter so damned much. I glared from him and back to Nico.

“What the hell is he doing here, Nico?” I growled.

“Just hear him out, okay? I know him and his brother’s, Maddie, and I trust them. Just give them a chance,” Nico implored, then he left the room before I could utter any further protest.

“What are you doing here, Hunter?” I asked as I struggled to sit up a little more. I hated the fact he was seeing me at my absolute lowest.

“I asked Nico to call me if anything happened. I never expected it to be so soon, or this bad though,” he replied as he reached up and ran his hand through his hair, just as he used to when he was stressed as a teenager.

“You had no right to ask that of him, and he definitely had no right to tell you my damned business!” I snapped, the sheer effort of raising my voice so much causing my ribs to throb angrily. “Just go, Hunter. Get out,” I told him breathlessly. I was fighting an internal battle not to allow myself to look up into his eyes again.

“Maddie, please just give me a few minutes. I just want to help you,” he pleaded. This was why I couldn’t meet his eyes. I knew if I did I would give in. I could never say no to him.

“Why? What do you care? You washed your hands of me a long time ago.” The bitterness in my tone was obvious and I hoped he caught it. I took a deep, steadying breath and looked up, glaring at him with all of the anger and hatred seeing him again had stirred up. “You left me! You walked away and abandoned me!”

“No we didn’t, Maddie. We never planned to leave you like that. We had no choice,” he countered as he moved closer and sat in the chair Nico had vacated.

“Yeah, okay,” I sighed, annoyed. I could argue all night, but I just wanted him gone. It was too painful seeing him and remembering all of the hope he and the others had filled me with so many years ago, only to leave me crushed.

“It’s true. Something happened and we had to split. We wouldn’t have left you if we didn’t have to. You know that.”

“I don’t even care anymore, Hunt. It was a long time ago and we’ve all grown up since then. Just leave. I don’t want to talk to you and I certainly don’t need your help,” I threw back.

“We fucked up, okay? Is that what you want to hear? We did leave you, but we felt like we had no choice. We thought we were doing the right thing for you.”

“Even if you had no choice about leaving, you did have a choice about calling me. You could have reached out and let me know you were okay! Hell, a fucking postcard telling me you were alive would have been something! You could have done something so I didn’t feel like I had just been abandoned by the only people who ever gave a flying fuck about me!” I raged, breathless once again by the time I was done, pain shooting through my bruised side from the effort. Tears filled

my eyes and I had to look away from him as I tried to calm down.

“Maddie. I’m so sorry. It was just all so fucked up and we thought we were doing the right thing keeping you out of it. I want to explain, but it’s not just my story to tell,” he sighed. “We thought we were doing what was right for you. You were happy there and you had a decent home. I know it wasn’t the best, but you were safe. We couldn’t offer you that back then.”

“A decent home? Safe?” I scoffed through my tears, my rage once again parked by his words. “You have no idea, Hunter! I was in Hell there and the only thing that kept me going was the four of you. Then you left me! You left me in Hell, all alone with *him!*” My last words came out in a squeak as I pushed through my emotions.

“What?” Hunter leaned forward and looked at me with a hard stare. “What the fuck are you talking about? You told us you were okay there. You told us Clive and Julie were taking care of you. We knew they didn’t feed you enough, but we figured they were safe at least.”

“Just fuck off, Hunter!” I snapped as I tried hard to halt any more tears from falling. I couldn’t allow him to see me so weak. I needed to stop *being* so damned weak.

“No! Tell me, Maddie. Was that fucker hurting you?” he growled.

“It’s none of your business!”

“Still so fucking stubborn!” he hissed as he ran his hand through his messy hair again. He took a deep breath and then looked to me, his face filled with a mixture of sadness and

annoyance that I hadn't just given in to him. "I'm so sorry that we left you. We really did think we were doing what was best for you. We had no money, no place to go and no way to take care of you. We thought we were leaving you in a safe home," he explained sadly, sounding exhausted.

I looked over to him and saw the genuineness in what he was telling me. I wasn't too proud to admit it settled a part inside of me that had been devastated for so many years. It was everything to believe they hadn't just abandoned me. That I had actually meant something to them after all. But that didn't fix what they had done.

"You knew me better than that," I told him. "I didn't need anything except the four of you. You were all I had."

"We messed up, Maddie. It was crazy and we were freaking out. We just ran. We realized pretty soon after that we'd made a mistake, but by then it was too late."

"Too late? You couldn't have called me? You couldn't write me a damned letter?" I barked, annoyed by his weak argument.

"It's complicated. I want to tell you everything but the others should be here. It's their story too." He took another deep breath and inched even closer to my bedside. "We searched for you. We've been looking for you for the last few years, but we couldn't find you," he continued.

"I changed my name," I told him, taking a little pity on him. He looked like he was close to breaking, and as mad as I was, I still cared about him. "When I turned eighteen I got my CPS file and it had my dad's name listed. I changed my last name to his in the hopes of a new start. That worked out really well for me," I sighed as I glanced to my daughter.

“You called her Willow?” he asked. I looked to him, surprised and he smiled a little, “Nico told me.”

“I missed you all so much. I just wanted a little piece of what we had,” I shrugged, knowing I should be stronger and tougher with him, but I just didn’t have the strength.

“We missed you too.” He reached out and covered my hand with his much larger one. “I want you and Willow to come home with me, Maddie. The guys and I, we have a place in New Jersey. Cam and Ev’s grandfather finally did the right thing and left them everything when he croaked. He left us his business, *Servo*, and his mansion. We live there together and we have a ton of space for you guys. We can protect you both and we can get to know each other again,” he told me.

“You can’t do that, Hunter. You don’t even know me,” I sighed.

“Yes we do. We’ve always known you, Maddie. You belong with us. Please, let us make amends for our mistake. We want you and your beautiful daughter in our lives, where you belong.”

“What about the others?”

“I called them. They were so fucking happy I found you. They want this too, Maddie. We need you,” he pleaded as he gave my hand a squeeze. “We...we joined the army when we split, all of us. Turned out we were pretty good at it too. We did three tours, but on the last one...well, things went bad. Everett...he didn’t come back, Maddie. He’s fucking gone and Cam...he’s a mess. Fuck, we’re all a mess without Ev. We need this. We need you. Please.”

“Oh God!” I gasped. Tears ran down my cheeks as I realized what he had just told me. Everett was gone. My Everett. One of my twins. “Poor Cameron,” I whimpered as I tried to imagine him without his brother, who had always been at his side.

“It’s been three years and he still barely comes out of his damned room. It broke him. He’s lost without Ev. We all are.”

“How did life get so fucked up, Hunter?” I squeaked through my tight throat.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s time we found a way to unfuck it, don’t you?”

“I think it’s too late for that.”

“No, it’s not. We’re here. We can change things now,” he told me, and more than anything I wanted to believe him. But that was the problem. I had believed him before – believed all of them, when they told me things would be okay. I had believed in the hope for a future they had promised me, only to have it all fall down around me and crush me to dust when they left. I couldn’t let that happen again.

“No.” I sat up and took a deep breath, looking right at him. “It’s too late to go back. I’m not going with you, Hunter. You should just leave. Nico already offered to help me and I actually trust him to keep his word.”

“You can trust me, Maddie.”

“No I can’t! I will never trust any of you again. You left me!” I raged, then froze and looked to Willow when she whimpered a little in her sleep. I moved to try and go to her, but Hunter was already beside her, running a soothing hand up her back and whispering sweet words to her until she sighed and settled once again.

“Think about her. She’s not safe here right now,” he said as he turned and came closer to me again. “Your husband is likely to look for you, according to Nico. How long before he gets to you and to Willow? Do you really want to risk that? Are you going to put her through his anger and violence again, just because you’re pissed with us?”

“How dare you?” I hissed, but he cut me off.

“Please Maddie. I get that you’re pissed with us, and you should be, but we never stopped caring about you. We just want to keep the two of you safe, and you will be if you come with me. Your husband has no idea who I am, who any of us are. He won’t have a clue where you are. It will give you time to heal and Willow time to get over what she’s been through. You don’t have to like us. Be as mad as you need to be, but please let us give you somewhere safe to stay,” he pleaded.

I knew he was right. Frank wouldn’t want what had happened getting out, so that meant Edward would be looking for us. Nico would be the first person he’d think we’d go to. I looked over at Willow again, looking so peaceful as she slept. I knew I had to do what was best for her. She had to come before everything, especially my own petty grievances for things that happened over a decade ago.

“I don’t want to make things worse for her,” I sighed. “I have already put her through so much. Moving to a new city, and a new home, it’s going to be a lot.”

“We’ll take care of her. We’ll make her a room in the house that’s all hers. We’ll ensure she has everything she needs and we can have people come to visit that she knows, like Nico and his sister, to make it more familiar. I can get referrals for a child psychologist if you think that would help. We can give her whatever she needs. Whatever you all need.”

“If I come with you, then it’s for her, and for my baby. It doesn’t mean I forgive any of you. I’m not sure I can ever forgive you,” I explained.

“Just give us a chance. When we’re together and you’re ready we can tell you the whole story. I know it won’t fix everything, but if you can just understand why we had to leave.”

“Fine. I definitely want an explanation,” I replied with a nod.

“So you’ll come with me, back to New Jersey?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes, for Willow’s sake, but it’s just temporary until I can work out what to do next. But you should know, I don’t have anything, Hunter. No money. I doubt I’ll even be able to get our clothes from the house. This is it. This is us. A woman who is pretty heavily pregnant and fucked in the head. A child who is likely emotionally scarred, and a stuffed lion. I hope you know what you’re taking on,” I questioned.

“You’re ours, Maddie. I know you’re mad at us, but please believe me when I tell you that we have loved you every minute of every day we have been apart. That makes Willow and that little one inside you, ours too. Let us do this. Let us take care of you and in return, you can try and help us piece ourselves back together too.” I knew when he told me they

loved me, he meant as family, but it was hard not to let my heart flutter at hearing the words I had wanted them all to say to me so many times as a teenager, lusting after the four of them. Somewhere in my heart I had loved them just as fiercely through all of the time we had been apart. They had always been with me in my heart and in my thoughts.

“I’m not yours. Maybe once I was, back when I loved and trusted you all more than anyone or anything in my entire life. Not anymore, though,” I told him firmly.

“All we ask is the chance to win back that love and trust you once had in us. We’ll prove we deserve it again, Maddie. Just give us the chance,” he almost begged.

“I don’t know that you can,” I whispered. “But we’ll come with you,” I added, giving in. “If Nico can get the restraining order so I don’t get arrested for kidnapping, we’ll come with you.”

“You won’t regret it, Maddie. Everything’s going to get better now, I promise,” he told me, just as I’d told my daughter a few hours before. I had to make sure neither of us were lying, for Willow’s sake. I wasn’t sure I could ever forgive them, but deep down I knew I wanted to. *Damn my traitorous heart!* The years I spent with Edward may have hardened it, but deep inside there would always be a soft spot for the boys I once loved. Still loved. Would always love.

Willow and I were discharged from the hospital late the next morning. Hunter had cancelled his flight, which had booked for early that morning, and rescheduled it for the next day, when hopefully we’d be able to go with him.

Nico had taken us back to the Milite building, sure we'd be safest there for now. Two floors of the building were turned into several luxury apartments where some of the employees, including Nico, lived. The building was secure, so I did feel safe there. We were staying in the apartment beside Nico's for the night with Hunter. Nico had been out to buy us both a few changes of clothes and a pair of sneakers each, as well as underwear and pajamas, so we were both now showered and dressed, feeling much more human.

"No silly!" Willow cried as I walked into the living room to find Hunter and Nico both sat on the floor with her, playing with a huge bucket of plastic animals Nico had picked up when he was shopping. "That's a king penguin! He doesn't live in the savannah! He lives in the tarctic!" she announced, outraged as Hunter tried to put a penguin in the African Savannah it looked like she was setting up.

"Silly Hunter! Don't you know anything?" Nico teased as he laughed his ass off.

"Everything okay in here?" I asked as a smile spread across my face. I was just so relieved to see Willow smiling. I couldn't even feel bitter that it seemed to be Hunter who had made it happen.

"Mommy! Did you see what Nic-Nic gots for me?" she asked excitedly. "We're making the Savannah, but then I gots to make the 'tarctic so Hunter can see where the penguins live!" she explained.

"That's great, peanut. I'll come and take a look in just a second," I assured her. I had been trying hard to avoid Hunter as much as possible and I intended to continue in that vein. I needed to stay angry with him, because the minute I wasn't, I

knew I'd crumble and be nice to him, and he didn't deserve that. The truth was that, no matter how mad I was with them for leaving me, I also still cared for and missed them just as much.

"Mommy wait!" she cried, making me pause as she got to her feet and ran over to me. She put her hands to her mouth like she needed to tell me a secret, so I got down onto my knees so she could reach my ear.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked.

"I checked," she whispered in my ear. "I asked him cos his name is 'Hunter' and I had to be sure, but he promised me he's not a hunter really, not like that mean man on the movie," she assured me.

I laughed out loud when I realized she thought Hunter could actually be a hunter just like the villain on *Tarzan*, one of her favorite movies.

"Good work, peanut," I laughed. "But you're right, Hunter is not a hunter. That's just his name and mommy has known him a really long time. He wouldn't hurt any animals," I promised her.

"Or us? He won't hurt us either, will he?" she asked as she looked back to Hunter, then up to me with huge, fear filled eyes. I looked to the guys as tears filled my own eyes, a lump forming in my throat.

"No Willow," I answered tearfully as I pulled her into my arms and held her tight. "Hunter will never hurt us. We're going to live with him and his brothers for a little while and we'll be safe there, okay?" No matter how pissed I was with them, I

knew them enough to know that was true. No amount of time could change who they were deep down. I was sure they were good men, just as I had always known they were good boys years before.

“Will daddy come there?” she asked fearfully, and a sob slipped from me as it just became too much. She was terrified and I had done that to her. I had made my three year old daughter fear people hurting her. “I don’t want daddy to come and stay with us again, mommy. He hurt you and he was always mad at me,” she sniffled.

Strong arms wrapped around me and Willow and I knew it was Nico by the sheer size and strength of him at my back.

“Willow, daddy’s not going to come near you and mommy, okay? You’re going to go with Hunter and you’ll be safe there. You’re going to have lots of fun, and me and Auntie Mia will come and visit you all the time,” Nico explained as I fought for control of my emotions.

“Nico’s right. We’re going to have so much fun. We have a big house with a swimming pool in the yard. And we have a dog there too,” Hunter added as he came closer and sat on the floor at my side, placing a soothing hand on my thigh. As much as I wanted the small comfort he was offering, my bitterness wouldn’t allow it. I lifted my leg enough to dislodge his touch, and he looked to me with hurt in his eyes. *Good, he deserved to feel hurt*, I thought to myself. But I still felt crappy for doing it.

“You do?” Willow lit up at that information. She lifted her head and looked to Hunter, thankfully taking his attention from me. “What’s his name? Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It’s a boy and his name is Dozy because he sleeps a lot,” Hunter laughed, making Willow smile even wider. “No one is ever going to hurt you or mommy again, pumpkin,” he assured her as he reached a hand out to brush the wild hair from her face. “Me and my brothers - Kai and Cameron – we’re going to take good care of you now.”

Willow looked to me for confirmation, her huge eyes wide with question and the need for me to assure her Hunter was telling the truth. It took everything in me to push past the huge lump in my throat to speak.

“Everything is going to be better now, honey. I promise. I’ll make sure of it,” I told her. I had no idea if I could ever forgive Hunter and the others and move forward from there, but they were pretty much all I had at that point. It was a chance I had to take, relying on my own instincts that I was doing the right thing, and the trust Nico seemed to have in them all. But if it didn’t work out then I would have the strength to walk away this time. Never again would I put my children in a situation like the one we had just escaped. They came first from now on, in every decision I ever made. Fear had ruled my life for too long and this had been the wake up call I had needed.

“How about we take a look on the internet so you can show me how you’d like your new room to look?” Hunter suggested to Willow.

“I know what you’ll pick,” Nico spoke up. He was still sat behind me, his arms around me, making me feel safe, and I wasn’t sure I ever wanted him to move. It felt too good. How long had it been since I had been held like that? Certainly never by Edward. Our relationship had just never been that close or caring. I couldn’t remember a single occasion when he had just held me. The last time I felt safe had been in my teens, with the guys. That had been forever ago. “Lots of pink and princesses everywhere, right?” Nico teased.

“Yuck!” Willow scowled at Nico. “I don’t like princesses. I likes animals. Lots and lots of animals, right mommy?” she looked to me, making me smile with the indignation on her face.

“Right. No pink princesses,” I agreed.

“Come and show me then, Willow please, otherwise I might pick something terrible like unicorns,” Hunter said as he got to his feet and held a hand out to her.

“Unicorns aren’t real, silly!” Willow scoffed as she took his hand and followed him to the sofa. I watched them for a few moments as they settled side by side, then looked down at Hunter’s cell together, the whole time Willow lecturing Hunter on what animals were and were not real.

“You doing okay?” Nico asked me quietly. I couldn’t resist my need to sink back into his hard body a little as I breathed in his amazing scent, a mix of sandalwood cologne and leather from the leather jacket he always wore.

“Am I making a huge mistake going with him?” I asked, unable to stop the question from slipping out. I wanted to be strong, but I was so scared I was just messing up all over again.

“I think getting away from here is the best thing for you and Willow right now, Maddie, and I trust Hunter and the others. I know them well and they’re good guys. They’ll keep you both safe.”

“Frank will go crazy when he finds out we’re gone. His perfect family is going to blow up in his face,” I pointed out.

“Screw him and his asshole son. There’s a police report now. If they push this, that report will become public and Frank’s campaign for reelection will be over before it even begins. He’ll realize that pretty fast and I think it will be enough to keep him off of your back. It’s Edward I’m worried about.”

“He won’t come after us unless Frank tells him to. We were nothing but an inconvenience. He’ll be glad to see the back of us,” I assured him.

“So it’s all on Frank then,” Nico sighed. “I think it’s best to get away for now at least, until we know what his next move is. But if you’re not happy there, then you call me, sweetheart, and we’ll figure something else out, okay? I am only ever a phone call away. I will always be here for you.”

“I’m going to miss you,” I admitted. Nico had been nothing but good and kind to me since the day I met him. He was an amazing guy – one I would have loved to have called mine in a different life. He was everything I could ever want – handsome, muscular and all man, but also gentle and understanding when it mattered. I had seen how fiercely protective he was for those he cared about and I was starting to feel like maybe I was beginning to come into that category. He and his sister were the closest thing to friends I had ever had – except for the guys - and I was upset to be leaving them behind.

“No you won’t, because you’re going to see and speak to me often. I’m going to be checking in on you and making sure those guys are treating you right. They don’t and they’ll have me to deal with,” he assured me, making me smile as tears filled my eyes.

“You don’t need to do that,” I protested weakly.

“I know that, but I want to. You and Willow...you matter to me, Maddie. Don’t you forget that, okay?”

“I won’t,” I squeaked through my tight throat. Nico squeezed his arms around me a little more, but I loved the way he was keeping his hold loose enough that it wouldn’t hurt my bruised side and back. He was being careful with me in a way I wasn’t sure anyone else in my life had ever been.

“Let’s make some food, okay? You haven’t eaten in hours,” he suggested as he released me from his arms and got to his feet in one graceful movement that belied his size. He offered a hand to me, to help me up too, which I took, but it didn’t stop the sense of mourning I felt for losing the feel of him wrapped around me.

I shook the thought away as he released my hand once I was up. I shouldn’t be thinking that way. I just escaped the nightmare of a relationship. I couldn’t even contemplate another – not when things were such a mess. And certainly not with a guy who was a million miles out of my league.

CHAPTER 4

MADDIE

“Mommy, come look! We’re in the clouds!” Willow cried excitedly. She was in Hunter’s lap, having jumped up from the seat beside me to go to him, the second the stewardess had told us we could move around. She was staring out of the window, a look of pure fascination on her face.

It was the first time she had been on a plane and I had been worried she would freak out on me at takeoff, but she didn’t. I should have known better really. My daughter was somewhat of a daredevil and she loved doing anything that was new and exciting.

No, instead it was me who was freaking out, for several reasons. One was that I had realized, as Hunter pulled his rental car up in front of a company plane, at a private air strip, that morning, just how stinking rich he and the others were. The plane belonged to the company the three of them now ran – *Servo*. It was a manufacturer and distributor of body armor and they supplied not only the military, but also several huge police departments. It was a company founded by Ev and Cam’s grandfather and he had left it to them, as his only living descendants, when he passed, despite the fact he had refused to take them in when they had been orphaned at five years old.

I had never been on a private plane before. In fact I had only flown twice in my entire life – to Hawaii and back for my honeymoon with Edward, and that had been commercial, the both of us packed into tiny seats on a crowded plane. This was very different and the sheer level of luxury surrounding me as I sat in the butter soft, cream, leather seat, the plane interior around me spacious and covered in fancy polished wood paneling, was making me feel very out of place. The

stewardess who was poured perfectly into her tight fitting uniform and made up with immaculate hair and makeup, wasn't helping either, especially when she continuously flirted with Hunter every time she spoke to him.

Beside her I looked like a troll that Hunter had dragged out from under a bridge. My hair was in need of washing, greasy and wild, scraped into a hap hazard ponytail which had been a struggle with one hand out of action. I hadn't had any makeup so obviously wasn't wearing any, and I just pulled on a pair of yoga pants and hooded sweater Nico had picked up for me, when I dressed that morning, wanting to be comfortable for the journey. I knew Edward would be turning colors, steam coming from his ears with rage if he saw me out in public looking like that, and that knowledge provided me with a little comfort as I fought not to compare myself with the stewardess.

I was also freaking out because it had hit me as we took off, that I was leaving behind everything I had, which, granted wasn't much.

Nico had been with us until we stepped onto the plane, and my goodbye with him had been tearful, despite his promises that he would come to visit us as soon as Emilia and the guys were back to take care of Milite. I just hated leaving the comfort and security he had provided since the moment he picked us up in the park, or if I were more honest with myself, since the first week that I started working for him. He had always been there for me - a small light in a dark life I was surviving through, and it terrified me that he wouldn't be close by if everything went wrong.

And that was the other reason I was freaking out. I had no idea what I was walking into. I didn't know Hunter, Kai, and Cameron anymore. I hadn't known them for a very long time, and here I was dragging my daughter across the country to live with them. I felt like an idiot for doing it. I could see my next

huge mistake just unfolding before my eyes and I was terrified of fucking things up for Willow and my unborn child all over again. The worry that I was a complete idiot was causing my stomach to turn violently. The knowledge that we had nothing if this was all a huge mistake, torturing and taunting me. I didn't even have money to get us away from there if I had to. I was such an idiot!

"Mommy?" I looked over to Willow again when I heard the worry in her tone. She and Hunter were both watching me and I realized I had zoned out completely.

"Sorry peanut," I sighed.

"Look," she pointed to the window again. "We're really up in the clouds. They're really fluffy. I wants to touch them."

"That's awesome, honey. Maybe you could draw a picture of them so you can remember what they look like," I suggested as I nodded to the pad of paper and crayons Nico had given to her for the journey when we left him. They were laid out on the table between Hunter and me.

"Good Idea, mommy!" she told me as she leaned over to get to work while staying in Hunter's lap. She had taken to him instantly and they were getting along like old friends. I was just relieved she didn't seem to be picking up on the frostiness between Hunter and me. For her sake, I had been civil with him, but I couldn't find it in myself to do more than that. Even after thirteen years I was still so angry and bitter with him for the decisions he and the others had made. Decisions that had taken everything from me that day.

"Can you watch her while I use the restroom?" I asked Hunter as I met his dark eyes.

“Of course. You don’t need to ask,” he assured me. “You feeling okay?”

“Fine. Won’t be long,” I told him as I got up and hurried towards the back of the plane. Hunter had showed us around when we stepped on board so I knew there was a full bathroom and bedroom back there.

I barely got the door locked before my stomach was churning and moisture filled my mouth. I dropped to the floor before the toilet just in time to lose the tiny amount of breakfast I had forced down earlier in the morning.

By the time the heaving stopped, I was wrung out and exhausted. Tears filled my eyes as I flushed the toilet and moved to the sink to wash my face. I was just so tired and confused. I wasn’t convinced going to stay with three guys who I hadn’t known in over thirteen years was a great plan to be going with, and that terrified me. I just wanted to get things right for my kids, but I didn’t trust myself to do that. I was a fuck up. Always had been. Always would be.

What if Kai and Cameron didn’t even want us there? They were young, single guys who had lived alone for a very long time, or at least I assumed so. Why would they want a pregnant woman and a very demanding three year old invading their space and taking over their lives? Why was I even going to stay with them when I was so damned angry with them? It made no sense!

And then there was Everett. My throat tightened and my tears poured faster at just the thought that he was gone. I would never see him again and that realization was devastating. I was worried about the state I would find Cameron in without his twin at his side. They had been closer than any two people I

had ever known and I feared who Cameron would be without his brother. What if I just made things worse for him? Going there with so much bitterness in my heart?

I glanced up at myself in the mirror and cringed at my own reflection looking back. I was looking a little gray in pallor and my eyes were almost sunken looking with dark smudges beneath. I looked as tired and wrung out as I felt.

Fear that Frank would force Edward to come after us, or worse – try to take my daughter from me – had plagued me all night and I had barely slept. I was clinging to hope that Nico was right – that Frank’s desire to keep all of this from the local news would force him to leave me alone, but I had my doubts.

Nico’s attorney had secured the restraining order against Edward for us, which prevented him from coming within a certain distance of Willow and I, and allowed me to take her out of state without facing any charges, but I knew that would only hold as long as Frank allowed it to. He had power and connections that meant he often got exactly what he wanted.

“Stop it,” I whispered as I looked up to my reflection once more. I had to stop running these thoughts through my mind. I was freaking myself out and it really wasn’t helping matters. I just needed to quieten it all down in my head, but that was easier said than done.

I washed my face with cold water to try and calm myself down, hoping it would soothe the redness of my eyes too. The last thing I wanted was to turn up to meet Kai and Cameron looking like the wreck I actually was inside. I found a brand new toothbrush and tiny tube of toothpaste in a clear packet on the counter, so was able to brush my teeth, which helped me to feel a little more human, but that was about all I could manage

with what I had. I still looked like the troll from under the bridge, but at least I wasn't mid melt down.

Willow was animatedly describing her picture as she colored when I stepped back out into the main section of the plane. Hunter was listening as he watched over her, a small smile on his face as he agreed with everything she said. He must have heard me approach because he looked up and the smile dropped from his face as he took me in. He raised an eyebrow in question and I smiled in an attempt to reassure him I was fine, even though I felt far from it.

As soon as I had left the bathroom a tremble had worked its way through my body and it wasn't stopping now. I was light headed too, the floor beneath me feeling like it was swaying violently from side to side as I fought to stay steady and upright. I was grateful when I reached the seat and could sink down into it.

"Mommy! There you are. Do you like it?" Willow asked as she held up her picture of the clouds and what I guessed was supposed to be our plane flying between them.

"That's beautiful, honey. Great job." I smiled at her and she beamed with pride at the compliment.

"I gots to add some birds now," she told me, then she was back to work, leaning down over her picture, her tongue sticking out in concentration.

I was relieved she seemed so happy and excited, but Edward's attack had taken its toll on her. She had awoken twice the previous night crying and upset after nightmares. It was something she had never had an issue with before and I knew it was a direct result of what Edward had done to her. I'd

already decided to take Hunter up on his offer to find a child psychologist she could talk to as soon as possible.

“Maddie?” Hunter said, and I looked up, realizing, from the look on his face, it wasn’t the first time he had tried to get my attention.

“Sorry,” I apologized with a shake of my head.

“It’s okay. I just asked if you want anything? There’s coffee or sodas and a ton of snacks,” he offered.

“I’m good thanks, but Willow might be hungry.”

“She already had a juice box, crackers and a banana,” he chuckled. “Nothing wrong with her appetite.”

“No there isn’t,” I agreed with a smile. Willow had always been a good eater, not that you’d know it judging by her size. She was small and petite for her age, measuring on the lower end of the percentiles at her checkups since she was a toddler, but her doctor had assured me she was within healthy ranges, so I didn’t worry. She certainly ate enough, and there was very little food she didn’t like.

“So can I get you something? You’re looking pale. Maybe some food would help?” he offered again.

“I’m okay, thanks,” I assured him. “I’m tired. I might just close my eyes for a while, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course. Why don’t you lie down in the back? It’ll be more comfortable and we have about an hour left to go,” he

suggested.

“I’m fine here,” I replied. I wasn’t ready to leave Willow for that long. She didn’t know Hunter very well and I wanted her to know I was close after everything she had been through.

When he nodded his agreement, I settled in the seat and lay my head to the side, closing my eyes. I knew I wouldn’t sleep but I just needed some peace to try and work through everything going on in my head. Things were only going to get even crazier when we landed and I needed to brace myself.

KAI

I couldn’t keep still as I sat in Hunter’s SUV on the tarmac at the airstrip, just waiting for the plane to come in. I was excited, desperate to see Maddie after all of these years and anxious she’d take one look at me and see straight to my fucked up parts.

We had been searching for her for the last three years, ever since we got out of the military and found a life for ourselves. Losing Everett had been the kick up the ass we needed to stop wasting time. We all wanted Maddie, and not in the way we’d had her before. We’d been idiots then, all of us denying the feelings we had for her because we felt the need to protect and look out for her. Our fears that she’d reject us if we told her the truth, and that we’d lose her as a result kept us all quiet, and instead we’d kept a distance from her. Then our lives went to shit and we’d left her behind, so sure it was the best thing we could do for her – to keep her out of our bullshit lives.

But we’d been so fucking wrong and losing Everett showed us that. It showed us that life was too God damned short and pushed us to go for what we wanted – her.

Hunter and I had worked hard to try and track her down, even returning to our old neighborhood in the hope she'd be living there, but she wasn't, and no one had any idea where she had moved on to. There was no trace of her online or on social media either. We were currently in the process of hiring a private detective to find her, but that was unnecessary now. We found her and she was coming home, where she belonged.

I saw the jet coming in to land and instantly jumped from the car, slamming the door closed behind me with a little too much gusto. I was so anxious. I just wanted things between us to be as they were when we were all so much younger and more naïve.

I mean, none of us were very naive back then either, I guess. We were all foster kids who had been given a pretty shitty deal. We had seen and lived way more than other kids our age and we were guarded and suspicious as a result. None of us trusted easily, that was for sure. But we trusted each other. We'd had each other and we'd been happy when we were together. There was so much shit in the world we didn't yet know about. There was still an edge of childishness to us all back then, that was long gone now.

We were going to be different people, and I knew it, but I didn't like it. I hated that my years in the military, the things I had seen and been forced to do, had changed who I was irreparably. It had changed all of us, as had losing Everett. Losing our brother had been the biggest blow of all – a blow that had left us all in pieces, and ever since we were all just scrambling around, trying to pick them up and find some way to put them back together in something that resembled who we once were.

Hunter and I had done that in some ways. We could laugh and smile, make jokes and function day to day. We were still

broken, but we had found a way to pretend we weren't. But Cameron, he was still in those pieces and he refused to even try and put them back together without his twin. He spent all of his time holed up in his room, or out woodworking in a large shed we had converted into a workshop for him out back of our house. He barely spoke to us more than necessary and he was dealing with some bad PTSD from the incident that had taken Everett from us all and left the rest of us injured both physically and mentally.

He suffered with nightmares and occasional anxiety attacks. He hadn't left the property in over a year, and Hunter and I were just at a loss as to how to help him anymore. We had given up on trying to get him to see a therapist. He flat out refused and lost it if we pushed too hard. The workshop was the only thing that seemed to soothe him, so for the most part we left him to work out there and just hoped that one day he would come back to us.

I had hoped that us finding Maddie would get through to him, and it had a little. He had seemed almost relieved when Hunter called to tell us he'd seen her. Then when Hunter had called hours later to tell us Maddie and her kid were in the hospital, put there by her fucking husband, he had gotten mad and had definitely been worried about them. Only Hunter assuring us he was bringing them back with him had calmed Cameron down, and then he had worked his ass off with me last night and all that morning to get Willow's bedroom prepared just as Hunter had told us she wanted it.

Of course he had refused to go to the store with me, the day before, to buy everything we needed, but I knew it was progress that he had helped me set everything up. I thought I had even seen the hint of a smile when we stood back and admired the finished article before I left. But he still refused to come with me to pick them up, retreating to his room with a grunt when I tried to persuade him.

I just hoped that having Maddie and her daughter in the house with us would somehow work some magic and bring Cameron back to us. Maddie always did have a special way with the twins. She was the only person I had ever seen bring them out of the epic tempers they were both capable of slipping into as teenagers. I prayed she still had that ability.

The plane pulled up to its planned terminal just meters away from where I had parked. I stood back as the ground crew got steps into place, then the door opened and I held my breath, desperate and anxious to see her.

Hunter was the first to emerge, carrying his own carry-on case and a small hold all. He looked tired and his hair was wild, signaling the fact he had been running his hands through it anxiously, as he often did.

“Hey man. Thanks for picking us up,” he sighed as he reached me and handed off the bags.

“How are they?” I asked. He had only been texting me since he got Maddie and Willow out of the hospital, not wanting to leave them long enough to call.

“Willow seems fine, though she had terrible nightmares last night. I’m worried about Maddie though,” he sighed.

“Why?”

“You’ll see. I need to help them off,” he told me, then he was gone, running back up the steps. I was tense as I moved to put the bags in the trunk, the thought of Willow having nightmares because of what that scumbag father of hers had done to her,

filling me with rage. She was three years old and he had broken her arm! What kind of monster was capable of that?

And Maddie too. He had hurt her; despite the fact she was pregnant with his child. Just thinking about it had me ready to jump on the plane and take it right back to Chicago so I could kill the bastard with my bare hands.

Hunter reappeared at the top of the steps as I slammed the trunk closed, and in his arms was the most precious little thing. Willow. It still hit me right in the heart when I thought of Maddie naming her daughter that, so she could keep a hold of a piece of what we had.

I moved towards Hunter as he made his way down the stairs, the little girl in his arms looking all around curiously as he carried her. Her curly blonde hair was blowing around wildly and I smiled as she used her hand filled with a soft toy to try and tame it so she could look all around. She didn't look like Maddie as I expected, but she was damned cute.

"Kai, this is Willow," Hunter introduced us as he stopped before me.

"Hey sweetie. I'm very pleased to meet you," I told her as she stared at me and took everything in. Then I saw Maddie in her, in the fire in her eyes as she assessed me. She was smart, just like her mom.

"Do you like pandas?" she asked me, taking me by surprise.

"Erm, I guess so." I looked to Hunter, who just smiled like he knew where this was going.

“Pandas are from China, right? Are you from China?” she asked, and I smiled too then, even though I had no idea how to answer that question.

“No, I’m not from China, but some of my ancestors probably were,” I shrugged as Hunter just grinned. Asshole.

“You don’t know?” Willow pushed.

“Nope. I don’t know any of my real family. I was a foster kid. You know what that means?”

“Yep. My mommy tolds me all about it. She was too,” Willow nodded.

“That’s right. That’s how we all met,” I agreed.

“Did you know Pandas like to eat bamboo?” she asked with a smile that lit up her entire face. “And they sleep a lot! Like, all the time. They’re really lazy, like your dog, Dozy, right? That’s what Hunter said. He said Dozy sleeps all the time. Did you bring him wiv you?” she asked as she looked down like she expected the dog to be sat there. I knew jack shit about kids, but this one was definitely cute, and she had me smiling more in those few minutes than I remembered doing in years.

“Willow, can you stay with Kai for me while I help your mom?” Hunter asked. I followed his gaze and saw Maddie at the top of the plane steps. She was gripping the rail hard and frozen in place, her eyes closed as she seemed to fight to remain upright.

Hunter placed Willow down on the ground beside me and she instantly reached her hand up for mine. I took it, not wanting

her to wander off, but it felt so odd, her tiny delicate hand in my huge mitt. She was so small too, barely reaching above my knee in height, and I worried she was too damn small and fragile. Was this because of that fucker? Had he not been looking after them?

One look at Maddie as Hunter all but carried her down the steps had me thinking maybe I was right in my fears, because she was so thin and frail looking. Her face was ashen and her eyes looked sunken and exhausted. There was barely a trace of the bright, joy filled, shy teenage girl we had known.

She was hunched slightly, clearly in pain, her arm set in a cast just like her daughter, and she had a very obvious baby bump sticking out at the front. Other than that she was little more than skin and bone, and definitely underweight. If I was honest, I had no idea how she was sustaining the life within her when she was clearly running on nothing.

“Hunter said mommy’s got lots of owies now, but she’ll be okay when they gets better,” Willow told me as she watched her mom struggle down the steps.

“That’s right, sweetie. She’ll be fine. We’ll help her,” I promised. When I looked up again Maddie’s beautiful brown eyes were locked on me, so pale they were almost a burning shade of amber. As soon as I saw them and the small smile that graced her lips I recognized the girl I had known so many years before, and something within me settled. She was still in there. My Maddie. I would never allow anything to take her from us again.

CHAPTER 5

MADDIE

I was pissed with myself as I moved down the steps of the plane, leaning so heavily on Hunter he may as well have just been carrying me. *Way to not look like a wreck, Maddie!*

I had been taken by surprise by how dizzy and unsteady I felt when I got to my feet to exit the plane. I had dealt with low blood pressure throughout my pregnancy with Willow and through this one too but it had never really been more than the odd dizzy spell. This was worse though. I could barely move in a straight line, and I felt violently nauseous. By the time I exited the plane I was sure I was either going to black out or throw up, possibly both.

“Should we take you to the hospital, Maddie? You don’t look so good and you’re shaking a lot,” Hunter offered as we got about halfway down. I looked up towards where Kai stood and met his almost black eyes. As always they were filled with warmth that set me at ease in only the way he could. He smiled a little and something in me relaxed. He may look a whole lot bulkier and a few years older than I remembered, but he was still the Kai I knew. I could see him right there before me.

“No, that’s not necessary. I’m just tired and my blood pressure is a little low. It happens when I’m pregnant. I just need to sit,” I assured him.

“When was the last time you had a prenatal checkup?”

“Hunter, I’m fine. Stop fussing. I don’t want to scare Willow. This is already so much for her to deal with,” I admitted.

“Just promise me you’ll tell me if you need anything, or if you start to feel worse. We’re here for you. Let us take care of you, okay?”

“I can take care of myself,” I snapped, and I knew it was petty, but I couldn’t help it.

“We know that, but you don’t have to now,” he told me. I didn’t reply, not sure what to say. It had been a long time since any one had wanted to take care of me in any way. Thirteen years to be precise, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to trust his words just yet. The idea of it scared me too much. Until I was sure they weren’t going to abandon me again, and Willow too this time, I needed to keep my guard in place a little.

By the time my feet hit the tarmac, Kai was before me, Willow at his side clutching his hand so trustingly it both delighted and terrified me. Delighted me because it showed what Edward had done hadn’t left her afraid but terrified me because I didn’t want her to get too attached to these guys, in case they walked away again.

“Maddie,” Kai sighed as he released Willow’s hand and opened his arms in invitation, just like he used to every time we saw each other so many years ago. I couldn’t have stopped myself from taking his hug if I’d have tried. It looked way too warm and inviting, and despite everything I had missed them all so damned much.

Kai had always been the smallest of the guys, just a little taller than me at around six feet, but he had bulked up in frame massively in the years we had been apart. His huge arms surrounded me as I lay my head on his wide shoulder that felt to ripple with muscle beneath the thin t-shirt he wore. He smelled of some spicy aftershave that I instantly loved, and

when I looked up I smiled at his shiny, thick hair, a little wild on top, just as I remembered. I itched to run my hand through it, but held back. “Missed you so fucking much,” he whispered as he gave me one last squeeze, then released me.

I was tearful as I pulled back, overcome with emotion at how familiar he felt to me, even after all of these years. I had to fight not to tell him how much I had missed him too. Instead I took a steadying breath and decided being polite was for the best. After all, I was going to be living with them. I needed the atmosphere to be at least amicable, for Willow, if nothing else.

“You look good,” I told him as I took in his handsome face. There were a couple of lines around his eyes, as there were around my own too, but he was still so damned handsome, his unknown mixed heritage giving him a unique look that was all him.

“So do you,” he replied, making me laugh out loud.

“Bull. But thanks,” I scoffed.

“Can we go and meet Dozy now, pleeease?” Willow cut in, and when I turned slightly I found her once again in Hunter’s arms.

“She likes animals, huh?” Kai laughed.

“She asked you about pandas, didn’t she?” I groaned and he nodded with a grin. “I knew it,” She was obsessed with the things and seemed to be sure every person of Asian descent she ever came across would have some knowledge of them. It had caused several embarrassing trips to the grocery store already.

“Come on, let’s get home and meet Cam. I don’t know about you ladies, but I’m ready for some real food,” Hunter suggested as he headed over to the car with Willow in his arms.

“What’s real food?” Willow asked with a scrunched up look as they walked away.

“So, how are you doing?” Kai asked as he wrapped an arm over my shoulders and led me to follow Hunter.

“Honestly?”

“Always,” he nodded.

“I’m exhausted, Kai,” I admitted, feeling strangely comfortable with him. I had been with him moments, but it felt like we had never been apart.

“It’s been a tough couple of days for you. That’s understandable,” he told me.

“More like a tough decade. I’ve fucked things up so badly,” I sighed.

“We’ve all made our fair share of mistakes, babe. Now’s our chance to change that. You’re here, It’s a start.”

“We’ll see,” I replied, his use of the pet name causing me to raise my guard a little. I couldn’t allow them to win me over so easily. I couldn’t forget what they had done to me all those years ago. I was continually reminding myself that, no matter

what, I could never hand them the power to hurt me in that way again. I had to be stronger this time.

The shrill sound of Willow squealing had me startling awake after dozing off during the drive from the airport. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, but I'd been exhausted.

I sat up and looked to my right for her, worried, but instantly calmed when I saw her smiling widely as she looked out of the window.

"What's going on, peanut?" I asked as I reached out my hand and ran it through her wild curls.

"Look mommy! It's a castle!" she told me as she turned momentarily to point me towards the window. I smiled indulgently as I looked past her for the source of her excitement.

Then I gasped. She was right. This was a freaking castle! Kai pulled the car through a pair of black, wrought iron gates, which were slowly rolling open to allow entry to the long block paved driveway. Straight ahead I could see the drive circled around a huge circular flower bed which was filled with beautiful greenery and an array of white flowers. Surrounding us on both sides was lush green lawn, dotted with raised flower beds, seating areas and tall, full trees.

I took in the house as Kai circled the drive and pulled up in front but I just couldn't accept the sheer size of it! Mansion had definitely been the right word to use when Hunter told me about it, and I could see why my daughter was so sure it was a castle.

It was a very symmetrical building, in a colonial style, built in bright white stone. It had three storeys that I could see, and on each end there was a wing that stuck out slightly. At its entrance was a huge set of heavy wood, double doors, surrounded by stone pillars and a huge porch area that was perfectly framed with beautiful hanging baskets of white flowers. The roof was dark grey shingle and contrasted with the white stone beautifully. I counted seventeen windows I could see across the front and wondered just how many rooms could possibly be inside.

“We’ve updated most of the rooms since we moved in, so it’s more modern inside,” Hunter told me.

“It’s beautiful,” I told him, still pretty awe struck by it all.

“It’s huge. It’ll be nice to have some more people filling it up,” Kai told me and when I looked to him nervously, he smiled comfortingly.

“Can we go inside now?” Willow demanded excitedly.

“No running around, peanut. I’m sure this beautiful house will be filled with lots of fancy things and I don’t want you breaking anything,” I warned her. I knew she was pretty well behaved on the whole – a side effect of life with Edward and his short temper – but she was very excited and I knew it could get the better of her.

“I won’t, mommy! Pleeeaaase can we just go now. I wants to see the dog,” she begged.

“Come on, sweetie. I’ll give you the grand tour while Hunt helps your mom,” Kai said, then he was out of the car and making his way to the back.

“Can I go, mommy?” Willow asked as she looked to me hopefully.

I looked to Kai, feeling unsure. The smile he gave me in return quieted the argument going on inside my head though. I trusted him with my daughter, just not with my heart,

“Sure, but just be careful and do what Kai tells you, okay?”

“I will,” she easily agreed as she clutched Mr. Roar and practically leapt out at Kai as he opened the door.

“Keep an eye on her. She can disappear in the blink of an eye,” I laughed to Kai.

“I won’t let her out of my sight.” He winked at me again, then hoisted Willow up into his arms and carried her inside. I fumed at the way the sight made my heart flip flop. I needed to remember I was angry with him, no matter how beautiful he looked with my child in his arms.

“She’ll be fine. Kai’s a lot more responsible than he used to be,” Hunter assured me from where he still sat in the passenger seat. “You ready to head inside?”

“This was a mistake,” I uttered, my thoughts slipping from my mouth.

“What do you mean?” Hunter asked.

“I don’t fit in here. I barely fit in where I lived before and it was nothing like this,” I sighed. I may have spent my time with Edward pretending I fit in with his life full of fancy parties and fundraisers. I had worn designer dresses, spent hundreds of dollars on ridiculous haircuts and manicures, but none of that was me. It never had been. I did it because Edward expected it, and I had even been good at blending in and mixing with stuck up people who I couldn’t stand. I had made a career of it all in an attempt to keep Edward happy and avoid what I knew would come the minute we got home if I didn’t please him. But at heart I was still that lost, scared foster kid who just felt so alone in the world. It was who I had always been, except for the times I got to have under that willow tree, as a teen, with four guys who could make me feel like maybe I could be something else. Something more. When I was with them I hadn’t been alone, lost, or scared. They saw me and showed me who I could really be. Until suddenly they were gone and once again I went back to all of those things I knew I was deep down.

“You’re wrong, Maddie. This is exactly where you’re supposed to be. You belong with us. You always belonged with us,” Hunter told me firmly. Before I could say anything he was out of the car and coming to help me out of the back seat.

“I can manage, thanks,” I dismissed him as I slid from the back seat of the car. He stepped back, but looked poised to jump in at any second.

As soon as I stood, my head felt like it was spinning and the whole world around me tilted as a rush of heat washed over me. I wavered on my feet and Hunter quickly stepped forward and grabbed my arm, surrounding me. I fell back heavily against him, terrified I’d pass out if I didn’t.

“Woah,” Hunter cried as he held me steady. “I’ve got you.”

“Sorry.”

“This can’t be normal, Maddie. Maybe we should have you checked out, just to be safe,” he suggested, worry clear on his face.

“I’m just tired and sore. I’ll be fine once I eat and sleep,” I assured him, annoyed with myself that I needed to lean on him so heavily.

“Okay, but if you’re not better tomorrow I’m getting you an appointment. Maybe they let you out of the hospital too quickly.”

“I’m fine. I can take care of myself.”

Hunter didn’t look convinced, but he dropped the subject as he helped me up the three stone steps and into the front door of the house.

“Wait!” I panicked just as we entered.

“What’s wrong?”

“What am I going to say to Cameron?” I asked as tears filled my eyes. “He lost Ev. What can I say to make that better?”

“Nothing, baby,” Hunter sighed as he wiped a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “There is nothing anyone can say to make that better. But you’re here and I have a feeling that is

going to help way more than anything Kai or I have tried in the last three years.”

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” I sniffled as I fought not to start crying again. “I didn’t get to say goodbye.” I looked up to Hunter with a little resentment. “You all left me and I never got to say goodbye. Now he’s gone and I...I’ll never get the chance to say so many things I should have told him,,” I whimpered.

“I’m so sorry, Maddie,” Hunter said as he squeezed his arm around me comfortingly, but I didn’t want his comfort. I tried to pull free of his hold, anger taking a grip of me once again, but he refused to release me. “I’m not letting you go. You’re too unsteady.”

“Hunter!” I growled.

“No Maddie. I’m not letting you push me away. Everett may be gone, but we’re all still here, damn it! We’re not wasting any more time,” he told me angrily.

“And what if it’s too damned late?” I demanded as I looked up into his eyes indignantly.

“It’s not. We’ll prove it to you,” he replied confidently. I sighed deeply, too tired to argue, and swiped at my tears as we continued into the house.

“I can’t imagine Cam without Ev at his side,” I said, needing to change the subject. I didn’t have the energy to stay angry.

“It takes time. It still hits me hard sometimes, even after three years,” Hunter confessed. “Just be you, Maddie. That’s what

he needs.”

I nodded and allowed Hunter to lead me further into the house. I froze on the spot once we were inside the entrance way. If I thought the outside was fancy, it had nothing on the inside.

“Holy crap,” I gasped as I looked up at the modern chandelier that hung down from a double height ceiling. The floor was polished, very shiny white marble and off to my right was a huge, wide, sweeping staircase with the most beautiful dark wood balustrade. The stairs were marble too, with a runner of dark gray carpet running up the center. The entrance way was huge, with a large table at its center, which held the biggest fresh flower arrangement I had ever seen. The walls were paneled and had been painted in a pale grey tone that gave the whole space a perfect mix of modern colors and traditional features. “You guys arrange flowers nowadays?” I asked as I looked to Hunter with raised eyebrows.

“Nah,” he laughed. “That’s Sam. He’s kind of like our housekeeper. He and his husband, Garth, have worked here for over twenty years and when we moved in, we kept them on. Garth is the gardener. You’ll see him around too. They live in a cottage on the grounds, and they keep us all in line.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” I scoffed, remembering just how hard it had been to keep the four of them in line when we were kids.

“True, but Sam does keep this place in order better than any of us ever could. Plus he’s the most amazing cook.”

“Mommy!” Willow squealed as she came running at me from nowhere, ploughing into my legs so fast she almost took me out. Thankfully, Hunter was still close enough to keep me upright.

“Steady there, munchkin. You almost knocked your mommy over,” Hunter told Willow playfully as Kai walked up behind her.

“Sorry.” Willow clung to my leg and looked up at me with a little worry in her wide eyes.

“It’s fine, peanut. Just slow down a little though, okay?”

“Okay, but did you see this house mommy? It’s absolutely giant! There really is a pool in the yard and they got a whole room just for games downstairs!” she explained animatedly, making me smile.

“That’s great, honey,” I agreed as I looked to Kai and smiled gratefully. I was so relieved to see her looking so happy and excited.

“Kai said I can see my room now. Will you come too? I want to show you too!” she pleaded and there was no way I could deny her sweet little face, even though the idea of tackling the staircase before me seemed almost impossible.

“Okay, let’s go,” I agreed easily.

The four of us fit almost side by side as we walked up the staircase, it was that wide. When we reached the top I looked around me at the mezzanine which overlooked the entrance way. Around it were dotted a number of doors, and two long corridors led off of it, with even more doors.

“How many rooms does this place have?” I asked as I stepped onto the lush, thick carpeted landing.

“There’s eight bedrooms, and a ton of bathrooms up here.” Hunter wrapped his arm around me again as Kai led the way towards the hallway off to the right, Willow right on his heels.

“It *is* a castle mommy, remember?” Willow reminded me with a shake of her head, as though my ignorance exasperated her.

“Sassy, isn’t she?” Hunter chuckled.

“You have no idea,” I laughed, but I was just relieved she felt safe enough to be sassy. She would never have dared say something like that in front of Edward, knowing it could set off one of his tempers.

“I picked these rooms because they’re interconnecting, but if they’re not suitable, just let us know. There are others to choose from,” Kai said as he stopped at the second door on the left and turned to look at me.

My heart fluttered at how handsome he looked as a smile spread over his face. He had matured in the years we had been apart, but it all just made him more attractive. His boyish features were gone and replaced with a sharp jawline. His body was packed with a lot more muscle than I remembered and he just carried himself with a confidence he hadn’t had before, like he knew who he was now.

“Anything you need changed, you just let us know, Maddie. This is your home now, we want you both to be comfortable here,” Hunter added.

“Thanks,” I agreed. I wanted to argue with what he’d said, since we really had no idea how long we’d be staying, but I

didn't want to upset Willow when she looked so excited and settled already.

"Okay sweetie, tell me what you think," Kai announced as he opened the door and stood aside to let Willow walk in.

There was a loud, high pitched squeal from Willow. Hunter and I followed Kai into the room, and found her running back and forth excitedly.

"Mommy! Look!" she cried as she spotted me in the doorway. "It's a jungle!"

"Kai," I gasped as I turned in a circle to take everything in. The large room had been painted on every wall with jungle scenes. Tall trees made their way up every wall, right up to the ceiling and amid them were painted a whole array of animals. Amongst the images were shelves on the wall, filled with stuffed animals, and some hammocks from which hung stuffed monkeys. One whole wall was lined with shelves filled with cube shaped buckets, brimming with toys and games, from what I could see, all brand new. To my right there was a child size desk filled with every art supply I could possibly think of and beside that, in the corner stood a huge giraffe stuffed toy that had to be six feet tall. The whole space was completely amazing, but the bed was the best part. It was raised a little, with three steps up to it. The two sides were cut out into the shape of an elephant and at the foot was the head, the trunk a slide that Willow could go down to get out of bed.

Willow clambered up, then cried with delight as she slid down the slide and landed on the carpet with a giggle.

"This is the bestest room ever!" she announced as she ran to the steps on the bed to do it all again.

“Good work, brother,” Hunter said as he slapped Kai on the back.

“Cam did a lot of it. He made the bed and the shelves. I just did the painting,” Kai shrugged.

“Cam made this?” I gasped as I walked over to the bed and ran my hand over the smooth wood.

“He does a ton of woodworking now. It’s the only thing that gets him out of his room,” Hunter sighed sadly.

“You still paint?” I asked as I looked from the beautiful art on the walls, to Kai.

“Not much anymore,” he shrugged. “But this was fun to do. Are you sure she likes it? We could change things if it’s not right. I just went off what Hunter told me she liked.” He rubbed the back of his neck and looked anxious as he spoke, and I realized it really mattered to him. He really wanted to make sure Willow was happy. That realization hit me hard. Edward had never worried about her happiness and she was his child.

“What do you think, peanut?” I asked as I looked to my daughter. “Do we need to change anything in here?”

“No way!” she cried. “This is awesome. Look, there’s a spider monkey over there!” she pointed to a monkey painted on the tallest tree opposite her bed, with a huge smile on her face. “They live in the rainforest in South America, but now I got one in my room!”

“She loves it, Kai,” I told him with a smile. “Thank you so much. I have no idea how you did all of this in such a short time.”

“Come and see your room. I didn’t have as much time to work on it, so if you want things changed, just let me know,” he said as he led the way to a door off to the side.

“You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble,” I told him, beginning to feel a little guilty about how snippy I had been with them when they had clearly gone to some considerable trouble to make us both comfortable in their home. They really didn’t have to do that.

“No trouble,” Kai shrugged.

“We’re just going to check out mommy’s room next door. You want to come, Pumkin?” Hunter asked Willow.

Willow froze where she was tentatively looking into the tubs of toys on the shelves and looked to me nervously. It was the first time I had seen a hint of the guardedness which Edward had instilled in her, since we left the hospital, and I hated it.

“Is it okay to stay in here, mommy?” she asked, unsure. I walked right over to her and dropped down to my knees, hiding my wince of pain at the move as I wrapped my arms around her.

“Of course it’s alright, honey. You don’t have to be scared anymore, okay? Hunter, Kai, and Cameron won’t yell at you like daddy did. It’s okay to tell them what you want or need,” I told her.

“Are we really gonna stay here now?” she asked as she looked up at me.

“Yes, we are. Is that good with you?”

“I likes it here and they’re nice,” she looked past me to Kai and Hunter. “But what if daddy comes. Is he mad with us?” she asked in little more than a whisper.

Tears burned my eyes as I debated how the hell to answer that question. A part of me felt it was wrong to say anything bad about her father to her, but the sensible part of me knew I needed to be honest with her to a certain degree. I didn’t want to scare or upset her more, but I needed to be sure she wouldn’t go running to Edward if he turned up there, not that I thought she really would. She was scared of him, and with good reason. I had never once seen him show her anything even verging on kindness or affection.

“You don’t need to worry about daddy, Willow. He’s a long way away. If he comes here then mommy will handle it. I’m not going to let him hurt us again, okay? We’re safe here,” I promised her. It was all I could get out without falling apart. How had I done this to my three year old? She was far too young to have these types of worries and that was all on me.

“Okay,” she agreed as she wrapped her arms around my neck and squeezed me tightly. “I wants to stay here. Can I play wiv the toys?” she asked as she looked from me to the guys.

“You can play with whatever you like, sweetie. All of these toys are for you. You want me to get something out for you?” Kai offered as he walked over to the shelves. Willow pointed up to a higher shelf on which sat a remote controlled jeep with a lion in the driver’s seat. Kai grabbed it and flicked the switch

on the base, before setting it on the carpet. “Come see how it works,” he said as he beckoned her over.

I heard him patiently talking her through the controls as Hunter appeared at my side. He held a hand out to me and helped me to my feet, then without a word he pulled me into his arms.

“She’s going to be fine,” he told me, like he could read my worries. I nodded and pressed my face against his shoulder as I gave in to a moment of weakness. As soon as I realized what I was doing I stepped back and took a deep breath.. I refused to allow my daughter to see me falling apart again, and I needed to stop leaning on Hunter. It would only end in pain.

“That’s it. You got it now!” Kai announced happily.

“Look mommy!” Willow cried happily, and when I turned to see her, she had a huge smile on her face again as she drove the jeep all over her new room.

“I see, honey,” I smiled.

“Great driving, munchkin,” Hunter encouraged her.

“Keep going, Willow. We’ll be right through that door, okay?” Kai told her as he nodded to the connecting door. Willow nodded vigorously but she was focused on driving, her tongue stuck out as she worked the control.

CHAPTER 6

MADDIE

Kai opened the door and walked through, and Hunter, who still had his arm around me supportively, led me through too.

The room next door was even bigger and my eyes once again burned with tears as I looked around.

“You remembered,” I whispered tearfully as I looked to Kai.

“There’s not a damned thing about you I allowed to slip from my mind, sunshine,” he replied. “Those memories were the only thing that got me through, most of the time.”

A sob slipped from me as I moved out of Hunter’s hold and walked across the small space to Kai. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him hard as emotions overwhelmed me.

“I missed you so much,” I admitted tearfully as I took in every second of him holding me the way he was. He smelled so good.

“Not as much as we missed you. I’m so fucking happy you’re here,” he sighed. He kissed the top of my head as he clung to me.

We just stood holding each other for several minutes as I found some calm and managed to stop my tears. They were getting to me and I knew it. I had hugged both of them now when I was supposed to still be pissed with them. And I was. I

was still so damn angry and bitter that they abandoned me, but that didn't mean I hadn't missed them more than words could say, and after all that I had been through, I just needed to be held and feel safe. I was weak and I knew it.

I stepped back and took a deep, calming breath as I looked around me at the room.

It was a large space, with three huge windows along the right hand wall. Light flooded in, only adding to the bright sunny feel of the room. Off in the corner sat a small lounge area with a sofa and two armchairs around a coffee table. A tall bookshelf stood off to the side, filled with books I was already anxious to study.

Ahead of me sat the biggest bed I had ever seen, flanked by two nightstands, and off to the left were two doors, one of which was slightly ajar and inside looked like a bathroom. It was an amazing space, but the reason I had gotten so emotional was the décor.

When we were kids, we used to dream about the home we would all have together one day. We never imagined it would be anything as grand as the one we stood in, but we always planned to live together when I turned eighteen. To cheer me up on bad days the guys used to have me describe to them the way I wanted our home to look. I had always told them about the same thing for my room. I wanted pale yellow walls, so it would always be sunny and bright. I wanted a white leather sleigh bed like one I saw in a magazine when I was cutting out images in art class. I had even taken the image to show the guys, I loved it that much. I wanted white furniture and bright floral fabrics. It was a dream that I never thought I'd truly get, but one that got me through some of my darkest days.

Now I stood in my dream, the bed before me exactly like the one from the magazine. It was covered with the softest looking white sheets and then piled high with pretty floral cushions. A cashmere throw in a lemon yellow lined the foot of the bed and all around me was the chic, traditional looking furniture I had always dreamed of.

“The bathroom is through that door,” Hunter said as he pointed to the ajar door. There’s a tub and a shower. We weren’t sure which Willow would favor. Next to it is a walk in closet.”

“Willow has a closet in her room too. I got you both some clothes, but I had no idea on sizes. The personal shopper helped me, but just let me know if they’re not right and we can order something else,” Kai explained. “I got some toiletries and shit too, but again it’s probably not what you actually use. We can take you shopping to get what you need as soon as you’re up to it.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I soothed him as I placed a hand on his arm. “Thank you so much. You didn’t need to do all of this. The rooms, the clothes, all the toys....you’ve done so much,” I squeaked as I became emotional again. *Damn it, I needed to stop crying!*

“It’s nothing,” Kai shrugged.

“We just want you both to be happy here,” Hunter added as he strode over and took my hand in his. He brought it up to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “We never should have left you, Maddie. It was the dumbest thing we’ve ever done.”

“And we’ve done some really dumb shit,” Kai added, making me laugh a little through my tears.

“I’ll bet,” I agreed as I looked between them. It felt so damned good to have them at my side once again, and yet it also reminded me of who was missing. When we were kids it was always the four of them together. It was so odd to have only two of them there. “Where’s Cameron? I’d like to see him,” I asked as that feeling of loss churned in my stomach once again.

“He’s out in his workshop. It’s best to leave him to it when he’s out there. You’ll see him later,” Kai told me as he sent Hunter a glance I couldn’t decipher.

“You should lie down and get some rest. You’re exhausted,” Hunter told me, and I couldn’t deny that. I felt completely wrung out and my entire body ached terribly from Edward’s beating.

As if on cue, a loud thud came from next door as Willow burst into a fit of loud giggles.

“I think Willow has other ideas,” I laughed tiredly, as I made my way back to her room to check what she was up to.

“Watch this, mommy,” Willow said as soon as I stepped into her room, then she hurried across the space to stand up a huge plastic rhino model on top of a rather precarious looking platform. She had built it from some bricks that were half poured out of one of the cube boxes from the shelves. She backed away enough to drive the remote controlled jeep into the bricks so the rhino went tumbling, then giggled loudly in delight at the scene.

“You know, I think we could build a much bigger tower than that to knock over with the car, don’t you Kai?” Hunter mused

animatedly.

“Definitely, but we’d have more space to do it down stairs in the living room. Maybe we should take everything down there? And Sam was baking cookies earlier. I’ll bet he’d give us some, to keep us all going while we work,” Kai added.

“Cookies?” Willow’s eyes lit up as she looked to me. “Can we do that mommy? Please?”

“Mommy’s kinda tired. Why don’t we head down while she has a little nap?” Hunter suggested.

“Hunt, no. I’m fine. You’ve done enough. I don’t expect you to take care of my daughter too,” I sighed.

“We want to spend time with her, Maddie. We want her to get to know us and be comfortable with us because we’re not going anywhere. You don’t have to do it all alone anymore,” he told me, his voice quieter so only I could hear him as Kai busied Willow gathering all of the bricks back into the box they came from.

“Fine,” I gave in, too tired to argue with his statement that they weren’t going anywhere. We’d see about that. I’d definitely heard it before, and then they were gone. “Maybe just for an hour.”

“Good girl.” He leaned in and kissed my forehead as I fought to ignore the way my center throbbed at those two simple words from him. “Anything we need to know? Does she have any allergies or anything like that?”

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face, touched that he even thought to check something like that. He and Kai had shown more concern for my daughter than her father ever had.

"No, nothing like that," I replied. "But keep her away from the pool. She doesn't know how to swim yet. I wanted to teach her, but I just never had the time," I told him with some major guilt. There were so many things I should have done with Willow, so many things I wanted to show her and teach her, but I just hadn't been able. Edward barely allowed us out of the house, and even if we could have gotten out, I never had money to pay for trips to the local pool or anything else like that.

"It's okay, baby. We can teach her and until then we'll keep her close. She'll be fine, promise. We've got her," he told me and I didn't miss the fact he'd called me 'baby.' I knew I was supposed to be focusing on bigger things, but it was hard to deny how good it felt to feel cared for.

"I know," I agreed confidently. I had no concerns about them taking good care of my child. I trusted them, and I knew that was way too easy, but they were still the guys I knew all those years ago. My time with them to that point had already assured me of that. I knew I could depend on them just as I had as a messed up teenager. They had my back.

"Good." He leaned in to kiss me again on the forehead and cradled my face in his hand. "Rest, take a soak. Do whatever you need to relax. Kai bought you everything he could think of, but if there's anything you need, just text me, okay? There's a new cell on the nightstand. It has all of our numbers, and Nico's. I had Kai text the new number to him, so he likely already tried to contact you," Hunter chuckled as he nodded to a shiny black cell phone behind me. Nico had asked me to leave my old cell with him so he could monitor messages from

Frank and Edward and I had easily agreed. I didn't want any way for them to get to me. Nico would warn me if there was anything I needed to worry about, and I was happy to live in ignorance otherwise.

"You guys are killing me," I whimpered as I unexpectedly teared up again. I was just so overcome with the small details they had considered to make me feel safe and comfortable. "You literally thought of everything." I applauded them if this was their strategy to gain back my trust. They were just so thoughtful.

"I doubt that. We're guys, Maddie, who have dated very little in our lives. We will forget shit that matters and we will screw up, but never doubt that we care very much for all of you. There's nothing we won't do to care for you and protect you." He placed a hand on my stomach as he spoke, assuring me he hadn't forgotten the little one growing in there, and his gentleness was more than I could take. My tears slipped free once more and I hurried to swipe them away.

"Come on Hunter! We gots towers to build and smash down!" Willow called to him as she giggled to herself. I looked to where she clutched the giant rhino under one arm. Kai stood beside her, his arms filled with toys but his eyes focused on me. The intensity of his gaze told me he had heard every word Hunter said and was pleading with me to believe them.

"Coming now, pumpkin," Hunter told her. I nodded, telling them I heard Hunter's words, and they both smiled a little, seeming relieved.

"We'll just be downstairs," Kai assured me, then they all slipped from the room, Willow talking a mile a minute as they moved down the hall. I knew she was content because she wouldn't have chatted away so easily if she wasn't and that

allowed me to relax a little. As long as she was happy and my baby was healthy, I could survive anything else.

I went through to the bathroom and stared longingly at the huge clawfoot tub. A soak would be heaven, but I wasn't sure I could navigate in and out of the deep bath with my growing bump and the bruising and injuries I had. Instead I moved over to the large shower and opened the glass screen to try and work out how to get it running. A long, hot shower would work too. Finally I figured out the futuristic looking controls and the water thundered down from the rainfall shower head above. I closed the door to let it warm up and looked around me at the large bathroom as I got undressed.

The walls and floor were tiled with black, white, and grey mosaic. To my right was a long vanity with twin sinks, over which hung a huge mirror. The toilet was in a separate little space off in the corner, with a door separating it from the rest of the room.

I smiled as I looked over the products in small baskets on the counter. One basket was obviously for Willow, filled with skin friendly, chemical free, bubble baths, soaps, and shower gels. There was also moisturizer and a few fun looking bath bombs. Beside that was a basket filled with rubber ducks, cups and a little watering can for her to play with when she was in the tub.

On the other side was three baskets, all obviously for me. One was filled with bath and shower products like shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, and bath salts, every one of which was a high end brand and all vanilla scented – once my favorite scent. I had stopped using it when Edward told me it smelled too sweet, but I smiled as I thought of using it once again now, and fuck him. I marveled at the tiny details Kai had remembered about me. They obviously didn't hate the smell of vanilla.

In the next basket were cleaners, toners, and moisturizers and in the last was a whole array of makeup in a variety of tones. Some of it was even the brands I liked to use, but the rest was way fancier than Edward was ever willing to pay for. On the counter there were hair products for both Willow and I , along with hair ties, barrettes, and pretty little bows and clips Willow would adore. Kai had literally thought of everything and I was overcome with their kindness.

The steam filling the room around me reminded me of what I should be doing, so I quickly shucked the last of my clothes and grabbed some shampoo, conditioner, and shower gel before slipping into the glass cubicle.

The shower was hot and powerful, and I had the greatest half hour I'd had in a long time as I basked under it in peace. Even with the awkwardness of trying not to use my sprained wrist, it was heaven. It had been years since I was able to get through a shower without Willow coming in to ask me how long I was going to be. I could never let her be far from me when Edward was in the house.

By the time I stepped out and wrapped myself in a soft, fluffy white towel, I was exhausted and trembling on my feet, but I felt much better. The aching down my back and side was less and it just felt good to be clean after the journey that morning.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I slipped into the closet to find something clean to pull on. The space was huge; two walls lined with rails and the other with drawers and shoe racks. Even more shocking than that was the fact the space was over half filled with clothes and shoes, all with their tags in place. I flicked through a few items, shocked to realize they were all not only designer, but exactly the right size. There were maternity jeans and dresses that would allow for my growing bump, and a huge mix of casual and more dressy

items. Behind me there was a mixture of boots, sneakers and sandals lined up in pairs, all my size.

“They’re crazy,” I whispered to myself in shock as I turned to the drawers, hoping for underwear. *Bingo!*

The top two drawers were filled with underwear and bras, all in matching sets, made of beautiful silks, lace and even some everyday cotton ones, in a whole array of colors. They were all beautiful and it was hard not to feel guilty as I totted up just how much they had spent on me. If Willow’s closet were the same, along with all they’d done in the bedrooms, they’d have spent thousands on us. Thousands of dollars I would never have any hope of repaying.

I grabbed a set of plain black cotton underwear, then opened the next drawer over where I found pajamas. I pulled out a pair of green and black checked lounge pants and a mint green t-shirt and took them through to the bed, unable to contemplate any more madness in that closet. My head was hurting from trying to work out how I could repay what they had done for us.

By the time I was dressed I was so tired I could barely remain upright. It had been a hell of a long couple of days, and now I knew Willow was settled and we were safe, it was catching up with me.

I laid on the bed, not even bothering to pull back the comforter, and sighed at the luxury that supported and surrounded me. The mattress was so soft and the sheets so smooth and cool beneath me.

I picked up the cell from the nightstand and smiled when I saw Nico had sent me a text message.

Nico

Hey. Kai sent me your new number.

Text me when you can. Let me know
how you and the princess are doing.

Miss you.

The last line had me smiling broadly and I couldn't tame it. I missed him too and I had only seen him that morning. I shook my head at my own thoughts. I was seriously losing it, lusting after not only Nico, but also Hunter and Kai when only the day before I had given myself a stern talking to about not even thinking about another relationship. There was so much more that I needed to focus on in my life, like the fact I needed a job so I could start earning some money to support myself and my kids. And I would. I'd make myself focus on what mattered.

But it was hard not to dream about what my life could be with one of the amazing guys who had surrounded and supported me the last couple of days.

I was going to text Nico back, but paused as I started to type. I really wanted to hear his voice.

I hit his contact before I could overthink it, then started to panic that I was calling him in the middle of the afternoon, likely when he was busy working. I moved to hang up, but Nico answered after just two rings.

“Maddie sweetheart. Is everything okay?” he answered, sounding worried.

“Crap! Sorry Nico. I shouldn't have called you. I wasn't thinking. I'm sure you're busy,” I blustered.

“Not busy,” he assured me. “I’m glad you called. I’ve been worried.”

“We’re good. The guys have been great with Willow. She has her dream bedroom, and more toys than she knows what to do with.”

“That’s good. She deserves to be spoiled. And you? How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m good too,” I replied. “Just tired. Kai and Hunter took Willow for an hour so I can sleep.”

“How’s your arm?”

“A bit sore, but okay,” I shrugged.

“You gonna tell me what’s bothering you?” he pushed and I smiled sadly. I had no idea how he did that, but he always seemed to pick up on it when something was going on with me.

“I just...I don’t know how I’m ever going to pay them back for everything, Nico. No one will employ me when I’m this heavily pregnant, and even if they did, I could never earn enough to pay them back everything they’ve spent on Willow and I.”

“I really doubt they expect you to pay them back, Maddie,” he told me.

“I know. I get that, but I want to pay them back. I’m not a charity case and I...I’m mad with them Nico, and grateful to them too. It’s so confusing!”

“Why are you mad with them? Because of the past?”

“Yeah, but it’s not just the past for me. They were all I had when I was a terrified, lost lonely kid. They came along and gave me hope that maybe someone wanted me and cared about me. They made me want more than the shitty hand I had in life, then they just left me without a word. They broke me all over again and I’ve never managed to put those pieces back together. I married Edward because I was mad at them. I messed my whole life up because I never dared to hope I could have anything better. I know that’s not all on them really, but I can’t help being bitter towards them. I just...I don’t know if I can ever forgive them, and yet here I am, taking everything they’re giving me. It just feels wrong,” I explained.

“They care about you and just want to be there for you and Willow in this shit time you’re having. Just think if the roles were reversed, if you found out one of them were in trouble and you could do something to help, would you? Even as mad as you feel about them?”

“Of course I would. Even though I was pissed with them for so many years, I still cared about them too,” I replied.

“Right. And they’re just doing the same thing for you. It sounds like they have a lot to make up for, and they obviously want to do that. Let them. Let me help too. Stop fighting to survive on your own and just accept that you have people in your corner now. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” I agreed.

“Good. Now, I’m hoping to get there next weekend. Mia and the guys will be back and ready to return to the office by then, so I can get away for a while.”

“You don’t need to do that, Nico.”

“We already had this conversation, Maddie,” he sighed. “I want to come out there. I want to spend some time with you and Willow, so I can see for myself you’re really okay. Plus I miss you. It’s so boring around here without you in the office.”

“I guess it will be good for you to take a break,” I mused. I had never once seen him take a single day of leave in all of the time I worked for him. His whole life revolved around Milite as far as I could see.

“Exactly. I haven’t had a damned holiday in years. I’m looking forward to it,” he assured me. “I already spoke to Hunter too. He’s happy for me to stay at the house, so I’m good to go.”

“I’m looking forward to it too,” I agreed happily.

“You sound tired. Why don’t you get some rest? We can talk later,” he suggested.

“I’d argue, but I’m too tired to,” I laughed.

“You can call me any time, Maddie. You know that. Night or day, I’ll be right here for you.”

“Thanks Nico,” I replied tearfully.

“Always sweetheart. Get some sleep. Speak again soon, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Bye.”

I ended the call as I fought back more damned tears. These guys were killing me with their kindness and soft words. Add to that pregnancy hormones and I was screwed.

I sent a quick text to Hunter to check on Willow and instantly received a reply in the form of a picture of Willow sat on Kai’s lap with a huge smile on her face and the remote control for her car in her hand. She was having a ball judging by that picture and it was enough to allow me to lie back and close my eyes. Within seconds I was out cold.

CHAPTER 7

MADDIE

I was startled awake by the quiet snick of the bedroom door opening. I sat up and looked to the door, terrified. Edward was staying out that night. He'd been to a charity event with his father and he'd sneered that I shouldn't expect him home as he left that evening, his overnight bag packed and on his shoulder.

I knew he would spend the night in a hotel with whichever tart he picked up at the party, but I really didn't care as long as he didn't come home drunk to force himself on me, as he liked to do now and then. In fact I had been relieved to have a night alone without him watching and critiquing my every move.

It seemed my luck was out though as Edward stumbled through the bedroom door. His suit jacket was gone and his shirt was half untucked from his trousers. He stumbled in and slammed the door behind him, making me wince as I listened for the sound of Willow waking up. Thankfully, she seemed to sleep through the racket.

"Edward? I th-thought you were s-staying out tonight?" I asked, hating the way my stutter betrayed my fear.

"Change of plans," he said as he glared at me with the hatred I had come to know very well in the last few years. He truly seemed to despise me and the feeling was mutual. "Take your clothes off," he demanded as he started to fumble with his belt buckle.

"Edward, no. It...it's late and you...you've had a lot to drink. You should g-get some sleep."

“I won’t say it again,” he hissed as he stumbled to the bedside so he loomed over me. “Take off your fucking clothes!”

“Willow...you’ll w-wake her,” I panicked. I knew what was coming. It was far from the first time he had taken what he wanted from me against my will, but still I tried to save myself.

I should have known better than to challenge him. In a second his drunkenness was gone as he lunged for me, straddling my waist as he wrapped a hand around my throat. I clawed at him, fighting to get free as he squeezed hard, cutting off my oxygen almost instantly.

“I should fucking kill you!” he spat as spots appeared in my eyes and the room around me started to blur. Tears filled my eyes and I fought hard, trying to buck him from my body. It was futile, since he was so much bigger and stronger than me, but I wouldn’t stop fighting.

By the time he released me I was verging on unconsciousness. I fought to take in a breath, coughing and spluttering as my throat throbbed painfully from his vicious grip.

“You’re a worthless fucking whore!” he hissed as he ripped my sleep shorts and underwear from my body as I fought to just breathe. He grabbed my waist and flipped me over so violently my face hit the mattress and bounced off painfully. “This is the only fucking thing you’re good for,” he reminded me. I fought to get free of his grip, the whole time trying not to cry out, worried I’d wake Willow. I looked behind me for any chance to get free of his bruising grip around the back of my neck, but I was too late. A small sob of pain and desperation slipped from me as he forced himself into my body.

My eyes opened and I sat up, panicked. I was panting hard, the phantom throb of my throat still there as I felt his hand squeezing still. I looked around frantically, trying to remember where I was. The soft glow of the yellow walls in the light from a small lamp reminded me of all that had happened.

I pulled myself over to sit on the edge of the bed and pushed my wild hair from my face as I tried to breathe, telling myself I was at the guys place – that it was just a bad dream and I was safe. My skin was covered with a sheen of sweat and my hands shook badly as I pressed them together in my lap.

Then it hit me. The room was lit with a lamp. I looked to the window and gasped, my heart pounding even harder at the realization it was dark outside. How long had I been asleep? I grabbed my cell, almost throwing myself from the bed to reach it. It was just after nine P.M. I slept for hours.

Willow!

I dropped the cell as I shot to my feet and ran from the room. I wasn't thinking straight as I bolted down the stairs like a mad woman. I hadn't even looked around any of the rooms down there so I had no idea where I was as I ran from the entrance hall and into the first room I saw. It was an office, paneled in dark wood and dominated by book shelf lined walls and a huge old desk. I didn't really take any of it in though as I frantically looked for my child. *She was going to think I'd abandoned her. Was she okay? I was such a terrible fucking parent!*

I ran from room to room, my panic increasing by the second. I found a gym, a huge conservatory, and a formal dining room, but no living room and no Willow!

“Willow!” I cried, giving in to my desperation. I hadn’t called for her before, not wanting to scare her if she was alright, but I needed to see her!

I ran from the dining room and across a hall, bringing me to a huge kitchen.

“Willow!” I cried again as I looked past the shiny black counters and charcoal grey cabinets to the man stood behind the stove looking startled.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. He was older, maybe in his fifties, with thick salt and pepper dark hair that hung floppily over his forehead. He smiled in an attempt to reassure me and lines appeared around his eyes. He looked kind.

“Willow? Where is she? Where’s my daughter?” I cried almost hysterically.

“Maybe just try to take a breath. Willow is fine. She’s safe,” he said soothingly, as he slowly approached me. He held a hand out like he was trying to tame a wild animal.

“Where is she?!” I demanded angrily. I turned at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, just as Hunter and Kai hurried into the kitchen. They had changed their clothes, Hunter now in sweats and a t-shirt and Kai in long shorts and a tank top.

“Maddie, what’s wrong?” Hunter asked as they ran towards me.

“Where is she? Where’s Willow? Is she okay? I slept too long. I’m so sorry. Is she scared? She must be so upset,” I cried all at once.

“Maddie, just slow down, okay? Willow’s fine. She’s in her room, fast asleep,” Hunter soothed as he approached and wrapped his arms around me. Kai disappeared the way he’d come as I sank against Hunter and deflated.

“She’s asleep? I didn’t even think to check,” I panted, feeling stupid. She’d been right next door to me.

“It’s okay. Deep breaths now.” He held me tightly and rubbed my back as I tried to calm down.

“You’re sure she’s okay?” I asked as I pulled away from his comfort and looked up at him.

“Here. sunshine, take a look for yourself,” Kai said as he returned with a tablet in his hand. He held it out for me and I could see camera footage of Willow’s room on the screen. The room was dimly lit with the leaf wall light above the bed. Curled up under the comforter I could clearly see my daughter fast asleep with Mr. Roar clutched to her chest. I could even hear the slight snore she made as she slept.

“We played all afternoon, then Sam made her pasta for dinner, which she devoured,” Hunter laughed. “She got tired so we changed her into some pajamas and all watched a Disney movie. She crashed on my lap about an hour ago so we put her to bed. She’s fine. We told her you were tired and needed to rest, but she knew where you were the whole time. She was totally fine.”

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” I gasped. “I just...just panicked. I’m so sorry. I only meant to sleep for an hour.”

“Everything’s okay, just breathe,” Hunter soothed as he pulled me back into his arms. I went willingly, needing his comfort as I tried to calm my racing heart.

“I’m just so used to keeping her close. I could never let her get too far from me, because Edward would lose it if she got under his feet,” I explained.

“We get it, Maddie, but it’s different now. Your daughter is amazing and we want her under our feet. You don’t have to worry or be afraid. She’s safe with us. We’ll protect her, always,” Kai told me.

“I know that,” I sighed as I turned my head so I could see him without removing myself from Hunter’s arms. “No matter how I feel about what happened between us, I know Willow is safe with you.”

“You are too, sunshine. Whatever we need to do to prove that to you, we will,” Kai told me. I wanted to believe him, but I refused to allow it to happen.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to not freak like that again,” I said instead.

“You need to eat. You’re shaking like a damned leaf,” Hunter grumbled as he released his arms from around me and instead placed a hand at the small of my back to lead me back over to the counter in the center of the kitchen.

I blushed as I realised the unknown older guy still stood in the kitchen, looking to me with genuine concern. I folded my arms over my chest, conscious I didn’t even have a bra on under the thin t-shirt.

“Maddie, this is Sam,” Kai introduced. I smiled sheepishly as I reached my hand up to try and tame my wild hair. *Great first impression*, I thought to myself with a wince. I must have looked a fright.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Sam returned with a gentle smile.

“You too,” I agreed as I nervously folded my arms again. “I’m so sorry about that. I’m usually less insane than this, I promise,” I laughed halfheartedly.

“It’s understandable. Don’t even think about it again,” he assured me. “Now tell me what I can cook for you. You look in need of a good meal and there’s nothing I enjoy more than feeding people.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I can make something.”

“Don’t even waste your breath, Maddie. Sam does not take no for an answer,” Kai chuckled. I looked to Hunter who just nodded his agreement, so I gave in.

“Um...well, I guess a sandwich would be good, if it’s not too much trouble,” I uttered nervously. This was weird. I’d never had someone to cook for me before and it made me feel kind of lazy.

“No trouble at all. Take a seat, and I’ll see what options we have for fillings,” he assured me as he moved towards the refrigerator. I took the man in fully as Hunter and Kai led me over to take a seat on one of the tall stools at the island.

Sam was in good shape for an older guy, slim but with wide shoulders and clearly visible biceps beneath the white button-down shirt he wore. He was tall, standing just a tiny bit shorter than Hunter and he obviously worked out. He looked relaxed in jeans with his shirt, and he had a navy blue apron tied around his waist.

“I’m afraid we don’t have much. I need to order groceries tomorrow. There’s just cheese, turkey, roast beef, or I could make you some eggs. Does any of that sound good? I could whip you up some pasta, or a risotto? Do you like risotto?” he asked as he stood with a mountain of food in his arms. My eyes bulged as I took in all he had offered me. Didn’t have much? Was he crazy?

“T-turkey is fine. Thank you,” I whispered shyly.

“Please don’t tell me plain turkey is still your favorite sandwich?” Hunter groaned. I blushed again as I looked nervously to my hands.

“I like simple things,” I uttered, a little embarrassed. If I was honest, food wasn’t something I bothered very much about. I ate what was necessary to keep me going and that was that. It stemmed from my childhood, years of skipping meals when the foster parents I was stuck with couldn’t be bothered to cook or even supply groceries. I learned to survive on the bare minimum and that had continued ever since.

“Nothing wrong with simple, but you need some calories for that little bundle you’re growing. How about some hot chocolate too?” Sam offered as he worked to make me a sandwich.

I knew my eyes lit up at the offer of chocolate, judging by the huge smile that spread on Sam’s face. I had always been a

sucker for chocolate but Edward had stopped me having it in the house, along with many other sweet treats. He was always mindful of Frank's direction that I shouldn't put on any weight.

"Hot chocolate coming up," Sam told me as he passed me a plate with a perfectly made sandwich on it.

"Are you okay?" Kai asked as he ran his hand up and down my arm soothingly.

"I think so. Can I...is it okay if I see her again?" I asked as I nodded to the tablet Kai had set down in front of him. "I know it's ridiculous, but I..."

"It's not ridiculous, Maddie," Kai cut in. "You're in a strange place. We get that you need to be sure your kid is safe." He touched the tablet and the screen lit up. Willow had moved and was now star fished across the bed, her legs hanging out from under the comforter. "We'll hear her if she wakes up. The monitor picks up every sound," Kai assured me.

"Thank you." I smiled tentatively as I looked back to my sandwich and picked half of it up in my still shaky hand. "I really am sorry I freaked out. It won't happen again."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Hunter told me. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Better than I have in a while," I nodded. "Oh, and I love your shower. It's amazing."

"One hot chocolate," Sam announced as he placed a huge cup, brimming with whipped cream and marshmallows before me.

“Sam, I think you and I are going to be good friends,” I laughed as I ogled the treat excitedly. It had been a really, really long time since I was given something that delicious looking.

“Oh I agree. And little Willow is going to be a delight to cook for. She cleaned her plate tonight, and thanked me three times, telling me I made the best pasta in the world apparently,” he chuckled. “She’s a perfect angel.”

“She definitely enjoys her food,” I agreed with a smile.

“Are you sure I can’t prepare you something a little more interesting?” Sam asked as he looked down to my untouched sandwich.

“Oh no, this is great, thanks,” I assured him. “I..I’m not a big eater. I do, however, have a huge soft spot for anything that involves chocolate,” I admitted as I swiped a finger through the cream on the hot chocolate.

“I can work with that, dear,” he told me with a smile.

“Sam’s the most amazing cook, and his baking is next level. He’ll be fattening you up before you know it,” Kai laughed.

I picked up the huge mug, trying to keep it steady in my shaking hands and took a gulp of the delicious chocolatey goodness, cream covering my top lip in the process. I hurried to wipe it away before anyone noticed.

“Try to eat something too, baby. You’ve barely had a thing all day,” Hunter urged as he pushed the sandwich towards me

again.

“You have to stop that,” I spoke up nervously.

“Stop what?” Hunter asked.

“The names. Baby,” I looked to Hunter, “And sunshine,” I looked to Kai. “We’re not there anymore. I told you I’m here for Willow. Maybe we can get things back to where they used to be, but it...it’s going to take time. Whether you meant to or not, you guys destroyed me when you left me,” I admitted as I stared down at the cup, unable to meet their eyes.

“We never meant to, Maddie. We thought we were doing what was best for you. We thought you were okay with Clive and Julia,” Kai sighed.

“I can’t talk about this now,” I squeaked, knowing I was seconds away from tears. I needed to feel stronger before we discussed everything.

“We will make it up to you, and we will get back to where we were, We love you, Maddie,” Hunter told me, and a whimper slipped from me as I fought to hold back a sob at the words I had longed to hear for so long. They had never told me they loved me when we were kids. I wasn’t sure any of us really knew what love was back then, but they were all I had and whether I said it or not, I loved them. My love for them was different from the sisterly type of love they seemed to have for me, but I never voiced that. I didn’t really care how they felt about me as long as I had them in my life.

Then they were gone and I knew, as time passed, just how much I had truly loved them; how much they had all meant to me. Now there they sat, telling me they loved me, and I didn’t

even care in which way they meant it. I was just overwhelmed to hear the words. And that was totally terrifying because if they left me again after telling me they loved me, it could only hurt even more than the last time.

“We don’t have to worry about any of it tonight. Just try to eat something and you can get some more rest. We can talk tomorrow,” Kai suggested.

I nodded and grabbed the sandwich, taking a small bite. It was actually really good. The bread was soft on the inside with a crispy crust, and my guess was it was freshly baked that day. I took another bite, surprised how much I was enjoying it, as the three of them just watched me.

I’d just picked up my hot chocolate for another drink when the glass doors behind me made a noise. I turned to look just as Cameron walked through the door, followed by a playful little dog who hurried in and jumped up at Hunter’s feet.

I held my breath as I just stared at him, the cup frozen halfway to my mouth. Cameron had changed a lot since last I saw him. The only reason I really recognized him was those pale blue eyes that were locked on me, so unique and distinctive. Everett had blue eyes too, but his had been darker. It was the only difference between them, other than the slight difference in their builds. Cam had always liked to work out more than Ev, so he had bigger shoulders.

Now Cameron was huge! He had always been tall, but his body was rippling with hard muscle, built like a linebacker. His shoulders were so wide I knew there was no way my arms would ever go around him. There was corded muscle visible on his neck and down his arms, and his biceps were bulging under the sleeves of the black t-shirt he wore. He had on a pair

of jeans which were splattered with paint, and they clung to his tree trunk wide thighs.

“Cam,” I whispered as I passed Hunter my cup and dropped to my feet. I smiled, but he didn’t return it as I took in his face. He looked exhausted, dark smudges under his eyes. He still had the same handsome bone structure and I knew if he’d just flash me his toothy smile that I used to love so much, a little dimple would appear in his right cheek.

But he didn’t smile. In fact he looked as though it had been a very long time since he smiled and it caused me physical pain to see how much he was hurting.

He ran a hand through his wild, sandy blonde hair as he looked away from me and down to the floor. His hair hung down over his ears, in desperate need of a cut and I could see sawdust and specks of paint in it.

I desperately wanted to run up and hug him, but the way he was holding himself so tensely deterred me.

“Th-thank you....for Willow’s room. She loved it and so did I. Your work is amazing,” I told him instead. It was lame, and definitely not what I wanted to say, but it was all I dare offer.

“No problem,” he uttered, his eyes still on the ground. “Glad you’re safe,” he added, then he stalked from the room without even looking up again. His little dog, who had been getting attention from Hunter, scampered off after him.

I listened to his boots pound up the stairs before I allowed my tears to fall.

“It’s so wrong,” I whimpered. “Seeing him w-without Ev. It’s all wrong.”

“We know. Believe us, we know,” Kai sighed as he pulled me into his arms and held me tightly.

“What happened? How d-did he die?” I asked as I clung to him.

“We were on a mission,” Hunter began. I sat up and looked to him, but Kai kept his arm around me supportively. “There were two Humvees and we were in the second one. The first one hit an IED. It took out both of the cars, but we took less of the impact. Kai and I got out pretty clean, but Ev had fucked up his right arm in the crash and Cam was unconscious. We got them out and tried to help the others, but it was an ambush. We were pinned down and air support took too fucking long.”

“We were outnumbered and we had no real cover. We did all we could to hold them back and cover the others, but it was fucking useless. Hunter got hit first, two in his right side and one in his leg. When air support came and took the bastards out, I had two in my back and could barely move. By the time we got back to Cam and Ev, Cam was awake again and he was cradling Ev in his arms, dead. He took a shot to his thigh, and he bled out.”

“Cam was awake with him as he passed, so he wasn’t alone,” Hunter told me, but that didn’t ease the agony tearing through me as I shook with sobs. Both guys held me as I cried hard for the boy I loved. He had deserved so much more in life.

“Cam’s just lost without him,” Kai said after a while. “He just needs to find his way again. We’re kind of hoping you can help us do that.”

“I’ll try,” I assured them. “Whatever he needs.” I looked for Sam, but he was gone, the kitchen spotless where he had been working before. I figured he probably headed home since it was getting late.

“You have to be patient with him. He’s not the guy you knew, Maddie. He’ll probably bite your head off when you try to speak to him,” Hunter warned.

“I can handle it. I’m not going to give up on him,” I promised. No matter how much I resented what the four of them did to me thirteen years ago, it wasn’t enough anger to stop me trying to help Cameron with his loss. He was hurting and broken. I knew plenty about that.

CHAPTER 8

MADDIE

“Willow! Come away from the pool!” I yelled loudly from where I had been reclining on a lounge in the bright afternoon sun. We had been out in the yard since after lunch. Willow had a huge tub full of bath toys, which Kai had bought for her, spread all around the small toddler pool Sam had brought out and filled up for her. She was desperate to go in the swimming pool, but I had flat out refused, feeling way too sore and bruised to go in myself, and not willing to let her in without me when she couldn’t swim. No amount of floaties would reassure me.

It had been two days since we arrived there and mostly I had been trying to keep Willow from bothering Kai and Hunter too much, busying her with all of her new toys and ‘adventures’ around the huge grounds that surrounded the house. She seemed to have settled in really well there and she was always laughing and smiling, which settled me no end.

Kai and Hunter seemed to have backed off a little, obviously sensing that I needed some time and space, but they were always close, making sure I knew they were there if I needed anything.

Cameron had been like a ghost. Apart from the night he came in through the kitchen, I hadn’t even laid eyes on him. I knew he wandered in and out of his workshop, which was right at the back of the large property, because Sam had mentioned a couple of times that he’d been to grab food and drinks, but I never saw him. I wanted to try and track him down so we could talk a little, but I was being a coward too. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to face the full emotional assault I knew it

would be to talk to him about his brother, who we had both loved very much.

“But Mommy...” Willow whined as she looked up to me from where she had been gazing at the sparkling blue water. Her face filled with a frown as she started stomping her way back towards me. “It’s soooo hot! Why can’t I gets in the pool? That’s what it’s for, you know?” she sassed.

“I know what it’s for, young lady,” I replied with raised eyebrows, warning her to tone it down. “I already told you; you can’t go in without an adult, and Kai is busy on a call for work. As soon as he’s done we’ll see if he has time to go in with you, okay?”

“But I’m hot!” she pouted.

“Then get into the little pool and play with your toys,” I laughed as I pointed to the small inflatable pool beside me.

“Fine,” she huffed as she stormed to my side and stepped into the pool, plonking down onto her butt with attitude I tried hard not to laugh at.

I laid back again, keeping one eye on her as she busied herself filling a small neon yellow watering can and then used it to fill small plastic teacups, pretending she was making potions as she chatted away to herself.

It was a scorching day – she wasn’t wrong about that. Even in the thin cotton sundress I had pulled on that morning, I was covered with the sheen of sweat. I would have happily jumped in the pool if I wasn’t so stiff from all of my bruising, that I could barely move. Add to that the way the entire world tilted

beneath me every time I got to my feet, due to my constant low blood pressure, and I was pretty much stuck where I laid.

Thankfully, Sam had been bringing us both cold drinks and snacks regularly, and Willow was happy playing where we sat, so I had no cause to move.

“Dozy!” Willow squealed and when I looked up, she was jumping from the pool and running to greet the little dog who was barreling down the lawn towards her. Thankfully, the lazy little dog seemed to have taken to my daughter, and he happily sat and let her clumsily stroke and poke him without any fuss whenever she saw him.

I laughed when she reached him, only for him to dodge her arms and run circles around her excitedly. She laughed, thrilled as she started chasing after him.

I looked across the lawn, hoping the appearance of his dog meant Cameron was coming out after him. Maybe I could get him to sit with me for a while and talk a little. I wouldn't interrogate him. I just wanted the chance to talk a little and to see how he was really doing. I wanted to find a way to help him and I couldn't do that if he continued avoiding me.

A small, nervous smile spread across my face when I saw him coming towards me from the direction of his workshop. He was dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a white t-shirt, his broad chest stretching the fabric to its limit. His hair was wild and it was obvious as he got closer, he was trying hard not to meet my eyes.

I sat up and readied myself, determined he wasn't getting away from me this time. I was going to make him speak to me, even if it was just pleasantries. I smiled and raised a hand to catch his attention, just as Dozy barked loudly, followed by

Willow squealing. I turned, alarmed, and watched in horror as Willow disappeared from sight, falling back into the pool with a loud splash.

“WILLOW!” I screamed as I struggled to get to my feet faster than I ever had before. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely breathe as my worst nightmares all came to life at once.

Dozy stood at the edge of the pool barking as I ran towards it as fast as I could, but before I got there, Cam was shooting past me, and he leapt from several feet away from the edge, straight into the water.

Willow popped up to the surface, waving her arms and trying to cry out between gasps, when I reached the edge, but before she sank again Cam was there, scooping her up and pressing her to his chest. He pushed her wild hair from her face and patted her back gently as she spluttered and cried hysterically.

I dropped to my knees at the pools edge, my whole body trembling with adrenaline.

“Willow!” I cried as Sam ran out of the house and dropped to his knees at my side.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She fell in. She c-can’t swim,” I panted, breathless.

“You’re okay, little mouse. I’ve got you. You’re okay,” Cam told her as he held her and walked over to the edge towards me.

“Give her to me!” I cried as I leaned into the pool and held my arms out. Sam quickly placed a hand on my back to stop me from tumbling in too.

“Mommy!” Willow cried as Cam reached up and lifted her to me. Sam ran to get a towel from the chairs at the side, then he wrapped it around her as she clung to me and sobbed hard. She was shaking and coughing up water.

“It’s okay, peanut. Mommy’s got you,” I soothed as I sat back on my butt and settled her on my lap. She pressed against my front and took deeper breaths as her cries subsided little by little. I just clung to her too as I fought not to cry, constantly reassuring myself she really was okay.

“Is she okay? Should we take her to the ER?” I looked up, squinting through the bright sunlight and found Cam stood over me, his t-shirt gone and his shorts dripping wet. He pushed his soaked hair back from his face as he looked Willow over with concern.

“I th-think she’s okay,” I gasped, then I looked to Sam who was crouched beside us, rubbing Willow’s back comfortingly. In the two days we had been there, he and Willow had become good friends, largely due to the fact the man always had baked goods to delight Willow with. “Do y-you think she’s okay?” I asked him shakily.

“She was only under for a moment. I’m sure she’s fine,” Sam assured me with a gentle smile.

“I don’ts like the pool no more!” Willow wailed as she lifted her head and looked to me with teary eyes.

“That’s because you tried to swallow it all up, trouble. You’re supposed to swim in it, you know?” Cam told her playfully as he leaned in and brushed some more of her wild hair back out of her face. For a moment, as I looked up and met those azure eyes, I saw the boy I had once known. Even in the chaos and terror of that moment, it was such an amazing feeling to know he was in there still.

“I didn’t!” Willow pouted as she sent him her best glare. “It was all Dozy’s fault. He tripped me up and I fell in.”

“This is why mommy told you not to go close to the pool though, isn’t it honey?” I reminded her.

“How about we go to the kitchen and get you a juice box to wash that nasty pool taste away?” Sam suggested. “I might even have some of the chocolate chip cookies, that we baked yesterday, left.”

“Can I, mommy?” she asked with a sniffle.

“Okay, but just one cookie. It’s almost dinner time,” I gave in as I handed her into Sam’s open arms. He smiled at me and gave a nod, reassuring me she’d be okay. I watched as Dozy happily followed behind them into the house, his tail wagging. No doubt Sam would spoil him with a treat too.

“Oh God,” I gasped to myself once Willow was out of reach. I lifted my trembling hands to my face and covered my eyes as I took a deep breath. I was so angry with myself for taking my eyes off of her. I should have known she’d be straight over to the pool as soon as I wasn’t watching her.

“Are you okay?” I looked up and found Cam still stood over me, looking nervous and unsure as he rubbed a hand over the

back of his neck.

“I should have been watching her. I’m really sorry,” I told him as I moved to stand. I got my feet underneath me and tried to push up, but I was shaking more than I realised and, as always, lightheadedness consumed me. I was grateful when Cam slipped his huge hand around my forearm and steadied me as I got up. “Thanks,” I said as I straightened up my dress “And thank you for getting to her so quickly. I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again. I still can’t believe I was so stupid. I should know better. She has such a knack for getting herself in trouble,” I rambled, feeling nervous and unsure now he was before me.

“Mads, just stop. You can’t watch her every second of every day. She’s fine,” he told me. He still held my arm and he used it to guide me back over to the lounge I had been sitting on before.

There was a hint of a smile on my face as I sat. He had called me ‘Mads’ just like he used to. Just like they both used to. That thought had the smile disappearing just as quickly as it had appeared. I looked up, squinting through the bright sunlight to see him. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was about Everett, but I knew nothing I could say would soothe the agony I could see in his eyes.

There was an awkward silence between us as we just took each other in. I tried to think of something to say, but I was scared of it being the wrong thing and upsetting him.

“Were you working?” I asked as I nodded towards where I knew the huge workshop building sat just out of sight. It was in the back corner of the property, tucked away behind some trees. I hadn’t seen the inside, but Willow and I had walked

past it when we were exploring the day before. It seemed to be a barn which had been converted.

“Just making some new shelves for the library in town,” he shrugged as he looked away from me and started fidgeting a little with his hands.

“The shelves you made for Willow’s room are beautiful. Your work must be in high demand.”

“I don’t sell it,” he clarified. “It’s just a hobby; something to keep me busy.”

“So you’re not charging the library for the shelves?” I asked.

“Nah. Kai set that up. The library is being revamped, but they didn’t have enough money to update everything. Kai asked me to help and I got nothing better to do,” he shrugged.

“That’s kind of you, Cam.” I reached out to touch his arm, but he stepped back out of my reach so suddenly it startled me. I looked up at him again, confused by his reaction. Cameron and Everett had always been tactile, always hugging and touching me when we were together. The almost anxious way he was glancing to me now, suggested that had changed since.

I opened my mouth to apologize to him, hating how uncomfortable he looked, but stopped when Kai came running outside.

“Maddie! Are you okay? Sam just told me what happened. I’m so sorry. I should have been out here with you,” he said all at once as he hurried over and dropped to his haunches beside me.

“We’re fine. Cam got to her really quickly. I think it just scared her more than anything,” I explained.

“You need to keep her away from the fucking pool,” Cam grumbled, and when I looked up at him, the Cam I knew was gone, his face now a hard, unreadable mask. Before I could say anything in reply he bent to grab his soaked shirt and stormed off into the house.

“Ignore him. Are you sure you’re okay?” Kai asked as he reached out to put his hand over mine, then stopped himself and pulled back.

“I’m fine. It was my fault. He’s right, I should have been watching her. It won’t happen again,” I told him as I swung my legs over to the side away from him and stood up. I had to get away from him before I gave in and fell into his strong arms. “I should check on Willow.”

I faltered a little as I moved around him to get into the house and he reached for me, but I swayed out of his reach and managed to stay on my feet.

“Maddie, he sighed tiredly. I looked up at him and saw the concern and a little annoyance in the set of his jaw and the intensity of his eyes.

“I’m fine, Kai,” I assured him. It was getting harder and harder to remember why I was even angry with them when they were all being so kind and caring towards me and Willow. The boys I once knew may have become men in the time we were separated, but inside they were still the kind boys who had befriended a lonely, lost foster kid. I was seeing more and more of the things I had loved about them back then, in who

they had become and it was melting my resolve to stay angry with them for what they had done all those years ago.

I gave myself a mental shake as I walked into the house. I was being ridiculous! Yes they had been kind and given us so much, but that didn't excuse what they had done to me. It didn't make up for them leaving me alone with no word or explanation. They abandoned me! I needed to remember that, because they could do it all over again and I needed to be on my guard if that were the case. No way would I allow them to destroy me as they did the last time they walked away from me.

I couldn't help but smile when I walked into the kitchen and found my daughter stood on a chair, elbow deep in a mixing bowl with her one good arm, laughing heartily as she lifted her hand which was covered in what looked like flour.

"Great job, Willow," Sam told her, despite the fact most of the contents of the bowl now seemed to be spread around it, rather than in it. He was stood at her side, his hand on her back to steady her on the chair, watching her with warmth, and a gentle smile.

"You two cannot be making more cookies," I laughed, announcing my presence. Willow looked up at me with a wide smile.

"We gots to, mommy. We ran out," she informed me, very matter of fact.

"That's because you keep eating them all, peanut," I countered as I settled into one of the stools at the island with a sigh of relief. It was good to sit and have the ground stop moving under my feet.

“Nu-uh. It’s not me. It’s Kai and Hunter! They eats waaaay too many cookies,” Willow announced, just as Kai followed me inside.

“You wouldn’t be snitching on me, would you Willow?” Kai teased, as he stepped up to the counter at my side.

“Nope! Not me!” she replied innocently, making me laugh.

“Come on, cookie monster. Time to roll these out,” Sam chuckled as he scooped Willow up in one arm and grabbed the mixing bowl with the other, taking both over to the biggest counter across the kitchen.

I watched as he set her on the counter and entertained her while also rescuing the cookie dough and rolling it out.

“She seems happy,” Kai said. Willow chose that moment to let out a high pitched giggle of delight as Sam brushed some flour on the end of her nose.

“She loves it here,” I agreed. “It’s the first time she’s been allowed to be herself without being scared.” I hated that, but it was a fact. Growing up with Edward, she had learned at a very early age to tone down her personality around him. She never laughed or made loud noises when she knew he was close by. She never left her toys or drawings out anywhere near him, knowing if he got in a rage he would destroy them, or worse, scream at her for leaving them out.

In just a few days there at the guys place, that had all changed. She laughed and had fun all of the time. She brought toys from her room to play with Sam and with the guys when she could.

She was acting like the three year old she was, and I loved it, but it didn't ease the guilt I felt about all she had been through because of me and my cowardice.

"And you? Are you doing okay here?" Kai pushed.

"Sure," I nodded, "I'm great."

"The truth, Maddie," Kai insisted.

"I really am good. Willow is happy and safe. That's all that matters to me."

"We're worried about you, sunshine," Kai admitted. I turned to look at him and saw the genuine concern all over his face. "We know you're not sleeping well. We've heard you screaming in your sleep."

"Really?" I gasped, embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. Have I been keeping you all awake?"

"We don't care about that, Maddie. We care about you. You're pregnant and you're not sleeping, barely eating, and running yourself ragged to take care of Willow."

"I'm fine. You don't need to worry," I assured him. I hated that they had heard me screaming. I knew it happened. I had suffered with nightmares for a long time. They started after the guys left me, around the same time Clive stepped up his abuse, and they had stayed with me ever since. My life with Edward had only increased the variety of the images that haunted me when I slept.

“You need to let us help you more. I know that you’re still angry with us, but we’re here for you. At least let us help more with Willow. You don’t have to keep her out of our way. We want to spend time with her.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my daughter, Kai,” I snapped, annoyed. Was this because of what had just happened? I didn’t need him to remind me how useless a mother I had been that morning. I was beating myself up enough.

“I know that. That’s not what I meant. I just want to help, damn it!” Kai snapped back, and when I glanced at him he was rubbing at his face tiredly.

“I know, but I can’t, Kai. I c-can’t rely on you guys any more than I already am. I just can’t,” I told him, my throat tight as tears threatened.

“We’re not going anywhere, Maddie. Not this time. Never again. We won’t leave you like that again. You can trust us.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I trusted you before and it destroyed me. I won’t make that mistake again. I can’t. I’m a mother now. I have to be more careful, not for me, but for her and for my baby,” I explained. My eyes remained focused on Willow, the sight of her giving me the strength I needed. “I’m grateful to all of you for having us here and for all you’ve done, but it’s all I can take from you right now. I refuse to make the same mistakes all over again.” I got to my feet. I had to get away before I looked into his eyes and wavered in my determination.

“Maddie, please...” He grabbed my arm, but I pulled away and turned my back on him. I couldn’t speak to him. I couldn’t face him. One look at the hurt on his face and I knew I would

give in. I may be angry with him, with all of them, but I loved them too, so damned much and that had never changed.

“I’m just heading up to my room if Willow needs me, Sam,” I called, my throat tight with the threat of tears.

“Get some rest, dear,” Sam called back. “We’re fine here. Willow’s going to help me make dinner next.”

“Bye mommy!” Willow called after me, dismissing me too. I smiled through my tears. It was for her. Everything I did was for her.

#

CHAPTER 9

CAMERON

I stood behind my closed bedroom door, listening as small footsteps padded up the stairs, followed by the closing of a door further down the hall.

I was being a fucking coward, listening out for Maddie going to her room so I could sneak back out to my workshop without having to see her.

It wasn't that I didn't want her there. I did. Seeing her after so many years of thinking of her and worrying about her was amazing. I fucking hated the reason she had been forced to come to us, and more than anything I wished I had the courage to leave the house and track down her asshole husband. It would have felt really damned good to show that motherfucker what it felt like to be terrorized. I still couldn't comprehend how that scumbag could hurt Maddie, let alone sweet little Willow, but he had and he really needed to pay for that.

Seeing Maddie had been like someone switching on the light for a moment, in the pitch darkness that I had been living in for the last few years. I had missed her so fucking much since that night we had been forced to flee and leave her behind. Even though we had thought we were leaving her in a pretty safe and settled foster home, we had all still worried about her and regretted our decision to leave her behind.

Talking about her, and planning how we would get her back when we all got out of the military was the only thing that had gotten the four of us through some of the terrible situations we had faced. Then Ev had died and there had been no more hope for me. Half of my soul was lost with him and I couldn't see a future ahead when I was only half a man.

It had seemed hopeless anyway. Hunter and Kai had put a ton of resources into tracking her down when we all got out, but she had simply disappeared after leaving the home of Clive and Julia on her eighteenth birthday. There had been no trace of her until Hunter bumped into her at that party in Chicago.

Now we had her back, sort of. Even in the two short interactions I'd had with her, I could see she was no longer the Maddie we had all known. Mads. Our Mads. She was gone, and in her place was someone who was living in fear, constantly on her guard and readying herself for the next fight she would have to face. Life had taken the last of the innocence that we had all loved so much.

She was still beautiful, but in a different way. All of her girlish innocence was gone, but in its place was the most breath taking woman. Her beautiful brown eyes sparkled when she smiled, her face now filled out a little. Her boyish figure had changed too, though she was still too thin. She had slight curves at her hips and her ass. She had finally gotten the breasts we had all secretly known she was so conscious about, and she had a generous cleavage in the pretty little dress she'd been wearing out in the garden. Her hair was still the same rich copper color, but it had been tamed, now hanging in shiny waves to just past her shoulders.

I loved her the moment I saw her, just as much as I had the last day we saw her under our willow tree, but I couldn't stand to be close to her. Being close to her only made the pain of not having Ev at my side that much more intense. Being near her only served to remind me I was half the person I was the last time we were with her and it hurt, so fucking much!

I had resolved to stay away from them both. They deserved better than what remained of me after all of the fucked up shit I had been through.

I listened for a few moments to be sure Maddie had gone into her room, then I snuck out like the pussy that I was and practically ran down the stairs, eager to get outside before she appeared again.

“Cam, we need to talk brother,” Kai called, stopping me in my tracks as I bolted through the kitchen. I paused and looked over to where he stood against the island in the center. Sam had the kid in the kitchen. Willow. She was laughing as she washed her hand, the cast arm held out of the way at her side. She flicked water at Sam then laughed again as he wiped at his face with a huge smile. She was the picture of joy and innocence, everything her mother should have had, had things been different. No matter how much of an ass I was, I would do all I could to help the guys keep that innocence and joy for Willow.

“What’s up?” I asked as I forced myself to stay and talk to my brother. I had put him and Hunter through hell since I lost my twin, but I’d been trying harder to cut them a break lately. They had done so much for me, keeping me together when I was so fucking lost. They deserved some peace and I was trying.

“I know it’s going to be hard, but you, me, and Hunt need to sit down with Maddie and tell her everything. She doesn’t trust us and that needs to change if we’re going to help her and keep her safe,” he said, keeping his voice low so the little one wouldn’t over hear.

“Tell her what you like. You don’t need me there,” I told him with a wave of my hand.

“Yeah, we do. This is your story too, Cam. I’m not telling her your business without you being there.”

“I told you to keep me out of it, Kai,” I reminded him. “I’m good with her being here, but I don’t want to be involved.”

“You don’t want to be involved? Seriously man?” he sighed. “She needs you, Cam.”

“No one needs me. She’s better off if I stay far away.”

“So you don’t have feelings for her anymore?” he pushed.

“No.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the way you look at her. You love her just as much as you always did.”

“Yeah, maybe I do,” I agreed, sighing, and crossing my arms over my chest, feeling anxious and eager to get away from this whole conversation. “But it doesn’t fucking matter, does it? I’m fucked up Kai. I’m no good for her.”

“We’re all fucked up, bro. Maddie too, but we need each other. We always needed each other. We never should have left her and we have to make up for that, starting with the fucking truth,” he growled.

“But we’re not all fucking here, are we?” I spat back, angrily, raising my voice.

A whimper from behind me, had me turning. Willow was in Sam’s arms, her little arms gripped tightly around his neck as she looked to us both with nothing but fear.

“It’s okay, darling girl. Cameron’s not angry, are you Cam?” Sam asked as he sent me a glare. Seeing her so filled with fear and knowing I’d put it there broke me again. Knowing it would be better if I just got far away from her, from all of them, I stormed through the sliding doors, slamming it shut behind me, daring Kai to try and follow me. I was right. No one fucking needed me. I was too messed up. All I could ever give them is pain and fear.

MADDIE

I avoided the guys for the rest of the day. By the time I returned downstairs, Sam had already fed Willow dinner and she was sat on the floor in the living room, with Hunter and Kai, building a zoo for the hundreds of model animals she now owned.

It was hard to hold onto my anger with Kai and Hunter when I stood and watched how much patience they had with my very demanding daughter. They followed her every command, smiling at her indulgently when she told them they did something wrong, or laughed at them because they had put the wrong animals together. How could any woman be mad with men who behaved in that way?

I had been forced to walk away before it affected me anymore, venturing into the kitchen instead. Sam had gone home for the night, but he had left me a plate of risotto to reheat and a delicious looking mini chocolate torte for dessert. I skipped the main, and instead sat and devoured the dessert. It was the most amazing thing I think I had ever eaten and I was already planning how to convince Sam to make it again, as soon as possible.

I made it to Willow’s bed time without seeing any of the guys, for which I was grateful. I collected her from the living room,

telling her to say goodnight to Kai and Hunter, then waited as she did it, not once making eye contact with either of them.

I herded my daughter upstairs for her usual night time routine of a bath, pajamas, and then a story in bed.

“Mommy, you has to do the voices,” Willow interrupted as I turned the page of the story she had selected.

“Sorry honey. I forgot,” I told her as I tried to buck myself up enough to get through this damned book for my child. I was just so exhausted and stressed out with all that was going on, but it was no excuse. I needed to do better. I put on my best growly bear voice and continued on with the story, much to Willow’s delight.

“Mommy?” she asked as we came to the end. I placed the book down on her nightstand and leaned in closer to her.

“Yes, peanut?”

“I likes it here. Are we gonna stay here forever?” she asked.

“Not forever, honey, but for now we’re gonna stay here, okay?”

“Do we gots to go back home, to stay wiv daddy again?” she asked, fear very clear to see in her wide eyes.

“No Willow. We aren’t going to live with daddy again. When we leave here it will just be me, you and your baby brother or sister, okay?” I assured her as I smoothed a hand through her wild hair.

“Maybe we can just stay here, mommy? I likes Kai and Hunter and Sam. They’re nice to me.”

“We can’t stay here forever, honey. This isn’t our house. We’re just staying here for a while. Soon mommy will find our own place to live, okay? Maybe we’ll go back to Chicago and live near Nico and Aunt Mia. That would be good, right?”

“I miss them,” she agreed with a nod.

“Me too, but we’ll see them soon. I don’t want you to worry, okay? Mommy will fix everything and until I do, we like it here, don’t we?” I asked.

“Yeah. I likes it here,” she agreed with a yawn.

“Go to sleep, peanut. Love you,” I whispered as I tucked her in tightly and leaned in to kiss her temple.

“Love you too mommy,” she replied, her eyes already heavy.

I checked her nightlight was on and Mr. Roar was at her side, then slipped from the room, pulling the door between our rooms to, but not fully closing it. I had the tablet that Kai had given me, with the monitor on, in my room, but I wanted to know I could hear her if that failed, and she needed me.

Feeling completely exhausted and still pretty unsteady from the issues with my damned blood pressure, I slipped off the dress I had been wearing and cranked up the shower in my bathroom.

Studying myself in the mirror over the sinks I took in the dark purple, green, and black bruising that covered my right side and back. It was all still pretty painful, but I knew it would heal and fade eventually. Seeing it just hardened my resolve to be more careful and make sure I never put myself or my children in that position ever again.

I kept my shower short, knowing the heat and steam would just make me feel even more lightheaded if I stood there for too long. I hurried through washing myself and my hair, then stepped out and wrapped myself in one of the thick, fluffy, lemon-colored towels. I didn't take the fact I was living in the lap of luxury, thanks to the guys, for granted. They had done all they could to make sure Willow and I were comfortable and had all we could possibly need, and I appreciated it. I really did. I just wasn't allowing it to make up for what they had done to me the night they left thirteen years earlier. Nothing could ever make up for that.

I slipped into the closet and found another beautiful set of soft cotton pajamas, that the guys had bought for me, in one of the drawers. This pair were lilac and pink, with little hearts printed all over both the shorts and t-shirt. They were the maternity kind, so they fit over my bump comfortably and felt so soft against my skin and sensitive bruising.

I was just slipping into the soft bed, planning to watch a movie on the TV in there before I went to sleep, when there was a soft knock on the door.

I wanted to ignore it, feeling too tired and raw to deal with whoever stood there, but I couldn't do that. They had been so good to me and I refused to be rude, so I jumped up and walked over, opening the door just enough to peek out.

“Hey,” Hunter stood there in checked lounge pants and a plain black t-shirt. He had changed from the slacks and white shirt he had been wearing when I left him in the living room. “Is the munchkin asleep?” he asked.

“Yeah. You guys wore her out. Thanks for keeping her entertained,” I replied.

“More like she was keeping us entertained,” he laughed. “Listen, Kai and I were wondering if we could talk?”

“I’m tired, Hunt,” I sighed.

“It won’t take long. We just wanted to clear the air. Kai spoke with Cam and he agreed we could tell you everything.”

“Everything?” I questioned.

“Why we left that night. You should know, Maddie. I think it’s important we get it all out there if we’re gonna make this work with you living here.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I wasn’t sure I was really in the right head space to hear it all, but they were offering me answers I had been waiting thirteen years to hear. I wasn’t going to turn that down. “I’ll meet you down there. Just give me a few minutes,” I told him. He nodded, so I closed the door and went to the closet to grab a sweater. I didn’t feel comfortable having this serious conversation in just heart PJs.

I pulled out the hoody Nico had leant to me the day we left him. I hadn’t washed it and it still smelled faintly of his sandalwood aftershave. I missed him.

Yes he had been my boss when I worked at Milite, but I had never really seen him that way. He had been my friend. He was always kind and patient with me, understanding when I wasn't in the mood to talk after some awful run in with Edward, or when I needed cheering up, or just to laugh. He had been a light in the darkness of my existence, and along with Willow and my friend, Emilia, he had gotten me through the tough times.

We had spoken every day since I got there, him wanting to check in with us, and that helped. I had confided in him about my messed up feelings for the guys and he had listened, but kept his opinions out of it, telling me to just follow my own feelings. He had plans to come here and visit us in a few days and I couldn't wait for him to arrive. It wasn't that I didn't feel safe with the guys. I did. I knew, no matter what, they would protect Willow and I, but I just didn't know them, not the way I knew Nico. I did once, but not anymore.

Nico's hoody was huge on me, falling to my knees like a dress, but I didn't care. It covered me and having the faint hint of his smell around me would help me get through this conversation I was about to have.

I picked up the tablet the guys had given me and checked the image of my daughter before leaving my room. She was fast asleep, Mr. Roar clutched to her chest. She looked so peaceful, but the cast on her arm was a reminder of all I had put her through.

While she had hardly mentioned her father or what he had done to her that night, I knew it was affecting her based on the nightmares she was still suffering with. Not a night had passed since we left Edward that she hadn't woken sobbing and crying out.

Hunter had done some research and found a child trauma counsellor who had excellent credentials and references. Willow had an appointment to meet with her for the first time the following week, and while I hated knowing she needed that kind of help, I was grateful to Hunter and the others for giving it to her. I didn't want her to be permanently traumatized by that one event.

I tucked the tablet under my arm and left the room, grateful Kai had thought to put the monitor in Willow's room. It was a big house, and I would never have been able to relax without the knowledge I would hear her instantly if she needed me or awoke from another nightmare.

The house was silent as I moved down the stairs and towards the living room where I guessed the guys would be sat. I felt like such an interloper as I moved through the lavish hallway, the cold marble floor under my feet. I didn't belong there. I didn't belong anywhere.

Kai and Hunter were spread out on the sectional when I walked in, both focused on the sports highlights quietly playing on the television.

They must have heard me approaching, though I had no idea how since I was pretty sure I hadn't made a sound, but they both turned at the same time to look at me as I nervously tiptoed into the room.

"Hey," Kai greeted me. "Come sit down." He patted the seat between them, but I opted to drop down into the armchair opposite them instead. I wanted to keep a clear head for this discussion and that was impossible to do when I was near any of them. It always had been. Being close to any one of them addled my thoughts and left me dizzy.

“Where’s Cam?” I asked as I nervously toyed with the tablet that sat in my lap.

“He didn’t want to be here for this. It’s hard for him,” Hunter replied.

“But it’s not hard for the two of you?” I questioned as I looked between them. They had both sat up now and looked tense as their focus turned squarely on me.

“It’s hard for all of us to think about that night, Maddie,” Hunter sighed.

“Tell me, please. I need to know. I need you to tell me why...” I had to pause and take a deep breath, pushing down my emotions and fighting not to cry. “...why you left me.”

Kai rubbed his hand over his face as Hunter pushed his through his wild hair. They both looked anxious and reluctant. I might have taken pity on them were I not about to get answers I had been waiting thirteen years for.

“After we walked you home that night, Kai and I went to this club in town. A guy at school told us we could get some work there filling the bar and changing barrels, that kind of shit. His brother was the manager there and he was willing to pay us cash under the table. Remember we were trying to earn enough to get a place?” Hunter looked to me and I nodded.

“Cam and Ev went back home because the guy only needed two of us and they had a project to finish,” Kai added.

“We worked at the club until just before midnight. The guys paid us and asked us to come back at the weekend. We were

excited as we walked home, because he'd paid us pretty well and we knew if we could do it a few nights a week we'd have a deposit for a place in good time for the twins turning eighteen," Hunter continued. They both looked physically pained as they glanced at each other before they went on. "As soon as we turned onto our street we saw Ev. He was banging on the door of the house in nothing but his jeans. His shirt and shoes were gone. We ran to him, worried because he was hammering on the door and screaming to be let in, and when we got close we saw he had a huge cut on the side of his head, which was pouring with blood. His face was starting to swell too and he had signs on his body someone had laid into him."

"Oh God," I gasped as tears filled my eyes. I had known when we were younger that the guy's foster dad hit them. I had seen the evidence on their faces, but they never talked about it, just like I never talked about what I suffered in my own foster home. We had all been dealt a shitty hand and we knew it, but we tried not to dwell on it when we were together.

"We tried to get him to tell us what was going on, but he was freaking out and just begged us to get to Cam, who was still in the house. We didn't know what was going on, but we knew it was bad," Kai told me.

"Kai and I managed to kick the front door through. Ev was first in, and he ran straight to their room, so we followed. We could hear Cam crying out as we got closer, but we weren't prepared for what we walked in on." Hunter's voice trembled as he spoke, and he had to pause to try and take some breaths.

My stomach churned violently because somewhere inside I knew what they were going to tell me next. I could see it in their eyes, in their reluctance to relive this moment. I wasn't sure I wanted them to continue, and yet I needed them to, because I had to know.

“Paul, our foster dad, had Cam pinned to the bed, holding him down while some other sick fuck he had invited around that night...h-hurt him,” Kai explained, the words pouring out of him in a rush, like he just had to get it over with.

“Raped him, Kai. Say it. Those sick motherfuckers were taking fucking turns raping him,” Hunter spat, and as tears slid down my cheeks, I met his eyes and saw they too were filled with tears, his fists clenched in his lap.

“We found out later that Paul had been using Ev and Cam ever since Hunter turned eighteen, blackmailing them into it with the threat of throwing Hunter out on his ass, and me too when I turned eighteen the next week. They were terrified they’d lose us, so they let him hurt them,” Kai explained, and a sob burst from me. I knew exactly how they’d felt, because I had been enduring similar pain just so I wouldn’t be taken away from the four of them. “When he turned up that night with his buddy, the twins refused and tried to fight them both off. Those bastards managed to get Ev out of the house and turned on Cam, since they could both subdue just him.”

“Wh-what did you do?” I asked tearfully, my voice trembling.

“Saw fucking red,” Hunter growled low. “I ripped the guy away from Cam and Kai tackled Paul. Ev managed to get Cam out of the way and then we laid into those two bastards. They tried to fight back, but Kai and I were bigger and more trained than the twins back then. We beat the shit out of them.”

“Good.”

“Marcie, our foster mom, came stumbling into the house, trashed as usual. By then her husband and the other fucker were out cold and covered in blood, as we were too, but it was all their fucking blood.” Hunter’s jaw was so tight I worried

he'd shatter his teeth. He was so angry. I looked to Kai and saw the same expression on his face. I could only imagine how filled with rage they'd been on the night it happened.

"Marcie started screaming and howling, saying she was calling the cops. Cam and Ev were a mess, holding each other and barely functioning. Kai and I already had a juvenile record for a fight we got into not long after we arrived there and we knew if the cops came they weren't going to believe us. We'd probably have done jail time, but even if we got off, Cam and Ev would have been taken from us and sent God knows where. We had to keep them with us. We had to stay together," Hunter explained, his tone pleading with me to understand.

"So you ran?" It wasn't really a question.

"We ran. We wanted to take you with us, but you have to understand, Maddie, we had nothing. The cash we had on us was barely enough to get us out of town. We knew we'd have no place to live. We didn't even know where we were headed. We thought you were better off where you were, and we planned to call you when we were safe." Kai looked to me imploringly as he spoke.

"We managed to get on a bus to some bullshit, hick little town and we got a motel room there for a couple of nights. Everett and Cam were a mess, covered in bruises and cuts. We let them have a few days to heal, but by then we were almost out of cash. We saw the army recruitment office in town and figured it was better than living on the streets. We had to lie about Cam and Ev's age since they weren't quite eighteen, but it worked. Next thing we knew we'd all made it through basic training and were headed off on our first tour."

"We thought about you and talked about you all of the time. You got us through some really shitty times, sunshine," Kai

told me as a sad smile crossed his face.

“You talked about me, and missed me, but you couldn’t call me? Couldn’t send me a letter?” I sobbed. “They didn’t even call the cops. They left! Your foster parents split. The house was empty by the time I went there after school the next day!”

“They were probably scared we reported them, so they ran, but we had no way of knowing that. We thought they’d report us,” Kai said.

“You would have if you called me!” I pointed out, angrily. “I was devastated you left me without a word, but more than anything I was terrified for all of you, terrified something had happened. I just w-wanted to know you were okay. That you were alive!” My voice was wavering in and out as I struggled to push the words through the emotion clogging my throat.

“We were idiots, Maddie,” Hunter sighed. “We thought we were doing what was best for you. We should have at least got in touch when we were settled, but our life in the army was crazy and we didn’t want to bring you into it, only to leave you when we got spun up again. We thought you were better off without us.”

“Well thanks so much for that!” I snapped, annoyed by their bullshit.

“Maddie, we’re so sorry,” Kai pleaded. I looked up and met his eyes, filled with so much regret and pain. I tried to calm myself down, taking in a deep breath.

“I get it,” I sighed, more calmly, but still full of emotion. “I understand why you left. You had to, but I...I wasn’t better off. You should have at least given me the option to be with

you. I would have been safer with all of you on the streets than I was with Clive.”

“You told us you were good there. You promised us those foster parents weren’t hurting you,” Hunter reminded me.

“Because I didn’t want to be moved!” I cried. “You guys, you were all I had. I’d have gone through anything if it meant I got to see you every day. I spent my whole life alone and so damned lost. You four were the only people who ever saw me, who cared about me. I couldn’t lose that! But I did anyway, and it broke me! Do you understand? You guys destroyed me the day you left me!”

“Fuck!” Hunter roared. I looked up, startled by his outburst, and found him now stood, pacing back and forth, his hand ripping at his hair in frustration.

“Tell us, Maddie. Tell us all of it. We need to know. You need to get it out,” Kai told me.

“What’s the point now?” I asked flatly.

“Because we should know!” Kai snapped. “We fucking abandoned you and we should know what we left you to suffer.”

“He’s right,” Hunt agreed as he met my eyes, his own still glassy. “Tell us. Clive. He beat you, right?”

“Yes,” I admitted with a nod.

“Did he touch you? Rape you? Was he abusing you, Maddie?” Hunter went on. Sobs bubbled up inside of me and I was shaking as memories of that monster and the things he put me through flashed through my mind. I couldn’t speak, but I nodded as I closed my eyes in an attempt to stem the tears.

“Please tell me you at least got away from him when we left,” Kai begged. I took in a shaky breath as I opened my eyes and looked up at him. His fists were clenched now too, and there were tears on his cheeks. Hunter was in front of me, his fists balled at his sides, his face set in a tense glare as he awaited my answer.

“No,” I answered with a tearful shake of my head. “I couldn’t. I...I wanted to be there...be waiting in case you ev-ever came back.”

“Fuck! Maddie,” Hunter gasped as Kai buried his face in his hands.

“I missed you so much. I just w-wanted you to come back,” I whimpered. “I th-thought you’d come back for me.”

By the time I cleared my tears enough to see anything, Hunter was right before me, looking down with an expression I couldn’t decipher.

“I’m going to hold you now, okay? I have to. Please...just let me hold you,” he pleaded, and I saw the desperation on his face. It was enough to make me give in and nod slightly.

In a second he had me swept up into his arms and cradled tightly against his chest. I lay my head on his shoulder, unable to hold back, desperate to be held after hearing it all. We had

all been through a nightmare of a childhood and it had torn us from each other in a brutal and painful way.

“We never should have left you. I’m so fucking sorry, baby. So sorry. We fucked up so bad,” he told me over and over again as he held me close. I could feel his tears running down his face, dripping off of his chin and onto me.

Kai appeared behind me, wrapping his arms around me and Hunter and holding the three of us close together. I could feel the slight tremble of his body at my back and realized the revelations had broken all of us that night. Our lives may have gone in different directions, but they had all been equally as fucked up.

“Can you ever forgive us, sunshine? Can we fix this?” Kai asked me after a while. That was the question running through my mind. I had hated and resented them, just as much as I loved them for the years we had been apart and that wasn’t an easy thing to overcome.

But now I had the truth I understood why they left like they did. Cam and Everett had to get away from that monster, and Kai and Hunter had been so scared they would lose them and each other. It was partly on me for lying to them and convincing them I had a stable home life in that crappy foster home. If I had been honest with them they never would have left me behind at the hands of that pervert.

“We all made mistakes,” I admitted shakily. “It’s too late to change any of them now.”

“If we could...” Hunter began, but I cut him off as I nestled a little closer against him. It felt so good to be held in his arms. I wasn’t exactly small at five feet nine tall, but he had this way

of making me feel like I was. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt as protected as I did in that moment.

"I know," I said, halting what he was about to say. "But we can't. All we can do is move forwards from here and learn from this fucked up mess."

"What does that mean?" Kai asked.

"It means," I sighed deeply. "It means I'm so sick of being mad with you guys. I'm not saying I can trust you the way I used to. That will take time, but I'd like it if we can start over. I missed you all so damned much," I admitted.

"We missed you too, Maddie. We'll win your trust back," Hunter promised.

"We're never going to let you down like that ever again, sunshine. We fucked up badly, but we've learned our lesson," Kai agreed.

"Just be my friend. That's what I really need right now," I told them. I glanced up and for the first time I realized Cam stood in the open doorway. As soon as my eyes met his, he turned and walked away, but I wondered how much he had heard. Had he been listening the whole time?

"We're here for you, sunshine. We're not going anywhere," Kai returned, pulling my attention back to him.

I had to admit, a weight had eased from my mind to know everything. It was a relief to know, after all of these years, that the reason they left me was legitimate. That insecurity, which I had carried for a long time, that I just hadn't been good

enough for them, had gone. I understood why they left, and knowing them as I did, I got why they thought leaving me behind was the right thing. Maybe I could finally let go of the anger I had been holding onto for so very long. God knew I needed them in my corner at that point in my life.

CHAPTER 10

MADDIE

I could hear my daughter laughing as I hurried down the stairs the next morning.

I had slept in later than I had in years and I had been panicked when I woke up and saw the time. Willow never allowed me to sleep in. She was always up not long after dawn, jumping on me and demanding I get up, usually because she was hungry. It was a great way to be woken up, seeing her beaming happy face as soon as I opened my eyes.

But that morning, not only had she not woken me, but she had also gone from her room. I had tried not to panic this time, sure one of the guys must have come to get her so I could sleep in. We'd had a late night the night before, staying up to talk over all that had happened. It was three A.M. by the time I had crawled into bed, completely exhausted.

I had forced myself to stay calm as I took a quick shower and got ready that morning, but now I found myself moving down the stairs as fast as I could, to check on Willow. It was hard to break my need to know where she was at all times. I was just so used to being the only person who took care of her.

“Maddie!” Sam greeted me merrily the second I strode into the kitchen. “There you are, my dear. Can I make you some breakfast?” he offered. He was dressed in what seemed to be his favored work wear, consisting of jeans and a neatly pressed shirt. Today the jeans were dark navy, and his shirt was baby blue. He always looked impeccably neat.

“Thank you, but I c-can get it,” I replied, still so unused to having anyone do anything for me. For so many years it had been me running around ensuring Edward’s every need was met.

“Nonsense. What would you like? Eggs? Pancakes? I could make waffles?”

“Erm, tea would be good and maybe some toast?” I replied nervously.

“I’ll make you some eggs too, in case you change your mind,” he told me as he gestured over to where Kai and Hunter sat with Willow at the breakfast table, over by the sliding doors out to the garden. She had an almost empty plate of what looked like pancakes, syrup, and fruit in front of her as she animatedly laughed at something Kai had just said.

“Morning, peanut,” I interrupted as I walked up behind her and leaned in to kiss her head, trying not to grimace when my hand cradled her cheek and landed over a patch of sticky syrup.

“Mommy!” she cried happily as she turned to me and wrapped her arms around my neck, squishing her very sticky face against mine and into my hair. “Sam made me pancakes for breakfast and they was yummy!” she told me as she released me and pointed to her plate.

“That’s great, Honey. I hope you thanked Sam,” I told her as I rounded the table and took the free seat beside her, keeping my attention on her. Kai was at her other side and Hunter was opposite her. I was nervous to make eye contact with them after all that had been revealed the night before. I just felt unsure about what happened between us next. We had agreed to a truce and fresh start, but how did that actually look?

“I did! Twice!” Willow assured me, raising two fingers to illustrate. “And I told him he made the best pancakes ever!”

“She did,” Sam laughed as he appeared behind me, placing a cup of green tea on the table before me. It was my favored drink when I was pregnant. I found it helped with the nausea and gave me the kick I usually got from coffee. “Your daughter is very good for my ego with all of her compliments on my cooking,” he added as he ran a hand affectionately over Willow’s head. She looked up at him with a huge smile on her face.

I thanked Sam, then took a sip of my tea, still putting off looking up at either Hunter or Kai.

“Mommy, Hunter, and Kai said we can go to the zoo today! Can we go, please? I want to see the lions! And the elephants! Kai said they even got panda bears there!” she squealed excitedly.

“Red pandas. They’re smaller, sweetie,” Kai reminded her.

“Only if you’re feeling up to it,” Hunter added and I forced myself to look up and meet his eyes. He smiled softly, reassuring me, just as he used to when we were kids.

“Don’t you have to work?” I asked. He and Kai had been working some kind of rota between themselves since we arrived, taking it in turn to go into the office while the other stayed with me and Willow. I had gotten the impression that their business, or Cameron’s business technically, required a huge amount of work and took over their lives for the most part.

“We both took the day off,” Kai answered.

“So can we go, Mommy? Please, please, pretty please. I always wanted to go to the zoo so we can see the animals for real!” Willow pleaded. There was no way I could deny her. She had always wanted to visit a zoo, but I had never been able to take her. Edward would never have allowed such a frivolous trip and wouldn’t have given me the money to take her on my own.

“Sure, as long as it’s okay with Hunter and Kai,” I agreed.

“The zoo it is,” Hunter told her with a huge grin. It lit up his whole face, only accentuating his chiseled cheek bones and sharp jaw. The years we had been apart had not taken an ounce away from how handsome he was.

“Yay!” Willow cried as she waved her arms up and down. She stopped suddenly, lowering her arms, and looking unsure when Cam came wandering into the kitchen. He was dressed in cargo shorts and a plain white t-shirt again, obviously headed for his workshop.

“Sorry,” he said when he saw us all looking at him. “I thought you guys would have finished breakfast by now.”

“It’s fine. Come and grab a seat, brother. Sam’s making breakfast for Maddie. I’m sure he won’t mind making you some too,” Kai said as he pulled the chair at his side out a little and looked up to Cam with so much hope that it hurt to see it. He and Hunter obviously missed their brother. The day Everett had died, they lost not only him, but Cam too. I could see how much it was hurting them both to not be able to help Cameron through all he was suffering.

“I’m good. I was just heading...”

“Is he mad again, mommy?” Willow asked, lowering her voice, but not enough that they all didn’t hear her question.

“Mad?” I asked as I looked between the three guys. Kai looked up at Cam.

“Yeah,” Cam said as he looked nervously to me. “I’m sorry. I kinda snapped at Kai yesterday and Willow saw. I scared her. I didn’t mean to,” he explained as he anxiously rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. He forced a smile and looked to Willow. “I’m sorry, trouble. I won’t do it again,” he added.

“S’okay,” Willow shrugged and smiled a little as she sat up straighter and looked right at him. “I gets mad sometimes too. Do you want to come to the zoo wiv us?” she offered. “They gots red pandas!”

“Er, no...thanks. I...I have to work,” Cam told her, looking a little unsure and taken aback.

“Work can wait. Come with us, Cam. Have some fun for once,” Hunter pushed.

“No. I can’t.” Cam looked to me apologetically before he hurried past us and out of the sliding doors. I watched as he charged across the grass angrily. I had no idea how, but I was determined to find a way to help him and to heal some of the agony I saw in his eyes.

“Why’s he so sad, Mommy?” Willow asked. I marveled at the way she was so intuitive at such a young age. It likely had to do with her learning early on how to decipher her father’s

moods. I looked to where she sat at my side, weighing up how much to tell her, but I wanted to be honest.

“Cameron had a brother, called Everett and he died, honey. That’s why he’s sad. He misses his brother,” I explained as I ran a hand through her blonde curls.

“Can we makes him feel better?” Willow asked as she looked from me to Hunter and then to Kai.

“I really hope so,” I replied sadly.

“If anyone can make him smile again, I know it will be you, munchkin,” Hunter added.

“Imma make him a picture, mommy. Can I go gets my colors?” she asked.

“That’s a great idea, peanut. You need me to help you carry them?” I offered.

“Eat breakfast,” Kai nodded behind me and when I turned, Sam was headed my way with a huge plate piled high with food. “I’ll help her.”

“We need to talk anyway,” Hunter added quietly, so I only just heard him and when I met his eyes, his expression was worried. *This couldn’t be good.*

I gasped as Sam placed the huge plate before me. It held three slices of toast, a mountain of scrambled eggs, and a stack of crispy bacon. Before I could protest, Sam spoke,

“Just eat what you can. That little one needs some calories.” He moved his eyes down to my bump, then back up and smiled at me.

“Thank you,” I told him. I knew he was right. I needed to try harder with what I ate for the sake of my baby who was fighting to grow inside me. It was just so hard to have an appetite with everything else that was going on.

Sam bustled back over to the kitchen as I picked up a slice of toast and took a bite.

“Okay,” I sighed. “Lay it on me.”

“Nico called this morning,” Hunter began, and my stomach instantly turned as my heart beat sped up.

“Edward?” I questioned as I dropped the toast back on the plate.

“Yeah. You don’t need to worry, but he started calling your cell yesterday and sending texts.”

“Let me guess. He threatened to take Willow from me if I don’t go back.” My voice was steady, but my hands were beginning to tremble as all of my fears of losing my daughter resurfaced.

“He can’t do that, Maddie. We have photos of what he did to you and Willow, and a restraining order, as well as a police report. The threats are empty,” he assured me.

“This is Frank. He wants us to go back so all of this can be covered up.”

“That’s what Nico thought too. He wants to pay Frank a visit. He’s going to show him the pictures of your and Willow’s injuries and warn him how public we can make it if he pushes things.”

“I don’t want Nico getting involved with him like that. Frank won’t like being threatened,” I worried. I didn’t know exactly what Frank was capable of, but I knew he could use his position to affect Nico’s life and his business.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Hunter told me.

“I have more pictures,” I admitted as I tried to work out the best way to play this. Of course I wanted my daughter and myself to be protected from Frank and his son, but I didn’t want to do that at the cost of Nico.

“What do you mean?”

“I took pictures of what he did to me....every time for the last couple of years,” I explained. “I created an email I could send them to, then I deleted them from my cell. Can we use those?” I bit my lip nervously as I looked up at him.

“How many pictures are there?” Hunter asked as a hint of anger slipped into his tone.

“Quite a lot,” I shrugged.

“We can definitely use them. Write down the login for the email address and I’ll send it to Nico. He can speak with the attorney he appointed and see where we should go next.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “I need you both to keep me updated though. This is my mess, Hunt. I’m not leaving you guys to deal with it.”

“We’re dealing with it together,” Hunter assured me. “I just don’t want you to worry too much, okay? You’re both safe here. He has no idea who we are or how we know each other. He can’t find you.”

“I know. You’re right,” I agreed. I didn’t add that nothing would stop Frank and Edward if they wanted to track us down though. I knew them well enough to know that. They always got what they wanted.

“Thanks so much for this, you guys. She’s in heaven,” I told Kai and Hunter as the three of us stood behind Willow. She was at the glass of the Lion enclosure, staring absolutely mesmerized by the lioness and her three cubs who laid out lazily in the sun.

She had been mesmerized just like that by every animal she saw. She bounced excitedly between enclosures, reeling off facts that blew mine and the guys minds, then when she saw the animals she just went quiet, watching and taking in every single detail.

“Sshh, mommy,” Willow whispered. “We don’t want them to run away.”

“I don’t think they can hear us through the glass, pumpkin,” Hunter told her, but kept his voice low anyway.

“Can you see the spots on the cubs Kai?” Willow asked as she grabbed his hand and pulled him right up to the glass. “See them? All lion cubs is born wiv spots like that, but when they gets older, they loses the spots.”

“I can see them. I didn’t know that, sweetie. You’re so smart,” Kai told her as he ruffled her hair.

“Do you thinks there’s a daddy lion in there?” Willow asked as she stretched up on her tiptoes to look around the large enclosure.

“I’ll bet there is. Why don’t we go on the treetop walk and see if we can spot him?” Hunter suggested and when Willow looked to me, I nodded in agreement. I was exhausted, having already walked the long distance around most of the huge attraction. But I couldn’t deny my child when she was so very happy.

Two hours later we were heading back to the car after a thrilling day for Willow. She had delighted in each and every animal she had seen, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before she was begging us to bring her back again.

“Want to check out the gift shop, Willow?” Hunter asked as we approached it en route to the car park.

“Can we mommy?” she asked as she looked to me, around Hunter, whose hand she was clutching.

“Okay, but only one stuffed toy. You already got so many new toys this week from the guys,” I gave in. Nico had ensured I got my paycheck, sending it to Kai so he could give it to me in cash, so I had a little money to treat her. I wanted her to have something to remind her of how much fun she had that day.

“Wow!” Willow cried the moment we walked into the store. She was surrounded by shelves and tables stacked with toys and stuffies. “How many dollars can I spend mommy?” she asked excitedly, and I flinched at the question.

“No limit, sweetie. Just look around and see which toys you want. Hunter and I will treat you,” Kai told her, and she hurried off with an excited squeal.

“You shouldn’t have said that. We’ll never rein her in now,” I laughed. “She’s gonna want everything.”

“Why’d she ask that?” Hunter asked, looking genuinely confused and curious.

“Edward controlled every cent. I didn’t have much spare very often, but I tried to save what I could to treat her every now and then. It was never much, but occasionally I could let her loose in the toy aisle at the grocery store and I’d tell her how many dollars she could spend. It’s just what she’s used to,” I shrugged. It sucked, but I had always done the best I could for her. Thanks to Frank’s orders that we look the part, she always had nice clothes and I always made sure she got good meals. Birthdays and Christmas were trickier, since Edward refused to waste money on gifts. I saved what I could to make sure she always had something to open. She had never been disappointed, and I had just been thankful she was so young and unaware of what others received in comparison.

“You did an amazing job with her, Maddie. She’s such a great kid,” Hunter told me, and I realized I was looking at the ground, embarrassed by what I’d told him. He wrapped his arm around me when I looked up and smiled a little.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “She really is.”

“Come on, let’s go see what she’s found,” he said as he herded me over to where she and Kai now stood looking at a huge wall of stuffed Lions. Kai already had a gorilla and an aardvark toy tucked under one arm.

“Which one should I gets, mommy?” she asked as she looked up at all of the choice before her.

“You can’t decide?” Hunter laughed as he released me and stepped forward.

“No. I likes them all,” Willow shrugged.

“I think in that case, the rule is, that you should always get the biggest one,” Hunter laughed as he pulled down a huge lion from the top shelf. It was big enough for Willow to sit on its back and ride it.

“That one is gigantic!” Willow cried as her eyes bugged out when Hunter placed it on the ground before her. She instantly climbed on the back and laid her face against the fluffy mane.

“You like that one, Willow?” Kai asked, a huge smile on his face as he looked at her adoringly.

“Yep. He’s so soft and cuddly,” she sighed.

“That settles it then. He’s coming with us. Who else shall we have, munchkin?” Hunter asked as he grabbed her hand to pull her up, scooping up the huge toy in the other arm.

“Who else? You means I can get more?” Willow asked, clearly shocked.

“Hunt,” I sighed.

“Let us spoil her, Maddie. She deserves it,” Kai stopped me.

“Just remember we have to get whatever you buy home with us,” I sighed, giving in. I knew it was pointless to argue with them, They always got their way. I had never been able to tell them ‘no,’ plus they were right, Willow deserved to be spoilt a little.

Thankfully, my daughter was more sensible than the men leading her astray, and she only picked out a giraffe to go with what she already had, assuring them that was all she wanted for now.

She was ecstatic as she sat in the back of the car with me on the way home, her gorilla, aardvark and giraffe lined up in the seat between us and the huge lion on the shelf behind her, blocking the entire rear window.

She’d had the day of her dreams and she was happier and more excited than I had ever seen her.

Up front Hunter and Kai were smiling too. They had been all day, I realized, and I was pretty sure they’d had just as much fun as Willow had. They really seemed to love spending time

with her. They never got sick of her endless random animal facts or shushed her when she got a little too over excited. They just indulged her and gave her their time and patience. That, to me, meant everything.

I must have dozed off on the drive home, because I jolted awake when the car came to a stop. I looked up and realized we were back at the guy's home. I glanced to Willow and smiled when I saw she too was passed out, clutching her new gorilla to her chest, along with Mr. Roar.

“You okay, sunshine?” I looked up and found Kai turned in the passenger seat, watching me.

“I'm great. Thank you for today. It made me so happy to see her enjoying herself like that. It's all I've ever wanted for her,” I admitted.

“Get used to it, Maddie. We're going to do all we can to make you both happy from now on,” Hunter told me.

I smiled at his words, but I refused to acknowledge them any more than that. I needed to tread carefully. I was glad we were starting afresh and that we could be friends again, but I needed to keep my guard in place. I couldn't allow myself to just give in and trust them as my heart was pleading for me to. I had so much more than just me to consider, and I needed to start being way more cautious with the decisions I made.

Every decision I made moving forward would be based on what was best for my children. They were, and would always be, my very top priority. I had to use my brain to make decisions, not my heart.

CHAPTER 11

NICO

I slammed closed the file, which I had been pointlessly staring at for the last hour. I was supposed to be working on the staffing for the jobs we were currently working, but that wasn't happening. In fact I had gotten very little done in the four days since Maddie and Willow left on that plane.

Even though I had spoken with Maddie each day on the phone and also with Hunter several times since they left, I still couldn't stop worrying about them. Maddie had been badly beaten and exhausted when she left me, not to mention the fact she hadn't seemed so happy to be going with Hunter at all.

Hunter had told me why Maddie was angry with them – because they had all ditched her when they were kids, but he had also told me a little about why they had been forced to do that and I got it. My own childhood had been filled with my father's violence and I knew how much it could mess you up. For years I trusted no one except my four brothers who I met in the military. They were all I had for years, but they were also all I needed. I knew I could count on them to have my back no matter what. Then Emilia came along. She was the little sister I had never known I had. My mom had abandoned me and my dad when she was pregnant and we never heard a word from her again.

Emilia, or Mia, as I called her, came searching for me when our mother died and I was so fucking grateful she found me. In the four years she had been in my life she had changed me. She showed me that it's okay to let people in – better than okay actually – vital. She showed me that I need to allow people into my life to be happy. And I was happy. Having my sister in my life gave me family and someone to look out for, which I had come to realize I needed. She also took care of me in return and gave me that feeling of being loved and of truly mattering, that I

wasn't sure I had before. Yes my brothers relied on me, but they never truly needed me.

Then, a year ago, Maddie walked into my office for an interview, and I just fell for her. It wasn't just her looks, though she is truly beautiful, but it was the strength I saw within her. I could see the darkness and pain in her eyes – both of which I recognized from my own reflection, and yet she was so strong and brave. The more I got to know her, the more I saw the fight she used each and every day to get not just herself, but Willow too, through the crappy life they were trapped in.

For months I had been forcing myself not to step in and pull them both out of that crappy home life. Every time I saw her husband I had to fight with everything I had not to smash his smug face against the nearest hard object. I held myself back because I knew it wasn't what Maddie would want. She was a strong woman and I knew the only way she could get away from the hell she was trapped in was to walk out of there herself.

And she had, finally. Not only that, but she also called me when she got up the courage to escape. She had trusted me just as I hoped she would.

I hated that she was so far away from me. I had this feeling deep inside that she needed me, and yet I couldn't go to her. Not yet anyway. Our business, Milite, was already going to shit because I had been pretty much ignoring my responsibilities all week. I couldn't just walk away from it and leave it rudderless.

Linc, Parker and Jax, three of my four brothers and business partners, were on vacation with Mia. The four of them were in a relationship and had been for a while.

It was a relationship I had been wary of to begin with. At the time they got together, my sister had been through hell and was

in a fragile way. I worried about her diving in with the three of them when she was so naïve and inexperienced with the real world. It wasn't that I didn't trust my brothers to protect and care for her. It was just that I knew how useless they could be with relationships and women. But they had surprised me and stepped up to the plate. The three of them were the solid foundation my sister needed to get her through the trauma she had endured in her life. They were there for her from the beginning and I knew she loved them. They made her happy and that was good enough for me.

I just wished they'd made their vacation a little shorter so they could get their asses back to the office and I could get to Maddie and Willow.

Nate was my other brother and business partner, but he was currently in the middle of a six month break from the business. His wife, Lola, had given birth to their beautiful son, Joshua, three months earlier and Nate wanted to take some time out to be with both of them. No way I was going to pull him back into the office.

So I was stuck where I was for the time being and I knew it. I fucking hated it too though.

I pulled Maddie's cell phone from the top drawer of my desk and growled when I saw more texts from Edward had arrived in the hour since I last checked it.

His messages were getting increasingly threatening and I was seriously getting to the point where holding myself back from kicking his ass was no longer an option.



EDWARD

If you're not home by the end of the day
I'm coming to find you and I'm taking
Willow!



EDWARD

You're not fit to be a mother you stupid
bitch and I can prove it!

EDWARD

You're a nobody. You can't win if I fight
for custody, and you know it. Come back
now or you'll be sorry!

EDWARD

You WILL regret ignoring me Maddie!!!

I growled again as I slammed the cell down on my desk and pushed my hands through my hair. This was what I needed to focus on. I needed to do whatever it took to get this asshole and his father, who was no doubt pulling the strings, off of Maddie's back.

They had put her through enough bullshit, and I wasn't going to allow them to continue. Hunter had sent me Maddie's login details for an email she had set up.

Looking at the images in that inbox, earlier in the day had almost killed me. I knew that bastard was hurting her. I had seen bruises on her arms and bad cover up on her face trying to disguise the damage he had done. I saw the signs of abuse in her manner and in how nervous she had become when a client had risen their voice in the office. I knew he was hurting her, but I had no idea the severity of the abuse. If I had known, I would never have left her to make her own decision to leave. I'd have dragged her away from that sonofabitch in a heartbeat.

I was pretty sure I had seen every inch of Maddie's body bruised and beaten between the many sets of images in that email. That fucker had beaten her black and blue, mainly in areas which could be hidden with clothing, again and again for at least the two years Maddie had been logging the injuries, and likely much longer than that. My blood had been boiling as I looked through them, my need to kill Edward increasing more and more with every click of the mouse. I wanted to inflict every injury he had on Maddie, on his pathetic body. I wanted to make him suffer as he had Maddie. But I couldn't. The family was too high profile and I would never get away with it. I was no use to Maddie and Willow in jail.

Instead I had a more logical plan that I intended to enact at a political fundraiser Milite had been invited to that night. Even though I couldn't mess that coward up, like I wanted, I could make sure he and his father stayed away from Maddie and Willow. It would have to be enough, for now.

I stepped out of my apartment later that evening, already pulling at the collar of my shirt and considering going without the damn tie that felt as if it were strangling me. I hated wearing a suit! That was why Park, Linc or Jax usually handled these formal occasions we sometimes showed our faces at. Well, the bullshit suit wearing and the fact that I wasn't much of a people person. People in general just pissed me off, usually before they even opened their damned mouths. But this was for Maddie and Willow and I would do anything to keep them both safe.

I had printed copies of the images I needed along with a memory stick in the zip up leather folder under my arm and I knew exactly what my plan was. I'd have liked to have a couple of my brothers backing me up, but in their absence I had called in another member of my extended family.

"Looking good, Nico, as always," Tyler started with his bullshit the second I walked into the lobby of the Milite building.

He was dressed in a Navy suit which fit him perfectly, and was no doubt made by some designer I had never heard of. Under it he wore a crisp white shirt, casually open at the collar.

"Why the fuck am I wearing a tie?" I growled as I ripped the damned leash off and threw it behind the reception desk, then I stormed towards Tyler. I unbuttoned the top button on my shirt and felt like I could finally breathe again.

"Good evening Tyler. You look incredibly handsome in that suit. Makes me wish I had taken you up on all of those offers years ago," Ty mocked with a shit eating grin, the whole time mocking the growly tone he always took when he was mocking my voice. "Why thank you, Nico," he added in his own voice.

Tyler was Parker's kid brother and Mia's closest and greatest friend. He had practically been brought up by Park and the rest

of us after the two of them lost their parents. He enjoyed toying with me with his flirting, but he was a good kid really. While he had never worked for us at Milite, he had been training with the five of us for years. He knew how to take care of himself and I trusted him to watch my back.

I had plenty of guys who worked for me who could have backed me up, but this felt personal and I wanted my family at my back.

“Fuck off, pretty boy. You good to go?” I asked, unable to hide the hint of a smile that slipped onto my face at his teasing.

“Yep. You gonna tell me what exactly you’re up to?” he asked as we headed out of the building. I didn’t answer as I jogged down the steps and over to the car I had ordered to use for the night. It saved me trying to find a place to park in the city.

I opened the door and ushered him into the back of a Lincoln Town car, then climbed in behind him. I had to unbutton the suit jacket so I could still breathe as I sat. *Fucking suit!*

“Nic? You know I’ve got your back, man, but I need to know what the fuck we’re doing,” he prompted as the car started moving.

“It’s Maddie,” I replied as I unzipped the folder under my arm and pulled out the images of her and Willow from the night I picked them up.

“Maddie? The woman who works in the office?”

“Yeah. Her husband has been hurting her for years. Earlier this week he hurt her daughter, Willow, while he was laying into Maddie. She called me and I got them away from the bastard, but he’s been calling and threatening her.” I held out the small

handful of images of Maddie and Willow taken at the hospital I had driven them to.

“Fuck, Nico,” Ty gasped as he shuffled through the images. “How old is the little girl?”

“Three. He broke her arm.”

“Fucking animal,” Ty hissed as he handed me the pictures back. “Why isn’t he locked up? Did she call the cops?”

“She did and she got a restraining order, but he got off with any charges,” I explained.

“How? Those photos would be enough to charge him, wouldn’t they?”

“His father is Frank Foster. The D.A.”

“Sweet, quiet Maddie is married to Edward Foster?” Ty gasped. No doubt he knew the family from the vast amount of press footage they got due to Frank’s position.

“Was. She and Willow are far away from that piece of crap now and I need to make sure it stays that way.”

“That’s why we’re going to this fundraiser? He’s going to be there?” Ty questioned.

“Yep. And Frank should be here too. I have more photos that Maddie took over the last two years and they’re bad, Ty, really bad,” I told him.

“Worse than those?” he asked as he turned his eyes to the images in my hand I had just shown him.

“Much worse, but that was the only time he hurt Willow, thank fuck. I’m gonna use the images to threaten Frank. Maddie says Edward doesn’t give a crap about her or Willow. He just does whatever Daddy tells him to, so it’s Frank we need to get to.”

“Frank’s up for re-election this year. He isn’t going to want this getting out,” Ty realised and I nodded my agreement. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just watch my back. I doubt Frank or Edward will do anything at such a high profile event, but there have been whispers of Frank Foster using underhanded techniques to get his way before, and he’s really not gonna like my threats tonight. I could ruin his whole career if these pictures get out,” I explained.

“You sure you shouldn’t have had more guys here? You know I’ve got your back, but I’m not Parker,” Tyler worried.

“I want it to stay between family as much as possible, for Maddie’s sake. She’s been through enough.”

“You like her.” It wasn’t a question. Tyler had always been perceptive and I was pretty sure my feelings for Maddie were all over my face because of how much I was worrying about her.

“She’s a friend. I just want her and Willow to be safe,” I hedged.

“And are they?”

“For now. They’re staying with some guys I know from my time overseas. They’ll protect them,” I explained. “So you good with

the plan?”

“No choice. Em loves Maddie. She’ll kill me if anything happens to her,” he shrugged with a grin.

“Ty. This is serious,” I scolded.

“I know. I’m in, Nic. Just try not to get my ass kicked though because Jake and I have that adoption meeting next week and I don’t think arriving with my face all messed up will make me look like a responsible potential parent,” he told me.

“Next week? That’s great.” Tyler and his husband, Jake, had started the process of adoption almost a year ago and I knew they were getting frustrated about how long it was all taking. This meeting was the final step though, and after it they would know if they were going to be placed with a child or not. I had no doubt that they would be. They were an amazing couple and would both make amazing fathers. They had a beautiful home just outside of the city that any child would thrive in, plus Tyler worked from home, so had all of the time in the world to dedicate to a little one.

“I know. We’re so excited and so fucking nervous too,” he replied.

“You’ll be good. They’d be idiots to turn you guys down,” I told him plainly.

“Hope so,” he agreed. “Just keep me bruise free so Jake doesn’t kill me.”

“Don’t worry, pretty boy. We’ll get you out unscathed. Wouldn’t want to mess up that pretty face,” I mocked. I just hoped things went as smoothly as planned.

“I knew you thought I was pretty,” Ty taunted with his usual grin in place. He was an asshole, but I was grateful to have him watching my six. I was so lucky to have the family I had found and I wanted that for Maddie, Willow and the little one growing inside her too.

We’d been at the most boring fundraiser I’d ever had the displeasure of being at for just over an hour when Frank Foster walked in. He had no doubt planned his arrival to be ‘fashionably late’ just so that all eyes would be on him and his asshole son when they strode into the room.

They were both dressed in fancy designer suits and carried themselves with the sophistication and bravado their privileged, ‘old money’ heritage had afforded them, but the charming smiles and welcoming words to those who greeted them, didn’t fool me. I knew exactly what they were. I knew what they had done to Maddie.

I clenched my fists at my sides as I held myself back from charging right over and taking the two of them down as I wanted to. They deserved it, but it wasn’t why I was there. I had to handle this with a diplomacy I wasn’t exactly known for.

“What’s the move?” Ty asked from where he stood at my side looking relaxed, sipping from a glass of champagne.

“Let them work the room for a while,” I replied quietly. “Wait for an opportunity to get them alone.”

“Small suggestion,” he said as he turned to face me. “Maybe try to look a little less murderous, if you can. You’re alarming all of

the rich assholes.”

“He broke Willow’s arm, Tyler. She’s only three years old,” I growled low.

“They’re safe, Nic. Remember why you’re here. You want to keep them that way,” he reminded me as he gave me a reassuring pat on the back. “Just breathe. Those fuckers are not gonna win this time. You won’t let them.”

“No. I won’t,” I agreed with determination.

Ty and I stayed in the background of the event for the next hour, not really speaking with anyone but each other, the both of us constantly watching Edward and Frank work the room with their false charm. It was easy to see how people were taken in by them. Not once in the time I was watching them did I see either of their masks slip even a little. They were good.

My opportunity finally came as the night wore on. Most people had taken to the dance floor, making the most of the live band now that a few drinks had lowered their inhibitions.

Frank and Edward were both standing at the bar together, no doubt conspiring about their next ploy. I gave Ty a nod, which he returned to assure me he would watch my back, then I made my way over to them, the whole time telling myself over and over why I couldn’t just lay them both out.

As I neared them they stopped talking and turned my way as if they sensed me coming. I consciously unclenched my fists and busied my hands pulling the leather folder from where I had it tucked under my arm.

“Nico. I was wondering when you’d have the balls to approach me,” Edward sneered.

“Rich coming from the coward who only has the balls to hit his wife and child,” I threw back as I walked up to the bar between them and leant casually back against it.

“Are you sure you want to be throwing about such slanderous allegations, Mr. Gallo? Remember who you’re dealing with,” Frank interjected and I didn’t miss the way his eyes subtly moved around him to ensure no one had overheard my words.

“I could sue you for deformation of character,” Edward added, but he looked a little flustered as he pulled at his shirt and jacket sleeves, unnecessarily straightening them.

“Try it,” I growled as I turned and stepped closer to him, leaning down until my face was right before his. “I’m sure the courts and the press would love to see the evidence I have to back up my claims.”

“Why don’t we take a seat to finish this conversation?” Frank suggested as he looked nervously to the server behind the bar who was blatantly trying to listen in to what we were saying.

“Fine by me,” I agreed easily as I turned away from Edward and followed behind Frank as he led us away from the bar. I saw Ty watching me from where he stood across the room, and as Frank headed into the foyer of the hotel, I saw Ty move to follow from a distance.

I followed Frank into a large conference room just off of the hotel foyer. Frank strode in and sat at the head of the large conference table, placing the glass of scotch, which he still held, down on the table before him. I moved closer but remained standing and Edward took his place across the table from me.

“Where are they? I know she came running to you,” Edward demanded.

“Safe, and they are gonna stay that way. Maddie will be filing for divorce and you *will* cooperate,” I told him, remaining a lot calmer than I felt on the inside.

“Are you threatening my son, Mr. Gallo?” Frank asked with a note of amusement. They truly thought they were untouchable.

Instead of answering I unzipped the folder I clutched and pulled out the pile of images I had within, throwing them across the conference room table so they spread out enough to make it obvious what I had.

“These are copies. Maddie’s attorney and my own both have copies too, just in case you were getting any ideas,” I warned as I looked to the two of them.

“What is this?” Frank asked as he shot to his feet and started pushing the photos apart so he could see them more clearly.

“Maddie’s injuries, inflicted by your son over the last two years. She photographed each one and kept a record. I also have images of what he did to Willow on that last night too. I’m sure the media would love to have this story,” I explained.

“This is bullshit. You have no proof I did this,” Edward snapped, clearly rattled by what he saw.

“Maddie’s attorney seemed pretty sure we have enough here to pursue criminal charges against you,” I told him. Satisfaction filled me as he visibly paled before me.

“What do you want, Gallo?” Frank asked as he sent his son a glare.

“Maddie wants a divorce. You will allow that to happen. You will also make sure this asshole stays away from Maddie and her children, and that she is given full custody in the divorce,” I told Frank, knowing he was the organ grinder. Edward would do whatever daddy told him to.

“Now just a minute!” Edward began, but Frank cut him off with a glare.

“Willow is Edward’s daughter. He has a right to see her and the baby when it arrives,” Frank tried instead, still clinging to the image he had created of his son being the doting husband and father.

“I’d say your son lost the right to be a father the day he tossed his three year old daughter at a wall so violently her arm snapped,” I ground out as I fought to hold myself back. “This is your only good option, Foster,” I added. “Either accept this deal and keep that animal away from them, or Maddie goes to the press and the courts and gets full custody anyway. I think we both know which option will benefit your career the most.”

“And what do we tell the press? I’m up for reelection.”

“You tell them your son and his wife have decided to go their separate ways and you keep Maddie out of it as much as possible. She gets any backlash from your bullshit and I will make sure the whole world hears the truth and that your entire career and reputation are destroyed,” I threatened.

“Take the deal, Dad. It will be a relief not to have to walk around with that fat, ugly bitch on my arm anyway,” Edward commented casually.

In a split second I had grabbed him by the lapels of his fancy suit, swung his sorry ass up into the air and smashed him down on his back across the conference table before me. I leaned down over him, my face so close to his I could feel his breath on my face as he panted in panic.

“One more word from you about either of them and I will end you,” I threatened menacingly as I slammed him into the table again hard, before releasing him and stepping back. I knew if I didn’t I’d kill the bastard.

I smoothed my hair back and straightened my jacket as I glared at him hard. He sat up and straightened his own suit. He tried to look unperturbed as he got to his feet, but I saw the tremble in his hand as he straightened up his crooked tie.

“So Frank?” I said as I turned to him, all the while keeping my periphery on Edward. “Do we have a deal or shall I call my contact at the Tribune?”

“Fine. We have a deal. But I want Madeline kept out of the city until after I have been reelected. I can’t have the press blowing this whole situation up.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be making stipulations,” I tutted with a shake of my head. “But I can assure you that as long as you keep up your end of our deal, Maddie will not speak to any press who approach her.” Maddie had already told me she had no intention of ever dealing with the media again if she could help it, so I knew she would be fine with me agreeing to that.

“Very well,” Frank agreed, sending his son a warning glance to dare argue. “We will issue a statement saying they have come to a mutual agreement to separate. If the press approach Madeline she’s to say, ‘no comment’ and nothing more.”

“Agreed. Maddie’s attorney will send over the relevant documents this week to start divorce proceedings and to sign over full custody of the children.” I started gathering up the images from the table as I spoke. There was no way I was leaving them behind. In most of them Maddie was in just her underwear and I didn’t want them falling into anyone else’s hands. “I expect them to be signed and returned immediately,” I added once I had everything gathered up and back in my case.

“And I’ll expect Madeline to hold up her end of this deal,” Frank growled, clearly pissed that he had lost this fight.

“She will, as long as the two of you do. That monster comes within fifty feet of her or the kids, and our deal is off. I get even a hint he’s sniffing around and I go straight to the press and the cops,” I warned.

“Oh please. I’m not that desperate. Have her, Nico. You’ll soon see she’s not worth the fucking effort,” Edward spat. I stepped menacingly towards him, determined to keep my promise to end him, but Franks stepped in front of me and held up a hand.

“Enough!” he barked as he glanced behind him to his son. “I’ll make sure he stays away from them. You have my word.”

“I better,” I ground out. “I may run a legitimate business, but make no mistake, I’m not a man you want to fuck with, Frank.”

With those words I turned and left the room. Tyler was waiting for me outside, stood on the corner so he could see who was coming from all directions, just as we’d taught him.

“Everything good?” he asked as I approached him.

“Yeah. Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I replied as I nodded towards the exit.

“Did it work?” he asked as he fell into step beside me.

“I guess we’ll find out,” I shrugged.

“And if it didn’t? What if they come after Maddie, or after you?”

“Then they’ll be very fucking sorry.” I’d do whatever it took to get those assholes out of Maddie’s life, and if that meant dusting off my sniper skills from the military, then so be it. Killing people was no longer my business, but for those two I’d make an exception if it came to it. The benefit of the skills I had, meant that I would never be caught for the crime and if it was what was necessary to protect Maddie, Willow, and the baby, then I’d do it without a backwards glance.

As Ty and I climbed into our waiting car, it hit me just how very much Maddie and Willow meant to me. I was falling for Maddie. It had probably been happening since the first day I met her at the interview for her job. She was beautiful, and sexy, but more than that she was so damned strong. She cared about people and she was kind. The love that filled her eyes when she spoke about Willow, or the baby she carried, was endless and so incredible to witness. She was everything I never knew I wanted in a woman, and so very much more. *Fuck, I was falling for her.* Who was I kidding? I had already fallen for her, and her adorable genius daughter. I wanted them in a way I had never wanted anyone else in my entire life. She filled my thoughts every moment of every day and being without her, since she left, physically hurt. I was screwed.

How could it ever work? Maddie had just escaped the husband from hell. It seemed unlikely she'd want to step right into another relationship. And even if she did, she had her kids to consider. I was ten years older than her. Was that too much of a gap? Was she even attracted to me or was I too old? I was starting to turn gray for fucks sake! Why would she want an old man like me?

And even if she did, my whole life was in Chicago and I doubted she would want to return there after all she had been through. Could I leave Chicago to be with her? Could I leave my business and my family? My sister? Where would we even live? What would I do to support her and the kids?

"Fuck," I sighed as I realized just how far ahead of myself I was getting. I was losing my damned mind.

"What's wrong?" Tyler asked from where he sat across the seat.

"Just worried about Maddie," I sighed. It wasn't a lie. I had done nothing but worry about her since she and Willow stepped on that damned plane.

"You should go to her. See how she's doing," Ty suggested.

"I will, as soon as the others get back to run the office," I sighed as I rubbed a hand down my exhausted face. I needed to sleep, but that hadn't been coming easily lately.

"She'd be lucky to have you, Nic. You know that right? As much as I fuck with you, you really are a catch," Ty told me with a gentle smile.

"Fuck off," I scoffed lightheartedly.

“I mean it, man. You’re a good man. You’re kind and so fucking loyal. You protect the people you care about and make them feel safe,” he told me. “And you’re hot as fuck too,” he added with a grin.

“I’m too old for her,” I argued, voicing just one of my insecurities.

“That’s bullshit and you know it. Don’t fuck this up for yourself, brother. Anyone can see you’re crazy about her. If you want her, don’t let her go,” he told me plainly.

“Even if that were true, the timing’s all messed up. She isn’t going to want to start something now,” I argued.

“Maybe. Maybe not, but either way, let her know how you feel. Tell her there’s no hurry, but if she’s ready one day, you’ll be waiting. Put yourself out there, Nico, and I think you might just be pleasantly surprised.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged and kept my face blank. Putting myself out there sounded terrifying, but what if he was right? What if it could get me everything I wanted one day in the future?

CHAPTER 12

MADDIE

It was the fifth night at the guys house and it seemed all of my exhaustion from everything that had happened had worn off and I lay in the middle of the bed, wide awake, too scared to sleep and not exhausted enough to just drop off naturally.

My nightmares seemed to have gotten worse since I escaped Edward's clutches and every time I closed my eyes he was there, waiting for me, or worse, Clive – the monster from my childhood - would appear to make cameo appearances.

It had become easier to just not sleep more than I absolutely had to. I turned onto my side and glanced at the tablet that stood on the nightstand, checking Willow still looked peaceful and settled.

Thankfully, her nightmares seemed to have stopped in the last couple of nights, and she had slept soundly through. I knew it was because she felt safe and happy in the house with the guys. Kai and Hunter had gone out of their way to show her that they would never hurt her, and to make sure she felt safe with them. Sam too. She adored all three of them and I had heard nothing but laughing and squeals of delight come from her in the time we had been there. It was a huge relief to see her settled, but I also worried what would happen when it came time for us to leave. It wasn't like we could stay there indefinitely. Eventually I would need to get us our own place, and I would need to find a job to support us. My fears over how she would deal with even more change when the time came, was just another stress to add to the mountain I was being crushed by.

So much was going on in my head, that I seemed to have a constant pressure headache. I worried about Edward coming after us, about what Frank would make of the whole situation and what he would do in retaliation. I was terrified about Nico and the guys getting mixed up with those two monsters, and I was terrified about how I would manage if any or all of them decided it was all too much trouble and cast us aside. I worried about the mental scars my daughter would be left with after her father's actions, and about the unborn child trying to thrive inside of me, amongst all of the chaos I had created. I was terrified I had made a huge mistake in letting Hunter, Kai, and Cam back into my life, and not just because I feared they'd walk right back out of it all over again, but because I had such messed up, confusing feelings for them all. A part of me still hated what they had done to me all those years ago, but a much bigger part of me still had those feelings of teenage love and desire every time I laid eyes on them.

I think, deep down, a huge part of me had always loved these boys and it had never let go. Now I had them back and my feelings just felt so confusing, but also wonderful and right. I wanted them as much today as I had wanted them under our willow tree all those years before, but I knew I couldn't have them. I had responsibilities that had to come ahead of my ridiculous crush, not to mention they had never once shown signs they ever wanted me in that way anyway. Maybe I should just add 'delusional' and 'desperate' to my list of flaws. It wasn't like they were the only guys I was crushing on. Nico was never far from my daydreams either.

Strong, handsome, protective, and kind – the four of them were any woman's wildest dream. Having the four of them as mine was certainly becoming my wildest dream, anyway. But it would have to remain that way – a dream – because even if for some insane reason any of them were into me, I couldn't get into another relationship. But what if they did ask me out? Could I even choose who I wanted to date? I had feelings for

all four of them and the idea of choosing sounded terrible. I wasn't sure I could do that.

“Idiot,” I whispered as I realized how ridiculous that thought even was. Like they were going to ask me to choose between them.

I sighed as I turned over again. I had to stop getting lost in these insane thoughts. I needed to focus on the future I could actually see being real. I needed to think about finding work once the baby was born, and on getting money together to put down on a house for the three of us. I needed to get the divorce started from Edward and make sure I had custody of my kids. Willow and my baby were my first priority and always would be.

A loud crash from outside my room had me sitting up, startled. I instantly grabbed the tablet from my nightstand to check on Willow, but she was still sound asleep. Another crash followed quickly after and I tossed the tablet down onto the mattress and slid out of my bed - a movement that was getting increasingly harder to do as my baby bump grew bigger and bigger, impeding my movements.

I moved over to the door and listened again for any more sounds as I slipped on the silk robe I had found in the closet that night after taking a long, relaxing soak in the tub.

The guys had spared no expense when they filled my and Willow's closets. Both were crammed full with every item of clothing either of us could ever need, all fancy designer brands and luxury fabrics and patterns. With Edward I had always had nice things to wear, as had Willow, all so we could play the perfect wife and daughter that Frank expected us to be, but what we'd had had been nothing on the luxury Kai and Hunter had surrounded us with. I grimaced every time Willow wiped

her sticky hands down the front of one of the pretty summer dresses or beautiful designer t-shirts I dressed her in. Hell, I was scared to wear most of what they had bought for me, for fear of what my clumsy self would spill all down the expensive garments. But the guys had insisted I shouldn't even worry about any of it whenever I rose the subject. They assured me money wasn't an issue and that they were happy they could provide Willow and I with what we needed. It wasn't that I wasn't grateful for it either. I just wished they hadn't spent quite so much. Willow and I would have been happy with a few items from the discount store to tide us over. We were both just grateful to be free of the tyranny we had survived in for so long. Anything else was just a luxury.

Still, I did marvel at the feel of the spectacularly smooth silk robe as I slid my arms into the long, cool sleeves. I had never felt anything so divine wrap around my body. Except maybe Nico, or Kai. *Oh fine!* Hunter too.

I opened my bedroom door just a sliver and peered out into the dimly lit hallway. It was empty, but the dull thud of something hitting the ground hard soon followed, making me jump back with a start.

Hunter and Kai's rooms were out on the landing, further away so I knew it was unlikely they could hear what I could. The house was so huge, I doubted the sound would carry that far. I realized that meant the sounds had to be coming from Cam's room, which I was pretty sure was a few doors away from mine along the corridor. No one had told me as much, but I had seen Cam come and go from the room in the time we had been there.

He was still avoiding me and now my daughter too, as much as possible. The day we went to the zoo Willow had worked hard to make him a picture. It had been of Dozy, Cam's dog. When she was finished she had demanded Kai take her in

search of Cam so she could give it to him to cheer him up, which Kai had agreed to, taking her out to Cam's workshop.

I don't know what happened when Willow gave the picture to Cam, but ever since he had been working twice as hard to avoid seeing either of us, slipping out to his workshop early in the morning before anyone was up and not coming back into the house again until late at night when he could slip in unnoticed. It hurt me that he was behaving that way – that he wanted to actively avoid me – but I also understood the pain he had to be dealing with. Not only had he lost his brother. He had lost his twin – a person who had been a part of him since they were in their mother's womb together. I couldn't imagine how he would ever learn to live with that, but I was determined to do all I could to help him.

I distantly heard what sounded like Cam crying out and all hesitation left me. With one last glance to the tablet on my bed to make sure Willow was okay, I slipped from the room and hurried down the long hallway to Cam's room.

I pressed my ear to the cool wood of the door and listened as I held my breath. Inside I could hear Cam. It sounded like he was talking angrily to someone, then there was another crash, this time something hitting the door I was pressed against. I gasped and jumped back, then looked around me as I tried to decide what I should do. Should I pretend I don't hear anything and just go back to my room? Should I wake Kai or Hunter? I didn't know, but then another sound from Cam, which sounded a lot like he was in pain and I moved forward. I needed to go to him. Whatever was happening, he was clearly in pain and I couldn't leave him that way, not even for as long as it would take me to get to the others and wake them.

The room was pitch dark when I slid the door open enough to slip inside. The light from the hall showed a lamp in pieces on the floor in the entryway and I realized that had to be what had

hit the door just a moment earlier. I skirted around the pieces and slipped inside, trying to blink through the darkness to get my bearings. I hadn't been in there before and didn't know the layout.

"Cam?" I whispered loudly, not wanting to startle him, but wanting him to hear me. The sound of his voice had stopped, and the room around me was silent, as I walked in and felt my way along the wall to my right. I was itching to flick a light on, but didn't want to alarm Cam by doing so. "Cameron? You in here? I just wanted to check on you. I heard the..." My words were cut off as hands wrapped around both of my arms and I was forcefully slammed back into the wall so hard my teeth rattled as my skull crashed against the plaster.

A cry of pain and fear slipped from me as I fought to see in the darkness, but any that followed were muffled by a hand over my mouth. The other hand moved from my arm and went to my throat, pinning me hard against the wall and stopping me from making another squeak.

My eyes widened as panic filled me. Not only could I not make a sound. I couldn't breathe and I clawed at the hands holding me as it became more and more terrifying.

Images of Clive and Edward both holding me in similar positions assaulted me, mixing with the very real terror of the moment.

As a fog descended over me and my fight died out until all I could do was weakly push at the hand around my neck and over my mouth, I realized the silhouette of the person before me was Cam. I couldn't see his features in the darkness, but I could see enough to know it was him holding me and choking the life from me.

“C–Cam!” I gasped desperately. I understood he had to be dreaming – seeing me as some threat that had been taunting him in sleep. I knew my only chance was to somehow wake him up before he choked me out, or worse.

With one last outpour of strength I reached my arm out beside me and scrambled around to get my hand on anything I could use to wake him up.

My hand landed on some kind of can, my fingers brushing against the cold metal. I fumbled for it until it was firmly in my grip, then held it up before me. I had no idea what it was, but it had a spray nozzle, which I slipped my finger over. I aimed it at Cam’s face, but kept it low not wanting to spray anything hazardous in his eyes, then I sprayed it, realizing quickly by the smell that it was just anti-perspirant.

Cam growled angrily, but dropped his hands from me so he could rub at his face. I crumpled to a pile on the ground, the can still aimed in his direction before me.

“Cam!” I cried as loud as I could. My throat was throbbing and my voice hoarse, but I pushed through it, determined to wake him up before he came for me again. “Cam it’s me! It–It’s Maddie!” I pleaded between coughs and gasps to breathe.

At the sound of my cries, I saw his silhouette stumble backwards, then he was shaking his head and rubbing at his face.

“What the...?” he uttered quietly, then he turned and walked away. Seconds later a lamp beside the bed flicked on, illuminating the space with a dull glow, and showing me the devastation Cam must have caused before I walked in there. As well as the lamp from the other side of the bed smashed in the doorway, a dresser had been overturned, its contents

spilling from ruined drawers. The chair, which must have sat at the desk before, lay on its side and looked a little bent out of shape, and the contents of the top of the desk were spread on the carpet before me.

“Mads?” Cam gasped as his eyes landed on me. “What are you doing in here? What happened? Fuck! Did I hurt you?” he asked all at once as he ran around the bed, but stopped a few feet away from me, as though he dare not get closer.

“I...I’m okay,” I tried to assure him, but the words were croaky and shaking. I automatically touched my neck in an attempt to ease the pain I felt there, but that just drew Cam’s eyes to it.

“Motherfucker!” he hissed. “I’m so sorry. You’re neck. I...I did that. I hurt you,” he panicked as he took another step backwards from me. I didn’t like him moving away, so I tried to get to my feet, but adrenaline was running rampant through my body and my legs were shaking so hard I couldn’t get them to cooperate.

“No Cam. I’m f-fine.”

“Don’t move. Fuck!” he cried as he moved his eyes from my throat to my stomach. “The baby! What have I fucking done? Stay there. Let me get the guys. We should call 911. I’m so fucking sorry, Maddie,” he cried, his eyes glassy with tears as he pulled at his hair and shook with his panic.

It was enough for me to jolt my body into cooperating. Before he could run from the room I forced myself to my feet and threw myself the few steps to get to him.

“Cam, you didn’t hurt me. I’m okay. Just breathe for me, please,” I told him as I wrapped my arms around his waist and tried to hug him.

“No!” he snapped as he pulled back and held his hands out to hold me back. “You sh-shouldn’t come near me. I hurt you. I’m dangerous. I shouldn’t even be in the house with you and Willow.”

I pushed past his hands and wrapped my arms around his waist again, this time locking my hands together at his back so he couldn’t stop me from holding him. I lay my head on his chest and could hear how hard and fast his heart was thudding. He was terrified.

“Sshh now,” I soothed, just like I did with Willow when she was upset. “Just breathe and calm down. I’m right here and I’m fine. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Maddie, I mean it. I can’t be near you. I could have fucking killed you,” he argued, but he didn’t push me away this time. He just stood frozen; his arms held up like he dare not touch me.

“You didn’t though. You wouldn’t. I trust you, Cameron, even if you don’t trust yourself,” I told him. “Stop fighting and just hug me back, you asshole,” I added with a tearful laugh. Yes, he had hurt me that night, but I knew he never meant to. He had been trapped in some terrible nightmare. I knew that he would never hurt me on purpose.

“I’m no good for you, Mads. Not anymore. That’s why I’ve stayed away,” he sighed, but he did relax and wrap his arms around me.

“I don’t want you to stay away from me, Cam. I’ve missed you so fucking much,” I whimpered tearfully, my voice wavering as I formed the next words. “I’ve missed you both, but Ev is gone. I’ll never get to hug him like this again. Don’t make me lose you too. I can’t. I can’t lose you again.”

“I missed you too. We both did. He talked about you all the time,” Cam sniffled as he ran a hand through my wild hair gently, his other wrapped tightly around my back, pressing me into his hard body. “But he’s gone and I’m not the same guy you knew. I’m no good for you. I’m no good to anyone.”

“Cam, you know I love you, but that is such a crock of shit,” I sighed as I pulled out of his arms and looked up into his shocked eyes.

“What?”

“You heard me,” I replied as I glared his way a little, straightening my spine as I did so. “I call bullshit on everything you’ve just said.”

“It’s not bullshit. It’s the truth. I’m broken, Mads. He was my other half. I don’t know what to do without him at my side.”

“Ev would kick your ass if he heard you talking like this,” I told him firmly.

“Yeah well Ev’s not here! I am! He got his stupid ass killed and left me the fuck alone!” he snapped.

“Yeah, you are Cam!” I agreed. “You’re here and you’re alive. I know it hurts like fuck without him, but you’re not alone. You have Kai and Hunt. You have family who miss and need

you. You can have a whole damned life ahead of you if you just try. Ev would want you to find a way to keep going and you know it.”

“I’m messed up!” he roared angrily, then all of the fire seemed to leak from him as he deflated and fell back to sit on the foot of his bed. “How can I move forward when everything in here is so fucked up?” he asked tearfully as he pointed to his head.

“You’re asking the wrong girl,” I laughed flatly as I sat on the bed beside him and wrapped my arm around his back to comfort him. “I’m pretty messed up too, Cam. I have no idea how either of us can fix that, but I do know we have to try. We have to keep moving forward and find ways to deal with what’s happened so we can have a future. I don’t know what it looks like or where either of us are headed, but I do know after all we’ve been through, we definitely deserve some happiness and peace.”

“I’m so fucking sorry I hurt you,” he whispered as he stared ahead of him at nothing in particular.

“Was it a nightmare?” I asked softly.

“Yeah. Night terrors they called them at the hospital. They’re so real. They don’t happen so often now, but you should never come in here again. I really could have killed you.”

“Can’t you get some help? Medication or maybe talk to someone about it all?” I pushed.

“Now you sound like fucking Hunter,” he growled.

“They’re worried about you, Cam. I am too. You’ve been trying to handle this on your own for too long. You have to let others help you,” I pleaded.

“I’m not sure I want to be helped,” he sighed.

“Well then I think it’s time to decide, and when you do, just remember how much your brothers love you and how much you will destroy them if you make them bury another of the only family they have. Just remember how much you mean to me. You’re not the only one who lost Everett. We all did. The question is, are we going to have to survive losing you too?”

“Maddie...” he began, but I stopped him as I rose to my feet.

“Just think about it,” I told him. I leaned in and placed a kiss on his cheek softly. “I love you, Cam. We all love you. We might not be Everett, but we’re your family. We’re all here for you, if you’ll allow us to be.”

With that I left the room, quietly closing the door behind me. Tears filled my eyes as I made my way back to my room. I checked on Willow, relieved to see she was still out cold.

As I slipped off the robe and climbed back into my bed I prayed for the first time in a very long time that Cam would find the strength to find his way back to all of us. We’d be with him every step of the way, but that first step had to be his and only he could choose to take it.

CHAPTER 13

MADDIE

“Mommy! You gots to watch!” Willow cried from the pool where she had been playing with Kai and Hunter for the last half hour.

It was a hot day and the guys were home for the weekend, though I had noticed the both of them still fielding calls from the office here and there.

I was laid on a lounger in the shade, dozing in and out of sleep, calmed by the happy, excited cries of my daughter and soothing, deep, relaxed voices of the guys. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt so at ease.

“I'm watching, peanut,” I assured her as I sat up and smiled her way. She was dressed in a bright lilac swimsuit the guys had provided her with and I had layered her pale skin with sunscreen several times. She had a special waterproof sleeve, which the guys had ordered online, over the cast on her arm to keep it dry. Her floppy sun hat had been abandoned at the side of the pool, and I realised why as Hunter picked her up from the water and launched her into the air a few feet. She landed on her back with a delighted squeal just in front of Kai, her floaties and the float filled vest, which Hunter had insisted on, ensuring she stayed on the top of the water as she landed with a splash.

Kai dramatically wiped the water from his face as the splash hit him, only making Willow laugh harder.

“You got me good with that one, sweetie,” Kai laughed.

“Great job, honey,” I laughed joyfully. Nothing filled me with more happiness than seeing her so at ease with causing mischief. She had never dared to do it before, but she was certainly coming out of her shell thanks to Kai and Hunt.

“Now you gotta throw me at Hunter, Kai!” Willow announced as she turned and held her arms up to him.

“Hey! I thought we were a team!” Hunt pouted, making her laugh again.

“Nope. I’m a killer whale and I’m gonna splash you next!” Willow told him impishly.

I lay back, closing my eyes again, a huge, contented smile on my face as I listened to the three of them play together happily. The guys seemed to love spending time with Willow, the genuine happiness plain to hear in their voices each time they were with her. Sam too had unending patience for my daughter, spending hours baking or coloring with her. I was so lucky to have them all around me.

“Hey,” At the sound of Cam’s voice I sat up and looked around, shocked to see him emerge from the kitchen, looking a little unsure. He was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, as always, but he was wearing a cap and his aviators and in his hand was a beer.

“Everything okay, brother?” Kai asked as he looked between Cam and Hunter with concern.

“Yeah, I just...” Cam glanced over to me nervously, then back to the guys. “It’s kinda hot. Thought I might cool off, if it’s okay?” He nodded to the pool.

“What do you think, munchkin? Can Cam join in with your whale game?” Hunter asked Willow. Willow squinted up at Cam and smiled widely.

“You can be on my team!” she nodded vigorously. “I bet you can throw me up to the sky!” she added excitedly. I smiled, agreeing with her. As ripped as Cam was, he probably could throw her that high.

I watched Kai and Hunter exchange bright grins and Cam walked over to a table to put down the beer he was clutching, then remove his t-shirt. They were delighted to see him try to join in, and so was I. This was the step I had been praying he would take. He was coming back to us.

Later that evening we all sat out with Sam and Garth. Sam and Hunt had grilled for dinner that night after a long afternoon in the pool for Willow and the guys.

It had been a really great day, and Willow had worn herself out but had the most amazing time with the guys, ordering them around and having them throw her about and carry her on their backs as they swam back and forth as she willed.

“She’s asleep,” Cam said as he glanced up at me. Willow was in his arms, her head on his shoulder and her arms wrapped around his neck. She had really taken to him that afternoon and refused to sit with anyone else. I had a feeling she knew if she let him go, he’d slope off back to his workshop and be alone again. She didn’t want that. None of us did, and so she had pretty much made him her prisoner.

“She seems pretty comfortable for now,” Garth laughed. It was the first time I had really spent any time with him since we arrived there and I liked him. He was a few years younger than Sam, tall and slim with a dark sun tanned complexion from all of the time he spent outside tending to the gardens. His hair was blonde but highlighted with some gray at the sides. He was handsome, in a rugged kind of way, and he smiled a lot. He and Sam just fit together like two pieces of a puzzle and watching them that evening had made me pine for such a wonderful love as they had.

“I can take her upstairs. Your arms must be aching,” I offered as I struggled to get to my feet.

“Stay where you are, Maddie,” Kai told me with a smile. “I’ll take her up, but let’s just give her ten minutes and make sure she’s out.”

“I’m good. She doesn’t weigh anything,” Cam assured me.

“She should, the way she’s been devouring Sam’s cooking and baking,” I laughed as I smiled lovingly at the kind man who had been so caring and generous since we arrived there. He cooked every meal we ate and was constantly offering home baked snacks and drinks in between. He obviously shared his kindness through his cooking.

“The way her eyes light up when I put a plate in front of her makes my day, every damned time,” Sam chuckled.

“I can’t thank you all enough for making her so happy and comfortable here,” I told them all. “She feels safe to be herself with all of you and that means so much. You have no idea.”

“She is safe here, sunshine. You both are. We hope you know that,” Kai told me softly.

“We’d never let anything happen to either of you, Maddie. No matter what comes, we will always be here for the both of you, or the three of you when that little one comes along,” Hunter added.

“That means me too,” Cam said. I looked up at him and he smiled a little. “I’m not going anywhere. I booked an appointment with my therapist for next week. I decided, Mads.”

“Decided what?” Kai asked.

“To try,” Cam replied as he looked to Kai and Hunter. “Maddie gave me a kick up the ass, I guess.”

“We’ve been kicking you up the ass for months,” Hunter told him.

“She walked in on one of my nightmares last night, Hunt,” Cam said more seriously.

“What? Why didn’t you tell us? Are you okay?” Hunter asked as he looked to me with worry.

“I hurt her. I lost it,” Cam said before I could reply.

“Maddie?” Kai looked to me with alarm.

“I’m fine,” I said hurriedly. “He scared me a little, but he didn’t hurt me.” There had been some faint marks on my neck

that morning, but Cam hadn't done any real damage and I refused to let him think he had.

"I had my hand on her throat guys. I...I could have killed her," Cam whispered. "I can't let that happen again. What if Willow had heard me and come into my room? It's made me realize I either have to get help or move out."

"No way, Cam. I'm not going to be the reason you have to move out of your own damned home!" I cried angrily.

"It's okay, babe. Take a breath. He's not going anywhere," Hunter assured me as he placed a calming hand on my thigh under the table we all sat around. I didn't miss the little zings I felt where his skin touched mine.

"I'm going to see my therapist. Maybe try some medications. I want to try and get some help so I can move forward. I know I've been an asshole for a really long time, and I probably still will be at times, but I'm gonna start trying, guys. Maddie told me Ev would expect me to try and I know she's right."

"She's right, Cam. Ev loved you. He'd want you to be happy," Kai agreed as he patted Cam on the shoulder.

"We've missed you, brother," Hunter added with a smile and a nod.

"You have no option now anyway," I told him with a smile. "My daughter seems to have taken a liking to you. You'll never be rid of her and her endless animal facts now."

"Yeah. I already learned a ton about whales this afternoon," Cam laughed. "I didn't know what was coming next when she

started talking about sperm whales.”

We were all laughing, but I couldn't take my eyes off the sight of my tiny daughter in Cam's huge arms. It was playing havoc with my already wild hormones, and those fantasies of a future, that could never be, were running wild in my head. In fact that had been the case all afternoon and evening as I watched the three of them spend time and give endless patience to my highly demanding daughter. It had been hard not to picture a future like that, with the three of them and Nico in our lives, loving me and my children and giving us a future filled with happiness and adoration for each other. But that's all it could be – a fantasy. Even if by some miracle all four of the guys I was falling in love with were on board, how could I bring my children into such a complicated and controversial relationship? How could I tell my kids they had four new daddies? How would they be treated in school when other parents found out? How would that look on forms? One mommy and four daddies?

Of course I was being ridiculous. Why was I worrying about the specifics of a relationship I had zero chance of being a part of? Sure, maybe Nico had shown a little interest in me in the past, but he was way out of my league and I doubted he'd want to be saddled with two kids and a woman with more baggage than a damned airport carousel. Flirting at work was one thing. He was likely just having a little fun to make the day pass.

And the others? They had always seen me as the kid sister they needed to protect and I was sure that hadn't changed over time. They had brought me there and helped me because they felt they owed me after abandoning me. Maybe they still felt some obligation towards me as a sister type figure, but I was pretty sure none of them saw me as more than that. I had to stop these thoughts and get my head screwed on straight. Living in these insane fantasies was not going to get my life back on track.

“What do you guys know about designing a website?” I asked all of a sudden, looking between them.

“A website? What for?” Kai asked.

“I have a few clients who I’ve done some graphic design work for over the last few years. I was thinking maybe I could expand that into a business. It would be a lot better with the kids if I could work for myself,” I explained.

“Oh, okay. We have some people at the office who could help you when you’re ready,” Hunter answered.

“I’m ready now, Hunt. I can’t stay here forever. I need to start earning some money so I can put down a security deposit and first month’s rent on a place. I need to get Willow settled before she’s due to start kindergarten next year.”

“We should head home. It’s getting late,” Sam said as he and Garth got to their feet and gathered up some empty glasses to carry inside with them. I didn’t miss the way the other three shared a silent conversation with their eyes as I said good night to Sam and Garth.

As soon as they were gone I looked to Hunter and raised my eyebrows, awaiting his explanation as to what they had been up to and why Sam and Garth felt the need to leave.

“Maddie, I don’t think we’ve been very clear and I think we need to be,” he began.

“Clear about what? Do you need us to leave sooner? It’s okay if you do. Nico said we could...” I was cut off by Kai.

“Maddie. We don’t want you to leave sooner, sunshine. That’s the point. We don’t want you to leave at all,” he told me.

“I can’t live here, guys. You have your own lives to live. What happens when you get girlfriends? They won’t want me and two kids hanging around,” I scoffed.

“That’s not going to happen,” Cam told me as he cradled my daughter even closer when she stirred a little.

“Of course it will. You’re not going to be single forever.”

“No we’re not,” Hunter agreed. “We’re going to have a girlfriend and hopefully a wife one day.”

“Of course you are. You’re good men. You’ll find someone you love one day,” I agreed, even though the words felt bitter on my tongue. It hurt to think of them with other women.

“We already have,” Kai cut off my ramble again.

“What?” I stopped and looked to them with horror. “Oh my God! Of course you guys have girlfriends! Are they pissed we’re staying here? What am I saying? Of course they are. I need to call Nico. He’ll help us get flights back. We’ll be out of your hair as soon as possible,” I panicked. “God, I’m so sorry you guys. You should have just told me. I’d never have imposed like this.”

“Fuck, Mads. Take a damned breath,” Cam demanded.

“We don’t have girlfriends,” Hunter laughed.

“But you just said...”

“We said we’ve met the woman we love and want to marry,” Kai told me as he leaned forward towards me. “That woman is you, Maddie. It’s always been you. We’ve loved you since the minute we met you, soaked through and shivering, your face covered in wild red hair. We walked away because we thought we were protecting you. We will never make that mistake again. You’re ours.”

“What?” I uttered as I stared at Kai, completely dumbfounded by his words.

“We love you, Maddie. You’re it for us, for all of us. We knew that when we were kids. We’ve always known it,” Hunter told me.

“No.” I shook my head, in complete disbelief at what I was hearing. “You love me like a sister, right? That’s what you mean?”

“No, baby.” Now it was Hunter who was shaking his head, a gentle smile on his face. “We’ve never seen you that way.”

“But you never said anything?”

“When we met you were still a kid. We all knew how we felt, but we agreed we wouldn’t say or do anything until you were older. Then everything went to shit,” Kai explained.

“We know the timing isn’t great. You’ve been through so much and you have the kids to consider, but we needed you to

know. We don't plan on letting you get away without a fight this time Mads," Cam spoke up.

"Oh my God," I whispered to myself as I sat there trying to process what the hell had just happened. They were offering me everything I had wanted since I was a kid, crushing on them all. They were telling me that whole time I had been dreaming of a life with them, they had also had feelings for me.

"Maddie, it's okay if you don't feel the same way. No matter what, we will always be here for you," Kai soothed as he reached out a hand and placed it on my knee.

I looked up at the three of them and couldn't miss the utter disappointment on each of their faces. It was so cute, it made me smile.

"I feel the same way," I told them, needing to put them out of their misery. "I've always felt something for you guys, and for Ev." I looked up to Cam with a sad smile. "I just...I was too scared to say anything when we were kids because I didn't think you guys saw me like that. I thought I was more like an annoying little sister."

"Trust me, babe. There is nothing sisterly about the way we feel about you. Never has been," Hunter chuckled.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"That part's up to you. You have full control here, Maddie. We get that it's complicated with three of us, but we want this with you and we're willing to do whatever it takes to make it work," Kai assured me.

“I get it if you don’t want to be with me, Mads. You don’t have to feel bad about it. As long as I can be a part of your life, I’ll be okay,” Cam told me as his sad eyes met mine.

“What the fuck, Cam?” Kai demanded, clearly annoyed.

“I’m a mess. I hurt you last night. I understand if you don’t want to be with me.”

“Cam, we’re all a damned mess,” I sighed as I leaned forward and placed my hand on top of his where he was nervously tapping it against the edge of the table. “If I were going to do this, then it would be with all of you. I love you, Cam, and nothing you can do or say will change that,” I told him.

“If?” Hunter questioned.

“I love you guys and this...you telling me you feel the same way – it’s a dream come true. You have no idea how many times I’ve wished for this, but the reality is very different. I have to be realistic. I’m about to start what will probably be a very messy divorce. I have Willow and another on the way. Starting a new relationship on top of all of that would be hard enough, but a relationship with three of you? It’s just madness, guys.”

“You know we love Willow already, and we will love the baby just as much when he or she comes along,” Hunter told me.

“I do know that. You’re all so good with her and she loves being here. It’s not that. It’s what it would mean for her. A relationship like this...like we’d have, it’s not typical and we’ll be judged for it. It would confuse Willow. She’s already

been through so much,” I explained, the whole time hating what I was saying. I was talking myself and them out of us getting everything I had always wanted.

“We understand what you’re saying. Yes, our relationship would definitely be unconventional, and yes, we may face some backlash occasionally. Willow might be a little confused at first, but think of all she would be gaining too. She would have the three of us in her life. We would love and protect her with everything we have. We would always be there for her as she’s growing up. Maybe she would have a strange family to outsiders, but who cares what everyone else thinks as long as Willow, and that little one...” Kai nodded to my bump, “...get to grow up feeling safe and loved, surrounded by happiness? Isn’t that what you want for her? Isn’t it what you want for yourself? We can give you that, Maddie.”

I bit my lip as my thoughts ran rapid fire through my mind. Yes I wanted that, for me and for Willow, and for the child to come, but was it all really as simple as Kai made it sound? I doubted it.

“We’re not asking you to agree to anything right now, baby. We just needed to let you know how we feel because we don’t want you to think about plans to leave. We want you here, with us,” Hunter reiterated. “Just think about what we’ve said, okay? Like Kai said, you have the controls. You let us know when you’re ready to talk about it all again.”

“Okay,” I agreed quietly. My brain was spinning fast as I tried to think straight about all they had said. I loved them and it seemed they loved me. They wanted us to be together and I wanted that too, but it wasn’t only about me. I had the future of my children to consider and I needed to do that very, very carefully.

“Why don’t you head up to bed? You look tired, and I know we’ve laid a lot on you there?” Kai suggested.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I am tired.” I got to my feet and straightened my dress nervously. I suddenly felt uneasy making eye contact with any of them.

“Maddie?” Hunter caught my hand in his and when I glanced up he had stood too and was right beside me. He smiled and wrapped an arm across my shoulders, pulling me into his warm side. “Stop worrying, baby. Everything will be okay. We won’t let it be any other way.”

“I’m okay,” I promised as I looked between them. “It’s just a lot.”

“Get some rest. We’ll talk again when you’re ready,” he told me. He gently kissed the top of my head as Kai took Willow from Cam carefully.

“Good night,” I told him as I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a quick squeeze.

Cam didn’t say a word as he moved over to me and placed a soft kiss on my forehead. We shared a brief smile, then I followed Kai inside and up the stairs.

As he lay my daughter in her bed with so much care and delicacy I flicked on the nightlight. My heart skipped a beat as I watched Kai tuck Willow in, then gently kiss her cheeks and whisper a quiet ‘goodnight’ to her.

It didn’t escape me that she could have that type of love and care for all her life if I gave in and accepted the life these guys

were offering me. I knew they would love and protect Willow and the baby. It was who they were. It was who they had always been. They were good men and we could have the most amazing future with the three of them. I knew that, but my fears of messing up again were holding me back.

“I’ll turn the monitor camera on,” Kai told me as he crossed the room to where the camera sat on the top of the bookshelves.

“Thanks.” I walked over and kissed my daughter goodnight, just as Kai had, then followed him out of the room and into the hall, closing the door behind us.

“You doing okay?” Kai asked as we both stopped outside my bedroom door.

“I think so. I guess I have a lot of thinking to do,” I shrugged.

“Just try not to over think it, sunshine. We love you. We love your daughter. We want a future with both of you and with this baby,” Kai lay a hand gently on my swollen stomach. “You love us too, Maddie. As long as we have that, we can deal with whatever comes along.”

“You make it all sound so simple,” I sighed.

“It can be, if you let it,” he replied. “Get some sleep. Love you,” he added as he leaned in and kissed me chastely on the lips, taking me completely by surprise. Before I could gather myself enough to say anything in return, he was walking away down the hall.

I uttered a 'goodnight' I wasn't even sure he heard, then scurried into my room, closing the door swiftly behind me. I made it to my bed before collapsing down on it with a sigh. I had a feeling it was going to be a long, sleepless night.

CHAPTER 14

NICO

The door of my apartment burst open loudly just as I was zipping up my duffel bag.

Mia and the guys had arrived home the day before. Parker had called to let me know they were back and that my team would be back in the office on Monday.

My relief had been great at hearing that. It meant that I could leave my sister and the guys to run Milite, and get to New York to see Maddie and Willow. Even though I had spoken with Maddie every day since she left, I needed to get eyes on her. My worries for her were out of my control and nothing but holding her in my arms would ease them.

“Nico?” Mia called through my apartment. I knew it was her, since she told me she would come over so we could see each other before I left for the airport.

“In here,” I replied as I moved to the closet to grab a sweater. I was just pulling it on as my sister appeared in the doorway. She had caught the sun in Miami, her skin now slightly sun tanned. She smiled brightly as she walked towards me and threw her arms around my waist.

I was always so happy to see her looking so content. When I met her, a few years before, she had only just escaped the nightmare of an abusive home which she had been trapped in pretty much since she was born. Since then she had been through hell and we had shared some very tough times, but she'd come through it all and she seemed genuinely happy

with my three teammates and with the life she had built for herself. I was so very proud of her.

“I missed you,” she told me as she squeezed me tightly.

“Missed you too. How was Miami?” I asked as I gave her a hug in return.

“Awesome. I loved the beach,” she told me excitedly. “And the food was out of this world. I ate way too much,” she laughed.

“It will do you good.”

“You sound like Linc,” she sighed with a roll of her eyes as she moved over to sit on my bed beside my packed bag. “So, you gonna tell me where you’re rushing off to?” she asked as she toyed with the zipper of my bag. I hadn’t told any of them about Maddie the night before when they called. They had been tired and I didn’t want to upset Mia.

“New York,” I replied.

“What’s in New York?”

“Maddie and Willow,” I answered.

“What?” Mia gasped as she shot to her feet. “Why are they there? Are they okay?” I knew Mia would panic. In the time Maddie had worked for Milite, the two of them had become pretty close. I knew Mia wanted to get to know Maddie even more, but Maddie kept a distance from everyone, likely to keep anyone from seeing the truth of her homelife.

“They’re okay, sweetheart,” I assured her. “They’re both safe. They’re staying with some friends of Maddie’s – guys I know from when I served.”

“What happened? It was her husband, wasn’t it?” Mia asked, her eyes now glassy.

“Yeah. She called me late last Friday night. Her husband had attacked her, and then he hurt Willow too,” I explained.

“Oh God! Not Willow!” Mia gasped. She slammed a hand over her mouth as tears ran down her cheeks. “Is she okay? Are they both okay?”

“Yes. They spent a night in the hospital. Willow had a fractured arm, but we got her fixed up. Maddie was banged up pretty badly too, but the baby was okay and the doctors weren’t worried.”

“You should have called me, Nico. I’d have come back. She’s my friend,” Mia sniffled.

“I know, sweetheart, but we had it covered.”

“We?” she questioned.

“Hunter. He and Maddie knew each other when they were kids. He was in town on business and we bumped into one another at that stupid fundraiser on Friday. Once I got Maddie and Willow to the hospital, I called him. I knew he could get them out of the city and away from Maddie’s asshole husband.”

“And you’re sure she’s okay with him?” Mia asked. “We could have protected them both here, couldn’t we?”

“Yes, but it was better to get them out of the city for a while. They’re okay, Mia. I’ve spoken with Maddie every day since she left. Willow loves it where they’re staying. I know the guys they’re staying with. They’re good men,” I assured her.

“Then why are you in such a rush to get to them? Is the husband coming after them?”

“I had a chat with her husband and his father last night. They won’t be going near Maddie or Willow again. I made sure of it,” I reassured her.

“What did you do?”

“Just threatened them. Maddie had images of what that fucker had done to her. I threatened to leak them to the press if they don’t back off. They agreed.”

“That’s good,” Mia nodded. “His dad’s the D.A. isn’t he? He won’t want bad press.”

“Exactly. Edward agreed to sign the divorce papers and give full custody of the kids to Maddie. I don’t exactly trust him to keep his word, but I’m pretty sure his father will make sure he behaves.”

“So Maddie is safe to come back here then?” Mia asked.

“If she wants to, but I think she’s pretty happy where she is. That’s why I’m headed out there. I want to check on them both

and see what her plans are.”

“You like her?” Mia looked at me with knowing eyes. She was the only person in the whole damned world who saw right through the mask I had spent so many years perfecting.

“I’m too damned old for her,” I grumbled.

“No you’re not, Nico. Don’t be ridiculous,” Mia said. “You’d be perfect for her. Do you have feelings for her?”

“Even if I did, she’s been through so much. She doesn’t need me hitting on her,” I scoffed as I busied myself checking through the backpack I already knew had everything I needed inside of it.

“Nico, look at me please,” Mia requested as she walked up beside me. I turned and looked to her, raising my eyebrows in question. “Do you like her?”

“Yes, but it’s not that easy,” I sighed.

“Yes it is. You’re an amazing man, Nico Gallo. You’re handsome and smart. Your loyal and when you love someone you protect them with everything you have in you. You have so much to offer to Maddie and her children. She deserves someone like you and I think she could make you very happy,” She went on. “Just please, try to stop telling yourself why this won’t work and consider how great it could be if it did.”

“I’ll try,” I agreed with a nod, knowing she’d never give up if I didn’t give in.

“Maybe I should come with you?” she suggested.

“While I think Willow and Maddie would be delighted to see you, you just got home. Let me go this time and if they’re not coming back you can come with me next time I go, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” she agreed. “I’ll call her instead, let her know I’m home if she needs anything.”

“She’d like that. She’s been asking when you’d be back,” I assured her as I grabbed my duffel bag and swung it over my shoulder.

“You have to go?” she asked, and I nodded.

“My flight’s in a few hours,” I replied.

“Stay for as long as they need you. The guys have the business and I’ll make sure the office stays on track,” she told me as she walked through my apartment with me.

“I know you will, Tesoro. Thank you.”

“Don’t let her get away without a fight, Nico.”

“She’s only just getting out of an abusive marriage, Mia. I don’t think she’s gonna be ready to start over right away,” I sighed, voicing just one of many doubts that had plagued me all week.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean you can’t let her know how you feel and tell her you’ll wait if that’s what she needs,” Mia said.

“We’ll see,” I replied noncommittedly. She was talking way too much sense and it was jarring against the thoughts I had been having all week, about why me and Maddie could never happen. I had to get out of there before my sister had me believing in happily ever after’s.

I could hardly believe my eyes as I stepped out of my rental car outside the address Hunter had texted to me the night before.

The house before me was a fucking mansion! This was where those three assholes lived? No wonder Maddie and Willow were happy there. Who wouldn’t be?

I walked past the perfectly pruned flowerbeds, shaking my head at the thought of any of the men I knew as lethal soldiers, out there in the yard, tending to the pretty flowers. I was laughing to myself as I made my way to the front door.

I pressed the video doorbell and waited anxiously. They knew I was coming. I had texted Maddie and Hunter the night before to let them know.

I laughed when the door started to open and I heard an excited little voice behind it crying, “Nic Nic! Nic Nic’s here!”

“You have to let me open the door first, munchkin,” Hunter laughed, then he pulled the door open. I just saw the huge smile on his face before a tiny ball of purple fabric and blonde curls launched herself through the gap and straight at me.

“Nic Nic!” Willow squealed as she wrapped herself around my legs like a spider monkey.

“Hey cutie,” I chuckled as I bent down to scoop her into my arms and lifted her up so I could see her.

“It took you too long to come!” she pouted as her blue eyes met mine.

“I’m sorry, princess. I’m here now though,” I replied.

“I missed you lots. Mommy did too,” she told me as she lay her head on my shoulder and wrapped her arms around my neck, holding onto me tightly and breaking my damned heart in the process.

I hadn’t spent a ton of time with Willow. Maddie occasionally brought her into the office if she had no choice, and I had been around when she met up with Mia in the building for coffee, with Willow in tow a few times too. But in the time I had been with her, I had become very attached. It was hard not to with Willow. She was a complete sweetheart and she wasn’t shy. She had happily chatted with me each time I had seen her and I had found her to be so smart. I was pretty sure the little fireball already won my heart. It would be a pleasure and an honor to be in her life, if Maddie would allow me to be.

“Missed you too, princess,” I told her as I held her in one arm and scooped up my bags from the floor with the other.

“Hey man,” Hunter greeted as he held a hand out to grab my bags. “Come on in.”

I thanked him, handing over my bags so I could hold onto Willow more securely as we stepped inside. I whistled as I looked around at the splendor that surrounded us.

“This place is amazing,” I told him.

“Thanks. We’ve done a lot of work since we moved in. The place was like a museum before.”

“They gots a pool! Will you swim wiv me?” Willow asked as she sat up and looked me dead in the eyes.

“I think we can manage that, cutie. What else is there for us to get up to in this huge house?” I asked her.

“Lots!” Willow cried, throwing her arms in the air animatedly. “I gots lots of toys and there’s a room in the basement wiv lots of games too! And Sam lets me cook wiv him. Hunter, can Nico cook wiv me and Sam too?”

“I’m sure he can if he wants to, pumpkin,” Hunter agreed.

Seeing Willow looking so happy and completely childlike put me at ease at once. All of the fear and anxiety that had been in her eyes, on the day that she and Maddie had gotten on to that plane, was now gone and she just looked as happy and carefree as any three-year-old could be. She seemed excited to be there and that could only be good.

“Hey Willow, why don’t you run ahead and let the others know Nico is here?” Hunter suggested.

“Okay!” I bent down and lowered her feet to the ground so she could take off, skipping happily into the house.

“She’s happy,” I remarked.

“She is. Maddie seems to think she likes it here. We’re trying hard to keep her occupied,” Hunter laughed.

“How’s Maddie?” I asked.

“Okay. She worries about Willow a lot and I think she’s having trouble sleeping, not that she’ll admit it, but when you consider what she’s been through, I think she’s okay.”

We stopped talking at the sound of footsteps approaching and when I turned slightly I saw Maddie coming towards me, Willow clutching her hand.

“Nico,” Maddie sighed as soon as our eyes locked. At that, something within me, that had been out of whack all week settled at seeing her smile softly my way.

“Hey sweetheart,” I greeted as I moved towards her with my arms open, desperate to hold her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she sighed as she wrapped her arms around my waist. I pulled her close and held her tighter than I ever had before. It had only been a week since I last saw her but it had felt like so very much longer.

“Are you okay?” I asked her quietly, so only she would hear.

“Yes. The guys have been great. I just...I missed you,” she told me, and it filled me with a warm feeling inside to hear it. It solidified something inside of me that had been worried she only came to me before because I was the only option she had. Now she had other options, but she’d missed *me*.

“I missed you too, both of you. I’ve been so worried,” I admitted.

“We’re okay,” she reassured me as she pulled back from my arms. I didn’t want to let her go, but I knew I had to. Kai was in the room now too, and he and Hunter were looking at us with confusion.

“These assholes better have been taking good care of you,” I joked as I looked between the two guys.

“Nico sayed a bad word!” Willow accused as she pointed a finger at me indignantly.

“Sorry Princess,” I apologized as I gave Maddie an apologetic look. I wasn’t used to having little ears around. That would have to change if this was going to work out.

“You tell him, sweetie,” Kai laughed as he approached me and held his hand out. “How are you, brother?” he greeted as we shook hands.

“Good. Glad to be here,” I replied as I glanced back to Maddie again. She had some color back since the last time I saw her, but she seemed thin and tired. There were smudges under her eyes and her face seemed drawn.

She was beautiful though, her shining red hair gathered into some kind of bun on her head, wild strands that had slipped free framing her face. She was dressed in a flowery sundress that stopped just above her knee and showed off every inch of her tight little body, curving tightly around her even more prominent bump. Her tiny, delicate feet were bare, her toenails painted a soft pink that just added to how damned cute she looked in that moment, fresh faced and beautiful.

“Mommy? Nic Nic says we can go swimming. Can we go now? Please? I’m hot!” Willow declared as she stood before Maddie, pulling on the hem of her dress to get her attention.

“Nico just got here, peanut. Maybe give him some time to settle in,” Maddie laughed.

“It’s all good. I’m kinda hot too after that journey. We can go swimming if that’s okay with you?” I offered, looking to her.

“Please mommy?” Willow pleaded as she pressed her hands together under her chin and looked up at her mom with puppy dog eyes.

“Fine. As long as Nico doesn’t mind,” Maddie gave in as she looked to me with a smile.

“No problem,” I agreed.

“I’ll get my swim suit!” Willow cried as she ran for the stairs.

“No running!” Maddie yelled at the same time Hunter and Kai called “Walk!” When they all laughed together I saw something pass between the three of them that made me feel something I hadn’t felt for some years – jealousy. Was

something going on between them all? Was I too damned late? I really hoped not, because now I had laid eyes on Maddie again, I wasn't sure I had it in me to ever let her go.

“That was amazing,” I sighed happily as I pushed my empty plate away from me at the dinner table later that night.

“Sam makes the bestest ever pasta!” Willow told me as she stood on her chair and pointed to the man working away busily baking something in the kitchen.

“No arguments here, Willow. That pasta was delicious,” I agreed.

“If you're done eating, why don't you come over here and help me out, little miss?” Sam said from the kitchen.

“Can I, mommy?” Willow asked as she dropped back down to her butt on the chair and looked to her mom.

“Sure, honey. Go ahead,” Maddie agreed. She looked even more exhausted now. I had been watching her all afternoon as we all hung out in the back yard, which was like a damned park in itself. Hunter, Kai, and I had mainly stayed in the pool with Willow, while Maddie laid on a lounge at the side and kept an eye on her firecracker of a daughter in between some reading.

It had been a pleasant afternoon and Willow had loved it, but it had left me with concerns about Maddie. She had barely moved, but every time I checked on her, she looked more and more exhausted. She was even quieter than usual, and that was

saying something, since Maddie was always pretty quiet. Something was obviously wrong and I wondered if it was the pregnancy – if it was just taking too much from her that she simply didn't have to give after all she'd been through.

“Did you bring my cell phone with you?” Maddie asked, pulling me from my thoughts. Willow was in the kitchen, standing on a stool and helping to pour flour into a huge mixing bowl with the guys housekeeper – Sam.

“Yes, but he won't be bothering you on it again,” I replied.

“Why? What did you do, Nico? I told you not to get involved with Edward or Frank,” Maddie panicked.

”Relax. Everything's okay,” I assured her as I reached across the table and placed my hand over hers to comfort her. “I saw them both at a fundraiser this weekend. I showed them the photos. All of the photos.”

“Bet they took that well,” Cameron commented. He had appeared as we all sat down to eat, but he had remained very quiet all night and I knew why. He'd lost his twin brother during their last deployment and Hunter had mentioned that he was struggling to cope with the loss. I felt for him. I had lost teammates myself overseas and that had been devastating. I couldn't even imagine how it would feel to lose flesh and blood.

“They weren't happy, but it wasn't like they could deny anything. I told them if they bother you again, I'd make sure the press gets a hold of those images,” I explained.

“They won't like that. Frank doesn't like being backed into a corner,” Maddie worried.

“There’s nothing he can do. I told him if anything happens to me, my attorney will release the images. They have nothing left to threaten you with.”

“He’s right, sunshine. We have all of the power this time,” Kai agreed.

“Edward agreed to sign the divorce papers and to give you full custody of the children. He won’t put up a fight,” I assured Maddie.

“Oh, thank God,” Maddie whimpered as tears slid down her cheeks. She started to sob and slammed a hand over her mouth to quiet the sound.

I moved to go to her, but Hunter grabbed her and pulled her into his lap before I could move. He held her against his chest and soothed her just as I wanted to.

“It’s okay, baby. It’s over now. He can’t hurt you or the kids ever again,” Hunter told her and I tried hard not to audibly growl at the realization I was too fucking late. The way he was holding and comforting her was so much more than friendship. Cam stayed across the table watching them, but the way he looked at Maddie – it showed the way he felt. They all wanted her. It was so obvious and it was killing me.

“Thank you Nico,” Maddie sniffled as she looked up and met my eyes. “You have no idea what this means to me. I w-was so scared he’d take my children from me.”

“I would never have let that happen, Maddie,” I told her firmly. I’d have killed the fuckers if I needed to.

“Us neither. No one is taking them from you, baby,” Hunter agreed as he held her tighter. Kai reached over, placing a hand on Maddie’s thigh to comfort her further and it was the final straw. I couldn’t witness any more.

I leapt up so fast my chair crashed to the floor behind me with a thud, making everyone pause and look to me.

“Sorry,” I uttered as I turned to pick up the seat and tuck it under the table. “I’m going to head to bed. It’s been a long day,” I added as I fought not to look at Maddie between the two of them again.

“But you gots to have some cookies, Nic Nic,” Willow cried as I started out of the room as fast as I could.

“Save me some for tomorrow, please princess,” I called to her, and I just heard her agreed before I turned the corner and ran up the stairs.

I was a mess by the time I got to my room and slammed the door closed. It had only been a week, but I was already too fucking late. The three of them wanted Maddie and they knew her way more than I did. They’d known her as a kid. They’d also had a week alone with her and it certainly seemed that week had been productive.

I was too damned late, I told myself as I lay back on the bed and buried my hands in my hair with frustration. I’d left it too long. I should have told her before. I should have told her how I felt about her months before, when it truly hit me. I’d been a coward and now I was too fucking late!

I could fight for her, compete with the guys to show her all I could offer her, but I didn't have it in me to do that. She seemed happy there. Willow was happy there and they had more to offer than I did. Sure, I had money and I could give her and her kids a good home and a comfortable life, but I clearly didn't have as much money as these guys. I couldn't offer her a mansion like the one we were in.

I dragged myself up from the bed and headed into the bathroom to start the shower. I was too fucking late! Maybe I'd just have to face that fact and accept Maddie couldn't ever be mine. I hated it, but I wouldn't ruin what she had found if she was happy. I'd just stay and make sure she and Willow were happy. If they were, I'd leave and remain her friend. It would kill me, but I'd do it for her. I'd do anything for her.

CHAPTER 15

MADDIE

Nico was being strange with me. He had been staying at the house for three days now and I had decided he was definitely being weird.

It had started on that first night at dinner when he had run off up to his room early in the evening and not come back down again until the next morning. Ever since then he had barely spoken with me more than pleasantries.

He had spent most of his time entertaining Willow. He'd played in the gardens with her, swam in the pool with her, and even taken her out to the park and for ice cream that day, but he hadn't invited me to come with them. In fact he had barely looked at me in the time he'd been there and I was just confused. I had thought we were friends. I had been so happy to see him after all of the uncertainty I'd been dealing with when he arrived, but now it seemed being near me just irritated him.

More confusion was the last thing I needed, since I was still wrestling with what the guys had told me a few nights before and trying to decide what I should do for the best. Nico had been a part of my indecision too, if I were honest. There had been a part deep inside of me that thought maybe Nico wanted to be with me and I had been worried I would lose him if I accepted the relationship with the guys. I knew how greedy that sounded, but I had feelings for Nico and I didn't want to dismiss them, not when they felt so strong. Now it seemed that was non-issue, since Nico had made it very clear he wasn't interested.

That still left me with my original worries about diving in with the guys though, worries about how hard such a relationship would be, and what it would be subjecting not just the four of us, but also my children to when we went out into the world. Not to mention all of my old concerns and insecurities about the fact that the three of them had abandoned me once and could possibly do it again. What would I do then? How would I explain to my children why they had been abandoned?

I groaned loudly as I slammed my head down on the cool kitchen counter. Willow had Hunter and Nico outside playing some game about lions and gazelles, and Kai and Cam were working, Kai in his office and Cam in his workshop, so I had some quiet. Quiet equaled thinking though, and that was the problem. There was too much going on in my head and it was giving me a headache!

“Here, sweet girl. At least cushion the blow,” Sam chuckled and when I looked up he stood before me with a cushion held out in offering.

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” I told him sheepishly.

“Want to talk about it?” he offered as he started pulling vegetables from the refrigerator and stacking them before me on the counter, no doubt to start preparing dinner.

“No,” I shook my head. “Yes. Maybe? I don’t know,” I cried. Could I really talk to Sam about any of my issues?

“I’m a good listener and anything you tell me stays between us,” he assured me.

I sat up and took a deep breath, looking around me to assure myself everyone was still out of earshot.

“Do you think Nico hates me?” I asked in a rush, needing to get it out. I was terrified I had done something to upset Nico and I needed some reassurance.

“What makes you ask that?” Sam asked. He had a chopping board before him where he stood opposite me now and was chopping peppers like a pro chef.

“Before, when we worked together, we talked all of the time. I thought he was my friend. He helped me when I ran away from my husband and he’s been calling me every day since we got here, but now that he’s here, he’s avoiding me and I...I just don’t get it,” I admitted.

“He doesn’t hate you, Maddie. Trust me on that,” Sam assured me with a smirk.

“How do you know?”

“The way he looks at you. His eyes barely leave you when you’re in the same room. He likes you, maybe even loves you,” he informed me nonchalantly with a shrug.

“What?” I gasped as my mouth dropped open and hung there in shock. “What d-did you just say?”

“He’s in love with you,” Sam repeated. “Think about it. He probably came here to come clean with you, make his feelings known, but when he gets here he finds you getting close and touchy with the others. That’s why he’s backed off and kept his distance. He’s jealous and upset that he’s too late for his chance.”

“No,” I shook my head. “You’re wrong. He can’t be. He...he’s my boss. He wouldn’t...doesn’t see me like that,” I denied.

“Deny it all you like, but I’m telling you, that man may as well have bright red hearts in his eyes when he looks at you. I know love when I see it,” Sam told me.

I turned to the side and looked to Nico, just as he looked up and met my eyes. He smiled a little before quickly averting his stare and returning his attention to Willow.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered as I thought over what Sam had said. Could that be true? Nico had been flirty in the past, but I just figured he was messing around.

I had never for one second thought he actually liked me. I mean he’s Nico. He’s six feet something of ruggedly handsome good looking and tightly packed muscle. He could be on the cover of some men’s magazine. He could have any woman he wanted. Why would he want me? Boring, plain, ginger me? It didn’t even make any sense.

Then again I thought the same about Hunter, Kai, and Cameron. They were also way out of my league, and look what they’d told me. This was insane. How did my life become so crazy?

I leapt up from my seat when I heard Willow, Hunter, and Nico heading closer to the house. I needed to get away until I could think straight again. I couldn’t face Nico yet. He’d know something was going on with me, and what if Sam was wrong? I didn’t want to make a damned fool of myself.

My feet hit the ground just as the glass door slid open and I turned to run, only for everything before me to flash with

bright light. My head became hot in an instant and then the next thing I knew, everything was black.

“Has she even seen a doctor since she got here?” I heard Nico demand as things started to seep back into my consciousness.

“Did she need to? She got the all clear at the hospital,” Hunter replied.

“Of course she needs to. She’s pregnant. She needs regular checkups and sonograms and shit,” Nico cried, and I hated the fear I heard in his voice.

“Why isn’t mommy waking up?” Willow sniffled from somewhere in the background, and I knew she was crying.

“She’s okay, trouble. Just give her a second, okay?” Cameron soothed her. I worked harder to open my eyes, realizing I must have blacked out and scared her, and Nico too, by the sounds of it.

My eyes felt heavy, but I got them open and found Nico leaning right over me. He looked pale and his eyes were wild with concern.

“What happened?” I asked as I looked around me and realized I was laid out on the floor in the kitchen.

“Just lie still. You passed out,” Nico told me as he placed a hand on my chest to keep me where I was.

“Mommy?” Willow whimpered and I looked up and found her in Cam’s arms over by the counter. Sam stood beside them and Kai and Hunter were on their knees at my other side.

“I’m okay, honey. I just stood up too fast,” I assured her, then I looked to Nico as I worriedly placed a hand over my stomach. Had I landed on the baby?

“Nico caught you as we were coming in. I think the baby’s okay, but we should get you checked out,” Kai explained.

“Help me sit up. I’m scaring Willow,” I told them as I tried to push up to sitting.

“Just go easy,” Nico told me as he wrapped an arm around me and eased me up until I leant against the counter.

“I’m okay, Willow. I’m so sorry I scared you, peanut,” I told her when I saw how tightly she was clutching Cam. I’d terrified her.

“How about we make mommy some tea to make her feel all better, Willow?” Sam offered as he opened his arms to her.

“That sounds good. Maybe I could have a cookie or two?” I said as I looked to my daughter with a smile.

“Okay, but you guys got to look after my mommy,” Willow warned looking between the four guys.

“We will, princess,” Nico promised her. Willow nodded, then leaned over so Sam could take her from Cam’s arms.

“I’m okay,” I told them as I looked between them and saw the worry on each of their faces. “It was just the blood pressure thing. I stood up too fast.”

“What blood pressure thing?” Nico demanded.

“I get low blood pressure when I’m pregnant. It happened with Willow, but it seems worse this time,” I explained.

“That’s it. I’m getting you an appointment for a checkup today,” Hunter growled as he got to his feet.

“That’s not necessary. I’m fine,” I argued.

“No you’re not. Make the appointment, Hunter. She’s going,” Nico said flatly, then he looked at me with a dare in his eyes to argue.

“Fine,” I gave in. “I’m due for a checkup anyway. Couldn’t hurt.” I wouldn’t admit it, but I was a little worried about just how weak and run down I had been feeling lately. This pregnancy was taking it out of me way more than my first, Maybe I could use some doctorly advice.

“You guys should go. I can just get a cab back or something,” I whispered to Hunter and Kai who sat either side of me in the waiting room of the clinic which Hunter had managed to get me an emergency appointment in.

“We’re staying, Maddie,” Hunter replied flatly.

“We’ve already been here twenty minutes and who knows how much longer it could take. I thought you had a meeting this afternoon?”

“The meeting can wait. You’re more important,” Kai told me as he placed a hand over my jittering knee and squeezed it reassuringly.

Kai and Hunter had drawn the short straw in who would accompany me to the appointment. Nico had instantly volunteered to stay with Willow, which didn’t surprise me. It seemed he would do anything to not have to be in my company ever since he arrived.

Cam had awkwardly uttered something about work, but I knew the truth was he never left the house. Kai had let slip that Cam hadn’t once been off of their property in the last twelve months. I hated knowing that. Cam and Everett had been so full of life and plans for great adventures when we were kids. The idea that Cam was now unable to leave his home cut deep. I had resolved to find a way to help him and I was determined I would. I just wasn’t exactly sure how that would happen yet, but I wouldn’t give up.

“How are you feeling? Do you need anything? I think we passed a coffee stand on the way up here,” Hunter fussed.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Did you eat lunch?” Kai asked.

“Maybe that’s why you blacked out. Did you even eat breakfast?” Hunter chimed in.

“Guys!” I snapped in hushed tones, not wanting the whole damned waiting room to hear me. “Stop stressing me out. I ate breakfast and Sam had just pretty much force fed me two chocolate chip muffins before I passed out. I ate plenty!”

There was little chance of anyone in that house going hungry with Sam constantly fluttering around offering up his freshly baked goodies. He was a complete mother hen, constantly making sure everyone who lived there had eaten. I was pretty sure I’d already piled on a few pounds in just the week we had been there.

“Miss Phillips?” Someone called, and I sighed in relief as I shot to my feet. It was so odd to hear myself called by my maiden name again, but I had specifically asked Hunter to book the appointment for me in that name. I refused to use my married name any longer. I was starting over, and getting rid of the ‘Foster’ name was the first step.

I moved towards the voice, leaving the guys to trail behind me, so grateful I had been called in before the guys could freak out any more.

We were led into a small office where a nurse busily took my vitals and asked me questions about my pregnancy so far. Hunter and Kai stood awkwardly in the corner, looking unsure and worried.

When the nurse had all the details she needed she led us next door into a much bigger office and the three of us sat behind a huge, modern glass desk. Certificates hung in fancy frames ahead of us, and one wall was covered floor to ceiling in solid wood bookshelves, stacked with medical volumes. It was unlike any doctor’s office I had ever been in before and I started to panic about just how much this appointment was going to cost.

Before I could raise the question with Hunter, a young woman in a white coat strode in. She was younger than I expected – maybe just a little older than me. Her almost black hair was styled perfectly into some fancy chignon, and she had on a perfectly pressed white blouse beneath her doctor’s coat. She smiled kindly as she rounded her desk and stood opposite us.

“Sorry for the delay,” she said. “I’m Doctor Andrews.” She held a hand out to me, which I shook as I forced a smile.

“Maddie,” I replied. “And these are my....friends,” I stuttered as I looked between the guys who sat either side of me.

“I’m Hunter,” Hunter offered as he held a hand out to her in greeting. She shook it and kept her smile in place, not even looking curious at my hesitation.

“And I’m Kai,” Kai said as he took her hand to shake next.

“So,” Doctor Andrews began as she took a seat behind her desk and looked to the screen of her computer. “We managed to get your records from Chicago and I’ve had a look over them. I don’t see any issues with your first pregnancy, correct?”

“I had low blood pressure throughout, but it wasn’t much of an issue,” I replied. “Everything else was normal as far as I know.”

“And you’ve been experiencing low blood pressure through this pregnancy too?”

“Yes, and it seems worse than last time. The morning sickness is worse too. It’s gone on past the first trimester and it’s not only in the mornings.”

“That can happen unfortunately, but I can give you some pills to try and ease that. Your blood pressure was very low when the nurse took it earlier. While it’s not unusual, it is concerning if it was the cause of your fainting spell earlier.”

“So it’s normal to have low blood pressure when your pregnant?” Kai asked.

“It can be, because the blood is being rerouted to the fetus. It only usually happens for the first trimester, but it can go into the second,” Doctor Andrews explained patiently.

“What can we do to stop it?” Hunter asked next. I wanted to get annoyed at them butting in, but how could I when they sounded so keen to understand what was going on and in finding ways to help me?

“I suspect Maddie may need to take things a little easier. I understand you have recently separated from your husband?” She looked to me with understanding.

“Yes. He...he was abusive. I had to get my daughter away from him,” I admitted, my face heating with the shame I felt at admitting that. Hunter must have picked up on it, because he grabbed my hand in his and smoothed his thumb back and forth over my knuckles comfortingly.

“I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through. Are you and your daughter staying somewhere safe now?”

“Yes. I’m staying with Hunter and Kai. We’ve been friends since we were kids,” I replied as I gave both guys a shy smile of gratitude.

“And you plan to stay there for the time being?” the doctor probed.

“Yes,” Hunter answered for me. “She and Willow are staying with us.”

Doctor Andrews looked to me with question and I just nodded, smiling to reassure her I was good with that.

“Well, I know you have a lot going on, but I really would advise you to try and minimize stress as much as possible. Put your feet up and rest whenever you can. Small meals and snacks often should help with your blood pressure too.”

“We can do that,” Kai agreed keenly.

“Good. I’d like you to get a sonogram before you leave today, but all being well with that, I’d say you and baby are doing just fine, Maddie,” the doctor summarized.

“Thank you,” I replied, relieved everything was okay. The longer we had sat in that waiting room, the more and more convinced I became that I had done something to hurt my baby with all of the chaos that had surrounded me lately.

At least I wasn’t a complete failure in life. I may not have protected Willow from her father, but so far I had successfully done what I was biologically programmed to do – incubate my child. *Yay me!* At least I managed not to fuck up something.

“I think that was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen!” Kai announced excitedly as the three of us headed through the parking lot towards Parker’s Range Rover.

The guys had stood beside me and watched the whole sonogram, the both of them stunned to silence by the images on the screen. It had made my heart pound hard in my chest to see just how excited they were at the sight of my child. They showed every expression on their faces that I had wished for Edward to show when I was carrying Willow, and again this time.

He hadn’t ever shown any interest though. He hadn’t even come to any of my sonograms with me for either pregnancy. He had been there at Willows birth, but only on Franks orders. Frank had pointed out the fact that people would have talked if I had delivered our first child all alone. So he had been there, but he had hated every moment and every time we had been left in the delivery room alone he had ranted at me that I was dragging the whole thing out on purpose, like I was having so much fun, pushing his child out!

Then Willow had been born and he hadn’t even wanted to hold her. He’d left the two of us alone in the hospital as fast as he could, feigning work. I hadn’t cared really. I had my beautiful daughter in my arms and I swore I wouldn’t allow him to ruin the happiness that brought to me, but still, it would have been so amazing to have shared that magical time with someone who was as besotted with my child as I was.

“We could see everything. He or she looks so much like you, baby,” Hunter gushed as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side. I went happily, a smile on my face as I basked in their excitement.

“He’s right. I definitely saw your little nose,” Kai laughed. “I can’t wait to show the video to Cam. He’s going to be amazed!”

“I really wish you would have found out if it’s a boy or a girl though. We could have got started on the nursery,” Hunter pouted.

“I want it to be a surprise. Edward made me find out for the decorator last time. This time I’m doing it my way,” I told them firmly.

“We can start the nursery anyway. We’ll just keep it neutral. We could make it really colorful. Fill it with rainbows and shit,” Kai shrugged, but he still had the huge grin in place on his face.

“You don’t need to do that. I just need a crib so the baby can sleep in my room,” I protested.

“Of course the baby needs a room. We’re planning to knock through so the nursery has a door right through to your room, just like Willow’s,” Hunter explained.

“Guys, you can’t do that!” I stopped dead and looked between them. “You don’t even know that I’m staying. You can’t remodel your damned house for me.”

“Sure we can,” Kai shrugged again and started walking.

“You’re staying,” Hunter added flatly.

“But what if...if I decide I can’t do what you guys are offering? If I can’t be in a relationship with all of you like that? It’s not going to be as easy as you guys seem to think, you know?” I said stubbornly.

“We know that, Maddie. We’re not expecting unicorns and fairytales. Life never works out like that. We know that better than most, but if we love each other and we make each other happy, we can overcome everything else, can’t we?” Hunter asked, almost pleading in his tone.

“I have to think about my children too. I can’t make their lives harder than they need to be. This kind of relationship could result in them facing some terrible bullying when they start school,” I sighed.

“Then we’ll teach them to stand up for themselves. All kids face bullying, Maddie. It’s not a reason to deny them what could be a really happy, secure family,” Hunter reasoned.

“Times are changing too, sunshine. Relationships like the one we’re proposing are unusual, but not unheard of. Plus there will be other kids from non-traditional families in school by the time the kids start. I agree it won’t be easy, but I know without a doubt it will be worth it. No one can love you, Willow, and that little one as good as we will.” Kai stepped towards me and rested a hand on my belly as he spoke, and as if the baby could hear him, he made the fluttering of the first kick that I had felt so far in this pregnancy.

“Oh my god!” I gasped as I pressed my hand over the top of Kai’s.

“What? Did I hurt you?” Kai gasped as he tried to pull his hand out from beneath mine.

“The baby...I think it heard you. I just felt him or her kick for the first time,” I explained, teary eyed.

“Really? Can I feel it too?” Kai asked in wonder.

“I don’t know. Probably not through my clothes. The kicks are only like a fluttering at first, but they’ll get more powerful as the baby grows. I used to be able to grab Willow’s foot when she kicked me, near the end,” I laughed.

“I think the baby was giving his mom a kick to make the right choice,” Hunter teased as he wrapped his arm around me again. It was getting harder to hold back my heart as Kai took my hand in his, and the three of us headed for the car again.

CHAPTER 16

MADDIE

Willow squealed excitedly from the garden where her, Cam, and Kai were all having a huge water fight. Kai had brought home the huge water guns the night before on his way home from a meeting at the office and Willow had been busting with excitement to try them out ever since.

The guys had been doing all they could to amuse her in the last few days, since my appointment with Doctor Andrews, working to keep her occupied while they insisted I take it easy and rest. Sam had been plying me constantly with food, focusing on the idea of small meals and snacks often, as the doctor had suggested. I had tried to insist the doctor hadn't meant it to be quite as often as Sam seemed to think, but it hadn't deterred him. I couldn't argue too much though. It felt nice to have someone fussing over me the way Sam did – like a parent. I had never had that before.

The evening after the appointment the guys had insisted we load up with snacks and all settle in to watch the DVD the sonographer had given them with my scan footage on it. Everyone had watched it, including Sam and Garth, and ever since the house had been abuzz with excitement about the baby. Kai and Hunter had been in my room the next day, showing Cam the plans they had to knock a doorway through to the room next door, then they were all drawing up plans for the nursery. Even Sam had been suggesting the names that he thought would work, every time we talked. I might have found it overwhelming if I weren't so happy to actually be allowed to be excited about my pregnancy for once.

Living with Edward had always required me to keep my mouth shut about my pregnancy. He didn't want to hear about

it. Now I could speak and smile about my baby as much as I wanted, and not only that, the people around me were enthusiastic too.

Well, most of them. Nico – not so much. He had been with us for almost a week now, and he still seemed to be avoiding me as much as possible. I had no idea what I had done to upset him, but whatever it was, it was getting worse the longer he stayed.

That morning, when I had arrived for breakfast, he had shot up from the table where everyone sat and hurried off, muttering something about working out, and it had hurt. I was so sick of dancing around him and trying to work out what was going on. As I watched him storm off, I resolved to get him alone and find out what the hell was going on. If he didn't want to be near me, then he needed to leave. I didn't want him to be there if he didn't want to be. Even if it would leave me devastated to see him go.

Assured Willow was having a blast with the guys, I headed to the office at the back of the house, where I knew Hunter was working.

The door was ajar as I approached, so I leant against the frame and looked in, smiling when I found Hunter behind his desk in a shirt and tie, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was staring at the screen of his laptop and running a hand through his hair as he often did when he was concentrating. He looked so mature, no sign of the boy I had known so many years ago. Instead he was a man now.

Handsome wasn't a strong enough word for the way he looked to me as I stood there admiring him. He was so much more than that, with his stubble covered, sharp jaw and his sun kissed skin from all of the time he had spent during the last

two weeks, entertaining my daughter in the pool and gardens. His white shirt was straining slightly across his shoulders, his muscles across them and down his corded arms defined beneath the fabric.

“Hey,” he greeted when he glanced up and saw me there. His face filled with a soft smile and I felt my heart skip a beat at how amazing that smile was. It was real. He was happy to see me standing there, and that meant so much after so many years of Edward scowling and cursing every time I was near him.

“Hey. You always get dressed up like that to work from home?” I teased.

“I had a conference call with a client,” he chuckled as he closed his laptop and leant his arms on the desk before him, giving me his full attention. “Everything okay? Where’s the little hellion?”

“In the garden, terrorizing Kai and Cam,” I laughed.

“Good. Someone needs to keep them out of trouble.”

“Getting them into trouble, is more likely,” I pointed out. “They’re a bad influence on each other those three, but I’ve never seen my daughter happier than when she’s playing with you guys.” It was true. The longer we lived with the guys, the more Willow came alive. She wasn’t scared of being herself anymore. In fact she had flourished with the guys and with Sam doting on her. She loved it there and I was really starting to see what the guys had told me – that a life with them, and the happiness that me and my children could have there, could really be worth any outside criticism we could face as a result.

There was no question of whether I loved them or wanted the three of them. That had always been true. I had loved and wanted them since I was fifteen years old and didn't even really understand the feelings I had. A future with them was a fantasy come true, but I was just so scared it was the wrong choice to make for my children's futures and I was terrified of messing their lives up any more than I already had.

"I was wondering if I could borrow a car," I asked, changing the subject before Hunter tried to persuade me anymore.

"Where are you going? I can give you a ride. I'm done for the day anyway," he offered.

"Thanks, but I need to do this alone. I want to take Nico somewhere so we can talk. I'm sick of him avoiding me, I want to know what's going on," I explained and I couldn't hide the pain in my voice as I spoke. I was hurt that Nico had all but stopped talking to me with no reason and I was struggling to keep my emotions in check.

"You haven't done anything wrong, babe. Nico's issues are all his own doing," Hunter sighed, instantly picking up on my tone.

"You know what's going on?" I asked hopefully.

"I have an idea of what's crawled up his ass, yeah," He sighed. "But he needs to talk to you, not me."

"So I can borrow a car?"

"Of course you can. Take mine." He stood and pulled a set of keys from his pocket, walking towards me with them in hand.

“You sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’m good. I feel much better the last couple of days. I think Sam’s intravenous food is working,” I laughed.

“Glad to hear it, baby.” He stopped opposite me and leant in to kiss the top of my head as he placed his car keys in my hand.

“Make him talk to you. He’s being an ass when he doesn’t need to be. We can all compromise here,” he told me.

“What does that mean?” I looked up to him, scrunching my face in confusion.

“You’ll find out. Call me if you need me and don’t worry about Willow. We’ll take good care of her.” He kissed my head again on the same spot, then strode past me from the room.

Confused by his words, but determined to work out what was going on, I went in search of Nico.

“Where are we going? You’re supposed to be taking it easy?” Nico grumbled, finally speaking after ten minutes of silence.

I had dragged him from where he had been sat in his room reading, out to get into Hunter’s car, the whole time not really explaining any more than I wanted him to come with me. He had grumbled about one of the others coming with me instead, but ultimately agreed.

Driving Hunter's monster of a car had been tricky at first, especially since it had been years since I drove, but I had made a few seat adjustments and now I was enjoying the ride and freedom I felt.

"I am taking it easy. I'm fine, Nico," I replied. I didn't exactly know where I was going, since I'd never been to the area before Hunter brought Willow and I there, so I was driving pretty aimlessly.

"Then where are we going?"

"To get coffee," I told him as I saw a Starbucks appear up ahead.

"There's coffee at the house."

"We're going to talk, Nico, some place where you can't walk off and avoid me," I told him firmly.

"Talk about what?"

"Coffee first, then we talk," I clarified as I pulled into the parking lot and parked up.

Nico sighed but didn't argue anymore as we both got out of the car and headed inside.

Even though I was anxious about the talk we were about to have, I was smiling as I stood at the counter ordering my large vanilla latte and chocolate muffin. How long had it been since I did something so mundane as go for coffee? How long had it

been since I had such freedom to just do whatever I decided I wanted to? It felt so damned good.

Once we had our drinks, I led Nico back outside. We settled at a table and chairs, in the shade of a large oak tree. We were the only ones seated out there and I was grateful for that, completely clueless about where this conversation with Nico would go.

“Okay, talk,” I demanded as Nico nervously fidgeted with his coffee cup and avoided looking at me.

“About what? You brought us here,” he uttered, still not looking at me.

“Yes I brought us here, but you’re the one who seems to have a problem,” I sighed. “What’s going on, Nico? Did I do something to upset you?” I was already tearing up, and Nico must have heard the wobble in my voice because his head shot up.

“Maddie, Jesus, no. You haven’t done anything. Please don’t cry, sweetheart,” he pleaded.

“Sorry. I can’t help it. I’m just really emotional with this baby for some reason,” I sniffled as I dabbed at my eyes with a napkin. “I just don’t want to lose you, you know? You and Emilia, you’re the only friends I have.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” he promised as he slid his hand across the table and grabbed mine. “Whether you stay here, or come back to Chicago, I will always be your friend, Maddie, and you can always count on me to be here for you.”

“Then what’s going on?” I pushed. “Because I’m not imagining it. You’ve been avoiding me. Is this about work? Are you pissed I might not come back to the office?”

Nico released my hand and sat back in his chair, his face hardening.

“So you’ve decided then? You’re not coming back home?” he asked and his tone was as hard as his clenched jaw.

“It’s not home, Nico,” I sighed. “It never was. I moved there for Edward. I’m not sure I’ve ever even had a home.”

“You have people there, Maddie, and you have a job. It’s more than you have here, or it was,” he uttered the last part so I only just caught it.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I admitted. “I don’t know what I plan to do. Is that what this is about? Work?” I asked, shocked Nico would be so petty when he was the one who convinced me to come here with Hunter in the first place.

“No Maddie! It’s not about fucking work!” he snapped. He took a deep breath and rested both of his hands on his head in exasperation. More calmly he said, “It has nothing to do with the office.”

“Then you need to explain because I’m just confused. You say I didn’t do anything and it’s nothing to do with my job, so what is it? Do you wish you hadn’t gotten involved in all of this?”

Nico grimaced and took another deep breath like he was trying to keep control of himself. I took that as a sign that I was right.

“I’m so sorry, Nico. I never should have gotten you mixed up in my shit. If you don’t want to be here with us, you can go. Willow and I, we’re okay with the guys. We’ll miss you, but we’ll be okay,” I rambled as more tears dripped down my cheeks. It was lies. I didn’t get it, but deep inside I knew I wouldn’t be okay if he left and didn’t speak to me again. I had feelings for him, no matter how hard I had denied them, and having him close made me feel settled and calm. It was like he was the final piece of a puzzle I had been trying to solve and I knew I’d be a mess if he was taken from me.

“I’m falling in love with you,” he blurted all of a sudden, stopping my verbal vomit instantly.

“What?” I gasped.

“I love you, Maddie,” Nico sighed as he leaned in closer to me. “I think I started falling the first day I met you. I tried to deny it because you were married, but then all of this happened and my feelings, they just got stronger. I love you. I’m not falling. It’s too damned late. I already fell. I love you. I love your kid. I love the way I feel when I’m close to you. I want a future with you, Willow, and that baby in it.”

“Nico...” I didn’t even know what to say. It seemed so impossible that he would be telling me he loved me. He could have any woman he wanted. Why would he want me?

Sam had been right after all. I had been denying his words over and over in my head, so sure there was no way Nico would want me like Sam suggested, and all along he had been right.

“Don’t. I already figured it out. I came here to tell you this. I didn’t want to rush you, but I needed you to know how I feel, but I get it. I’m too late,” he grumbled angrily.

“Too late?” I repeated, still lost in confusion and astonishment.

“You’re already with them, aren’t you? They want you and you love them? I can see it when you all look at each other.”

“No,” I finally found some words. “I’m not with them, but yes I do love them. I’ve always loved them, since I was fifteen years old.”

“That’s good. I’m happy for you, sweetheart. It sucks for me, but all I care about is that you’re happy,” he told me genuinely. I could see the pain in his eyes as he spoke and it cut me to the bone.

“You make me happy too, though,” I confessed, realizing it was now or never. If I didn’t open up and tell him how I felt, he would leave and I may never have this chance again. “I can’t explain it, but something inside me feels better when you’re with me, Nico. The first week here, I missed you so much. I can’t call it love, because we don’t even know each other that well yet, but I have these incredibly strong feelings for you. I don’t understand it, but I do know that I feel safe and peaceful when you’re with me. I think...I think maybe I’m falling in love with you too, and I think I have been for some time. I just never expected you to ever see me that way.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re so beautiful and smart. You make me smile, which is no easy feat,” he chuckled. “You’re everything I ever wanted in a partner, Maddie, but like you just said – you don’t know me that well, and the others, they can offer you so much more than I ever can.”

“I don’t care about any of that. Money doesn’t mean anything to me. Edward had money and he made my life hell.”

“But you do love them, right? And they’ve told you they want you?” he asked.

“Yes. They made their feelings known. They want us all to be together.”

“Well you know that kind of relationship can work. Look at Mia. I was worried when she told me she was dating all three of my teammates, but they have a wonderful relationship now. They’re happy together.”

“I know, believe me. I’ve been thinking about Mia’s situation all week as I tried to decide what I want. I think it could actually work out for us, but something has been making me hold back and I know what it is now.”

“And what’s that?” Nico asked.

“You. My feelings for you. I want to be with them, Nico, but I’m greedy. I want to be with you too. I know how crazy that sounds, but I can’t just walk away into the sunset with the guys and forget how I feel for you. My heart won’t let me. It’s too strong, the way I feel. It’s demanding to be acknowledged.”

“So where does that leave us?” Nico asked the sixty-four million dollar question.

“I honestly don’t know. I’m not even sure I’m ready to get into another relationship yet. I have Edward to deal with, and this

pregnancy, not to mention Willow and the fact I have upended her whole life. She has to come first.”

“I completely understand that. Of course your kids are your priority. I just needed you to know how I feel.”

“I’m glad you told me.” I smiled as I slid my hand over his on the table. “I don’t want to mess you around, but I just....I’m gonna need time. I have a lot of thinking to do.”

“Take the time you need, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere,” he assured me. “I’ll try to stop being an asshole too. It was just so hard when I thought I had no chance with you, seeing you with them. I was being a jealous idiot. I’m so sorry I upset you.”

“I’m just relieved I didn’t do anything to make you hate me,” I told him, once again tearful.

“Never, Maddie. I could never hate you.”

“Will you have to go back to Chicago soon?” I asked, hating the words as they came out. I didn’t want him to go.

“I’m not in a rush. Mia and the guys have things under control. Nate’s due back next week too. They can handle things for a while,” he replied, instantly soothing my fears. “I like being here with you and Willow.”

“We like having you here,” I told him. We loved having him there and never wanted him to leave. Problem was, I couldn’t imagine a future without Kai, Hunter, and Cameron in it too. Things were a mess, but in the best possible way. I had the four guys of my dreams telling me they wanted me. It was a

dream come true, so why did it make my head hurt so damned much?

CHAPTER 17

MADDIE

Two weeks had passed since Nico and I had our talk and in that time things had settled down. Hunter, Kai, and Cameron hadn't pushed any more for an answer from me, and Nico was just back to being himself, and my friend.

The days had passed quickly. Willow was having the time of her life with four guys who were always willing to play or listen to her random conversation. She adored Sam and could often be found stood on a chair at his side in the kitchen, helping him cook or bake.

Hunter had arranged for her to see a child psychologist once per week, because she was still having the occasional nightmare, but the psychologist, Dr Finn, had sat us down after the first appointment and assured us Willow seemed to be adjusting well to all that had happened. That was a huge relief to me, but we decided to keep up the appointments for a while, just to give Willow an outlet if she wanted to talk about her father with someone who wasn't me.

The attorney Nico had helped me to find had filed for divorce and sent the papers to Edward. He had already signed the custody papers, surrendering all his parental rights for Willow, and granting me full custody, and the day before he had signed and returned the divorce papers too. It seemed he and Frank had really heeded Nico's threats.

Things were going great for us, and we were both happy. My wrist and most of my bruising had healed up well, and I could once again look in the mirror without seeing the haunting reminders of what Edward had done. Even my pregnancy seemed to have calmed down, and I was starting to feel a lot

more like myself, even if I wasn't quite sure who that was after so many years in Edward's shadow.

"Mommy. I'm bored!" Willow complained from where I had her set up coloring and drawing at the kitchen table. It was the first time since we arrived there that the two of us found ourselves alone.

Nico had been forced to go back to Chicago for three days so he could attend some important meetings. Hunter and Kai had gone out to the home improvement store to get paint for the nursery, which they were now ready to start painting after bringing in a contractor to create the doorway they had planned.

Sam and Garth had a day off, and had headed to some farmers market outside of the city, which was apparently their favorite thing to do when they took a day for themselves.

Cam was around, probably out in his workshop, so I wasn't technically alone, but we were, apparently, too alone for Willow. She seemed unamused with my attempts to keep her busy. Clearly drawing with mommy wasn't as exciting as having the guys throwing her around or chasing her through the house.

"And my arm won't stop itching!" Willow pouted as she tried to poke her finger under her cast.

"I know, honey. You won't have to wear it for too much longer," I soothed as I grabbed her arm and poked the flat end of one of her crayons under it to sooth the itch.

"How about I make us some lunch?" I suggested once she had calmed some and picked her crayon back up.

“But you don’t makes it like Sam does,” she whined. She was tired. She’d been restless the night before with nightmares haunting her and she’d woken up at six A.M. refusing to go back to sleep.

“You never complained before,” I laughed.

“But now we gots Sam and he’s the bestest cook there is,” she told me with a smile.

“Well he’s not here today, so I guess you’ll just have to make do with my cooking.”

“I guess so,” Willow sighed loudly, clearly aggrieved. I couldn’t help but laugh as I left her at the table and rounded the island to grab ingredients from the refrigerator.

The second I bent to grab carrots from the very bottom shelf, I felt a dampness between my legs that instantly made my blood run cold. I stood up and took a deep breath, urging myself to stay calm.

“Mommy just has to pee, peanut. Can you wait right there for me?” I asked as calmly as I could.

“Okay mommy,” Willow agreed easily. I hurried to the nearest bathroom, the whole time my heart pounding hard and fast in my chest. Utter terror consumed me as I pulled my jeans and panties down, and for a moment I dare not look down. I couldn’t lose this baby. Not after all we had already been through together.

A cry slipped from me when I finally got up enough courage to look down and found way too much blood all over my white underwear.

I don't even know how long I stood there staring at it as panic consumed me, but I was snapped out of it by the sound of Willow calling for me.

"Coming now, honey!" I called back, my voice shaking as hard as the rest of my body. I took a breath in and tried to stay calm as I pulled my jeans back up and washed my hands. I knew I needed to act fast. Maybe if I could get help, they could save the baby. He or she was at around thirty-two weeks. There was a chance they could survive if they were born now, right?

I could hardly contain my shaking body as I moved back through the house to check on Willow and get my cell which I had left on the kitchen counter.

"There you are mommy. I'm hungry," Willow told me as soon as she saw me. She smiled sweetly and I was grateful she didn't see how much I was freaking out.

"We need to go out, honey. Can you grab your shoes for me while I find you a snack?" I asked.

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere exciting. Grab your shoes, peanut," I repeated. I was relieved when she just nodded and clambered down from her chair, hurrying off towards the door for her shoes.

My hand shook so badly I could barely hit Cam's contact on my cell, but I managed, and I tucked it between my shoulder and ear as I started searching for a snack to appease Willow when we left.

"Hey, Mads," Cam greeted after a few rings.

"Hey. Wh-where are you?" I asked as calmly as I could.

"In the workshop. Are you okay?"

"No. I...I'm bl..." I couldn't say it, a sob slipping free in place of the words.

"Maddie?"

"Can you just c-come back to the house?" I whimpered as I fought back any more sobs. I didn't want to scare Willow.

The line went dead and a moment later Cam was crashing in to the kitchen, moving so fast he clipped a dining chair as he raced to my side.

"What's wrong? What happened?" he asked as he pulled me into his arms and held me tightly.

"I...I think I'm l-losing the baby. I'm bleeding," I whispered as I clung to him.

"Shit! Fuck!" Cam hissed as he held me even tighter. "Okay, where's Willow? We have to get you to the hospital," he added more calmly.

“I gots my shoes, mommy!” Willow announced as she appeared in the kitchen again.

“Great job, little mouse. Let’s put them on in the car, okay?” Cam said as he released me and went to Willow, gathering her up into his arms. “Let’s go,” he added as he turned and held a hand out to me.

“Where are we going?” Willow asked.

“There and back to see how far it is,” Cam joked as we moved through the house towards the garage.

“You’re silly!” Willow laughed as Cam opened the back door of a silver SUV and strapped her into the back. I was surprised to see there was a car seat in there for her, considering we had never even been in the car before, but I shouldn’t have been. The guys were always prepared for every eventuality.

“Jump in, Mads. It’s going to be okay,” he told me as he shut the back door and moved to the driver’s side.

He was texting as I slid into the passenger seat. I could feel I was bleeding even more and I had to fight not to burst into tears as my fears just intensified.

I tried to focus as Cam placed his cell in the cup holder and started the car. I was still clutching the bag of cookies I had grabbed for Willow so I turned and handed them to her. She smiled in delight at getting cookies for lunch and happily munched on them throughout the ten minute drive to the nearest hospital. Cam and I remained silent too, but Cam was clutching my hand in his, reassuring me the whole way.

My panic rose once again when Cam pulled up outside the emergency room and I realized we were going to have to take Willow in with us. I didn't want her to witness any of what was about to happen.

"You h-have to take Willow home. I'll be okay," I told Cam quietly.

"The guys are coming. I'm not leaving you," Cam told me as he squeezed my hand again. Just then Kai's truck swerved into the parking lot, much too fast, and sped to a stop beside us. In an instant Kai and Hunter were out and coming towards me.

Hunter opened my door as Kai opened the back.

"Hey sweetie," Kai greeted Willow in his usual easy going tone. "You gonna come and help me find Sam and Garth?" he asked.

"Yay! I'm hungry and mommy just gived me cookies," she pouted as she held up the empty bag.

"Cookies! No way! Wait until Sam hears about that," Kai laughed, but I heard how hollow it was.

"He has her, baby. Let's get you taken care of," Hunter said as he leaned into the car and grabbed my free hand.

"Be good for Kai, okay honey? I'll see you later," I told my daughter once I was out of the car. Kai had her in his arms, so I leaned into kiss her head.

“Love you, mommy,” she told me with a smile and I had to fight not to cry again.

“Love you too, peanut.” Kai gave me a reassuring smile, but it didn’t ease my worry as it usually did. Nothing but hearing my baby was okay could do that. He reached out and gave my hand a quick squeeze in comfort, then he whisked Willow off to his truck.

They drove past us as we headed into the emergency room.

“Sam and Garth are meeting him back at the house. They’ll watch Willow so we can all be with you,” Hunter explained.

“I think it’s too late, Hunt. I’m still bleeding. I...I can feel it,” I whimpered.

“Let’s just see what the doctors say, okay?” Cameron soothed as he wrapped an arm around me and helped me make it inside.

“Get her checked in. I want Doctor Andrews here,” Hunter ordered, and before I could argue he was charging away with his cell to his ear.

“I can’t lose this baby, Cam,” I squeaked as we walked towards the reception desk.

“We’ll do everything we can, beautiful,” he assured me as he pulled me into his arms and laid a kiss on my head. I stayed there as he spoke with the receptionist about what was happening and gave my details, feeling less like I’d fall apart completely when he held me as he was. My world was

crumbling down around me, and Cam's arms seemed to be the only thing keeping me together.

"Where the hell is Doctor Andrews?" Hunter ranted for the tenth time in the last hour. I had been put in a private room and had a monitor for the baby's heartbeat strapped around my bump where I lay in a hospital gown. I had seen the on call OBGYN and she had assured me the amount of bleeding I had wasn't of great concern. She checked me over and did a sonogram and seemed happy the baby was just fine.

They had decided to admit me and put me on the fetal doppler while we waited for my own doctor to come and check everything for a second time. I was relieved everything seemed okay and reassured by the crazily fast heart beat I could hear echoing through the room from the monitor.

Cameron and Hunter weren't quite so reassured though. Cam was sat in a chair at the side of the bed I lay in, clutching my hand and looking stressed to breaking point, while Hunt just paced back and forth constantly pulling at his hair so hard I worried he'd end up with bald patches.

"She's delivering a baby, Hunt. She doesn't even need to come now. The doctor said me and my baby are both fine," I tried to soothe him.

"We're waiting for a second opinion. We're not taking any chances. I got Doctor Andrews because she supposed to be the best," he replied stubbornly.

"When did you become such a snob?" I laughed.

“I just want to make sure you have the best care available,” he told me and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling gratefully at how much he cared.

“I don’t deserve you guys,” I told them both as I looked between them. Cam had left the house to take me to the hospital without question or even pause when I needed him to, despite his issues with leaving the property. Now he had stayed, even though I knew he was uncomfortable and desperate to get out of there.

“Hey. What’s going on?” We all looked up to where Kai appeared in the room panting as if he’d run all of the way. He came right over to me and took my free hand, placing a kiss on my knuckles. “Are you okay?”

“The baby’s okay. The doctor said some bleeding can be normal. They’re just monitoring the baby’s heart beat for a while,” I explained, even though I knew the guys had been updating him with texts. “Is Willow okay?”

“She’s fine. Sam and Garth were helping her decide what she wanted for dinner when I left her. They’ll take good care of her,” he promised.

“Thank you. I’ll have to apologize for ruining their day off,” I sighed, feeling guilty. I was worried I had completely overreacted, but I had been so scared.

“Don’t be crazy, Mads,” Cam told me as he leaned forward and brushed some hair from my face and behind my ear. “Sam and Garth won’t care about their day off. They just want to know you and Willow are okay. They may work for us, but they’re also family. You’re a part of that family now too.”

“They love spending time with Willow anyway. I bet they were relieved they got to come back and have dinner with her. She makes them both happy, just like the both of you make us all happy,” Kai added, and once again I was tearing up. *Damned hormones!*

Before I could formulate a response to such kind and touching words, Hunter’s cell ringing interrupted us.

“It’s Nico. I texted him to let him know what’s going on,” Hunter said.

“You shouldn’t have bothered him. He has meetings,” I told them, but I couldn’t hide the relief I felt at knowing Nico was calling. I wanted to speak with him. I wanted to hear his voice.

“He made me promise I’d call him if anything happened before he left. He’d have kicked my ass if I didn’t tell him,” Hunter explained, then he answered the call as he slipped from the room.

“You good brother? Hunt and I can stay if you need to get home,” Kai asked Cam with concern.

“I’m good. I’m not leaving,” Cam said stubbornly. He looked up into my eyes as he squeezed my hand in his much bigger one. “I’m right where I need to be.”

“Nico’s about to get on a flight back here,” Hunter announced as he walked back in.

“He didn’t need to do that,” I protested.

“Then you try and stop him, but you’ll be wasting your breath. He wants to be here,” Hunter shrugged.

“Just let us all take care of you, Maddie. Arguing is futile anyway. We’re not going anywhere,” Kai told me with a gentle smile.

“I don’t want you to go anywhere,” I admitted as I looked between them. I loved them. I couldn’t deny it. The issue was I was pretty sure I loved Nico too and I didn’t want him to go anywhere either. I wanted it all, but it seemed unlikely it could ever work out like that.

CHAPTER 18

NICO

If one more damned person got in my way, I was going to seriously lose my shit! I was trying to get through the airport and to the rental car office so I could collect the car Mia had organized for me and get to Maddie as soon as possible, but it was like the whole fucking world was against me.

It had taken me almost half an hour to get through the damned airport and out into arrivals because of the queue at passport security, and now I was fighting my way through the throngs of people waiting for their loved ones at the gate.

A growl slipped from me as a middle aged guy clutching a bunch of white flowers in his hand, stepped out, not even seeing me as he looked past where I stood and waved to someone.

I knew I was being an asshole, but I didn't care. All I cared about was getting to Maddie and it was taking way too fucking long!

I knew she and the baby were safe. Hunter had been texting me with updates since I spoke with him hours before. Maddie's doctor had arrived and agreed with the first doctor that everything seemed fine and that the bleeding wasn't anything to worry about. She had done another sonogram to put their minds at ease and they had all seen the baby for themselves, moving around and healthy.

When I had stepped off of the plane I had another text message telling me Maddie had been discharged from the hospital and was on her way home with the others. So I knew she was okay,

but I was so fucking angry with myself for leaving her. I had known it was a bad idea when I left.

I hadn't wanted to leave, but the meetings we had with a potential new client this week were too big for me to not be a part of. I had done most of the legwork in reeling in this big fish and I knew they would expect to see me at the meetings to cement their contract.

Maddie had assured me that she and Willow would be fine if I left for a few days and so, as reluctant as I had felt, I went. Now I regretted that decision so fucking much. Nothing was more important to me than Maddie, Willow, and that baby. Certainly not a client. Not even Milite.

For so long the company my brothers and I created after we got out of the Military – Milite – had been my whole life. Before my sister came along I had devoted everything to making our security software company a success. Apart from Linc, Parker, Jax, and Nate – my team – it was all I had. Even after I found my sister, Mia, and discovered there was more to life than work, I had still kept Milite as a huge focus. But now that Maddie was in my life, and I saw the possibility of a future with a family and a life I never really envisioned for myself, my work was paling in significance.

“Nico Gallo. I have a reservation,” I said as calmly as I could, slamming my driver's license down on the desk of the car rental office.

I growled my way through the ridiculous questions the irritating guy asked me then impatiently followed him around the car to inspect it, not that I looked at a damned thing. As I climbed into the car, throwing my case into the passenger seat and started the engine, I couldn't even tell you what fucking color the car, which I sat in, was. I hadn't been paying a dot of

attention to anything but my cell for updates and getting the god damned keys in my hand.

Thankfully, due to how late it was, the roads were pretty quiet and I got a clear run to the guys house. Within thirty minutes I was pulling in through the gates.

As I parked on the driveway in front of the garages, the front door opened and Kai came jogging towards me.

“How is she?” I asked as I climbed from the car and turned to him. He was striding towards me, dressed in sweats and a hooded sweater. He looked exhausted and as stressed as I felt.

“She and the baby are fine. She’s just exhausted,” he replied.

“Is she asleep?” I asked with disappointment.

“Yeah. We put her straight to bed. Hunt and Cam are staying with her. She’s okay Nic, but I need your help with Willow,” Kai sighed.

“Willow?” I looked down to my cell in my hand to check the time. It was almost midnight. I had assumed Willow would be fast asleep.

“She woke up when we brought Maddie home and she’s upset. I think she had a nightmare, then she saw Hunt carrying Maddie in, and freaked even more. Sam and I have been trying to soothe her, but she’s scared. I don’t want to wake Maddie.”

“Let’s go,” I said as I leaned into the car to grab my case, then headed for the house, Kai right behind me.

As soon as I walked into the house I could hear Willow crying and my heart started to pound hard at the pain that made me feel.

“We brought her down here so she wouldn’t wake Maddie, but nothing we’ve tried has calmed her down.” Kai explained as I hurried through the house towards the sound of her distress.

When I walked into the living room Sam had Willow clutched to his chest as he walked back and forth in front of the fire. He was cradling her head to his shoulder and trying his best to soothe her.

Willow was dressed in bright yellow plaid pajamas and was clutching Mr. Roar between her and Sam. I couldn’t see her face, but I could see her body shaking with her deep, heartfelt sobs.

“Look who’s here, Maddie,” Sam said as he looked to me with a strained smile. Maddie turned her face against his shoulder, just enough to peek with one eye at me.

“What’s wrong, princess?” I asked as I moved to Sam’s side and rubbed a hand up and down her back.

“Nic Nic,” she whispered. She turned her entire face to look at me, then held her free hand out, reaching for me.

I didn’t have much experience with kids. Linc’s brother, Kyle, and his family, had a few that I had interacted with at gatherings, and they had all seemed to like me just fine when they saw me but I really had no clue when it came to taking care of kids. But when Sam handed Willow over and she

wrapped her tiny arms around my neck, clinging to me as tight as she could, her tiny body shaking with sobs, something hit me right in the chest. I already adored her. She was an amazing kid and spending time with her had never been a chore, but as she clung to me that night, I suddenly felt possessive of her. Protective instincts like I had never known consumed me and I knew there was nothing I wouldn't do to protect and care for her.

"I wants my mommy!" Willow sobbed. She was running out of energy, her cries getting quieter and quieter.

"Mommy's really tired, cutie. She used up all of her energy growing your brother or sister today," I told her. "Can you tell me what's wrong? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Did mommy gets more owies?" she sniffled as she stopped crying and looked up at me just slightly from my shoulder.

"No Willow. Mommy's okay. She's just really, really tired. She just needs to sleep. It's really late."

"Nico's right. It's like the middle of the night right now, sweetie. We should all be fast asleep," Kai agreed as he appeared at my side and tamed some wild hair behind her ear so she could see him.

"I had a bad dream... 'bout daddy. He hurted mommy," Willow told us.

"It was just a bad dream, princess. Daddy won't ever hurt you or mommy again," I assured her as rage simmered within me. I should have killed Edward fucking Foster when I had the chance!

“My tummy hurts!” she wailed as the sobs started again and she curled back up against me.

“Does she have a fever?” Sam asked. “I didn’t notice when I was holding her, but I never considered she could be sick.”

I pressed my cheek against the top of her head and looked to Kai with panic.

“She is warmer than normal. Do you have a thermometer?” I asked.

“Do we?” Kai asked as he looked to Sam with the same level of panic I was feeling. If Willow was sick we were all screwed because I was pretty sure that not one of us knew what the fuck we were doing, except Maddie and she had been through enough for one day.

“I’ll go and look,” Sam said as he hurried off.

“Willow, can you show me where your tummy hurts?” I coaxed as I looked down at her. Worse case scenarios ran through my head. Was it her appendix? Did she have food poisoning? What if it was something even worse than that?

“Everywhere!” Willow wailed again, breaking my damned heart.

“It could just be because she’s been crying so hard,” Kai suggested.

“She wouldn’t have a temperature if it was just from the upset though, would she?” I asked, completely unsure.

“Maybe we should call a doctor?” Kai looked to me with question.

“We don’t have a thermometer in the first aid kit,” Sam announced as he walked back in.

I was contemplating calling Livy, Lincoln’s sister in law and the mom of the only other kids I knew when Willow sat up and looked at me. Her bottom lip was trembling and she looked pitiful, her face red and blotchy from the tears.

“Nic Nic,” she whimpered. “I don’ts feel so good.” Before either of us could utter another sound she opened her mouth and vomited all over herself and me.

I tried to move her back, so that the vomit would land on the ground between us, but I was too slow, and Willow refused to release her terrified grip around my neck.

“Oh Fuck!” Kai gasped as Sam launched across the room to grab a trash can. By the time he was at my side with it, Maddie was done and crying hysterically again, the both of us covered with the disgusting smelling results of her upset stomach.

I looked to Kai, who was looking to Sam, not one of us knowing what the fuck to do now.

“It’s okay, Willow. You’re okay,” I soothed her as I tried to rub her back without touching any of the mess between us.

“Bathroom. First thing is to get you both cleaned up,” Sam suggested and I was on board with that plan.

“We’re going to get cleaned up, okay princess, then we’ll find a way to make your tummy all better,” I promised as I followed Sam and Kai through the house to a full bathroom just off of the kitchen.

“Mr. Roar gots all dirty,” Willow sobbed as she pulled the vomit covered lion out from between us, flicking some wetness in my face in the process.

I tried not to gag, but I was struggling. I had seen a lot of shit in my life, been in some fucking disgusting places and dealt with many things, but I had never been covered in child’s puke while trying to soothe said hysterical child before. It was a new challenge for sure.

“I think we might have to give him a spa day, Willow. He needs a good wash and some pampering. Can you let me do that while you and Nico get cleaned up too?” Sam asked gently.

She nodded and handed the lion over to Sam, who grabbed it cautiously by a dry ear.

Kai was in the bathroom as we walked in. He already had the shower running and the tub was filling up too. He looked to me and we both shrugged at each other.

“Tell me if your tummy feels funny again, okay?” I told Willow, wanting some warning if she was going to blow again.

“It’s better now,” she sniffled.

“Your tummy?” Kai questioned. “It doesn’t hurt anymore?”

Willow shook her head and then rubbed it against my shoulder in an attempt to wipe her nose, I realized.

“Get in the shower first to rinse the worst off, then we’ll put her in the tub,” Kai suggested and I nodded my agreement.

“I’m tired Nic Nic,” Willow told me with a yawn.

“I know, cutie. Let’s just get you cleaned up and then you can go back to bed, okay?”

“I don’ts wants any more bad dreams.”

“No more bad dreams. I’ll stay with you tonight and keep them all away, okay?”

“Okay,” she yawned again.

She clung tightly to me as we stepped under the shower fully clothed and rinsed away the majority of the vomit. When she was relatively clean I handed her off to Kai who got her out of her pajamas and quickly rinsed her off in the tub.

I threw off my vomit and snot covered sweater, abandoning it in the bottom of the shower and went into the bedroom to change into some sweats and a t-shirt Sam had found from Kai’s room for me. They were a tight fit, but I was just relieved to be clean and dry.

By the time I got back to the bathroom Willow was dressed in clean pajamas and Kai was just towel drying her hair as much as he could. It wasn't ideal putting her to bed with wet hair, but we'd had to wash it because it had vomit in it too.

"Do you think we should call a doctor in? She doesn't feel warm now, and she says her stomach still feels good."

"I don't know. It can't be a good sign that she puked like that," I pointed out.

"Maybe we should just wake Maddie. She'll know what to do for the best," Sam suggested.

"She was exhausted. The doctor told us she needed to rest," Kai replied.

"Let me make a call. I know someone who will know what to do," I told them both as I slipped from the room.

I felt terrible calling Livy, Lincoln's sister-in-law, at such a late hour, but I knew she would understand. She was one of the kindest people I had ever met. She was married to Lincoln's four adopted brothers, and the five of them, along with their amazing kids had become like family to me.

"Nico?" she answered sleepily after a few rings. "What time is it?"

"Really late. I'm so sorry to wake you, Livy," I apologized.

"Oh my God! Is it Lincoln? Is he okay?" she cried all at once, panic filling her.

“He’s fine. That’s not why I’m calling,” I soothed her quickly. I could hear one of her guys asking her what was going on in the background and more guilt filled me as I realized I was going to have the whole damned household awake in the middle of the night. “Everyone’s fine,” I added to reassure her.

“What’s going on then? It’s almost two A.M. Nico.”

“I need your help. I’m with my friend, Maddie and her three year old kid. Maddie, she’s pregnant and she had a scare today. She’s okay, but she’s asleep and I don’t want to wake her,” I explained.

“Maddie from your office?” Livy asked.

“Yeah. Have you met her?”

“I have. Emilia introduced us when I met her for coffee a few weeks ago. I liked her. Is she okay?”

“She’s having a tough time, but she’s good. I just...I need to let her sleep, but Willow, her daughter, she just vomited all over me and I don’t know what to do. She said her stomach hurt and she felt kinda warm, then she puked.”

“How old is she?” Livy asked.

“Three. She says her stomach feels better now and she’s cooled down, but I didn’t know if I should still call a doctor in.”

“Have you taken her temperature?”

“No. We don’t have a thermometer,” I admitted. I made a mental note to find a drug store and buy one the next damned day.

“But she doesn’t feel warm to the touch when you touch her forehead?”

“She did, but she’s cooled down now.”

“If she’s telling you she feels better I wouldn’t bother with calling in a doctor. Just keep her hydrated and keep a close watch for any signs of a fever. It was probably something and nothing. Kids catch things so easily.”

“So I can put her to bed?” I asked for clarification.

“Yes. Give her a drink, put her to bed and let her sleep. If she keeps throwing up, I’d call the doctor then, but chances are it already passed, whatever it was.”

“Thanks Livy. I’m sorry I woke you. I just didn’t know who else to call,” I sighed, relieved.

“No problem. You know you can call me anytime,” she assured me, and I was relieved to hear it, because I had a suspicion this wouldn’t be the last piece of advice I would need if Willow was going to be a part of my life going forward. “And Nico, keep a bucket close. At that age you won’t get much warning if she’s going to puke again,” she added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, I learned that the hard way earlier,” I laughed.

I found Kai and Sam back in the living room once I had hung up with Livy. Kai had Willow in his arms, rocking her back and forth. She was calmed, but still looked to be feeling pretty sorry for herself.

“How are you feeling, princess?” I asked as I approached her.

“Mr. Roar has to stay at the spas all night, Nic Nic,” she told me sadly.

“Really? He must be getting the star treatment then. I’ll bet he’ll enjoy that.”

“But he always sleeps wiv me,” she sniffled.

“Well tonight I’m going to sleep with you, right?” I asked.

“You promised to keep the bad dreams away,” she reminded me.

“That’s right. That’s exactly what I’m gonna do, princess.”

“Should I call the doctor? I found the number for a pediatrician who does house calls?” Sam asked.

“I spoke with a friend. She has kids and said as long as Willow doesn’t have a temperature and isn’t throwing up, we don’t need to. We just need to keep her hydrated and let her sleep.”

“Well she feels pretty cool right now, so that’s good, right?” Kai asked as he looked to me.

“Let’s hope so,” I shrugged.

“Take her up to her room. I’ll make her a drink and bring it up,” Sam directed.

“We can handle things now, Sam. You should get home. Garth will be worried,” Kai told him.

“I’m staying tonight. I already sent Garth a text, so he knows. You’re going to need me here if Willow gets sick again,” he pointed out and I wasn’t arguing. It was going to be ‘all hands man your battle stations’ if Willow vomited again.

CHAPTER 19

HUNTER

I couldn't take my eyes from Maddie where she lay in her bed, fast asleep and looking more peaceful than I had seen her look at any time since I found her again. It was a reminder to me of just how much she was struggling with. I had been thinking she was settled with us, but seeing what she actually looked like when she was relaxed and at peace only proved I was wrong.

She had been walking around tense and on her guard constantly and I hadn't even realized. I worried it was because of us – because she distrusted us so much after what we had done to her when we walked away all of those years ago. I worried it was because of the stress we had put her under with our talk of a relationship with her. I worried we had only added to everything she was already fighting so hard to deal with.

And yet, even if it was all of that, I couldn't let her go. I loved her so fucking much, and letting her go was not an option for me. I wanted her in my life. I wanted a future with her and her children. I wanted them to be mine to care for and protect. No, if we were the issue adding to her stress then we would just have to find a way to make it better, because there was no way she was getting away this time.

Cam and I both turned from where we were sat in chairs on either side of the bed, at the sound of the door creeping open. Kai stuck his head in through the gap and waved a hand to get us both into the hall.

As he retreated, Cam and I stood, but both paused to look at Maddie, both of us hesitant to leave her. She had been through

hell that day. I had seen the utter terror all over her face as we walked into the hospital. She had feared for the life of her child and it had ripped her to pieces thinking she was going to lose him or her. I was still thanking God that it had not been the case and that the both of them were safe.

It wasn't my child Maddie carried, but it was hers and that meant I loved it even before I met him or her, just as I loved Willow. I loved them because I loved Maddie and they were both a part of her.

“What’s going on?” Cam asked as the both of us stepped into the hall from Maddie’s room and found Nico and Kai waiting there. Nico was dressed in sweats and a T-shirt that clearly weren’t his, the fabric of both items straining at the seams around his freakishly huge body. Both he and Kai looked exhausted and I wondered what the hell had happened. I knew Willow had woken up, upset after a nightmare, but could they really have had so much trouble calming her?

“Willow’s sick. She has a stomach ache and she threw up all over herself and Nico earlier,” Kai explained quickly.

“Fuck. When it rains it pours, huh?” I sighed.

“She seems better now. I managed to get her to sleep,” Nico assured us.

“Do we need to get her a checkup?” I asked.

“I called a friend. She said as long as she’s not vomiting and doesn’t have a fever, she should be okay,” Nico shrugged.
“How’s Maddie?”

“Still out cold. I think she’ll sleep through tonight. She was completely wiped out by the time we left the hospital,” Cam replied.

“What do we do about Willow?” I asked, feeling uneasy at the thought of her being sick and us not having her checked by a medical professional who knew what the fuck they were doing.

“I’m going to stay with her tonight. If she starts to feel hot again, or gets sick, we’ll call in a doctor. Otherwise, we get her through the night and see what Maddie wants to do in the morning,” Nico suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Kai agreed.

“We’ll stay with Maddie,” I told them all. “Let us know if things change with Willow.” I moved to go back to Maddie’s room, eager to get back to her, but Nico reached a hand out and stopped me.

“Hold up,” he told me. He took a breath as he looked between the three of us. “I know the timing’s not great, but I want to ask while I have you guys alone, what are your intentions with Maddie?”

“Our intentions?” Cam sneered. “What are you? Her dad?”

“No I’m not her fucking dad!” Nico snapped, clearly annoyed, and disgusted by the notion. I leant back against the wall and tried not to smirk, but I knew what was coming. I had seen it since the night of the fundraiser where I had first seen Maddie. I wasn’t an idiot. I had seen the lust in Nico’s eyes when he looked at Maddie. Seeing them together in our house over the last couple of weeks had only solidified the knowledge that

Nico was falling for Maddie, just as the three, well four actually, of us had so many years before. I wasn't sure if Kai and Cameron had noticed as I had, but it had been pretty obvious he was into her, especially when he had spent the first few days here pouting like a fucking toddler who had his favorite toy taken from him.

"Just spit it out, brother," Kai pushed with a shit eating grin. Oh yeah, he knew what was coming too.

"Spit what out? What's going on?" Cam asked as he looked between Kai and me.

"Nico's in head over heels with our girl too," Kai told him.

"She's not your girl!" Nico growled.

"Not yet, but she will be. We love her and we're not letting her go," I told him firmly.

"I don't think that's your decision to make," Nico pointed out.

"She loves us too, Nico. She told us she has always loved us. She's just scared of the kind of relationship we're offering."

"And what kind of relationship is that?"

"The kind I'm pretty sure you're familiar with. Isn't your sister with three guys?" I asked. Maddie had told me all about Emilia and the three of Nico's teammates she was with.

"Yeah, she is. What about it?" Nico asked instantly becoming defensive.

“Chill, man. Hunt just means you get it, right? You understand the relationship the three of us want with Maddie?” Kai calmed.

“Or maybe it could be the four of us?” I looked to Nico as I spoke and raised my eyebrows.

“What?” he uttered, looking a little taken aback.

“You love, Maddie, don’t you?” Kai asked, and Nico nodded. “So do we,” Kai went on. “This doesn’t have to be us against you, fighting for her. It can be all of us, offering her everything she wants and needs.”

“What if that’s not what she wants?” Nico pointed out.

“It’s what she wants,” I confirmed. “I think the main reason she’s holding back from us is her feelings for you. She loves us, but she loves you too and she can’t bring herself to choose. We should give her the option not to have to choose.”

“And if that is what she wants, you’d all be good with that? With me being a part of what you have with her?” Nico asked, looking between us.

“We’ve known you a long time, Nic. I might not know you as well as these motherfuckers, but I know you enough to know you would fit in with our family,” I explained.

“Maddie loves you. We love her. We’d make it work,” Kai added with an easy going shrug.

“What the fuck?” Cam shrugged as we all looked to him. “I’m good with whatever makes Maddie happy. I guess four fucked up guys are better than three.”

“This is crazy,” Nico sighed. “We don’t even know if Maddie would even consider what you’re proposing.”

“I think she would. In fact I think it’s exactly what she wants.” I turned to glance through the small gap in the door as I spoke, peeking in at Maddie to make sure she was still sleeping.

“Would it even work? I live in Chicago,” Nico mused.

“The logistics will need some work, but I think the four of us can make a relationship work if we really want it to. Like Cam said, we’re all a little fucked up. Together we can offer Maddie and the kids everything they need. I’m not sure any of us could do that separately,” I pointed out.

“Basically it all comes down to the fact we love her and we want her. Doing this together means we don’t put her through the hell of having to choose. I think that’s important. She’s been through enough in her life. Why not let her have what she wants and deserves for once?”

“I’m not against this. I agree with you, Kai. I don’t want to make Maddie choose if she loves all of us, but this is a huge thing to go into. A relationship with five people is not going to be easy to navigate. I’ve seen the struggle my sister has faced with the guys over the last couple of years,” Nico explained.

“But they’ve come through it, right? They’re still together?” I asked.

“Yeah, they have, because they love each other,” Nico nodded. “I know another relationship like this too. Livy, the mom I just called – she has four husbands, and they have kids together too. They’ve been together for years and they make it work really well.”

“So it can work,” Kai agreed.

“We need to talk to Maddie about this. We can’t just stand here making decisions for her,” Cam cut in.

“Agreed, but I think it’s best if the four of us are on the same page before we do that,” I clarified.

“So are we?” Kai asked as he looked between us. “On the same page?”

“I’m good with this,” I agreed.

“I want whatever Maddie wants,” Cam added.

“Same,” Kai agreed.

“I just want to be with Maddie. If that means I have to put up with you assholes too, I can handle that,” Nico said with the hint of a grin on his face. When I looked to my brothers, they were both smirking too. They were happy. We all were. We had a plan to make Maddie ours and I was feeling pretty sure it was a plan she would get on board with.

The sound of Willow crying out had all of our faces dropping as we hurried towards her room in a rush, clashing at the door as we all tried to squeeze through it together.

Nico, being the biggest motherfucker amongst us, ploughed through first, the rest of us following.

“Call the doctor,” Sam told us. When I got in there I found him sat on the floor with Willow in his lap, leaning over a bucket as she vomited. “She’s burning up,” he added as he tried to soothe her.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself, hoping Willow wouldn’t hear me cursing. This was bad. We all looked between each other, all as clueless on what to do next as the other. It was going to be a long fucking night.

MADDIE

Opening my eyes to find Nico sat at my bedside with a soft smile on his face was like a dream. I blinked a few times and rubbed at my eyes, confused and sure I was actually dreaming, but when I sat up, he still sat there.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he said as he sat forward and smoothed some of my wild hair from my face. “How are you feeling?”

I reached a hand up to smooth my hair and winced when I felt how wild and crazy it was. I probably looked like a member of that cartoon ‘*The Hair Bear Bunch*’ with it stuck up all over.

“When did you get here?” I asked as I discreetly tried to tame the madness with my hand.

“Late last night.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told him honestly. The day before had been terrifying, and even though everything had been okay in the end, I had been through the ringer. I felt better waking up and finding him close. There was just something inside of me that settled when I knew I had them all close.

“Me too,” he agreed. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah. I feel good actually. How long was I asleep?” I glanced to the window and saw bright light coming in around the blinds.

“A while, but you obviously needed it.”

“Is Willow okay? I didn’t even see her when we got back last night.”

“She is, but she’s had a rough night,” Nico told me carefully.

“What?” I gasped as I looked to him. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“She woke up just before I arrived with a stomach ache. We weren’t sure what to do, then she vomited,” he explained.

“She’s sick? Why didn’t you wake me up?” I demanded as I scrambled to get free of the comforter to go to her.

“Easy, Maddie. She’s okay. We didn’t want to wake you. The doctor said you needed to rest and we had it handled. I rang Livy and she told me what to do, then when Willow started

throwing up again, we decided to call in a doctor to check her over.”

“Livy?” I had met her once, when she came to the office to pick Emilia up to go for coffee. I knew she was Linc’s sister in law, and that she too was in a relationship with several guys, but I didn’t know much else about her.

“She and the guys have three kids. I knew they’d know what to do.”

“What did the doctor say?” I asked, needing to get back on topic.

“He thinks it’s just a bug she picked up from somewhere. He told us to keep her hydrated and let her rest. There was nothing else he could do.”

“Where is she?” I asked as I finally got free of the comforter and swung my legs from the bed.

“Downstairs. She’s much better. The vomiting stopped about two hours ago and Sam got her to eat some eggs just before I came up here. She really is okay,” he assured me.

“I need to see her.”

“Okay, but maybe get dressed first?” Nico suggested. I looked down at myself and blushed furiously when I realized I was only wearing a cami with my underwear. The guys must have pulled off the jeans and cardigan I had been wearing the night before, before they put me to bed.

“Oh God!” I gasped. “Sorry, Nico.” I grabbed the comforter and clutched it to my front.

“You don’t need to apologize to me, Maddie. I’ve been waiting a long time to see more of your beautiful body,” he looked to me with so much heat I could feel it creeping over my body. I felt the overwhelming desire to climb into his lap and kiss the hell out of him. I wasn’t sure anyone had ever looked at me the way he was in that moment – like he was hungry for me. It gave me a powerful feeling that I was unfamiliar with, but that I loved and wanted more of. Is this what it felt like to be wanted?

“Willow,” I reminded myself. “I...I should get dressed.” My daughter needed me. I had to snap out of it.

“You’re sure you’re feeling good?” he asked as he too seemed to snap out of the fog between us.

“I’m sure,” I agreed.

“Okay. Meet you downstairs then?” I nodded my agreement, so he stood and strode from the room. I couldn’t help but ogle him a little, watching his perfect ass in the hugging black jeans he wore. Even after he had left the room, the scent of his sandalwood aftershave lingered and drove me wild. These guys were turning me into a sex starved, frustrated hussy.

The sight when I walked into the living room soothed all of my fears and worries for my daughter and instead sent my heart racing for a whole different reason.

Willow was sat in the middle of a huge bed which had been created in the center of the room. It was made up of mattresses which lay on the floor, covered with comforters, pillows, and blankets. Cam was laid out at her side, his head rested on one arm which was behind his head, and clutched under his other arm was Willow's giant stuffed Lion from the zoo. Hunt was laid out on her other side, laid on his side so he could listen to her as she chatted away to him about the stuffed chimpanzee that sat between them. Kai was beside Hunt, also on his side, leaning over Hunt so he too could be a part of the animated conversation. The three of them were all in pajamas, or the shorts and tank they slept in, just like Willow, and Tarzan, her favorite movie, was playing on the TV.

“Okay,” Nico announced as he walked in through the other door from the kitchen. “It’s bed picnic time.” He was carrying a tray laden with sandwiches, chips, veg sticks and cookies. Sam followed him in with another tray filled with cups of coffee for the guys and juice boxes for Willow. They both took seats on the mattresses as the guys sat up, all of them forming a circle around the food which Sam was laying out just like a picnic.

“You can be the picnic princess,” Kai told her as he placed a plastic tiara on her head, and Willow beamed with delight. She didn’t look sick at all, apart from the fact she was a little pale in color. In fact she looked like she was having the time of her life surrounded by them all. She was the absolute center of attention and she loved it.

My heart was pounding hard as it hit me just how amazing these guys were for my child. They cared about her and they made her feel safe and happy. She had family here. It was everything I had ever wanted for her.

“Do I get to be a part of this picnic?” I asked, making my presence known as I stepped forward.

“Mommy!” Willow squealed as she abandoned her juice box and leapt to her feet, running straight into my arms.

“Hey peanut,” I greeted as I held her tightly in my arms.

“I gots sick and Mr. Roar gots all dirty. He had to go to the spas to get all clean but Sam said he’ll be back really soon,” she told me animatedly.

“I heard, honey. Are you feeling better now?” I asked as I brushed her hair from her forehead and pressed the back of my hand to her skin.

“Her temperature’s good. Nico went out first thing to buy a kids thermometer and we’ve been checking it. She’s been good for the last couple of hours,” Kai told me as he got to his feet and approached me.

“I feels all better, but I likes the floor bed. Can we keep it, mommy, please?”

“I think the guys might want their living room back at some point, peanut,” I chuckled.

“We can keep it for today, okay munchkin?” Hunter told her as he looked over to us. “Come and eat some lunch. This picnic needs its princess back,” he added as he waved her over.

“Are you coming, mommy?” she asked as she looked up at me.

“As if I’d miss out on our first bed picnic,” I replied with a smile.

“Then you gets to be the princess,” she pulled her tiara off and handed it to me with a toothy grin.

“Come on, picnic princess,” Kai teased as he took my hand in his and led me towards the others. Hunter and Kai both helped me get my whale sized self sat between them, and I put my tiara on.

Sam handed me a paper plate covered with jungle animals and a mug of steaming coffee, and I smiled to him gratefully. Willow chatted away excitedly about what was going on in the movie, which she knew by heart from how many times she had watched it, as we all drank our coffee and nibbled on the goodies Sam had prepared.

I watched Willow closely, feeling like a terrible mother once again for not being there when she needed me the night before, but she showed no signs of whatever had afflicted her the night before as she happily chewed at a sandwich, followed by several more.

The guys were all watching her too, paying attention to every word she told them and making her laugh constantly. They all looked exhausted and a little worse for wear from whatever Willow had put them through the night before. Not one of them had taken the time to style their hair as they usually did, not even Nico who had been out that morning to buy the thermometer. I knew how stressed they would all have been having to deal with a sick kid. None of them had experience in the situation as far as I knew and Willow wasn’t great at being sick. It usually meant a lot of hysterical crying, but they had coped. They had taken care of her and gotten her through it.

Not only that, but she was also happy. After a night of very little sleep and a lot of vomiting she was smiling and joking.

Any doubts I had about how these men would manage my children if I were to have a relationship with any of them, were quashed as I sat there. It was clear to see that they all cared for Willow very much and I was sure that would be just the same for my child yet to come.

Of course I had always known what good men they all were and I didn't expect anything less of them really. I knew they would be good to Willow. Nico had always been great with her when I brought her into the office and the others, well I knew them better than I knew anyone. I always trusted them to keep Willow safe and to be good to her. But she wasn't their child and we weren't even in a relationship. I never expected them to step up as they all had. I never expected them to treat my child just as I had always wished for her biological father to, but they had. They still were and I suspected, given the opportunity, they always would.

It didn't help me make the decision about who and what I wanted any easier, but it reassured me that if I did choose to start something with any of them, that it might not be another terrible choice for my life and for that of my children. How could bringing a man, or men into their lives, who would love, protect, and care for them, be a mistake?

CHAPTER 20

MADDIE

I was anxious as I sat in the waiting area of the doctor's office. Cam was in his first appointment with the therapist he had agreed to try. He had wanted to come alone, but I pleaded with him to allow me or one of the guys to tag along, and he had finally relented and allowed me to be there.

He'd already been for an appointment the week before with his old therapist, but he'd walked out of the session just ten minutes in and flat out refused to go back. He just hadn't liked the therapist, and he didn't feel able to open up with her, so he felt it was a waste of time.

Luckily, Kai hadn't given up. He had spent hours researching the best therapists in the area for Cam's needs and found this guy – Henry Cash. I had joked that it sounded like the name of an action hero, but his credentials were good, and he was also a veteran himself, so the guys felt he would be able to understand what Cameron had been through overseas.

So far so good. Cam had been in there for fifty minutes so that had to be good, right?

He'd been working hard since he promised me he would try. After our rushed visit to the hospital he had been making the effort to leave the house with the guys. He went with Hunter to the store for milk the other day, and when Kai took Willow for ice cream two days ago, Cam had tagged along. He was trying harder to join in with us all in the house too. It had been almost a week since my scare and Willows night of illness, and in that time we had been spending a lot of time together, Me, Willow, Nico and the three guys. I knew Cam struggled at times, and needed to retreat for some peace, but he'd come

back after a while. He was smiling more and hiding in his workshop less. I knew there was no overnight cure for all he was dealing with, but I was just so relieved he was trying to come back to us.

My main hope was that he would leave this office with some meds to help him sleep more soundly. His nightmares were still happening often and I hated hearing him in pain and not being able to go to him, but the guys had all agreed with him that I should stay away when he was dealing with his nightmares. He had told them he worried he would hurt me in the throes of one, and they had agreed it wasn't worth the risk, so I had reluctantly agreed to allow Hunt or Kai to go to him at night when he woke up, but I hated it.

I jumped up when the office door opened, bracing myself for Cameron to be angry as he had been when he came out of that last appointment ten minutes in, but as soon as he saw me, he smiled a little, much to my relief.

“Hey,” I greeted. “How was it?” I asked as I approached him. He closed the office door, then turned to me.

“Okay,” he replied. “Better, I guess.” He shrugged. “Let's get out of here.” He took my hand in his and pulled me towards the elevator. We were in Downtown New York, a place I had never been before and I was kind of dreading going back out into the chaos of the street below. Busy cities had never really been my thing and I was keen to get back to Cam's truck and get the hell out of there.

We didn't speak as Cam held me close to his side and navigated us down the hectic sidewalk and back to the multistorey where he had parked his truck. I was just relieved when we stepped into the much quieter parking lot and out of the madness.

“It’s crazy out there,” I laughed as Cam released the hold he’d had on me and took my hand instead.

“I fucking hate the city,” he agreed. “Why’s everyone always in such a damned hurry? Where the hell are they going?”

“Beats me. I’m definitely a small town girl at heart though,” I laughed.

“You and me both,” he agreed, making me laugh. “You know what I mean,” he clarified, but there was the tug of a smile on his face which delighted me.

“I missed seeing you smile, Cam,” I told him.

“I’m trying, Mads.”

“I know you are.” I stopped him and turned so we were facing one another as I slipped my hand free and instead reached up to place both on his shoulders. “I see how hard you’re trying and I’m so proud of you.” I told him.

“I just want to be better for you,” he said as he placed his hands on my hips and looked down into my eyes.

“I don’t need you to be better for me, Cameron. I love you just the way you are. I always have. I want you to do this for you. I want you to be able to find some happiness again. Ev would want that for you too.”

“I know,” he agreed. “I’ll get there. I already found some happiness.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

“You and Willow. Being with both of you makes me happy. Being with you both and the guys this week...it’s been good too. I’m not sure I can be who I was with Ev before, not without him, but this week, being together with all of you, it’s made me think maybe I can be a new version of who I used to be. Maybe I can find a way to keep going without him.” Tears filled my eyes at the hope I heard in his words and I couldn’t have stopped myself if I tried. I reached up on my tip toes and pressed my lips to his, taking him by complete surprise. I pecked his lips twice before he seemed to allow himself to return the kiss. I moved my hands to the back of his head, pulling him closer as his tongue touched my lips, demanding entry. His hands roamed up my back, pulling me in as close as he could with my bump between us. He took control of the kiss, devouring me and setting my whole body alight in a way I knew I had never ever felt in my life.

“You have to find a way,” I told him breathlessly as we pulled apart. I was still teary eyed and my lips were tingling from the earth-shattering kiss. “You have to because I need you. I love you, Cam.”

“I love you too, Mads. So fucking much.” He lowered his head and kissed me again, this time slower, taking his time.

I had no idea what it all meant. I hadn’t even consciously meant to kiss him. Things between us all and Nico were so up in the air and I knew I had just made it worse with that kiss, but I couldn’t stop myself in the moment.

He was smiling again as we pulled apart and resumed our walk to the truck, our hands clutched tightly together between us.

“Are you going to tell me how it went in that office?” I asked once we were seated in his truck and headed home.

“It was tough, but I liked the new guy much better. I think I can work with him,” Cam told me, sounding positive about it all.

“Did you tell him about the nightmares?” I pushed cautiously. I didn’t want to upset him, but I wanted to know what was going on.

“I have some pills to try. I made an appointment to see him again next week, too.” he said it like it was no big deal, but I knew in truth it was major. The guys were going to be so relieved he had some meds and that he was going back again next week. We had all been so worried about him. This seemed like the first big step in recovery for him.

“That’s great, Cam,” I told him happily.

“I told him about Everett. I think he actually gets it. He lost a friend while he was serving too,” he went on.

“I don’t think anyone will truly understand unless they’ve lost a sibling they were as close to as you and Ev were,” I told him sadly. “But it’s good he has some understanding. I’m just relieved you agreed to see him again.”

“I miss him so much, Mads. It feels like half of me literally died with him.” His voice was hoarse as he spoke and tears instantly filled my own eyes as I fought to hold them back.

“I know.” I placed my hand on his thigh and squeezed, wanting him to know he wasn’t alone. “I miss him too. I wish

so much that he was with us all, that he could meet Willow.”

“He’d have loved her,” Cam laughed. “He might even have stood a chance at keeping up with her animal facts.”

“He always was the smartest of us all,” I agreed tearfully.

“He told me to find you...as he was dying...he told me to stop wasting time and find you,” Cam admitted. “He said we’d all wasted so much time being idiots.”

“He was right, as usual,” I agreed again. Why had I spent so many years trapped in my miserable life with Edward? Why hadn’t I had the guts to walk away? Why had I allowed him and his father to treat me the way I had? I should have chased the guys when they left me. I had raged at them for leaving me, but why didn’t I go after them? Why didn’t I try to track them down? I knew I loved them, but I let fear hold me back too. “We can’t waste any more time, Cam. We all need to get our shit together and decide what we’re doing with our future. We have to live for Everett and for ourselves, We deserve to be happy, don’t we?”

“God, I really hope so, Mads, because I am so sick of life being so fucking shitty,” Cam sighed as he placed his hand on top of mine on his thigh and held it there.

I hoped so too. If not for my sake, then for that of my beautiful daughter and unborn child. I had to give them a better life than I’d had up to that point. Of that I was sure.

The sun was starting to set by the time we got back to the house. Cam led me inside with an arm wrapped around my back and I had to admit, it felt good, as did the small smile that was still gracing his handsome face.

We walked into the house and I listened for the sound of my daughter. She was rarely quiet since we moved in with the guys, always squealing as they chased her or laughing uproariously at something they had done or said. But the house was pretty silent except for the distant sound of some soft music playing.

“Oh God,” I uttered.

“What’s wrong?” Cam asked, obviously having heard me.

“I can’t hear Willow. That’s definitely a bad sign. She’s never quiet. She must be up to something and I dread to think what it could be,” I explained.

“Come on. Let’s find out,” Cam laughed as he took my hand in his and led me through the house towards the formal dining room.

“Why are we going in here?” I asked, confused. In the time we had been staying there, we had never even used this room, all meals always eaten in the kitchen.

“You’ll see,” Cam teased as he opened the door slowly and peered around it, keeping me behind him.

“What’s going on?” I asked impatiently, but I didn’t have to wait any longer. Cam swung the door open wide and I gasped at what awaited inside.

The blinds in the room had been closed so it was romantically dim inside. Candles stood in tall silver candelabras on the window sills, all along the sideboard down the far side of the room, and down the center of the large round dining table. The table was set for five with fancy cutlery and glassware and red rose petals had been sprinkled down the center, around the candles.

The guys stood in line before the huge, grand, oak fireplace, all dressed in suits with open collar shirts underneath. They were all immaculately styled and looked like an ad campaign for some fancy designer, stood as they were.

“Guys, you look amazing,” I gasped as I took it all in.

“Yeah, thanks guys. Way to make me look like the loser,” Cam joked as he looked down at the jeans and t-shirt he stood in.

“Oh please.” I rolled my eyes at him. “Like any of you ever look bad in anything you wear.”

“Thanks baby. Glad you think we’re hot,” Hunter said as he threw me a wink that looked damn sexy on him.

“What is all of this?” I asked as I ogled the four of them in their suits once again. I could hardly take my eyes from them.

Nico was in a suit so dark gray; it was almost black. It fit around his huge, muscular body as if it had been tailored for him, which it likely had. One thing I had noticed about Nico was that he didn’t skimp when he bought clothes. While his style seemed casual, usually consisting of jeans and t-shirts or henleys, it was all usually designer labels. His jeans always fit

him perfectly, sculpting to his perfect ass just so. I was pretty sure the suit he stood in was designer too. Under the suit he wore a black shirt, and against his tanned complexion he looked dark and a little dangerous, in the most delicious way.

Hunter was in gray too, but his was much lighter in tone. Underneath it, his shirt was bright white and he and Nico were like ying and yang beside each other.

Kai, never one to miss a chance to show his personality, was in a navy suit, and beneath he wore a paisley patterned shirt. The print was baby blue and pink, which on anyone else might have looked a little out there, but on him it was just perfect. They were all perfection and they were sending my hormones, which were already on overdrive, insane. I wanted them. It was all I could think. I wanted all of them. My brain was short circuiting and I didn't want to correct it.

“We wanted to surprise you. You deserve to be treated to a special night and we thought you'd prefer this to going out anywhere,” Kai explained.

“Willow?” I questioned.

“She's staying the night with Sam and Garth. She was really excited to go, but Sam promised he'd bring her right back if she changes her mind or gets upset,” Nico told me. I didn't have any worries about Willow being with Sam and Garth. She adored the both of them, even though Garth spoke very little. I thought she saw it as some personal challenge to get him chatting, and had witnessed her talking his ear off several times.

She seemed to have a close bond with Sam. She adored him and loved the time he often spent baking and cooking with her.

I saw the appeal. They were both good men and in the time I had known them I had found them to be kind and honest. They'd do anything to help the guys, who they both seemed to care for deeply and they had taken Willow and I into their little family happily.

"Did she take Mr. Roar?" I asked, knowing she would never sleep without him.

"Yep. She has everything we could think of, but if we forgot anything, Sam or Garth will just come over to get it. She'll be fine," Kai promised.

"I have my cell right here in case they call," Nico added to reassure me, holding up his cell which he held in his hand.

"Sorry. It's just been a long time since I took a night off like this," I said. In fact, I realized, apart from the guys taking care of her here and there while we'd been with them, I wasn't sure she had ever spent a night away from me.

"It's okay. We get it. Do you want to go and check on her before we eat?" Cam asked.

"No. I'm sure she's fine," I replied. "Should I go and change? I'm very underdressed." I looked down at the maternity jeans and white t-shirt I had pulled on to go to the city with Cam. Thank God I'd taken the time to style my wild hair and apply a little make up earlier.

"You're perfect, sweetheart. Come and take a seat. We got you some sparkling cider, since champagne was out," Nico told me as he pulled out a chair.

As I sat, Hunter poured the cider into the champagne glass before me, with a flourish, making me smile. Kai and Cam sat too, Kai to my right, and Cam opposite me. When Hunter was done playing waiter, filling the guys glasses too, he took the seat to my left and Nico took the one beside him so he too was almost opposite me.

“You guys didn’t cook did you?” I asked as I took a sip of the cider. I didn’t know about Nico, but I had seen the other three attempt to cook over the last two weeks and it had not been pretty.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cam asked with a fake pout.

“Cam, I watched you almost set the kitchen on fire making toast the other day,” I laughed.

“That wasn’t me. It’s that stupid toaster,” he groaned as the others all laughed.

“Don’t worry, sunshine. Sam cooked everything and left instructions. We wouldn’t risk poisoning you,” Kai chuckled.

Soft, romantic music was playing in the background and I couldn’t deny it all felt a lot like a date as I looked between the guys, their eyes sparkling in the candle light as they too watched me.

“This is the closest I’ve ever come to a candle lit meal,” I laughed, feeling a little overwhelmed by the heat they were all watching me with.

“Have you never been wined and dined, sunshine?” Kai asked with a smile.

“I don’t think so. Edward is the only guy I ever dated and romance wasn’t exactly his thing, not even in the beginning. He was nice enough, but he never took me for romantic meals or anything like that,” I explained.

“That asshole is the only guy you’ve ever been with?” Nico looked shocked as he spoke, and I could feel myself blushing.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I was never interested in anyone before him.” I looked between Hunt, Kai, and Cam sadly. My heart was broken when they left me, and for a long time I never looked at another guy. I had never really been that into Edward either, but he had been sweet and made me feel wanted. I had thought that would be enough when I agreed to marry him. I’d been so stupid.

“Let’s not talk about that fucker tonight,” Cam suggested and I was all for that. Edward had ruined enough of my life.

“Good idea. Let’s talk about our future instead,” Kai agreed.

“That’s a pretty confusing subject too,” I pointed out. I had been trying to decide what to do for the best for days and I was still no closer to a decision. Whatever choice I made, I was going to hurt someone and I hated it.

“Well, that’s what we wanted to talk to you about,” Hunter began as he took my hand in his on top of the table and held it between us. He rubbed his thumb back and forth over my knuckles, soothing me. “We’ve all been talking.”

“We know Nico told you he has feelings for you, just like we all did too,” Cam cut in when I looked between them all with confusion. I knew I was blushing furiously now as I looked down to my lap. What must they all think? I had feelings for all four of them and they knew it. Were they angry with me? Disgusted? Was it wrong to feel as I did for all of them? I knew it wasn’t normal, but how could it be wrong when I felt so strongly for all of them?

“It’s okay, sunshine,” Kai said as he placed a hand on my thigh and rubbed up and down to comfort me. “That’s what we wanted to talk about. We’re good with you wanting Nico too.”

“What?” My head snapped up at that comment and I looked between them all with confusion and a small spark of hope.

“You know how Mia’s relationship works, right?” Nico asked. When I gave him my full attention his face softened into a small smile and it settled the panic that was beginning to grip me.

“Emilia doesn’t have kids,” I pointed out, while at the same time internally telling myself to shut up. I had a suspicion they were about to offer me everything I could ever dream of and I was trying to talk them out of it.

“No, but she plans to in the future and she’s not worried about it working with her three men. You know Livy too, right?” I nodded. I didn’t know her well, but Emilia had told me about her marriage.

“She has four husbands,” I recalled.

“That’s right. They also have three biological kids and a little boy they recently adopted. They’ve been together for about

fifteen years, I think, and they make it work,” Nico explained.

“Hold up. What exactly are you guys saying?” I asked, needing them to spell it out.

“We are willing to give this a try, if you are, Maddie. Nico’s all in, and you know we are. We don’t want to hurt you by making you choose,” Hunter clarified.

“You’re good with this?” I asked, looking to Nico.

“I am. Obviously I don’t know these assholes as well as they know each other, but we worked some intense situations together overseas. I know enough to feel confident we can all pull together to make this work, if that’s what you want,” he told me.

“And you guys?” I looked between the others.

“We just want to be with you, Maddie. Like Nico said, we know enough about him to believe we can all make this work. We believe that together we can give you and the children everything you need and deserve. There’s not one of us who could do that alone. We’re all flawed. Maybe together there are enough broken parts to give you a whole man,” Cam added.

“It’s a lot to take on. I’m not sure you understand how much baggage I come along with,” I argued.

“Good thing there will be four of us to help carry it all then,” Kai chuckled.

“We love you, Maddie,” Hunter said, glancing to Nico, who nodded to agree. “We love Willow and we will love the little bean you have growing too. We want to make this work. That’s all we need. We’re all a little fucked up and we all have baggage, but we can handle it, together. We can find a way to laugh through the hard times and we can find happiness, together.”

“Do you even want this, sweetheart? We don’t want to push you into this. We feel like we can make it work, but only if you’re all in too,” Nico questioned.

“I want it,” I told them all as tears filled my eyes and a lump formed in my throat. “I’ve loved you guys for thirteen years,” I said as I looked between Hunter, Kai, and Cam. “And Nico, I fell for you the first day I met you. The more I’ve gotten to know you, the stronger my feelings have become. I’ve spent all week trying to decide what I should do and who I should be with, because I...I’m in love with all four of you. This...what you’re offering, it’s a dream come true. I definitely want you guys.”

“But...?” Cam pushed.

“But it’s all just so complicated. What would we tell Willow? What happens when she starts school and I fill in the forms. Do they even have four ‘daddy’ sections on the form?” I scoffed.

“It would be up to you what you want to tell Willow, but personally I hope you would want to tell her the truth – that you love all of us and that we’re going to be a family. Just because our relationship is unconventional and outside of the norm, it doesn’t mean it’s wrong, baby,” Hunter told me as he squeezed my hand a little. “As long as Willow understands we love you and you love us, I don’t see any harm.”

“Any more arguments for us to crush?” Kai asked with a grin.

“Nico...you don't even live here? Your whole life is in Chicago.”

“Not my whole life. A pretty huge part of it is here right now,” he told me with a smile.

“Your business is there,” I reminded him. “And yours is here,” I added as I looked between the others. “How are we going to make that work?”

“I've been thinking about that. I spoke to Linc, Parker, Jax and Nate last night. They're on board with me opening a branch of Milite out here. We've been thinking about expanding and this is the perfect opportunity. I'd need to hire some staff to help me, but I'm sure I can make it work,” Nico explained.

“Security, right?” Cam asked him.

“Yeah, mainly corporate.”

“Maybe I could help you out?” Cam suggested, looking a little unsure about what he was proposing even as he said it. “I have no interest in working for the company my asshole grandfather created, and Hunt and Kai don't need me there anyway. They have it running smoothly.”

“That sounds great, Cam. You certainly have the experience,” Nico agreed as he patted Cam on the back enthusiastically.

“So you're moving here?” I asked, looking to Nico again.

“I want to be wherever you are, and you and Willow are happy here. The guys already have a thriving business and a home set up. It makes sense,” Nico shrugged.

“We can do whatever you want, Mads. If you want to live in Chicago, we’ll make it work. Tell us what you want,” Cam pushed.

“I am happy here and Willow loves it,” I replied. “I don’t really want to be close to Edward or his father again either, but what about Emilia and your team? Those guys are as close as brothers to you.”

“It’s only a few hours on a plane. We can visit, and they can come here. They’ve been my life for a long time, Maddie, but now my priorities have changed. I want to be where you and Willow are. Maybe a fresh start in a new city is just what I need.”

“We’re really going to do this, aren’t we?” I asked. I was pretty sure I was in shock as I looked between the four of them. They wanted me! These four, hot, handsome, sexy guys who were nothing but good, kind, and loyal wanted me! It was crazy.

“We’re all in, baby. Just waiting on your answer,” Hunter reminded me playfully.

I swallowed and took a deep breath as I tried to make my head think straight. I knew there were hundreds more points I should argue with them. So many more reasons I shouldn’t just jump on this crazy train with them, but ultimately it all boiled down to one thing. I was in love with all four of them and there was not a cell in my body that didn’t want them.

“I’m in,” I agreed easily. “I want to take things slow though. Willow has been through so much and I don’t want to add to it. Can we just allow her to get used to having all of you around for now? No PDA in front of her, or anything like that, for now at least?”

“Whatever you want, Maddie,” Hunter agreed as the others nodded. “Where Willow is concerned we’ll take your lead completely.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you guys to be a part of her life. I do. She loves you all and I know you’ll be amazing father figures for her, but I just...I don’t want to rush this. So much has already changed in her life,” I tried to explain.

“We get it, sunshine. We love her too and we definitely want to be a part of her life, but on your terms. We’re not in a rush here. We’re not going anywhere,” Kai told me.

“Thank you.” I smiled and let out the breath I had been holding, relieved they understood and weren’t offended. “What now?” I asked as I looked around the table.

“Now we eat,” Hunter laughed. “I’m starving and the casserole should be about ready.”

They insisted I stay seated while they all got the food ready, so within moments I was alone at the huge dining table. I realized I was smiling to myself like a loon. I was happy. The idea of a relationship with the four of them was exciting, and a huge part of me that had been panicking internally for days had been calmed now that I knew I didn’t need to choose. I knew it wouldn’t all be sunshine and roses. A relationship between five of us would be messy and very complicated, but I loved

them. Even Nico, though my feelings for him were newer, they were still strong and I knew it was love between us, albeit new. I loved them and they loved me. They were amazing with my daughter and they wanted to take care of us. Protect us. It was a start, and I hoped the foundation of us building something strong in the future.

CHAPTER 21

MADDIE

“I’m gonna call it a night,” Nico yawned as he stood from the armchair he had been settled in for the last couple of hours. After we ate the amazing meal Sam had prepared for us, we’d all changed into more comfortable clothes and headed to the living room for dessert and a movie.

I had happily snuggled on the sofa between Hunt and Kai while Nico and Cam took the armchairs. We had devoured the huge devil’s food cake Sam had left for us as we watched an action movie together, then I had settled against Kai, his arms wrapped around me, as I rested my feet in Hunter’s lap. I had been more comfortable and settled than I ever remembered being and it had been perfect.

Cam, who had been exhausted after the emotional rollercoaster he had been on that day, had gone up to bed over an hour ago, and Hunter had gone not long after, telling us he needed to be up early for a meeting in the office the next morning. Both had come over to kiss me before they retired for the night. They kept the kisses chaste, but they both kissed me on the lips and it had given me a thrill that I craved more of each time. Now I was desperate to get them alone so I could feel what it was like when they really kissed me.

“I’m going to look at a few potential properties for the new office tomorrow. Cam is going to come with me, and I wondered if you would too, Maddie? Give me your opinion on them?” Nico asked as he sat forward on his chair and looked to me.

“Sure, but I don’t know how helpful my input will be,” I laughed.

“You’ve worked at Milite. You know exactly what we need,” Nico told me.

“If you think so,” I agreed. “I’d like to come, anyway. It’s exciting opening a new office. Are you going to hire me?” I asked hopefully.

“It will be a while before we’re up and running, but if you want your job back, whenever you’re ready, of course you can have it. I like a little eye candy around the place,” he teased with a smile.

“Me too,” I teased right back, with a wink, making him laugh. “Seriously though, I love my job at Milite. I definitely want to get involved after the baby’s born. I’ll need to look into childcare though. Willow will probably have started in preschool by then, but this one will need to go somewhere while I’m working,” I said, rubbing my stomach as I spoke.

“We can make it work between us. Hunt and I both don’t need to be at the office all of the time. One of us can be here with the baby if you want to go back to work,” Kai told me, and the soft smile on his face looked excited at the prospect of him having time with the baby.

“Cam and I will help too. Like Kai says, we can make it work,” Nico agreed.

“Sam will definitely want to be involved with the babysitting too, don’t forget,” Kai added. I knew that was true. Sam was so excited about the arrival of my baby. His sister had three kids who were all in their teens now, and he had told me how much he missed them being little. He was excited to have a baby in the house.

“We have plenty of time for planning, I guess,” I shrugged, but it was so reassuring to have them offer to help me with the baby. When I had Willow I had been completely on my own and it had been scary at times. Edward hadn’t been interested in his daughter at all, and it had been overwhelming to say the least, to have a new born baby to deal with completely alone. I was more experienced this time, but it would be nice to not have to do it all alone.

“We need to leave at ten in the morning. Is that good with you? You can bring Willow along, though she might get bored,” Nico offered.

“Willow can stay with me. I promised a trip to the park anyway,” Kai said.

“Are you sure?” I bit my lip as I looked to Kai. I was starting to feel bad about how much time these guys were spending taking care of my child.

“Positive. I love spending time with her, Maddie. We all do. Stop worrying so much,” Kai scolded as he pulled my lip free of my teeth. He leaned in to place a peck on my head, pulling me from my worry and making me smile.

“Okay. I’ll be ready for ten,” I agreed, turning back to Nico.

“Great. See you then.” Nico strode across the space to me. He placed one hand on the back of the sofa and leaned in, placing a gentle, reverent kiss on my forehead. “Good night, sweetheart,” he told me softly.

“Night, Nico,” I replied, wishing he’d lean right back in and kiss my lips instead. I wondered what his kiss would be like. Forceful and firm, I imagined, and that sent a thrill running through me. I wanted to know what it felt like to be lost in his kiss as he surrounded me with all of his sheer strength and size. Nico, being as tall and built as he was, made me feel something I never had before – delicate and small. I liked that feeling and I knew it was only going to get better the closer we got.

“Do you want to go to bed?” Kai asked.

“Not yet, if it’s okay? I’m comfortable here,” I sighed as I snuggled back into his side and breathed in the scent of his spicy aftershave. He tightened his arms around me, making the tingle, that Nico had sparked in me, become more insistent with his innocent touches.

“I don’t want to be anywhere else,” Kai agreed happily. The credits were running on the movie we had watched, so Kai grabbed the control and flicked through a few TV channels before settling on a rerun of an old comedy show.

Ten minutes into it and I had no intention of going to bed any time soon. I was too settled, perfectly comfortable and content with Kai holding me as he was.

“This is so perfect, Kai,” I sighed. “I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so comfortable and relaxed as I do right now.”

“Me too,” he agreed as he placed a kiss on the top of my head. “You fit against me so perfectly. I can’t believe we missed out on thirteen years of this.”

“We’re here now. We have to be grateful for that,” I reminded him.

“You’re right. I love you Maddie. I know that seems fast, but I have loved you for thirteen years and I refuse to waste any more time not telling you.”

“I love you too.” I turned my body enough so that I could reach up and press my lips to his. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in tight against his side so he could get closer. We quickly became entangled in a frenzied, desperate kiss. While one of his hands found its way into my hair, the other slid down my back and to my butt. He cupped my cheek, squeezing it playfully before he urged me to lift up. I swung a leg over his lap until I was straddling him and we were eye to eye. Kai growled as he pulled me closer against his body, deepening the kiss until it felt as though he were devouring my mouth. Not that I was complaining.

I looped my arms around his neck and dug my hand into his soft hair, pulling him even closer, begging him to kiss me even harder. I had never been kissed like this – with unbridled need and passion – and it was lighting me up inside in a way I didn’t even realize was possible. I never wanted it to end.

“Kai,” I whimpered as the feelings within me rose to uncontrollable levels. It felt amazing and overwhelming all at once.

“Tell me what you want, sunshine?” he gasped between kisses.

“You...please Kai. I need more,” I panted.

“You wanted to go slow?” he questioned as he stopped the kiss and pressed his forehead to mine. “I don’t want to push you.”

“I want to go slow for Willow. She’s not here right now,” I clarified. “Please Kai, take me to bed. We’re not rushing. I’ve waited years for this moment.”

“Fuck yes. Me too,” he agreed eagerly.

“Take me to bed,” I demanded with a confidence that was all new.

“On it, sexy,” he teased with a grin as he placed hands under my thighs and lifted me as I wrapped myself around him. I worried he would struggle. He was the shortest of the guys, and while he was definitely in shape and toned, he wasn’t as built as the others either. At five feet nine I was almost as tall as him, and pretty heavy with my own weight and that of the baby, but he seemed to stand with me in his arms with such ease, and it shocked and amazed me.

“Why the fuck’s my room so far away?” he growled playfully as he walked across the room and headed for the stairs.

“Maybe I can distract you a little,” I offered as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pressed my lips to his again, kissing him hard and with the rising need building inside of me. He returned it while also navigating his way through the house and up the stairs.

By the time we reached the door of his room, his kiss had progressed, his lips now burning a fiery trail down the right side of my neck.

“Kai,” I begged, the new feelings of need and desperation building within me, becoming out of control. “Hurry up...

please.”

“You’re very demanding when you’re all worked up like this,” he teased as his beautiful dark eyes met mine. “I love it.”

When he remained in the door way and started to once again trail kisses down my neck and over my shoulder, I cried out, in excitement or frustration, I was unsure.

Before I could focus enough to work it out, he stopped and kicked open the door of his room, stepping inside enough to kick it closed again behind him.

I glanced around quickly, taking in the space, which I hadn’t actually stepped into before. There was a large, king bed in the center, covered in checked blue and black sheets. The walls were painted a gentle shade of gray that made the space feel warm, while also modern. Hung above the bed was a huge canvas which I knew he had painted himself. I knew his style from seeing the paintings and drawings he had shown me when we were younger. His style was dark and modern. He threw paint at the canvas with the anger and bitterness his upbringing had instilled in him. The painting above the bed was just like that, with splashes of dark blues and blacks, but it was also dotted with some yellow that brought some hope and brightness into the moody darkness. Were I not filled with a quickly rising desperation, I could have studied it for hours, trying to decipher what he was feeling as he did it.

The other walls were empty. In fact most of the room was pretty empty. There was just a large dresser against one wall and a pair of night stands on either side of the bed. I guessed the two doors I could see led to an adjoining bathroom and closet, just like my room.

My perusal of the space was cut short when Kai set me down on my feet, the hardwood floor cold enough on my bare feet to cool me off a little.

“You’re so sexy, Maddie,” he told me as he stood before me, his eyes raking over my body with a hunger that only got me all hot and desperate once again.

“So are you,” I told him. Done waiting, I reached up onto my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him as close as I could get him and then kissing him, hard and fast. His lips met mine just as eagerly and we became lost in each other once again. His hands found their way down my body until he had a firm hold on my ass. I was starting to suspect he may be an ‘ass’ man and I became worried he would find me lacking in that department. While I had been pretty curvy at one time in my life. I knew I was now pretty skinny.

He cupped my flat cheeks in his hands, kneading them, then he lifted me up until we were eye to eye, our kiss hotting up. I wrapped my legs tightly around his waist and fought to push back the insecurities I was feeling. He had told me he thought I was sexy and he clearly wanted me. I fought to cling to those facts, and not overthink anything else.

“Are you sure about this, sunshine, because I gotta be honest, we’re getting to the point of no return here. You’re driving me wild,” he admitted.

“I’m sure. I want this, Kai. I want you,” I told him confidently.

“I just want you to be sure. I don’t want you to regret this and I don’t want to do anything wrong and scare you.”

“Kai,” I stopped the playful kisses and looked deep into his eyes. “I have never, ever been scared of you, and that’s not going to change now. I trust you, so stop worrying and take me to bed,” I told him with a smile.

“God I love you,” he growled, then his lips were on mine again as he lowered me down to the middle of his bed. He kissed me a few times as he backed off, then he was stood before me with a playful smile on his face.

“You gonna strip for me, handsome?” I teased as I lay a hand behind my head and smirked at him.

“Gotta provide the lady with a show.” He waggled his eyebrows and made a show of lifting the hem of the t-shirt he wore, revealing his tightly packed abs just a little.

“You big tease!” I accused with a grin.

“Like what you see?” he taunted as he lifted his shirt a little higher.

“I think I need to see more before I decide that,” I flirted back.

He lifted his shirt over his head painfully slowly, little by little revealing more and more of his toned body and his washboard abs. His golden skin contrasted with the black hair that was smattered down the center of his chest, and I licked my lips as I imagined kissing my way down his body.

“Do you see enough to give an honest review yet, madam?” Kai asked playfully. He tossed his shirt behind him and ran a teasing hand down the center of his body, until his thumb tucked into the top of his sweatpants and relaxed there. I only just held in my groan of frustration that he was stopping there.

“I think I’ll reserve judgement until the end of the show,” I told him.

“Your prerogative,” he shrugged. He shucked off his sweats then and stood before me in just his close fitting black boxer shorts. His very obvious erection was enough to have me swallowing hard and blushing furiously. Edward’s was the only penis I had ever seen, and either he was abnormally small in size, or Kai was freaking huge. The idea that he wasn’t even going to fit inside of me, had me panicking. Was I going to be a huge disappointment? Did I even know what to do? Had what Edward and I done together in the early days, when I actually wanted to have sex with him, even been normal?

“Are you freaking out on me now, beautiful?” Kai asked, pulling me from my mini freak out. He sat on the foot of the bed and grabbed my hand in his. “It’s okay if you need to stop,” he told me.

“I just...I’m nervous. I don’t want to disappoint you,” I admitted shyly. I sat up and moved closer to him, resting my head on the top of his arm so he wouldn’t be able to look me in the eye. I was embarrassed I was freaking out when this had all been my idea.

“That’s not possible, Maddie,” He assured me as he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me into his side. “I’ve wanted you for so long. Nothing you could do would ever be a disappointment. Jesus, I’m about to go off in my pants like a damned horny kid just from what we’ve done so far,” he added with a chuckle.

“I...I’ve only ever been with Edward,” I confessed as I hid my face against his arm. “In the beginning, I guess it was okay, but the last few years...well, let’s just say I didn’t exactly want it, not that he ever took ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Fuck. I’m so fucking sorry, Maddie.” He pulled me even tighter against his side and hugged me harder.

“I just...I guess I’m trying to say it’s been a while,” I laughed flatly. “Maybe we could just take it slowly. You...you’re really big, Kai and seeing...that... it’s scared the crap out of me,” I blurted, then covered my face, mortified. Why did I say that?

“Hey,” Kai turned so he was facing me and pulled my hand away from my face. “We’re gonna go slow, okay? I’ll make sure you’re ready for me. I will never hurt you,” he told me firmly.

“I know that. Sorry. I’m sorry I’m freaking out on you.”

“I like it when you get all flustered. It’s cute,” he told me as he rose up onto his knees and straddled my legs. He closely moved upwards until I had no choice but to lay my head back against the pillows. He crawled higher until he was straddling my thighs, his arms beside my head and his body caging me in.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I agreed with a nervous nod. He leaned in and kissed me chastely a few times. I reached my hand up to catch the back of his neck, stopping him from pulling back after the latest kiss, pulling him down and snaring him for a deeper kiss. The deeper the kiss got, the more my nerves and worry disappeared, until I was writhing with need for his touch, beneath him, my whole body once again alight with lust.

I was relieved when he broke the kiss and instead began to kiss his way down my neck, and behind my ear. His trail alternated between kisses and small nips of my skin, both of which only added to the burning need, which was getting to the point of combustion within me.

“More Kai! Please... I...I need...” I gasped, but I couldn’t decide what I needed. More kissing? More touching? I wanted it all and I wanted it right at that second.

“What sunshine?,” he asked. “Tell me what it is that you need.”

“Touch me...please. I need to feel your hands on me, Kai,” I panted breathlessly.

He moved his hands under the hem of my pajama shirt, and I regretted wearing the ones with a huge *Care Bear* on the front when I realized that was what I had on. *Very sexy, Maddie!* I thought with a roll of my eyes.

Thankfully, he didn’t comment on my wardrobe choice. Instead he slid it, very slowly, up my body, toying with me as he left a trail of kisses up the middle of my very prominent stomach as he went.

He got it over my head and threw it aside, then paused, staring down at me as I lay before him in a pair of skimpy sleep shorts, that sat under my bump, and nothing else.

“How can you be even more beautiful than I imagined?” he asked as his eyes moved from perusing my body and up to my eyes.

The desperate need I had been fighting to cover my slightly sagging breasts, and stretch marks all over my stomach abated at the sight of the hunger I saw when his eyes met mine. He didn’t see the imperfections all over my body, it seemed. I didn’t understand it, since I was a long way from the tight

body I'd had before Willow. Breast feeding had made my breasts softer and a little saggy. I was covered with stretch marks from that pregnancy and new ones from this time too. I also had a few scars around my sides from Edwards various attacks. My skin was pale from lack of sun light exposure and I knew I was too skinny.

But Kai didn't seem to see any of that. The way he looked at me made me feel sexy and wanted, and so I decided to embrace that and tried hard to block out any of the negativity Edward and my life so far had instilled in me. I wanted this perfect night with Kai, and I hoped it could be the beginning of something amazing.

He leaned his weight over me again, caging me under him so he could slowly kiss his way down my neck, between my breasts and down my stomach. When his hands moved back up to cup both of my breasts gently, a moan escaped me.

"Are they sensitive?" he asked as he looked up at me from down over my bump.

"Yes. Be gentle with me," I told him with a playful smile.

"Always, sunshine," he assured me. I lay back and closed my eyes and he gently teased his thumbs over my nipples, giving just the perfect amount of pressure. It felt so good and my core was throbbing with need for his attention next.

Thankfully, Kai seemed to be on the same train of thought as he got to his feet and leaned in to grab the hem of my shorts. He slid them off and threw them behind him as he looked up into my eyes, checking in with me to make sure I wasn't panicking again. I smiled shyly, nervous to have him see all of me as he could so clearly, stood over my naked body as he was.

“I need to taste you, Maddie,” he growled, like it was truly a need.

“I don’t...I’ve never....” I blushed and looked away from him, embarrassed.

“Then it’ll be my fucking honor to be the first, beautiful,” he told me as he returned to the bed and slowly draped my legs over his shoulders, the whole time watching my reaction to his movements. I was nervous, because I’d never done this before, but there was no way I was stopping him. I was desperate for his touch.

The first touch of his mouth at my core and I was bucking against him and crying out. My core was throbbing and I was so worked up I knew it wouldn’t take much. Kai worked his tongue over my center with an expertise I greatly appreciated. Within seconds I was flooded with pleasure and crying out his name, begging him to give me more.

I had never once had an orgasm during sex with Edward. It had always been about him getting off, and it had been over before it ever really started. Just minutes into Kai giving me pleasure and I was crying out with my second release, drowning in the pleasure he gave me and still desperate for more.

“Oh God! Kai,” I panted.

“You good, beautiful?” he asked as he lifted his head and locked eyes with me.

“So good,” I gasped. I reached for him, pulling him over me again so I could kiss him hard. Tasting my own essence on him was odd, but not unpleasant and nothing was going to stop me from showing my gratitude for the amazing way he was making me feel.

“Make love to me, Kai “ I whispered. “I’m ready for you,” I assured him.

He smiled as he leaned in to lock his lips on mine. He kissed me more slowly, taking his time and getting me to the point of begging once again in just a few moments.

“Are you good with me on top like this?” he asked as he broke the kiss and studied me.

“Yeah, just....don’t put your hands near my throat, okay?” I said, hoping he wouldn’t make a big thing of the request. It was the one thing I knew would make me freak out. Edward had loved to squeeze the air from me as he forced himself on me.

“I’ll never hurt you, Maddie. Never,” he whispered, then he was kissing me again.

My nerves returned momentarily when he sat up and leaned over to grab a condom from the nightstand, tearing it open and expertly rolling it on. The thought he was good at that crossed my mind, but I refused to start thinking about him with other women when I had him all for me right there.

“You still okay?” he asked as he glanced up at me,

“I’m perfect,” I assured him. I was nervous, but there was no question I wanted him in that moment.

“I’ll go slow, okay? Just tell me if you need me to slow down even more,” he told me as he very slowly and tentatively slid into me. I nodded and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, holding onto him and locking my eyes on his as I felt him pushing inside of me.

He moved slowly, maintaining eye contact with me the whole time, as we became lost in each other. Everything else ceased to exist in that moment. Our past, our future, it just faded away until there was just me and him and that perfect moment. As he began to move back and forth the initial pain of him stretching me disappeared and it felt as though every nerve ending was coming alive with pleasure. Within minutes the pleasure was overwhelming and perfect all at once.

I wrapped my legs as tightly as I could around his waist, hooking my feet at his back, pulling him closer so he would be deeper inside of me, with every thrust. He leaned in and kissed me hard as I pushed my hand into his hair, pulling and holding onto it with one hand and clutching his shoulder with the other, as the most intense, mind-blowing feeling built inside of me.

“Oh Fuck! Kai!” I cried out as pleasure surged through me. I moved my hand from his hair to his other shoulder and clung to him, the orgasm ripping through me more consuming and overwhelming than anything I had ever felt,

I became lost in overriding pleasure as I gripped onto Kai for dear life, scared if I let go I’d never find my way back to him.

“it’s okay, beautiful. Let go. I’ve got you,” he soothed, like he knew exactly what I was feeling. I allowed myself to become

lost in the moment and the pleasure washed over me in waves, again and again.

I heard Kai cry out a grunt breathlessly, moments later, then he stopped and pressed his slightly sweaty forehead to mine, which was just the same, the both of us panting hard.

It took a few minutes for me to come back down from the heavenly place he had pushed me to, but when I did I was still clinging to his shoulders hard, my legs wrapped around him.

“Fuck, Maddie,” he exhaled.

“Yeah,” I huffed a laugh. “That was....Jesus. I have no words,” I laughed.

“I’m taking speechless as a good thing,” he joked.

“Definitely good,” I sighed. “So, so good.”

He leaned in and kissed me on the forehead, a smile on his face. “I need to clean up,” he added, before pulling out of me with a mortifyingly wet sound, and standing. “One minute,” he said, then he was gone, headed for the bathroom.

I laid back and stretched a little. My body felt relaxed and there was a satiated buzz running through me. It was an amazing feeling and I wondered how I had gone for so long through my life so far without experiencing it.

Kai returned a few minutes later and laid on his back beside me, pulling me into his side. I curled into him, my head on his chest and my arm wrapped around his waist.

“I love you, Maddie. I hope you know you’re stuck with me now. I’ve lived way too much of my life without you in it. No more,” he told me firmly.

“No more,” I agreed. “You’re stuck with me too.”

“Good.” He kissed the top of my head.

We lay there in a comfortable silence, just holding each other and enjoying the perfection of our time together. Eventually Kai fell asleep, the sound of his soft snoring filling the room. I spent a while just watching him and trying to make myself believe that the whole evening had actually been real. But it had. The guys I wanted, wanted me too. Nico was willing to uproot his whole life to be with me. And I’d had mind blowing sex with Kai. There was definitely a little satisfied smile on my face when I eventually dropped off a short while later.

CHAPTER 22

MADDIE

“I think this space could work. What do you think, Maddie?” Nico asked. We were looking around the third property with the realtor Nico had hired.

“It’s definitely the best one,” I agreed as I looked around the office we stood in. This building was a short drive from the guys house, just outside of the city. It was a modern three storey structure which was mainly glass from the outside. Inside the large office space on the middle floor was bright and modern. The top floor consisted of four large executive type offices, and a conference room, and the ground floor was a luxurious, welcoming reception and waiting area. There was a modern basement that would work for storage and also to build a gym for the guys to train, which they did a lot. “It fits with the offices you have in Chicago too,” I added. I was trying to be supportive and enthusiastic, but something huge was worrying me.

“The location is good. Being outside of the city means we have parking for clients and it’s close to home for us,” Cam said from where he was looking out of the huge windows.

I turned back to the window, fighting with myself on whether I should voice my worries, or whether I should keep my mouth shut.

“What’s going on, sweetheart?” Nico asked as he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

“I’ll be downstairs,” Cam said, and when I turned to look at him, he was leaving the room. I turned around in Nico’s arms

until I was looking up at him.

“Who said anything is wrong?” I asked.

“You’ve been quiet in every building we’ve looked at, and you keep wringing your hands together. I know something is bothering you. Are you going to tell me what it is?” He still had his arms around me, and the smell of his aftershave and his leather jacket was surrounding me too.

“I just...I’m worried. You’re doing all of this for me. What if it doesn’t work out? What if you hate me when you get to know me? Jesus Nico, we haven’t even been on a date and you’re changing your whole life for me,” I blurted.

“We might not have been on a date, but I know you, Maddie. I know you enough to be able to tell you that I absolutely will never hate you. I know you enough to be able to tell you that I am in love with you. I’m not doing this just for you. I’m doing it for me too. I’m doing it because I want my life to be with you. I’m doing it for us.”

Choked up by his words, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to speak, so instead I reached up onto my tip toes, placing my hands on his chest to steady myself as I tried to kiss him. He had to bend down to meet me halfway, then his lips were on mine and it was exactly as I had imagined. Nico kissed me hard and instantly took complete control, pulling me closer and placing his hand on my face so he could angle my lips just the way he wanted. His lips were firm, and his stubble rubbed at my face in a way I strangely found a turn on. His tongue plundered my mouth and I just clung on tight and went with it.

“Fuck,” he gasped when we pulled apart. “I’ve wanted to do that for so long.”

“Was it everything you hoped?” I asked playfully.

“And so much more.” He wrapped his arms around me again and pulled me into a hug. I lay my head on his chest and sighed contentedly.

“I’m sorry that I keep freaking out. I just...I guess I’m not used to good things happening to me. Willow is the only thing that has ever gone right in my life.”

“Not any more, sweetheart. That’s going to change now. We’re all going to make sure that good things happen from now on,” he told me.

“They already are.”

Nico and Cam spoke with the realtor before we left, telling her they would take the building. Nico was excited about his new venture, but the thing that put a huge smile on my face was Cam. He was so enthusiastic about working with Nico on the new branch of Milite. He had been honest with Nico, and told him that he wasn’t keen to deal with clients to begin with. He hoped that would change in time, but as they started out, they had agreed Cam would have more of a background role within the office.

Nico got what Cam was dealing with. He had served himself and he had dealt with PTSD and anxiety before, so that helped a lot.

I was just so relieved to see Cam trying so hard to take back his life, or to find a new one for himself any way. I knew he had a long road to travel, but at least he was headed in the right way. He had certainly been smiling a lot more and that was a great start.

The drive back to the house was filled with them chatting excitedly about what they would need to do to get the office up and running. They had a lot to do, but they seemed to both relish the challenge ahead of them.

It was late afternoon by the time we got back to the house and I was feeling pretty worn out. Kai and I had been up late the night before, then I'd woken early and slipped from Kai's room while he was still sleeping, scared Sam would bring Willow back and she'd find me in Kai's bed.

I kicked off my shoes, relieved to get my slightly swollen feet out of them, then headed into the kitchen. I found Sam, Kai, and Willow playing a game with some bright picture cards that I hadn't seen before. Whatever they were playing, Willow was taking it very seriously, staring at the fan of cards she held precariously with her tongue sticking out in concentration.

"You gotta put a card down, sweetie," Kai chuckled.

"Sshh. I gots to concentrate," she scolded him without taking her eyes from her cards.

"What are we playing, peanut?" I asked with a smile. I walked up behind her and placed a kiss on the top of her head. I glanced at the cards and realised they had animals on them. *Of course they did!*

“Mommy!” she smiled as she looked up at me. “Kai got me a new game, It’s got animals on the cards.” She held them up to show me.

“That looks great. Who’s winning?”

“The little card shark here,” Sam chuckled as he nodded to Willow.

“Sam’s not so good at this game,” Willow told me with a shake of her head and roll of her eyes, making me laugh out loud.

“Hey! No more cookies for you,” Sam cried.

“It’s okay, Sam. You make the best pasta,” Willow consoled him.

“Hey sunshine,” Kai and I shared a smile, and thoughts of what we had shared the night before played in my head. “How’d it go?”

“Good. They signed a lease on a place close to here,” I explained. “We may not see either of them for the rest of the day. They’re pretty excited.”

“I’m just pleased to see Cam getting excited about something,” Kai shrugged.

“I know. Me too. I think working with Nico is going to be good for him.”

Willow aggressively slammed a card down on the pile in the middle of the table, then grinned wide.

“Your turn Kai, but you aren’t gonna win now,” she told him with delight.

“We’ll just see about that,” Kai teased.

“Sit down, Maddie. Have you eaten?” Sam asked as he pulled a chair at his side out for me. I moved over and collapsed tiredly into it.

“We stopped for lunch between the viewings, thanks.”

“How about some tea then?”

“I don’t want to interrupt your game.”

“I’m out already. As Willow so kindly pointed out, this isn’t really my game,” Sam laughed.

“Thank goodness for your pasta cooking skills, huh?” I joked, making him smile. “Tea would be amazing, thank you,” I added when he got to his feet.

I sat back and watched Kai and Willow finish their game. I had no idea what the rules were, but Willow was winning and she was making no secret of it. Her delight was clear to see.

“I win! Again!” she cried a few minutes later, pumping her fist in the air in victory.

“How do you do that? Are you cheating?” Kai asked playfully, a mock pout on his face.

“I don’t cheat!” Willow was outraged at the accusation, standing on her chair, and slamming her hands on her hips.

“Of course not. I’m so sorry I even suggested it. I guess I’m just a bad loser,” Kai told her, trying to hide his grin.

“It’s okay,” she leaned on the table and put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll let you win the next game, okay?”

Kai burst out laughing as Sam returned with a steaming cup of green tea for me. I thanked him and cupped my hands around the mug, feeling a little chilled despite the warm, sunny day outside.

“Come on, little miss. Come and help me make some dinner,” Sam said as he scooped Willow up and carried her off to the other end of the kitchen.

“You okay? You seem tired?” Kai asked as he leaned across the table and placed a hand over mine against the cup.

“Just tired. Someone kept me up late last night,” I teased.

“I don’t recall you complaining,” he replied smugly. I smiled, unable to argue. I certainly hadn’t been complaining.

“Has Willow been okay? Did she behave?” I asked, needing to change the subject before I found myself jumping at Kai all over again.

“She was an angel, as always. We went to the park, then called in at the store to pick up some groceries. She even helped me in the store.”

“She loves grocery shopping,” I laughed. “It’s about the most exciting thing she got to do before we came here.”

“Well, she’s brilliant at it. She knew where all the shit on the list would be. I’m taking her with me every time. I can never find a thing on my own,” he laughed.

I took a sip of my tea and relaxed back in the chair, closing my eyes for a moment. I felt drained. Even though the pills the doctor gave me had eased the nausea, I was still exhausted all of the time and having issues with my blood pressure. This pregnancy was no easy ride, that was for sure.

“Come on,” I opened my eyes and found Kai stood at my side, picking up my cup of tea from the table.

“What? Where?” I asked. How had he moved without me hearing him?

“Up to your room. You’re exhausted. You need to rest. You can drink this in bed,” he told me.

“But Willow...”

“She’s fine, Maddie. She’ll be busy with Sam until dinner is ready anyway, and I’ll keep an eye on her too. Come on, sunshine.” He grabbed my hand and eased me to my feet, then wrapped his free hand around my back, my tea in his other.

I turned to find my daughter, who was carefully trying to peel a carrot under Sam's close supervision.

"Willow, I'll just be in my room if you want me, okay honey?" I asked.

"Okay mommy," she agreed without even turning to look at me.

Kai led me up the stairs and into my room. I sat on the edge of the bed, exhausted after the climb up the stairs.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Kai asked as he set my tea on the nightstand, then sat beside me.

"I'm just tired. This baby is sapping me," I assured him. He looked concerned, but nodded.

"Maybe we could make an appointment with the doc again? She did say to go back if you didn't feel any better."

"Yeah, maybe," I shrugged. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

"I'll tell Hunter to make an appointment." He cupped my face in his hand and pulled me a little closer so he could kiss the top of my head.

"Do you want to change?" he asked me, and I shook my head. I didn't have the energy. "Okay. Climb into bed then. Let me tuck you in," he said with a smile. I stood and he pulled the comforter back for me.

Once I was sat against the headboard comfortably he covered me with the comforter and tucked it around me like he really was tucking me in.

“This is a first,” I laughed.

“Hunt and I used to do it for the twins when they first came to live with us. Before their parents died, they used to tuck them in every night, and it made them smile when we would do it, until they got too old to be tucked in, of course,” he chuckled.

“That’s so sweet,” I sighed, imagining them all so much younger, Kai and Hunt who were only months older, taking care of the twins and trying to make their pain just that little bit less.

“Are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?” he offered as he studied me.

“I’m good, Kai. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful.” He leaned over the bed and kissed me. He took his time and explored my mouth a little before pulling back. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you when dinner is ready, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. I watched him leave the room, still somewhat mesmerized by the fact we were together. Would it ever feel real?

“Now I gots to add a secret ‘gredient, so you gots to look away, Mommy,” Willow told me very seriously.

“Don’t I get to know what the secret ingredient is?” I asked with a pout.

“Sorry, but it’s just me who gots to know, or anyone can make the magic potion,” she explained solemnly.

“Well, if you put it like that. We wouldn’t want just anyone running around with magical potions, would we?” I struggled to get up from where I had been crouched beside the tub and turned my back so she could add the final ingredient to the potion she had been creating with water and foam from the bubbles, in the little plastic watering can she had.

“Oh no. That would be bad,” she agreed.

I took the chance to lean back against the vanity counter and catch my breath. I had slept for a couple of hours earlier, Hunter waking me with a gentle kiss for dinner.

It had been odd sitting around the table with all four guys and Willow, knowing what we had decided the night before – knowing we were going to try and make a relationship between the five of us work. We shared a lot of knowing smiles, and I couldn’t look at Kai without blushing and replaying all we had done the previous night, in my head. It had also felt wonderfully domestic, all of us chatting about our days and the guys helping Willow with her food. It gave me a glimpse of what we could all have if we could make it work, and I wanted all of it. It was a glimpse into a future I could only dream of.

After dinner we had played some board games with Willow, which again, had just been another scenario of domestic bliss. By the time it was Willow's bed time, I had been completely wiped out once again, feeling like I hadn't even slept just a couple of hours earlier. I wouldn't have been too worried, since the running theme of this pregnancy seemed to be me feeling drained, but there was also the realization that the baby hadn't moved when I had gotten out of bed, which he or she nearly always did.

I was trying not to worry about it too much. The baby's movements were unpredictable at best and if he or she had moved position maybe I wouldn't feel the movements as strongly.

"Hey. Do you need any help?" I looked up and found Hunter in the doorway. He had changed from the shirt and slacks he had on earlier, and was now wearing a pair of dark shorts and a deep red t-shirt that clung to his muscular frame underneath and perfectly complimented his coloring. His feet were bare and I had the strange realization that in all of the time I had known him, I had never seen his bare feet.

"Hunter! I made a magic potion!" Willow cried excitedly as she held up her watering can.

"You did? I didn't know you were a witch," Hunter replied animatedly. He stepped into the room and crouched at the side of the bath, giving her his full attention.

"I am not a witch!" Willow pouted. "I'm a magical fairy. Witches are ugly. I'm not ugly, Hunter."

"No you are not, munchkin. You're beautiful. How could I make such a terrible mistake?" he gasped with mock horror.

“I was gonna tell you my special ‘gredient too, but now you don’t gets to know,” she told him firmly.

“Hey!” I cried. “How come he gets to know the secret ingredient and I don’t?”

“Now no one gets to know, so there!”

“Okay peanut. Come on, time to get out.” I grabbed a towel and moved over to the tub, but Hunter stood and took the towel from me.

“I’ll grab her. You look tired,” he told me. I smoothed a hand over my hair subconsciously, wondering just how bad I looked, but of course Hunter read my mind, as always.

“Don’t. You’re beautiful, baby. You’re always beautiful.” He leaned in and kissed the top of my head, then turned back to Willow who was busy with her watering can once again.

I left him to get her out of the tub, glad I didn’t have to lift her, and went through to her room to grab her some pajamas.

She was laughing loudly as Hunter brought her through, wrapped in the huge fluffy towel. Once he had her set down on the bed I got her dried off and into the sunshine yellow pajamas I had picked out. Hunter was laughing and joking with her throughout, and it made me feel so good inside to see how happy she was. I had been so worried she would be mentally scarred by what she saw Edward do to me, and by what he did to her, but being there with the guys, in a place where she felt safe enough to be herself, it had healed her and

she was now the joyful, mischievous three year old I had always hoped she would get the chance to be.

“Can he, mommy?” Willow asked, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked up, confused. “Can Hunter read me a story tonight?”

I glanced to Hunter where he was perched on the edge of Willow’s bed, and he smiled to assure me he was good with doing that.

“Sure, honey. Go and pick a story book.”

“I already knows which one I want,” she cried as she leapt to the foot of the bed and slid down the elephant trunk slide. She grabbed a book from the shelves – one of her favorites – and then hurried back up again.

“How about you give your mom a hug good night, then she can go and do other things while we read this, okay?” Hunter suggested and before I realized what was happening, Willow was leaping across the bed at me. I just managed to catch her before she ploughed into me, laughing at her antics. She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me tightly, then moved back enough to kiss my cheek with a wet smack.

“Night, night mommy,” she said softly. I kissed the top of her head and told her ‘goodnight.’ By the time I got to my feet to leave the room, Hunter had her tucked into bed and he was sat right beside her, his arm around her and the book open before them. Tears filled my eyes as I just stood looking at them. That was what I had always wanted for my daughter – to have a father who showed her the love and care she deserved. Hunter would give her that. They all would. They could give her, and my unborn child the stability that I had been unable to offer so far in their lives. Maybe they could give me that too.

CHAPTER 23

MADDIE

After leaving Willow with Hunter, I went right to my room to shower and change. I needed the shower to try and clear my head before I allowed my emotions to take over once again. It had been an overwhelming couple of days, in an amazing way, but I wasn't exactly great at keeping a rein on my emotions with this pregnancy and I didn't want to end up a crying wreck.

I knew I was lucky. Things had gone better since the night I walked away from Edward, than I ever imagined they could have. I had gotten my guys back after thirteen years of pining for them. I had found out Nico had feelings for me, and admitted my own feelings for him. They had all told me they loved me and wanted me, and I had the chance for such a bright future. Nico was staying. That had been a huge relief, but most of all – the greatest relief for me was how happy and settled Willow was there. It was all amazing, but overwhelming at the same time.

I took a deep breath then leaned my head back under the spray to wash my hair. I knew I just needed to take each day as it came. I needed to focus on all of the good and try to stop worrying about the doomy possibilities of what could happen.

I jumped, snapping my head up and my eyes open at the sound of the glass shower screen sliding open. Cold air assaulted me and I instinctively covered my breasts when I saw Hunter stood there.

“Hunt...” I gasped.

“Sorry. I know I should have asked before, or knocked or something, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to walk in here when I knew you were behind this glass, naked.” He explained a little shyly.

“Is Willow okay?” I asked, worried she’d come in there and find us together.

“She fell asleep halfway through the story. She’s out. I turned on the monitor so we’ll hear her if she wakes up.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and pushed past my nerves, dropping my hands to my side, and sending him a small smirk.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” I asked, taking what I wanted without any guilt or regret. This was what I needed to do – embrace the good.

Hunter smirked, then closed the door. I could see the movement of him shedding his clothes through the steam covered glass, and my core clenched in anticipation of finally seeing him naked – of putting my hands on his perfect body. Maybe it was fast, but I didn’t care. I had waited thirteen years for Hunter, Kai, and Cameron. I was done waiting.

Hunter opened the door again and stepped in. I turned to face him, not wanting to miss the opportunity to see him in all of his naked glory, and it was magnificent. He was as ripped and toned as I thought he would be from the times I had been pressed against him, in his arms. He had a very defined six pack, and his shoulders and biceps rippled. His skin was golden and there was a smattering of hair down his chest, leading all the way down his stomach. His legs were wide and muscular, covered with a dark covering of hair that looked masculine.

He stepped under the spray, tipping his head back and pushing his hands through his hair as it became drenched. It was like a perfectly choreographed scene of some superstar in an ad campaign. He looked spectacular and my body was humming with need for his touch. As he lowered his head, I moved behind him, sliding my hands under his arms and wrapped them around his body as much as I could. I pressed my wet, naked body against his back, as the blissfully hot water rained soothingly down over us both.

“Maddie...” he said as he turned and put his hands on my waist, lifting me until we were eye to eye. “I’ve wanted this for so many years,” he told me.

“Me too. We’re here now though.” I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, holding myself up against his body. He leant in and I met him halfway, small pecks quickly turning into a furious tangle of lips and tongues. He used one hand to hold me up while the other started to roam, exploring my wet skin.

“Yes,” he gasped between kisses, “We are.”

My hands moved of their own accord, from where I had them looped around his neck, and down over the ridges of muscle on his back.

His lips moved from mine, to nibble a path down my neck and across my shoulder. I grabbed his shoulders and pulled myself tighter against his body, desperate to find some friction where there was an insatiable throbbing between my legs. I needed more.

“Hunter. I...please, I need more,” I gasped.

“You never could wait,” he chuckled as he pulled back from the kiss and smiled as he studied me, only driving my need higher with how handsome he looked.

He placed his hands on my thighs and urged me to release them, sliding me down his body and setting me down on my

feet. I let out a squeak of disappointment, unable to hold it in, and again Hunter was smirking. I was relieved to see I wasn't the only one who was so affected though, His huge erection showed he was just as much in need.

"Hunt, please," I whispered, breathlessly.

"I'm getting to it, baby," he laughed. "Lean back against the wall for me, and tell me if you feel dizzy, okay?"

I nodded as I stepped back a couple of steps until my shoulders were pressed against the wall. The tiles were freezing against my heated skin, but I welcomed the distraction from my ever increasing need and arousal. Hunter stepped up right before me, his lips landing on mine, kissing me into a worked up frenzy all over again.

"Put your hands on my shoulders and keep them there for me," he told me. I followed his direction, then gasped a huge breath of relief as he dropped down, and landed on his knees before me. I knew what was coming and I almost cried with relief. "I can't believe I'm finally gonna get a taste of you."

"God! Yes please!" I cried. He teased me more, running his hands up my legs from my ankles, over my calves and then painfully slowly up my thighs.

And he wasn't finished teasing me yet. Next he kissed his way up the trail his hands had just made.

As he moved my stance a little wider and positioned himself between my thighs, the anticipation was too much, and my legs began to tremble beneath me. I needed his mouth or his hands on me. Now!

My legs started to tremble even more violently within seconds of Hunter's mouth finally finding my center and giving me exactly what I wanted and needed. I became lost in the gentle motions of his talented tongue and lips, and before long I was moaning in delight, my head thrown back against the wall as I clutched my hands on his shoulders to keep myself upright.

The pleasure coursing through me started to rise to its crescendo and I cried out his name as I dug my fingers into his shoulders. My orgasm crashed over me all at once and I cried out Hunter's name again, this time in pure joy.

As I collapsed completely against the wall, spent, and wrung out, my knees threatened to buckle beneath me.

"I got you, baby," Hunter told me as he wrapped his arms around my waist and shot to his feet, steadying my body against his. I looped my arms around his neck and clung to him as he gently pecked my lips.

"Even more perfect than I imagined," Hunt whispered against my ear, as he held me tightly.

"Uh-huh. I agree," I gasped as I looked up at him with a smile. "We should definitely do that again."

"Oh, we will definitely be doing it again. I think I just found my new favorite snack," he teased.

"Hunt!" I laughed as I hit out at him playfully.

"Come on. Let's get out and check on the munchkin."

“What about you?” I asked, nodding down to where he was still sporting a sizable erection.

“I’m good. Don’t mind him,” Hunt shrugged. “This was about you.”

“But what if I want more?” I asked shyly. Being forward wasn’t really my thing, but I had resolved to go for what I wanted and I wanted Hunter in that moment.

“I don’t have a condom,” he told me as he studied my face.

“I don’t think you’re gonna get me pregnant,” I laughed.

“I guess not,” he agreed. “I’m clean, Maddie. I got tested when I was serving and I haven’t been with anyone since.”

“Me too. I got tested that night at the hospital, just to be safe.” I opted to leave out the part about me feeling the need to do that because I had no idea who or how many other women Edward had slept with then we were together.

“You’re sure? We don’t need to rush this,” he hesitated.

“I’m sure, Hunt. I’ve loved you for almost fifteen years. That’s not rushing.” I stepped up to his front so we were both under the warmth of the spray and placed my hands on his shoulders to steady myself as I pushed up on my tiptoes. We kissed slowly at first, taking our time to explore one another as his hands slid around my hips and held me as close as I could get to him. Then the kiss fired up, until we were grabbing at each other as our mouths clashed in a desperate battle to devour one another. Hunter grabbed the backs of my thighs and lifted me so I could wrap my legs around his waist once again.

“Fuck Maddie, you fit against me so perfectly,” he growled as he lined himself up at my entrance. I slid my hand into his hair and pulled his head closer until our lips met, just as he pushed up and inside of me.

He was gentle at first as he moved in and out of me, his jaw tense with how hard he was working to keep control of himself, but I didn't want that. I wanted all of him – the real him.

“Harder, Hunt, please!” I cried as I clung to his shoulders and moved up and down in tandem with his movements.

“I don't want to hurt you or the baby,” he gasped.

“You won't. I promise,” I panted back. “Please Hunt. Don't hold back. I can take it.”

He only hesitated for a moment more before he grabbed hold of me firmly, and started to thrust harder and harder.

“Yes! Hunter!” I cried. My orgasm was upon me without warning, all of a sudden and I had to try and stifle my own scream as it washed over me in violent waves, barely conscious of my daughter asleep in the next room.

Hunter's own release followed moments later, and he too tried to stifle his roar of pleasure, pressing his mouth against my shoulder. Then we stood clinging to each other, the only sounds that of the water raining down over us, and our heavy panting.

“Are you okay?” he asked me as we both came back to reality. I looked up at him with a smile and nodded. “We should check on Willow. We were kinda loud.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, though I hated the idea of leaving his arms.

“I’ll go. Just let me rinse off,” he said as he helped me lower back down to my feet. I had to put a hand on the wall to steady myself, my legs feeling shaky beneath me.

Hunter turned into the shower spray and rinsed off quickly, then he slipped out to check on my child while I rinsed off too, the whole time smiling to myself at the two mind blowing rounds of sex I’d had in two days. I could definitely get used to that.

Hunter was laid in my bed when I stepped into my room. He had the tablet with Willow’s monitor stood up on the nightstand, and I could see for myself that she was still fast asleep.

“Is it okay if I just stay a while? I’ll be gone by the time Willow wakes up. I just want to hold you,” he asked.

“I’d like that too,” I agreed. I grabbed a sleep shirt and some underwear from the closet, not wanting to be naked if Willow crawled into my bed the next morning. Once I had them slipped on, I slid into bed and straight into Hunter’s arms. He pulled my back into his front and held me tightly.

“Love you, Maddie,” he whispered as he kissed the top of my head.

“Love you too,” I replied, already falling asleep in the perfection of the moment. “Please don’t leave me again.” I hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but it had slipped out.

“Never, baby. I promise. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Mommy!” Willow came running into my room early the next morning, clearly surprised to find me already up and pacing the length of my room. I had woken an hour earlier after a wonderful night in Hunter’s arms. He had slipped out some time in the early hours of the morning, just as he’d promised, but now I wished he had stayed.

I had woken with the horrifying realization that the baby hadn’t moved all night. It was when he or she was most active and last night I hadn’t felt anything. I’d gone straight to the bathroom for a drink of water, that usually triggering a few wiggles or kicks, but again there had been nothing. I had this terrible feeling and it just wouldn’t go away.

“Morning, honey,” I greeted as I forced a smile for her sake.

“You’re up already, mommy,” she said with confusion.

“I know. That’s because I have to go somewhere. We need to get you dressed before breakfast too, okay?” I said as I ushered her back into her room. I was already dressed and ready to go.

She moaned a little at breaking her routine by getting dressed before breakfast, but after a few minutes she seemed to pick up on my stress and did what she could to help me get her

dressed into a pair of leggings covered with panda bears and a long t-shirt that matched, with a huge panda on the front. I quickly braided her hair, grabbed her a pair of sneakers and Mr. Roar and then headed downstairs hoping someone would be awake.

“My, you’re both up early,” Sam announced as we walked into the kitchen.

“Mommy’s gotta go somewhere. Can I have breakfast now, please?” she whined as she looked to Sam hopefully.

“Grab a seat, peanut,” I ushered her over towards the kitchen table and watched as she clambered onto a chair and started talking to Mr. Roar.

“Is everything okay, dear?” Sam asked.

“No...I don’t know. I hope so,” I rambled. “I...I need to talk to the guys. Can you...” I nodded to Willow as my throat tightened too much to talk.

“Of course. Go. I’ll take good care of her,” he assured me as he placed a soothing hand on my forearm.

“Thank you,” I squeaked, then I was racing back to the stairs. I only knew exactly which room were Cam’s and Kai’s. I hadn’t been in Hunter or Nico’s and there were so many doors to choose from. I got to Camn’s first and burst in without even knocking, panicked and desperate for them to tell me I was overreacting.

Cam leapt up from where he still lay in his bed, looking to me with alarm and some aggression. I instantly felt bad for

bursting in as I had.

“Cam?” I squeaked as I stepped in a little.

“Maddie? What’s wrong? What’s going on?” he asked as he rubbed at his tired face.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...your room... it was closest and I...I’m freaking out. I didn’t know...” I stopped talking as a sob slipped from me. I slammed my hand over my mouth to stop any more from escaping. Cam leapt from the bed, dressed only in a short pair of blue shorts. He hurried over to me and engulfed me in his arms.

“Talk to me, Mads. What’s wrong?” he asked.

“The baby...it hasn’t moved since yesterday. I wasn’t worried because he or she doesn’t always...but then last night, there was nothing and they always move at night. Something’s wrong...I think something’s wrong,” I babbled.

“Okay. It’s going to be okay,” he assured me as he pulled back from the hug and wrapped one arm around me, leading me over to sit on the edge of his bed. “I’m texting the others. We’ll get dressed and we’ll go to the hospital, okay?”

“What if I’m freaking out over nothing?”

“Better safe than sorry, right? If everything’s okay then great, but we should check, right?”

“I guess,” I agreed as I swiped at the tears running down my face.

“I’ll be two minutes, okay? Stay there.” I heard Cam in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, then he was back, fully dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, with his sneakers on too. Dozy, who had been asleep in his bed in the corner of the room, stood and stretched, then sat patiently at Cam’s feet, waiting to see what was happening.

When there was a knock at the door, Cam hurried over to open it, Dozy taking the opportunity to shoot out of the room, likely to go in search of Sam for his breakfast.

“Hey man, you ready?” I heard Nico ask.

“We ready, Mads?” Cam asked. He walked back over to me, Nico right on his heels. I looked up and realized Kai and Hunter were right behind him, all of them clearly dressed in a hurry. Nico and Hunter didn’t have any product in their hair and they looked so different.

“I’m scared,” I admitted to all of them. “I c-can’t lose this baby. We’ve come so far. I can’t lose them now.” My words were squeaky, my voice tight with emotion.

“It’s going to be okay, sunshine. I’m sure the baby just decided to have a rest or something,” Kai tried to assure me.

“Let’s just get you checked out, okay?” Hunter added.

“We’re all coming with you. You won’t be alone, sweetheart.” Nico appeared before me, taking my hand in his and pulling me to my feet.

“Willow. She’s downstairs,” I worried.

“I already called Garth and told him what’s going on. He and Sam are going to keep her busy,” Hunter told me, and I nodded. I knew she’d be okay with Sam and Garth.

The short drive to the hospital was tense. I was in the back with Cam and Nico, securely wedged between them, each of them holding one of my hands comfortingly. Hunter felt it was worth the slightly longer drive to take me to the hospital where my doctor – Doctor Andrews – was based. They seemed to trust her, since she had come highly recommended to Hunter, and I had to agree that seeing her would reassure me somewhat.

Hunter had called ahead, so as we pulled up there was a nurse waiting with a wheelchair for me. Kai, Cam, and Nico came with me as I was pushed inside, while Hunter had to go and park the car.

“Hi Maddie,” Doctor Andrews, who seemed to be waiting for us when we entered, greeted.

“Hi,” I returned nervously. “I’m sorry about this.”

“None of that. You did the right thing coming in. Let’s get you on a monitor and see what that little one is up to, okay?” she suggested as she directed the nurse pushing me towards a side room.

Doctor Andrews wanted me to lie on the bed in the bright, sunny room, so Nico grabbed my hands, helping me up. I pulled off my cardigan, even though I felt chilled, Cam taking it from me..

The nurse was just fastening the doppler, which picked up the baby's heartbeat, around my stomach when Hunter came barreling in. He paused in the doorway of the already very full room and looked right to me. I gave him a wobbly smile, which he returned, then he moved over to stand against the wall with Kai.

"When was the last time you felt movement?" Doctor Andrews asked as the nurse started up the doppler to pick up the baby's heartbeat.

"Y-yesterday morning. I realized last night they hadn't moved, but I didn't think much about it. The movements aren't exactly regular yet," I tried to explain. I was already beating myself up for not acting the night before when it had occurred to me the baby hadn't moved. Why did I wait?

"Why didn't you say anything?" Nico asked as he took my hand in his and rubbed soothing circles on the back with his thumb.

"I should have." I replied guiltily. "I just wasn't really that worried. I haven't even been feeling that much movement yet."

"It's going to be okay, Mads," Cam said as he leaned over me and kissed my forehead.

I heard the sound of the doppler kicking into action, then the steady whoosh of a heartbeat, and a sob slipped from me.

"Is that the baby?" Kai asked as he stepped forward.

“It is,” Doctor Andrews replied, but the look on her face wasn’t comforting as she looked at the numbers on the screen.

“Is it okay?” Cam asked.

“The heartbeat is slow,” she explained as she turned her attention to me. “I think your baby may be in distress, Maddie. His or her heartbeat is much slower than I would like. We need to get you delivered.”

“What? No! I’m only thirty three weeks. It’s too early!” I cried as I clung even tighter to Nico’s hand.

“Thirty three weeks gives the baby good chances of survival. The lungs should be developed and with a little time in the NICU, the odds are good. I know it’s scary, but a c-section right now is your baby’s best chance.”

“Oh God!” I sobbed.

“Is this dangerous for Maddie?” Hunter asked warily as Nico pulled me into his chest and wrapped his arms around me.

“A c-section is a pretty standard procedure. There are risks but I have done hundreds of them without incident,” the doctor assured Hunter.

I clung to Nico for a few moments more, drawing as much strength from him as I could, then I sat back and looked to the Doctor.

“Okay,” I nodded. “Please just save my baby.” I swiped at the tears on my face and took a deep breath.

“I’ll schedule an operating room. We need to do a quick sonogram before we get you in there.”

“Can we be with her?” Kai asked.

“Just one of you I’m afraid. There’s a waiting room for the others,” the doctor explained. “I’ll send a nurse in to get you prepped and I’ll be back to do the sonogram.”

I nodded that I understood, even though the words seemed to be echoing round in my head, and the Doctor left us all alone.

Thoughts were running through my mind at a hundred miles per hour, but only one really mattered.

“You guys will keep them safe, right? If anything happens to me, you’ll take care of Willow and of this baby? He can’t get his hands on them...Edward. You can’t let him have them,” I panicked, tears running down my cheeks.

“Hey, enough of that. Nothing is going to happen to you,” Nico growled.

“It could. Please...I n-need you to promise you’ll do whatever it takes to protect them. I need them to be safe. Why didn’t I make out a will?”

“Maddie, stop panicking. Everything is going to be okay,” Cam told me as he placed his hand on my thigh and squeezed a little.

“But if it’s not...” I began.

“We will never let him near your kids, Maddie. Never. I’ll take them and go into hiding for the rest of my life if I have to,” Nico told me.

“We all will. We’ll protect them always, baby, but you will be here to watch us all do that. Do you hear me?” Hunter insisted.

“Who do you want with you, sweetheart?” Nico asked. I looked between them, wanting to have all of them, but I knew I couldn’t have that.

“Kai,” I selected. “You’re the calmest in a crisis,” I added by way of explanation. I knew he would be the best one to keep me calm.

“We’ll all be close by, baby,” Hunter told me as he leaned in to kiss my lips chastely.

“Will you let Sam know what’s going on? Someone needs to explain it to Willow too.”

“I will. I’ll head back when they take you in. I can tell Willow and get you some of your things,” Nico volunteered.

“The baby will need clothes too. I have some in the nursery, though they’ll probably be too big,” I sighed worriedly.

“I’ll grab them anyway,” Nico assured me.

“And we’ll order more. There must be stores that sell clothes for premature babies, right?” Cam asked.

“We’ll figure it out. Don’t worry about anything. We’ve got Willow and we’ll make sure we have everything we need for the baby too, okay?” Hunter assured me.

“I love you guys so much,” I told them all emotionally. Before they could respond a nurse bustled into the room with a gown, for me to change into, and a small mountain of paperwork. Nico and Hunter handled what they could on the paperwork as Kai and Cam helped me to change into the gown.

I was a little calmer as I climbed back into the bed, confident Doctor Andrews knew what she was doing. It would be scary to have my baby in the neonatal unit, in one of those glass boxes, but at least he or she would be safe.

“Okay Maddie,” Doctor Andrews announced as she walked into the room, followed by a younger woman in pink scrubs who rolled a scanning machine with her. “I have the O.R. ready to go. Just a quick sonogram first and I’ll see you in there,” she explained.

I thanked her again, and then she was gone. A nurse came to find out who was accompanying me, then took Kai off to change into scrubs.

“Okay, let’s see what this baby is up to,” the sonographer laughed as I covered myself with the sheets and lifted up the gown so she could spread her cold gel all over my bump. Hunt, Cam, and Nico all stood in a line beside me, watching the screen anxiously and touching me in some way. Hunter was near the foot of the bed so he had a hand around my ankle. Cam stood in the center, and was holding my hand in his, and Nico was at the top, running a soothing hand over my hair again and again. I was just so glad they were there with me.

The wait was beginning to make me feel even more anxious. I was at the point of thinking it was bettered to just get the baby out of me. At least then his or her life would be in the hands of healthcare professionals.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” Nico reminded me as I stared at the screen, desperately wanting to see my child appear.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this,” I told him as my eyes met his. “This baby has been through enough. I didn’t want them to come into the world with stress too.”

“He or she will be just fine, and once we get them home we’ll show them so much love they’ll never remember that the beginning they got was a little rough,” Hunter assured me.

“He’s right, Mads. Once he or she is here, they’re gonna have the four of us to always protect and keep them safe. We’re gonna love this baby just as much as we love you and Willow,” Cam assured me, making me cry yet again.

“Damn right,” Nico agreed.

I smiled at them all, then turned my attention back to the screen. I could see my baby, just as we did on the other sonogram I had not long ago, but the sonographer was studying the screen with a look that concerned me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as calmly as I could.

“I just need to grab the doctor. I’ll be back in a moment,” she said, and then she had raced from the room before I could ask her anything else.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I looked back to the guys.

“She probably doesn’t know what she’s doing. She’ll be back,” Hunter assured me, but I didn’t miss the look the three of them shared. They were worried too.

The sonographer hurried back in a moment later, followed by Doctor Andrews.

“Doctor, what’s going on? Shouldn’t we be getting into the operating room?” Hunter asked with some annoyance.

“If you could just give me one second to look at the sonogram,” the Doctor halted him. I watched the sonographer flick through images she had captured, and I saw the doctor’s face change just fractionally. She tried hard to hide it, but I knew. I knew what she was going to say before she turned to me with sad eyes and opened her mouth.

Tears filled my eyes and my heart began to pound hard and fast in my chest as she started to speak. Her words sounded hollow, like she was stood at the end of a long tunnel talking to me.

“Maddie, I’m so very sorry, but the baby is no longer moving and we can’t pick up a heartbeat anymore,” she began. “I’m afraid your baby has died.”

I closed my eyes and fought to take in my next breath as the words ran around and around my head over again.

“Can’t you do something? You have to get the baby out and resuscitate it or something!” Hunter cried.

“The heartbeat was fine just a few minutes ago. How can this even happen?” Nico demanded.

“The baby has already gone. I can do a c-section quickly, but not quickly enough to save him or her. I’m so sorry,” the doctor explained.

“This is bullshit! You’re supposed to be the best, for fucks sake!” Hunter was angry, his default setting when he was emotional.

I forced myself to breathe in and open my eyes. I looked right to Hunter and his eyes met mine.

“It’s n-not her f-fault, Hunt,” I told him shakily. I didn’t add that it was mine, though. I didn’t think that would help him to calm down.

“I’ll leave you alone for a few minutes before we talk about what happens next.”

“Wait!” Hunter looked to the doctor nervously. “Is this...could this be because we had sex last night? Did I do this?” he asked shakily. The thought had crossed my mind too, but I was sure it was safe to have sex when you were pregnant, wasn’t it?

“No,” the doctor smiled sympathetically. “Having sex would not cause this unless it got very wild?” She looked to me and I shook my head. “No one is to blame for this. Sadly, it just happens sometimes,” she added, and Hunt nodded and thanked her.

Doctor Andrews left the room, closing the door behind her, and I completely broke.

My entire body wracked with deep, desperate sobs for my baby and for the fact he or she would never take their first breath because of me – because I had failed to keep them safe and brought them into such chaos.

“Maddie.” I felt Nico sliding his hands beneath me, then he was sitting on the bed, cradling me in his lap, his arms wrapped tight around me. “I’m so fucking sorry,” he said, sounding as though he too were tearful.

“We’re here, baby. You’re not alone. We’re here with you,” Hunter added and I felt a hand rubbing up and down my back.

“Should we get a second opinion? What if she’s wrong?” Cam asked. I lifted my head enough to see him. He was stood at Hunters side and Hunt had an arm wrapped around him, comforting him as tears trickled down his cheeks.

“We s-saw the screen, Cam. She’s not wrong,” I whimpered. “I wish she were, b-but she’s not. My baby is gone.”

“This world is such bullshit!” Cam growled angrily, and I wasn’t going to argue with him. How could this be happening? How could my baby’s life be taken before he or she even got a chance to live? How was that fair?

“Are we ready to go have a baby?” Kai asked excitedly as he burst into the room in green scrubs and a clear plastic cap on his head. He was smiling and filled with so much excitement. A piece of me died forever in that moment as I realized one of us had to tell him what had happened.

Kai paused just inside the room and looked from me to the others. Hunter opened his mouth to explain, but I cut in. This was my fault. I didn't take care of my baby inside me and now they were paying the price, just as Willow had when Edward hurt her. I was a failure as a mother.

"The baby's g-gone. They can't d-do anything. It's too late," I sniffled.

"What? No. The c-section....they said they were getting the baby out," Kai argued.

"It was too late, brother. The baby was already gone by the time they did the sonogram. The Doctor can't do anything else," Hunter explained. His glassy eyes met mine and I broke all over again. All four of them were tearful and seeing them that way, these strong alpha men who always worked so hard to keep a lid on their emotions, it was more than I could handle.

"Hunt," I gasped, forcing myself to speak and keep it together. "Get the doctor. I n-need to know what happens next. I need to get back to Willow."

"Willow's okay, sunshine. Sam and Garth will take good care of her," Kai assured me as he approached the bed and stopped beside me. He moved to hug me, but I stopped him with a hand.

"Please..." I whimpered. "Please no one hug me right now. I...I can't. I'm b-barely holding on."

"It's okay to not hold on, Mads. It's okay to fall apart. You just lost your child," Cam told me as he pulled away from Hunter and came to my other side.

“I can’t. Not now. Not here. I just need to get through this and get out of here,” I told them, hoping they’d understand and not think me heartless.

“I’ll get the Doctor,” Hunter said before leaving the room.

The room was silent once Hunter left, all of us lost in our own thoughts and sadness. The guilt inside of me was all consuming, and I was calling myself every name under the sun for allowing this to happen. Was it the last time Edward laid into me? Is that what had led to this? Was it the days I spent barely eating or sleeping afterwards? Would he or she have survived if I had come to the hospital the night before, when I was concerned? Whatever the cause, it was all my damned fault!

“Maddie, are you okay? Can we get you anything?” I snapped out of my thoughts and found Doctor Andrews at the foot of the bed. Hunter was back at Cam’s side too.

“I need to know what happens now. I have to get home to my daughter,” I said as calmly as I could.

“We’ll need to deliver the baby. We’ll give you some tablets to induce labor, then it usually moves quite quickly after that,” she explained.

“Labor?” I swallowed past the huge lump in my throat and looked to the doctor. “I have to...to deliver the baby?”

“It’s the safest way,” she replied with a nod. I bit my lip to hold in the sob as more tears slipped free.

“Why can’t you just put Maddie to sleep and do a c-section?” Kai asked.

“We would only do that if Maddie had health complications that prevent her from giving birth naturally. Otherwise a natural delivery is the simplest and safest way.”

“Can I...do I g-get to bury my baby?” I asked.

“Of course. Once your baby is born you can have some time with him or her. If you want to bathe them and dress them, we can make that possible and our nurses can be there to help you or leave you to be alone with your child. When you’re ready we can deal with the remains if you prefer not to handle it, or you can make arrangements with a funeral home. We’ll be here to support you in whatever way you need, Maddie,” she assured me, but I didn’t feel very assured at the idea of a funeral home having my tiny baby’s body in their possession. It made me feel ill.

“Ev,” Cam whispered and I looked to him. “We can bury the baby with Ev. He or she will be safe with him.”

“Can we do that?” I asked hopefully as I looked between the others.

“Is he in Arlington?” Nico asked, and Cam nodded. “The rules are pretty tight there. I don’t know...”

“We’ll find a way, if that’s what you want, baby. I’ll see to it,” Hunter assured me, cutting off whatever Nico was about to say.

“I can’t bury my child alone. I don’t want them to be alone,” I whimpered. Sobs erupted from me and I was relieved when strong arms wrapped around me. I knew it was Kai by his aftershave and the feel of the scrubs he still wore. I grabbed at his arms and held on, terrified I’d never find my way out of the grief and back to him, if I didn’t.

“The baby won’t be alone, Maddie. We’ll make sure he or she is buried with Everett, okay?” Kai soothed.

I nodded and pulled back from his hold, fighting to breathe through my grief. I looked to the doctor again.

“When?”

“We usually like you to take a couple of days to deal with what’s happened before we induce you,” she replied and I was shaking my head.

“No. I don’t want that. We need to do this now,” I told her. I couldn’t go home and see my daughter, tell her what had happened to her baby brother or sister, then leave her in a couple of days all over again. I needed it done and I needed to get back to Willow.

“I can arrange that,” she agreed.

“Can the guys all be with me?” I asked, terrified she was going to say no. I needed them. I was drowning and they were the only thing keeping me afloat.

“Of course. You’ll be shown to one of our private suites and you can stay there as long as you want to. There will be a

midwife with you for the delivery, but after that you can decide how much or how little support you want.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Do you...will you know why? When he or she is born...will you know why they died?” I dared to ask.

“There are a number of reasons why this can happen. Some, like a birth defect or complications with the placenta, may be obvious at birth, but to be honest Maddie, most of the time we never get to know the reason for a still birth. It is possible to do additional tests if you feel you need to know, but I would consider that carefully, because there is a good chance you will never find out the cause, even after the additional tests.”

“I don’t want that...do I?” I looked to Nico, my lip trembling as my thoughts raced. “I don’t want someone prodding and poking my baby, do I?”

“It’s up to you, sweetheart, but if there’s a chance you’ll never know anyway, maybe we just lay the baby to rest. Knowing why won’t change anything in the end,” Nico soothed.

“I’ll make the arrangements for a suite for you, and I’ll be right back,” the Doctor told us, and then she was gone again.

“I don’t even have anything for him or her. She said I...I c-can bathe and dress my baby and I h-have nothing,” I whimpered as the tears started up again.

“I can call Sam. He could get some things and bring them,” Kai suggested.

“No. Let Sam stay with Willow. I’m gonna call Mia, okay Maddie? She’ll come right away and she can get what we need

on the way. She can go to the house and help Sam with Willow too.”

“She doesn’t need to do that,” I sniffled.

“She’ll want to be here for you, sweetheart, and we could be here for a while yet. Willow will be distracted by Mia arriving,” he reasoned and I nodded, agreeing with him. Willow loved Mia and she had been complaining she missed her since we arrived there.

“We’re going to get through this, sunshine, together. We’re all right here with you and we’re not going anywhere,” Kai promised. I grabbed his hand and clung to it as I sobbed once again. I wasn’t sure how I was going to find my way forward. My child was dead, was there a way forward from that? I didn’t think so, but I knew I had to find one, not for me, but for my daughter. I had to be there for her, no matter how broken I was. I just hoped the men surrounding me would be enough to help me find that path I needed to keep going.

CHAPTER 24

NICO

Maddie was sat in Hunter's lap in one of the armchairs in the suite we had been shown to. The room was nice, painted in tones of grey and pale yellow, decorated with pictures on the wall. There was a seating area with armchairs and a sofa around a coffee table, and a hospital bed in the back. It had an adjoining shower room and a view out over a garden area, which was covered at the moment, the blinds drawn. It was a pleasant room and the staff had been kind and understanding, but none of it helped to break the pain that filled the room. Maddie's pain and ours. Maddie had lost her child, but we all felt we had too. We had been so excited to welcome Maddie's second child into the world. We had fallen in love with him or her before they even arrived.

We had been decorating the nursery back at the house whenever we could. Just the other day I had assembled the changing table to go in there, dreaming of being stood there changing diapers, excited to play a role in the life of Maddie's child who would hopefully one day call me 'daddy' but now that would never happen.

"I c-can't do this!" Maddie cried as she curled into herself and gripped Kai's arm so hard I saw her nails digging into him. It had been this way for two hours now, ever since the pills Maddie had been given had kicked in, inducing labor, and starting the contractions. She was in agony every time they hit, and they were getting closer and closer together. It was killing all of us standing there just watching, unable to do anything to ease her pain, or her grief.

"You can, sunshine. You're the toughest person I know. You can do this," Kai told her. It was all we could do – be there for

her.

“I only got through it l-last time because I knew I’d have my baby in the end. This time...he or she is dead, Kai. My b-baby is dead,” Maddie sobbed.

Cam stood and crossed the room, walking over to crouch before her. He took her hand in his and held it until she looked up at him.

She looked exhausted, her skin pale and her eyes red from crying. She was trying to stay strong, but she was in so much pain, both physically and emotionally. It was killing me to be so fucking useless!

“We still get to see him or her. We get to hold them and show them just how much they’re loved. We’re going to bathe him or her and dress them, and we’re going to take some pictures so we can always remember the moments we got together, okay? We’re going to make some memories. I know they’re not going to be enough, or the kind of memories you wanted, but we’re going to do all we can to make sure this baby is forever a part of our hearts and that we will be a part of theirs,” Cam told her, and I was once again tearing up at the pain in his words, and the truth in what he was saying. It wasn’t the memories any of us wanted to make, but if it were all the opportunity we got, we would make damned sure this baby knew he or she was loved.

“You’re right,” Maddie sniffled. “We h-have to give them a name, too. I haven’t even picked any yet.”

“We’ll think of one, Maddie,” Hunter promised.

I glanced to my cell on the table at the sound of an incoming text. I picked it up, seeing it was Mia and let out a small sigh of relief at her text that told me she was here and downstairs.

“Mia’s here,” I announced.

“Go, brother. We’re good for a few minutes,” Hunter said as he nodded to the door.

“Will you ask her to tell Willow I love her?” Maddie asked as I approached her.

“Of course I will, sweetheart. She’ll be okay with Mia, Sam, and Garth,” I assured her as I leaned in and kissed the top of her head. She reached her hand up and cupped my cheek, staring into my eyes for just a moment before she let me go. “I’ll be right back,” I promised, then I hurried from the room, wanting to get back as soon as possible.

I didn’t have the patience to wait for the elevator, so I ran down the stairs, taking out a little of my rage, at what had happened to my girl, on the doors when I passed through them, as I stormed towards the foyer of the building.

“Nico!” I heard my sister call as I bypassed the cafeteria and looked around for her. She was near the entrance, Tyler at her side. They both had small carry on cases beside them and Mia was clutching a pink hold-all in her hands. As I moved her way, she dropped the bag and ran at me, launching herself into my arms when she was close enough. She wrapped her arms around my waist and held me so tightly I could hardly breathe, or maybe that was the tears that choked me up at just seeing her. All of my emotions rose to the surface from where I had been pushing them down all day, and my eyes filled with tears as I held her as tightly as I dare.

“I’m so sorry,” she whimpered, her words muffled by my shirt. She held me for a few more moments and then pulled back, looking up at me. “How is she?”

“Devastated and in a lot of pain with the labor,” I sighed as I swiped at my eyes. I wrapped my arm around her and led her over to where Tyler waited, clearly giving us some time alone.

“Hey man,” I greeted him.

“Nic,” He nodded to me. “I’m so sorry for what’s happened. If there’s anything I can do,” he offered as he patted me on the back.

“Thanks for coming with Mia. I think Maddie will feel better knowing Willow has someone she knows well here.”

“No problem,” he shrugged.

“The guys refused to let me come alone, and they were all busy with work.” Mia explained. I glanced to my cell in my hand, feeling guilty for all of the work calls I had been ignoring. “Don’t, Nico. They have it handled. You just worry about Maddie.”

“She’s right, bro. Park told me to tell you, not even think about Milite. He has it all in hand.”

“I should get back up there,” I said as I worried about leaving Maddie for so long. “The guys said Sam knows you’re coming. There’s a ton of rooms at the house so that won’t be a problem. Willow’s excited to see you.”

“Does she know?” Mia asked.

“No. Maddie wants to be the one to tell her. She just knows Maddie’s staying away tonight.”

“She’ll be fine, Nico. We’ll keep her busy,” Mia promised.

“Thanks. She loves being with Sam, but he’s older and I think he struggles to keep up with her. He just needs a little help.”

“We’ve got it, Nic. It’ll be good practice for me,” Ty told me. He and Jake had been approved to adopt finally and would be placed with a child sometime soon.

“Here, Nico.” Mia handed me the pink bag. “I was able to get some clothes for a baby under five pounds, which was the smallest they had. I got some bathing supplies the lady in the store suggested too, and a few other things. I also brought toothbrushes and clean t-shirts in giant sizes for you guys. There’s clothes for Maddie too and some snacks. If you need anything else just call and we’ll get it right over here.”

“Thank you so much, Mia. Maddie was devastated she didn’t have clothes for the baby. This is going to help,” I said, holding up the bag.

“Tell her I’m here, Nico, whatever she needs. And tell her not to worry about Willow. We’re gonna be just fine together.” Mia reached up onto her tip toes and kissed my cheek. “I love you, big brother,” she added.

“Love you too, *Tesoro*.” I gave Ty a nod of thanks, then turned and hurried back to the stairs, desperate to get back to Maddie.

MADDIE

“You did it, baby. You did it,” Hunter told me as he smoothed my wild hair back from my sweaty face, then swiped at the tears running down my cheeks. He was behind me on the bed, his legs and arms around me, bracing my weight and trying to take some of the strain from my back.

The labor had not been quick, as Doctor Andrews told me. I had been having agonizing contractions for over seven hours before I started pushing and on top of all of the emotions I was dealing with, I hadn’t handled it well. Thankfully, I’d had my guys and they had been with me every step of the way.

They were there now, as the midwife who had delivered my baby wrapped him or her – I still didn’t know – in a towel. I was sobbing as I collapsed back against Hunter. Kai and Nico were at one side, Cam at the other and they were all trying to soothe me with their touches, letting me know they were there.

“It’s a boy, Maddie,” The midwife told me.

“A boy,” I sobbed. Willow had wanted a brother. She had been so excited to play with him and to take care of him. Now she would never get that chance.

“Do you still want to hold him?” she asked.

“Yes.” I sat up and took a deep, steadying breath. My heart was broken and I was wracked with guilt for causing the death of my child, but Cam’s words had hit me hard earlier. This time, right there in that room was all I would get with my baby

and I needed him to know how much I loved him. I need to emblazon his image in my mind so I could hold onto it always.

The midwife handed my son to me, wrapped in a pale blue towel, and still covered with all of the gunk that had surrounded him inside of me.

“He has red hair, sunshine, just like you,” Kai remarked, and when I glanced up at him, tears were tracking down his cheeks. I reached up to smooth down the thick hair on my sons head. It was dark because he needed bathing, but very obviously red.

“He’d have been mad with me for that when he got older,” I laughed and cried at the same time.

“Nah, I think he’d have carried it with style, just like his gorgeous mom,” Cam told me and when I glanced to him he smiled despite the tears in his eyes.

“He’s so perfect,” I whispered as I took in his chubby little face and his button nose. His lips were pouty with a perfect little archers bow at the top. I freed his hands from the towel and counted his tiny fingers. Everything about him was so perfect, and were it not for the fact his tiny body was so cold on my arms, I would have been expecting him to open his eyes and wail at me, just as his sister had the first time I held her.

“He’s beautiful,” Nico whispered as he smoothed one of his huge hands over the red hair.

“How are you feeling, Maddie? You’re very calm?” The midwife said and I looked to her, confused. Was that an accusation? Should I be more emotional, because I could assure her I was falling apart on the inside.

“This is the only time I get with my baby,” I told her, somewhat annoyed by her comment. “There will be plenty of time to fall apart later. Right now I want to memorize every single detail of my little boy.”

“I think you can leave us now. We have everything we need,” Hunter dismissed her, much to my relief. I had felt the afterbirth come minutes after the baby, so I knew the labor was over. I just wanted her out now.

She had already had the baby bath and some supplies brought in while I was having contractions, so we had all we needed to take care of my baby and I didn’t want anyone else in the room ruining the short amount of time we had.

Hunter followed her to the door, closing it a little aggressively behind her once she was gone.

“Ev always loved your red hair,” Cam sighed as he touched the baby’s tiny hand.

“He’ll take good care of him, won’t he?” I asked as a lump formed in my throat.

“You know he will, Mads. This little guy will be so loved up there with Ev,” Cam promised and I fought not to cry.

“What are you going to call him?” Nico asked.

“I was thinking ‘Noah’ maybe? It means ‘dove’ and doves are peaceful, right? I want him to h-have peace,” I wobbled near the end, but got the words out, before I pressed my baby to my chest and pressed my cheek gently to his hair.

“It’s beautiful, sweetheart,” Nico agreed.

“It...” Cam gasped a little around a sob as he looked to me. “Noah w-was Ev’s middle name.”

“It was?” I didn’t know that, but it just made it even more right for me. “Would he mind?” I asked.

“No,” Cam shook his head. “He’d love it. He’d be jumping around telling me he won if he was here,” he laughed through his tears.

“It’s perfect, baby,” Hunter assured me with a tearful smile.

“Hey Noah,” Kai said as he leaned in close to me. “Do you know how very loved you are? We all love you so very much.”

“Do you want to hold him?” I offered, and Kai’s tears slipped free too.

“Can I?” he asked, seeming surprised. I nodded and handed him my baby boy, sobbing as he took him into his arms and cradled him close to his chest.

It was just the start of a very special, but heart breaking night. Together we filled the tiny tub and bathed Noah. Emilia had bought everything we could possibly need, for a boy or girl. We got to wash his hair and bathe him just as we would have every night had we gotten to take him home. When we were done, Nico and Kai worked together to wrap him in the yellow hooded towel Mia had bought, then we all held him again, taking in his scent mixed with the smell of baby products on

his skin, committing it to memory so that we would never forget.

We dressed him in a tiny premature baby diaper, then in a white vest that was so much smaller than any baby clothes I'd ever seen, and a green romper with tiny giraffes all over it, that I knew Willow would approve of. I brushed his hair with the tiny baby brush, and cried when I saw it was exactly the same color as my own, and so thick for a new born baby. He was gorgeous and I loved him so much. The fact he would never open his eyes and look at me broke my heart. I would never know what color his eyes were. I would never see him smile or hear him cry or laugh.

Mia had bought an imprint kit so we could make a picture with his hand and foot imprints, so we worked together to press his tiny hands and feet into the soft dough, then Hunter carefully packaged it away so the dough would set hard and we would always have another piece of Noah to hold on to. We took pictures too, of us each holding him, and close ups of his tiny hands and feet. Maybe some people wouldn't approve of that, but for me, I wanted to hold onto every bit of him that I could, and I never wanted to forget how beautiful my boy was.

The guys took turns holding him and committing him to their memories as I took a shower and got dressed, then for three hours we sat holding him and talking, imagining all he could have done as he got older and all of the ways his big sister would have both adored and terrorized him. It was hard, but it was also healing in a way. Just as Cam had said, we made memories of the short time we got with Noah – memories we would cling to when he was gone. Memories I hoped would give me a way to survive this heart breaking loss.

Mid way through the next morning I knew it was time to go. I needed to get back to Willow and we had done all we could for Noah.

I sent Kai to get the midwife, knowing we had to leave Noah with her and dreading the moment I had to hand him over. Just the thought of where they would take him when we left, broke me. Would he go to the morgue? Would he be put in some cold storage with other dead bodies? I couldn't even think of it without falling apart. He was my baby. He should be coming home with me!

“Maddie, baby. I've arranged for the funeral home to collect him as soon as we leave. They're going to take him and they promised me they'd take good care of him until we can arrange the burial. We can even go there to spend time with him if you want to do that,” Hunter told me.

“Hunt said they will put things with him too, if you want to. I was thinking the bear could go with him, Keep him company, huh? And we could put the little jacket on, to keep him warm?” Nico suggested, tears once again glassy in his eyes.

It had comforted me to know how affected they all were by us losing Noah. I knew that made me sound callous, but it helped, to know they really were with me all the way in this devastating loss. At least I wasn't alone.

“Yeah, that would be good,” I agreed. Nico grabbed the cute, knitted jacket with a dinosaur on the pocket and the stuffed, fluffy blue bear, both of which Emilia had bought for us. I was so grateful to her for all she had sent. At least my boy got to be dressed in nice clothes and taken care of for the short time we were able. It meant so much to me.

I was silently crying as I got him into the warm little jacket and showed him the bear Nico handed me.

“I wish I could be with you, honey, but I...I can't. We can't. We'll always be thinking of you though,” I told him. “And we will always love you so very much. You will always be a part of us, Noah.”

I handed him to Nico, so he could say goodbye, and got to my feet, stumbling across the room and right into Cam's arms. I sobbed into his chest as I listened to Nico sweetly whisper that he would always love Noah, and that he would take care of his mom and sister. Then Kai did the same, passing him to Hunter who whispered his own words. Then I found myself in Nico's arms as I listened to Cam.

“My brother, Everett, will take good care of you. You might have to show him who's boss, because he can be kind of cocky, but he's a good man, and he will love you with every bit of love we can send from down here,” he whispered as he looked down at Noah. “We love you so much, little guy. You will always be a part of our family down here. Take care of Ev for me, okay, and tell him I love him.”

The midwife was in the room and I knew I had to say goodbye. I fought to hold it together as Cam placed Noah back in my arms. I ensured he was wrapped tightly in the beautiful rainbow colored knitted blanket, and tucked the tiny bear up with him,

“Mommy loves you, honey, so, so much,” I told him tearfully. “Never forget that. If there was anything I could do to have you here with me, I would, but I can't so I'm sending you to be with one of the best men I know.” I glanced up to Cam, who was crying, but he forced a smile and nod for me. “Ev will take care of you until we can be together again,” I told my son. I walked across the room to the midwife and stopped before her. I placed a kiss on his soft, bright red hair and told him I loved him once more, then I did the hardest thing I had

ever done in my life – I handed my beautiful baby boy over to a virtual stranger, knowing I had to leave him behind.

She gave me a sympathetic smile, then left the room. I watched them go and at the sound of the dull thud the door made as it closed behind her, I broke. A wail tore from me and I crumpled to the ground. My son was dead, and with him had gone a part of me I would never ever get back. My only hope was that he was in a better place, safe with Everett and that he held and felt that piece of me inside of him, that had been taken; that it was enough for him to know how much I loved him and would love him always.

CHAPTER 25

MADDIE

I barely remember leaving the hospital. I know a nurse came in and gave me some pain meds in case I needed them, and there was some talk of counselling services being available, but I wasn't listening.

After Nico had lifted me from the floor and into his arms I had sobbed for a long time, the guys all surrounding me, silently letting me know they were there with their gentle touches. Eventually I wore myself out and the sobs calmed some, though the heart break did not.

By the time the nurse walked in to discharge me, I just felt numb. I sat curled up in Nico's lap, nodding like I was listening and trying hard to keep it together, but I wasn't.

The guys must have gotten me out of there, because the next thing I knew we were in the car. I was in the back between Nico and Kai, tucked up against Kai's side and gripping onto his arm hard. Cam and Hunter were in the front, Hunt driving.

"I have to tell Willow," I said, my voice croaky.

"What's that, sunshine?" Kai asked as he ducked his head enough to meet my eyes.

"Willow. I have to tell her. How do I tell her?" I asked tearfully. "She wanted a brother so much."

“You don’t have to do it at all, Maddie. We can tell her,” Hunter said as he glanced to me in the rear view mirror.

“No. It has to be me. I just...I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell her that her brother was born sleeping and that he’s gone to heaven. She’s too young to truly understand,” Cam suggested.

“I can call Mia and ask her and Ty to take Willow out for the day if you need some time,” Nico added.

“No,” I shook my head. “I...I need to see her. I’ll be okay.”

“Just remember we’re all with you, baby. You’re not alone in any of this. You lean on us as much as you need to,” Hunter told me.

His words had me crying again and I buried my face in Kai’s shirt, needing the comfort. I was so thankful they were there to support me. It was obvious they were all upset. They were grieving the loss of Noah too; maybe not in the same, soul destroying way I was, but they were grieving the loss of what could have been. They were grieving the loss of a baby they had all wanted to help raise. They had lost the future they had envisioned for all of us as a family. It helped me to know that. It helped to know I wasn’t completely alone in my devastation.

It took me several minutes to stem the tears once again. Once I was a little calmer I sat up and wiped at my face. I needed to try and find a braver front to put on before we got home. I didn’t want to upset Willow anymore than I knew I already had to.

“How are you feeling? Do you want to take some of the pain meds before we get back?” Nico asked.

“I’m fine.” The pain from the birth was minimal, since Noah had been so small, at just four pounds. I was exhausted, but not in pain – not physically anyway.

“I spoke to Sam earlier. He said he and Garth will happily have Willow stay with them tonight if you need some time,” Hunter told me.

“I’ll see how I feel, but I...I think I’m going to want to keep her close for a while,” I whimpered.

“That’s fine, Maddie. Whatever you need,” Kai assured me.

“What about the service and burial? We will be able to bury Noah with Ev, won’t we?” I was terrified the military, or whoever had the power, would say no and not allow us to bury Noah with Everett. The idea of burying my child alone in the cold ground was incomprehensible.

“I’ve already made some calls, and Nic has too. We have some favors we can call in,” Hunter explained.

“We’ll fix it, sweetheart. I don’t want you to worry about that. We will find a way for Noah to be laid to rest with Everett,” Nico added as he took my hand in his and smoothed his thumb over my knuckles.

I looked out of the window in an attempt to stop more tears from falling, and realized we were pulling up to the gates of the house. I took a deep breath and tried hard to find some calm for my daughter.

“Thank you all for being with me through this. I...I don’t know how I’d have gotten this far without you,” I told the guys as I looked between them.

“We love you, Mads. We’ll always be at your side when you need us,” Cam returned. Nico leaned in to kiss my cheek and Kai squeezed his arm around me in agreement.

“We’re not going anywhere now, baby. We’re in this and everything that happens from here on out, together.” Hunter pulled the car onto the driveway of the house as he spoke, parking up out front.

“You ready?” Kai asked me as he released the both of our seatbelts.

“No, but I really need to h-hold my daughter,” I replied shakily.

By the time Kai had helped me out of the car, the others were all out and surrounding me. Hunter and Cam each took one of my hands and led me up the steps.

Kai opened the door and we all walked inside. As soon as the door was closed behind us, I could hear Willow laughing excitedly from further inside, and my eyes instantly filled with tears once again.

“I don’t think I can d-do this,” I sniffled as I looked up at Hunter. How could I explain to my daughter that she had a brother, but that he was gone before she even got to see him? How could I even get the words out without breaking down myself?

“You’re not alone, Maddie. We’re all here,” he reminded me.

I nodded and freed my hand from his to swipe at my tears. I needed to find some strength from somewhere. More than anything I wanted to hold my daughter, and that meant I would have to tell her the truth of what had happened too.

I started towards the kitchen, guessing that was where Willow was, but stopped when I saw Emilia walking towards me. Her hands were clenched in front of her, and she looked unsure of how I would act with her.

“Hey,” she greeted quietly.

“Hi,” I squeaked as my throat tightened and more tears threatened. In an instant Emilia hurried to me, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

“I’m so sorry, Maddie,” she whispered as she held me in a crushing hug. I buried my face against her shoulder and sobbed. She was the closest thing I had to a friend and I was glad she was there. Sometimes you just needed another girl’s shoulder to cry on.

Emilia just held me tightly while I cried. Eventually I managed to stem the tears and step back, wincing when I saw the huge wet patch on her shoulder.

“S-sorry,” I sniffled, “I’ve ruined your sweater.”

“I don’t care about that. How are you? How do you feel?” she asked as she caught my hand in hers and studied me.

“I feel okay physically. I just...I didn't w-want to leave him. I had to leave him there, Emilia, all alone.”

“He's not really there now, Maddie. He's already gone to a better place,” Emilia told me as tears trickled down her cheeks too, and her words wobbled.

“She's right, Mads. He's with Ev already, I know he is. They'll both be up there together, looking down at us,” Cam soothed.

I nodded, knowing if I said another word about Noah, I would break and not be able to put myself back together again.

“Is Willow okay?” I asked instead.

“She's fine, Maddie. Ty and Sam are helping her paint a birdhouse we bought at the park yesterday. Sam's promised he'll put it in the tree in the yard when she's done,” Emilia explained. “She's been so good for us and she slept just fine last night. I stayed in her room with her in case she woke up upset, but she was good.”

“Thank you so much for being here,” I told her as I gave her hand a squeeze.

“Of course, hun. We're family.” She looked behind me, and I followed her gaze to Nico, who smiled sadly.

“I need to see her,” I declared.

“Let's go and find her, sunshine.” Kai appeared at my side and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, leading me towards the

kitchen. I smiled sadly at Emilia and then released her hand.

She moved over to Nico and I heard them talking quietly as we walked away. I was glad she was there, for Nico's sake as well as my own. She and Nico were so close and I knew he'd be relieved to have her there to talk to about all that had happened.

"Mommy!" Willow spotted me the moment I stepped into the kitchen. She jumped down from her chair at the table and ran to me excitedly.

She was dressed in denim dungaree shorts with a sunny yellow t-shirt and her hair was in two little curly bunches, a huge smile on her face as she hurtled towards me.

I dropped down to my knees on the floor so I could hold her properly, and she launched herself at me.

"I missed you, peanut," I told her as I wrapped her in the tightest hug I dare give her. When she wrapped her arms around my neck and held me just as tightly, the tears, that I had been fighting to hold back, broke free.

"I missed you too. Where have you been?" she asked.

A sob slipped from me at her question, because I didn't know where to begin answering it. I bit my lip to stop any more from following, but Willow had heard it. She pulled back and placed her hands on my shoulders as she looked at my tear stained face.

"Why are you sad, mommy?" she asked as she moved her hand to my cheek and wiped at my tears there.

“Something very said has happened, honey,” I told her as calmly as I could.

“Do we gots to live wiv daddy again?” she asked, and I couldn’t hold in the sob that caused. My poor child. She was terrified we would go back to the miserable life we had with Edward. The fact she had asked that just showed how much the worry was on her mind.

“No Willow. That’s never going to happen. We will never have to live with daddy again, okay?”

“Good, cos I don’ts wants to,” she told me firmly.

“I...I’ve been at the hospital,” I admitted as I fought to keep breathing enough to get the words I needed to say out. “Your brother was born, honey, but he...he never woke up. He...he’s gone to heaven. Do you know what that means?” She shook her head and I took a deep breath as I tried to think of a way to explain that she may understand.

“Can we goes there to see my brother?” she asked.

“No peanut. We can’t go to heaven. Heaven is the place where people go when they die. It’s a beautiful place where everyone gets to be peaceful and happy. Your brother, Noah...he...he’s gone there now.”

“But I wants him to live with us.”

“I know, Me too, but he...he can’t,” I was fighting back more tears and finding it hard to speak.

“Your brother was special, princess,” Nico said as he dropped to his haunches at my side and grabbed Willow’s hand in his. “He was too special to stay here with us. Instead he had to go and live up in heaven with the angels.”

“Will he likes it up there?”

“Sure he will. He’ll get to play with all of the other angels in the clouds,” Nico told her enthusiastically.

“Maybe we can see him if we goes on the airplane again!” Willow cried excitedly. “Hunter, can we goes on the airplane again? Then we’ll be up in the clouds too and we can see my brother.”

I stumbled to my feet and through to the kitchen, in an attempt not to let Willow see me crying, but the hope in her voice was killing me.

“No, sweetie,” I heard Kai cut in. “We can’t see Noah. No one can go to heaven until it’s their time to go.”

“Is that why mommy’s sad? Because we don’t gets to see him?”

“That’s right, munchkin. Even though we know Noah is happy with the angels, we’re sad that he doesn’t get to be with all of us,” Hunter explained.

Arms wrapped around me where I stood with my face in my hands, and when I glanced up, I realized it was Sam who had me encased in a huge hug.

Moments later I felt little arms wrapping around the tops of my legs and when I looked down, Willow was clutching onto me, as her huge blue eyes met mine.

“It’s okay, mommy. I promise I won’t goes to live wiv the angels. I wants to stay here with you, and Kai, and Hunter, and Nic Nic, and Cam.” She told me. “Oh, and Sam, and Garth....and Dozy. Don’t forget Dozy.”

“I know, peanut,” I sniffled as Sam released me from his arms so I could bend down to pick her up and hug her properly. “I love you so much, Willow.”

“I love you too, mommy.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me for a moment before pulling back. “Do you wants to see my birds house now? Tyler said we might gets a family of birds to live there.”

“Really?” I gasped. “That would be so awesome, right?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded. As soon as I placed her on her feet she grabbed my hand and pulled me over to the table where Ty and Emilia now sat.

“Hey Tyler,” I greeted as I forced a smile. I didn’t know him well, but I had been introduced to him by Parker, his older brother who was one of the partners at Milite. I hadn’t really spoken with him much, but he had seemed nice. I knew he was a very close friend of Emilia’s.

Willow started chattering away about the small wooden birdhouse she had covered with bright paint, as the guys settled in seats around me.

I smiled and tried to keep up with Willow, but it was hard when I was so tired and when my head was such a mess.

Sam brought us all coffee and some cookies he had baked, and once again I found myself fighting back tears at the simple realization that there was no reason I couldn't have a cup of coffee. I wasn't pregnant anymore, and I didn't have my child to breast feed.

"Can we take you up to rest, baby?" Hunter asked in hushed tones from where he sat beside me. "You look wiped out."

"I should stay with Willow," I argued.

"She's fine. She's having a blast with Tyler, Emilia, and Sam. Come on, Maddie. You need to try and sleep," he told me, and I knew he was right. I hadn't slept a wink all night and after going through the labor too, I felt exhausted. I gave a weak nod.

"Mommy's tired, munchkin. She's going to take a nap. Can you stay and play with Tyler, Emilia, and Sam for a while?" Hunter asked. I looked to Emilia to make sure she was okay with watching Willow for longer and she gave me a smile and a nod.

"Yep," Willow nodded vigorously. "Tyler said we can go swimming after lunch."

I opened my mouth to warn Tyler that Willow couldn't swim, but I didn't need to.

“Make sure she wears her floaties and stay close. She doesn’t swim yet,” Nico said instead.

“Will do. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine,” Ty assured Nico, then looked to me with a soft smile on his face.

“Come on, Mads. We’re all coming with you,” Cam said as he appeared at my side and held a hand out to me. I took it, allowing him to pull me to my feet and press my body to his side as he engulfed me under his arm.

As the others surrounded us and followed me up the stairs, I allowed all of the pain that was eating me from the inside out to take full hold. The tears and sobbing started half way up to my room, and by the time we got inside and closed the door, I was a wreck.

“I miss him already,” I cried as Cam led me to the bed. “He was mine! I want him back!” It hurt so much inside. I felt as though my son had been ripped from me and the gaping hole left behind would never heal.

Cam lifted me into his arms and settled into the middle of the bed with me pressed against him. The others climbed on too, surrounding me and touching me where they could with gentle caresses so I knew they were there. It was a relief to not be alone, but nothing could ease the pain of losing my child. Nothing would ease the guilt that wracked me at knowing it was all my fault his life was cut short before it even began.

My pain and grief poured from me as I fell apart, until eventually it all just became too much and, exhausted, I slipped into sleep.

CHAPTER 26

KAI

“We need to do something, brother. She can’t go on like this,” Hunter sighed from where he was walking beside me.

It had been a week since we lost little Noah, and we were in Arlington to lay him to rest. Hunter and Nico had needed to call in some huge favors to have the military agree to the burial, but they had pulled it off.

Hunter was right. We were all besides ourselves with worry for Maddie. She was barely sleeping or eating, and for days she had been like a zombie, scarcely even speaking unless it was to Willow, who she managed to put a brave face on for. Otherwise she just sat staring blindly, or crying. She was pale and looked drawn and exhausted. The black dress she wore that morning for the service only showed us even more starkly just how pale she looked.

It was just the five of us, Sam, Garth, and the minister Hunter had hired to speak that were there that morning. Willow was with Tyler and Emilia, back home. They had been a God send all week, taking Willow out and occupying her so Maddie could take the time she needed to grieve.

Maddie had called Edward earlier in the week, determined that he should at least know his son was gone, but the asshole hadn’t cared. He just told Maddie it was probably her fault Noah was dead, then yelled at her that if he wasn’t allowed to come near her, she shouldn’t be able to call and harass him either.

None of us were surprised at his behavior, and I was pretty relieved the asshole hadn't showed up for the service, to further harass Maddie. This day was going to be hard enough for her, without that asshole and his bullshit.

"Maybe she'll start to find her way back after this," I told Hunter.

"I hope so, because she can't go on like this, Kai," he sighed. "We can't just sit back and watch her waste away."

"I know, Hunt. We won't let that happen," I agreed. "Let's just get through today first, yeah?"

Maddie was walking in front with Cam and Nico at either side of her. Sam and Garth were behind us. We all wore black suits and Hunter had arranged for there to be some flowers at the grave. The day was bright and sunny, not at all reflective of the mood surrounding us all.

We were heart broken – every single one of us. Noah wasn't actually our child, but he was going to be a part of our family. The guys and I had been so excited for his arrival, discussing what sports we would teach him as we decorated his nursery back at the house, over the last couple of weeks. We had each bought little stuffed toys and outfits for him when we'd been out and seen something that caught our eye. He had been so very wanted in our new, but promising family, and now he was gone.

The minister was waiting for us at the grave side when we approached. Maddie had just wanted a quiet service at the graveside. Everett's grave had been dug enough for the tiny white casket to be interred above him, and, as planned, flowers on two tall stands hung at either side. It was pretty and peaceful.

Nico was clutching the tiny casket, which he had taken from the undertakers at the gates of the cemetery. I had seen quite a few caskets in my time. I had buried several colleagues from the time I served, but I had never seen a casket as tiny as little Noah's, and it seemed so very wrong. How could an innocent baby's life be taken before he even got a chance?

Tears filled my eyes and I had to turn away in order to keep myself together.

Nico placed it down at the grave side and we all lined up either side of Maddie. Sam and Garth joined the line at the end, and the minister started talking. I wasn't really listening to his words as I gave all of my attention to Maddie at my side. She was quietly crying, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue as she fought to just get through this.

I lost track of everything but Maddie and that tiny white casket as the minister went on and on. I joined in with the 'Amen' at some point, then two men appeared before us, dressed in suits much like ours. They lifted black ribbons on either side of the casket and moved it into the grave, slowly lowering it down until it was out of sight, deep below.

A deep sob from Maddie echoed the way I was feeling inside as my eyes burned with tears too. We had been to the funeral home a couple of days before to see Noah and to say our final goodbyes to him. He had been so very small in my arms, as I pressed a kiss to his head and promised to always protect and love his mom and sister.

We had all done the same thing, taking our chance to feel his weight in our arms, committing his sweet little face and the smell of his fiery color hair to our memory, so we could always remember him, for us, and for Maddie.

Now he was gone. We would never hold him again. Maddie would never see her beautiful little Noah ever again.

Sam appeared before us, handing us each a perfect white rose. He took his own to the grave side and dropped it in. Nico went next, dropping his own in.

“Protect and love him for us, brother,” Cam said as he looked to the sky, then dropped his in next.

Hunt and I, who were either side of Maddie, wrapped our arms around her as we moved forwards together.

“Sleep tight, little buddy,” Hunter said emotionally as he dropped his in.

I glanced up and saw the plaque Hunter had ordered to be added to Everett’s headstone. Maddie had chosen the words that were engraved into the chrome plate.

Noah Phillips

August 12th, 2023

Some people only dream of Angels,

We held one in our arms.

Night night, baby boy.

You are loved, always.

Tears filled my eyes once again and I was powerless to stop them this time. I swiped at them with the back of my hand, then dropped my rose in next. I wanted to say something, but I was too choked up to do so.

“I love you, Noah, so much,” Maddie told him as she dropped her rose in, then she stumbled back and Hunter and I had to hurry to steady her before she went down.

Hunter pulled her into his front and hugged her tightly as she sobbed broken heartedly. I crowded in behind her and rubbed a hand up and down her back as Nico and Cam came to our side. I could see Sam and Garth walking away and guessed they were giving us some time together.

“He’s going to be okay, Maddie. Everett will take good care of him,” Cam tried to soothe her.

“I know,” she sniffled as she turned her head against Hunter’s chest, to look at us. “I just miss him. He should be here with me...with us.”

“We know, baby,” Hunter sighed. “We miss him too. He was so perfect and there was so much we wanted to do with him and teach him.”

“You guys would be amazing dads,” Maddie sniffled as she forced a smile through her tears.

“We have Willow, and we’ll never forget Noah. He will always be a part of our family, Maddie. I was thinking maybe we could light a candle for him and Everett every time we have a birthday, or celebrate a holiday. That way they would know that we’re thinking of them and making them a part of the celebrations,” Nico suggested.

“I like that idea,” Maddie agreed. “D-do you think we could light one tonight? So they both know I’m thinking of them?”

“Of course we can, sunshine,” I agreed as I leaned in to kiss the top of her head.

“Shall we go back to the hotel?” Hunter asked. Maddie looked back to the grave, then to me.

“Can you give me just a sec? I need to talk to Ev.”

“Sure thing, baby. We’ll wait near the cars.” Hunter kissed her chastely, then backed away, watching her closely to make sure she was steady on her feet again.

The four of us walked away side by side, all of us fighting hard not to look back and check on the woman we loved. We wanted to give her some privacy to talk with Ev, but it was so hard to walk away from her when we knew all she was going through.

“She’ll be okay, guys,” Nico spoke up. “She’s been through hell and she needs some time, but she’s strong and I know eventually, she will be okay.”

“She has to be, because without her, none of us can ever be okay again,” Cam sighed. I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and pulled him to my side. I knew today had been hard for him too. It was the first time he had returned to Ev’s grave since the burial.

“How are you doing, man?” I asked.

“I’m okay. I think it was good to come back here, even though the reason we’re here is so fucking unfair and sad. It was good to be able to see his grave and tell him I love him. I felt able to

face him knowing I'm not giving up now. I'm not letting him down anymore, now that I'm trying to move forward."

"That's all any of us can do, Cam, and you're doing great." I assured him.

"I just hope I can be good enough to be there for Maddie. She's going to need all of us, and I'm so scared I'll let her down."

"You won't, and if things get close, we're there. That's why our relationship is going to be so strong, because we all have each other to fall back on. We've got you, brother, and we've got Maddie. We're gonna be okay, just like Nico said."

"Damned right," Hunter agreed as he slapped me on the back.

MADDIE

"Hey, you," I greeted Ev as I dropped to my knees at the side of his headstone. "I'll bet you're reeling a little, huh? You don't see or hear from a girl for thirteen years and then here she is entrusting her child to you," I laughed flatly.

"You'll take care of him for me, won't you?" I asked through my tears. "You're the only one I trust to do it, Ev. If he can't be here with me, then I need him to be safe with you. Please. I know we haven't seen each other in so long, but I loved you Everett. I've always loved you, just like I loved them too." I looked over to where the guys were waiting near the cars with Sam and Garth. They were watching me with concern, but respecting my need for this time alone.

“Cam’s doing so much better. He goes to therapy every week and he’s starting the new office with Nico. He’s trying, and I think he’s going to be okay. I’ll take care of him. I’ll take care of all of them, well, as much as I can. You know what they’re all like,” I laughed a little at that.

“I just...I need you to take care of Noah for me in return. I don’t know why he was taken from me. I don’t know why I can’t have him here with me. It hurts, Ev. It hurts so much to have him taken from me. I don’t want to bury him in the ground like this,” I whimpered. “But I can do it if I know he’s not really here. I can let him go if I know he’s in a better place with you. Please, just love him like I love him and keep him safe for me until it’s my time to see you again. Please Ev.”

I wasn’t really one to believe in ghosts, or messages from the other side, but when a tiny bird fluttered and landed on the top of the headstone at that very moment, I gasped and sat perfectly still staring at it. It turned to study me, dipped its head a little, almost like it gave me a tiny nod, then it flew off again, taking off high into the sky. Maybe it was just a bird, landing at that exact moment by chance, but I took it as a sign from Everett.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I looked back to the headstone tearfully. “I love you, Ev, and I miss you so much.” I kissed my palm and lay it over the engraved letters of his name.

“And I love you Noah, more than words can say.” I kissed my palm again, laying it over the plaque with Noah’s name on it as tears flooded down my face.

I had buried my son, and accepted the fact I would never get to lay eyes on him again. It didn’t ease the pain within me, or fill in the huge hole in my heart that was made the second the doctor told me my son was dead. I had no idea how I was

supposed to keep going; keep breathing now without him, but I knew I had to. I had a beautiful daughter and four amazing men counting on me to do just that and I knew I had to do it for them.

We decided to stay another night in the hotel in Washington. I wasn't in any state to face my child after the funeral, and the guys were exhausted too.

We'd parted ways with Sam and Garth in the hotel lobby, agreeing to meet back there the next morning to head home, then the guys and I had gone up to the suite on the top floor together. My tears had stopped, but the pain had not. I was exhausted and completely drained mentally.

The guys were worried about me, and had said as much. I'd told them that I was okay, but that I needed the rest of the day to just mourn. I promised them I'd try harder the next day, but for that afternoon, I was just done.

Thankfully, they understood. When we got back to our room, we changed into comfy clothes and curled up together on the biggest bed to just hold each other, with some movies on in the background. I alternated between feeling completely numb, and crying, deep wracking sobs. Now and then I cried myself to sleep for a little while before I would leap up from a nightmare and cry all over again.

At some point the guys ordered room service and forced me to eat a few bites and drink some water, but for the most part they just allowed me to have the meltdown I needed.

I must have fallen asleep again eventually, because the next time I awoke the room was in darkness, the TV no longer on in the background, and most of the guys had cleared out. I looked up and found I was snuggled into Nico's side, my head on his chest.

"Hey," he whispered, obviously not asleep. It was too dark to make out his features, so I snuggled against him again instead.

"Hey. Where are the others?" I asked sleepily.

"I sent them to get some sleep in the other rooms. They were exhausted."

"Aren't you exhausted too?" I asked.

"I was sleeping too, but I felt you tense when you woke up," he explained.

"You're a light sleeper, huh?"

"Yeah. A habit left over from the military," he sighed. "Plus I never sleep well in hotels. They never feel secure enough if you ask me."

"Well those are comforting words from the security expert," I laughed dryly.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You're safe with me. I'll never let anyone hurt you," he assured me.

"I know that. I always feel safe with you," I told him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as he brushed a hand through my hair. “Do you think you can eat something yet?”

“No,” I shook my head. “My stomach’s in knots. I just miss him so much, you know? I know it might sound silly. I only got to hold him a few times and he was already gone by then, but he’s been inside of me for over five months. I had so many dreams of the life I would give him and now he...he’s just gone,” I explained as my lip trembled with the need to cry.

“I get it, Maddie. I had quite a few dreams of my own about being in his life.”

“I c-can still feel his tiny weight in my arms. I can feel his tiny hand in mine. It hurts so much and I...I can’t see how I’m supposed to keep going without him here.”

“I know, sweetheart. I wish I had some magical cure to make it all better for you, but I don’t, and I don’t have any great advice either. I don’t know how you overcome something as terrible as losing Noah, but I can promise you’re not alone. We’re all here for you. We’ll do whatever you need to help you through this.”

“I know, and I think it’s the only reason I’m still going,” I admitted.

“That’s not true. If we weren’t here, you’d find a way to keep going because you have to. You’re the strongest woman I know and I know that you would find a way through this for Willow’s sake if not your own,” he told me.

“I just wish I could see him. I’m scared I’ll forget his little face,” I whimpered.

“You can. I have the pictures we took on my cell. You want to see them?” Nico asked as he reached up to the nightstand to grab his cell phone.

“Yes, please.” I wiped at my tears trying to clear my blurry eyes as Nico unlocked his cell and brought up the photos.

“Hunt sent the images to all of us in case anything happened to his phone. He’s uploaded them to the cloud too, so they can never be lost,” Nico explained.

He opened an image of me, sat holding Noah in my arms at the hospital. In it I could see Noah’s little sleeping face so clearly, and see the fiery red hair against my pale arm. A sob slipped from me as I took the phone from Nico and brought it closer to study the picture.

“Do you think I c-could print these and have them in my room or something? Is that weird?” I asked tearfully, unable to take my eyes from the image.

“No, it’s not weird. He’s your child, Maddie. Of course you want to be able to look at him. You just tell me which you want and I’ll make sure the images get printed out, okay?”

“Thank you, Nico.”

I picked a few images that I wanted to have in my room in frames and Nico promised he would print them for me as soon as we got back home. Seeing the photos was hard, but it comforted me a lot to know I still clung to that little piece of

Noah, and that I could go through them and see his face whenever I felt I wanted or needed to.

Nico and I stayed up chatting for a little while, until I started yawning and Nico suggested we try to get some sleep. We were flying back home early the next morning, and when we got back Willow would demand our attention since we'd been away for two nights.

But I couldn't sleep. I tried to lie still at Nico's side so I wouldn't disturb him, but I was just so restless. All of the upset and stress of the last week had brought my old nightmares right to the forefront, right alongside new nightmares about my son being ripped from my arms. The pain inside of me felt suffocating too. Laying there, still, and silent gave me too much time to dwell on all I could have done to prevent Noah's death and those thoughts were crippling. I was filled with guilt that it had all been my fault he was gone and I hated myself more than I ever had before.

"Sweetheart." Nico turned and propped his head up on one elbow, looking at me through the darkness. "You need to sleep. What's going on?" he asked.

"I can't, Nico. I can't sleep. I can't do anything. It hurts so damned much," I gasped, feeling like I couldn't catch my breath.

Nico sat up against the headboard and lifted me into his lap, cradling my head against his chest as he surrounded me with his huge, tattooed arms. He was shirtless, dressed in only a pair of shorts, and I pressed my face against the heat of his skin, desperate to feel something other than the pain that was consuming me.

I looked up and met his dark eyes looking right down at me. The need for more of him, to feel anything but the pain, consumed me and I rose up as high as I could until my lips landed hard on his. I pushed my hands into his hair, urging him closer, and kissing him wildly.

I moved to straddle one of his tree trunk like thighs so I could get up onto my knees and closer to him, and he kissed me back just as furiously as his arms banded around me, holding me tight against him. His hands roamed up and down my back over the t-shirt I wore, which belonged to Kai, but it wasn't enough. I needed his hands on me I needed him to soothe away some of the pain, even if the relief was just temporary.

I moved my hand to the hem, and started to pull it up, intending to take it off completely, but Nico stopped me and pulled back from the kiss.

“Maddie, slow down, sweetheart. I'm not sure this is the right time...” he started, but I cut him off.

“Please Nico. I need this. I need to feel something else, just for a while. I need the pain to stop,” I pleaded.

“They said we couldn't though, at the hospital. We have to wait six weeks after the birth, right?”

“Please Nico,” I begged tearfully. “I need to feel something.”

“Okay,” he soothed as he pulled me into his arms and held my shaking body against his. “Just breathe, sweetheart. I'll take care of you if you just breathe for me.”

I relaxed against him and cried a little as I took some deep breaths in. I knew I was freaking out on him and the last thing he wanted was to have any form of sex with the crying mess in his arms, but I needed it. I needed him.

When I felt calmer I looked up and started to apologize for my craziness, but Nico stopped my words by smashing his lips down over mine and kissing me hard and fast, devouring me and doing exactly what I needed him to do, distracting me from everything but him.

His huge hands moved from my back and to the hem of the t-shirt I wore. He lifted it slowly, not breaking the kiss until he had to pull the t-shirt over my head, then I sat in his lap completely naked. When we had returned from the service earlier I had showered, then too exhausted to look through my bag, grabbed kai's shirt off the bed and pulled it on and nothing else.

“Are you sure about this, Maddie?” he whispered as he trailed kisses down my neck and behind my ear.

“Yes, please Nico,” I gasped as I squirmed in his lap, my skin rubbing against the soft fabric of his shorts.

“Turn around for me then, sweetheart,” he whispered into my ear again, the heat of his breath making me shudder and my core clench.

I turned around so my back was facing him, then gasped when his arm went around me and pulled me against him, so my back was pressed to his chest.

“Can you put your hands up behind my neck and keep them there for me?” he asked softly. I nodded shakily and did as he

asked, locking my fingers together so I would remember to keep my hands there.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he told me as he leaned his head over my shoulder to look at my body as he trailed a hand up my stomach slowly.

My whole body shuddered violently at his touch and the prospect of more. I needed this. I needed his touch to take me somewhere where the pain and grief didn’t exist, even if just for a few moments.

He seemed to hesitate at my shudder, so I looked up at him, meeting his eyes and pleading with him to give me what I wanted.

“You promise you’ll tell me if I hurt you, or if it feels uncomfortable?” he asked.

“Yes, I promise. Please Nico,” I gasped.

“I’m only going to touch your clit, okay sweetheart? I don’t want to hurt you. I just want to see if I can help you relax a little,” he explained between kisses down my neck and over my shoulder that were driving me wild.

“Yes, please, just touch me,” I cried.

Finally, he slid his hands down over each of my shoulders and over my very sensitive nipples. I blocked out the thought that flashed through my mind about why they were so sensitive. I didn’t think about the milk I had been producing all week for the son who couldn’t drink it. It had stopped the day before, and that had hurt too.

“Maddie, stay right here with me, *Amore Mio*,” Nico whispered in a husky voice that instantly brought my mind back to him and his hands roaming down my body. I looked down at the colorful tattoos on his arms and focused on them as his hands moved lower and lower.

His hands landed on my thighs, his palms alone so big they covered almost the entire things, his dark skin such a contrast to my milky white.

“Open for me. Straddle my legs,” he urged as his hands guided my thighs apart until I was sat wide open astride him. For a moment I felt conscious of being so on show with the man who was my boss for the last year, but then he resumed his trail of kisses and I forgot everything except how desperate I was for him to touch me.

Eventually his hands started to move again, making their way up to exactly where I needed them to be. I was crying out at his first touch on my clit.

“That’s it, *Amore Mio*. Just relax for me and feel,” he soothed between kisses on my neck and behind my ear as he toyed with that sensitive bundle of nerves like he knew exactly what he was doing. When his other hand slid up and teased my nipples alternately, my orgasm started to build, heat and tension filling me as it built and built.”

“Nico!” I cried as I lay my head back against his chest..

“Just let it happen, Maddie,” he told me, and the husky tone in his voice was enough to push me over that edge. I untangled my fingers and grabbed the back of Nico’s neck, holding onto him as my orgasm rushed over me all at once. My body shook

violently as the waves kept coming, Nico continuing to touch me through out, only prolonging the perfect moment.

Panting and gasping the pleasure that had pushed my pain back for a short while, ebbed away and the pain came flooding right back in. Tears filled my eyes as Nico turned me to face him again, and laid back, settling my body on top of him as he wrapped me in his arms.

“Let it out, sweetheart,” he whispered as he held me tightly and cradled my head against his chest. A sob slipped out, followed by another, and another, my emotions overwhelming me after the release he had given me.

Nico just held me, soothing me with his hold and his gentle touches until finally I had nothing left in me and I drifted into sleep, soothed by the strength and heat underneath and all around me.

CHAPTER 27

MADDIE

I was awoken by the shrill ring of my cell phone. Groaning I turned over, disconnecting myself from the warm body I was half laid on. I pried my eyes open and looked around the room, remembering we were still in the hotel in Washington. I looked up and found Nico at my side. He opened his eyes and moved to grab his cell, but I knew it was mine. It seemed unlikely he had ‘baby shark’ as his ring tone. That was, of course, Willow’s choice for my cell.

“It’s mine,” I told him groggily as I rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up. I felt a little shaky, since I hadn’t eaten much the day before, but I managed to make it to my purse.

“Let me get it, Maddie,” Nico said as he sat up and moved to get out of the bed.

“I got it. It could be Emilia calling about Willow,” I worried as I finally got my hand on my cell and pulled it out.

The number flashing up was unknown, so I worried it had to be Tyler, and answered in a hurry, praying Willow was okay.

Just as I was answering, Nico’s cell started to ring too, but I was so worried about Willow I ignored what ever he was doing and answered the call.

“Hello, Tyler?” I gasped.

“Guess again, Madeline, dearest.” My blood ran cold at the sound of that voice.

“How did you get this number?” I asked. Hunter had given me a new cell just after I arrived there with the guys, and I had cancelled my old one, Nico just keeping it now in case we ever needed Edward’s threatening and abusive texts, which were still on it, for evidence.

“Tyler? Is he the boy toy of yours who had our daughter?” he asked and I turned to look at Nico with horror. “You really are a whore, aren’t you? Shacked up with four men, and another taking care of your child?”

“Maddie, put it on speaker,” Nico whispered as he hung up the call he was on and moved over to me. My hands were shaking as I put the call onto loud speaker and handed the phone to Nico.

“What do you want Edward? You...You have to stay away from me. I have a restraining order,” I said shakily.

“And we had a deal. You didn’t stick to it, so now I’m not going to either,” he spat angrily.

“What? What are you talking about?” I cried as I looked up to Nico again. He wrapped his arm around me in comfort.

“My father found himself being investigated by the FBI this week. I think you might know a little something about that,” he hissed.

“Edward, no. I swear, it had nothing to do with me,” I cried.

“LIAR!” he roared. “He’s dead, Madeline. My father shot himself and it’s all your fucking doing. You took him from me! Now I’m going to take something from you!”

“Edward...”

“Say hi to mommy, you little brat!” Edward said, then there was some scuffling sounds before I heard my child.

“Mommy!” she screamed, followed by sobbing, and my heart beat out of my chest in fear as my blood ran cold.

“Willow, I’m here, peanut!” I sobbed.

“I warned you not to fuck with me, you stupid bitch!” Edward raged.

“Edward, please. She’s your child. Just let her go!” I cried.

“You’ll never see her again. I hope it was worth it, you whore!” With those hate filled words the call ended.

“Oh God! Nico!” I sobbed as I tried to make my brain think straight. “We have to get her back. He’s going to hurt her!”

“He grabbed her at the park. Someone lit a trashcan on fire to distract everyone. Mia looked away for a second and she was gone,” Nico explained and I realized Emilia must have been on the call he took.

“What do we do?” I cried as I fought to keep it together. I didn’t have time to fall apart. I had to get my daughter back.

“Wake the others. I need to call my team,” Nico said, adopting the persona I had seen him use when he was in business mode.

I nodded and ran from the room. I went straight to the room next door, where I found Hunter and Kai asleep in the twin beds in there. I slammed on the lights in the dimly lit room.

“Guys, wake up!” I yelled, then I was running back down the hall to find Cam.

“Maddie, what’s going on?” Hunter asked as he came running after me. I made it into the small living room where Cam had been sleeping on the sofa, but all of the commotion had him waking up already. He sat up and looked around, just as Kai followed Hunter into the room too.

“Edward called me. He took Willow!” I cried as I fought not to break. I looked between them as I went on, “He said the FBI were investigating Frank, and Frank killed himself. Edward thinks it’s my fault. He t-took Willow for revenge.”

“Fuck!” Kai cursed.

“Do we know he has her? He could just be trying to scare you?” Hunter asked as Cam got to his feet and rounded the sofa, wrapping me in his arms.

“Emilia rang Nico at the same time to say Willow was gone. He grabbed her from the park,” I explained tearfully. “I...I can’t lose her too, guys. I just can’t.”

“You’re not going to, sunshine. We’ll get her back.”

“I heard her on the call. She was so scared,” I whimpered.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. We’ll get her back. I need you to go and get dressed, okay? We need to get back home,” Hunter directed and I was relieved to have a task to focus on. I nodded and stepped out of Cam’s arms, but Hunt stopped me, wrapping his hand around the back of my head and pulling me in for a kiss. “I promise it will be okay,” he told me. I nodded again, knowing every fear coursing through my mind would come out if I dared to speak. Hunter looked into my eyes, nodded, then released me, and I ran back to my room to get dressed, telling myself the whole time to trust in the guys. They’d get Willow back. They had to, because there was no way forward if I lost both of my children. That was something I couldn’t even try to come back from and I knew it.

Twenty five hours. That was how long it had been since the call from Edward. That was how many hours my tiny three year old daughter had been at his mercy. She had to be terrified, and worse than that, I was terrified that bastard would have hurt her. Was she in pain? Was she crying out for me and wondering why I wasn’t coming to save her?

The office door opened and I looked up to see Hunter peeking around the door cautiously. We had come to their office building straight from the airport the day before. Nico’s teammates and business partners – Parker, Lincoln, Jax, and Nate had flown in and arrived around the same time as us, and all of them had been working together to try and track Edward down ever since. Nico had asked Mia and Tyler to stay at the house in case Edward thought better of it and returned Willow, but I knew that wouldn’t happen. Edward had been so angry and I knew he’d want to make me pay for whatever crime he had already found me guilty of.

“Baby, you’re supposed to be sleeping,” Hunter sighed as he walked in. He was dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt, his hair wild from running his hands through it. He looked as exhausted as I felt. All of the guys had taken this personally. They loved Willow and they were just as terrified for her as I was, and determined to get her back.

“How can I sleep with my daughter missing?” I asked shortly. “What if he’s hurt her, Hunt? What if she’s out there crying for me?”

“We have a lead. That’s what I came to tell you. We found another property in Frank’s name,” he told me as he came closer and pulled me into his arms. “We’re going to get her back, Maddie.”

They had tried to trace Edward’s phone first, but Edward wasn’t stupid. He’d shut it off, or gotten rid of it. Either way it was no help. They tried to trace the GPS locator on his car, but that led them right back to the house in Chicago, where he had left the car. When I left them, forced to lie down for a while by Kai, they had been going through his credit card activity.

“Where?” I asked, clinging to hope that this would be it.

“Right here. That’s why we think we found him. Frank bought up some property on the outskirts of the city. He was probably going to knock down the three houses on it and build some luxury homes. Who knows? Anyway, he bought it a few years ago and it’s just sat empty ever since. Edward has to be hiding out there,” Hunter explained.

“Frank had ambitions of being the D.A. of New York. He probably planned to live there when that happened,” I mused,

thinking back to the grand plans Frank liked to brag about. It made sense Edward would know about the property and go there. It wasn't like he had connections in New York.

"We're heading out now. I want one of my employees to drive you back to the house. You'll be safer there," Hunter went on.

"What? Shouldn't we call the police?"

"No. The police aren't as skilled as us. I don't want them spooking him into doing anything stupid. Trust me, baby. The best chance we have of getting Willow back safely is if the eight of us go in and get her. We're trained for this. We can do it," he told me confidently.

"He could have a gun," I worried.

"Nico's guys brought everything we need, Maddie. We'll be prepared for him."

I nodded. I knew they were all ex-military, and while I didn't have details of what they had done for the military, I trusted my own guys. I knew they wouldn't go in for Willow if they didn't know absolutely it was her best chance.

"I'm coming with you," I added firmly.

"Maddie..."

"No, Hunt. Willow will be terrified when you find her, and maybe even..." my voice broke, but I took a breath and tried again. "...maybe even hurt. She will need her mom. I'll stay

back and out of the way, but I want to be close when you've got her back."

"Fuck!" Hunter looked up to the ceiling as he ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He looked back down and found me glaring at him, daring him to argue. "Fine, but you stay back until we say it's safe."

"Agreed." I nodded.

"And you wear a vest."

"Fine."

"If anything happens to you I will never ever forgive myself," he growled as he hooked his arm around me and pulled me into his front. "So you better stay fucking safe, you hear me?"

"I will. Promise," I agreed as I reached up onto my tip toes and kissed him just once. I hoped it was a promise I could keep, but if I needed to put myself in danger to get Willow back then I wouldn't hesitate. Hunter knew that though. That's why he didn't want me there, and it was why he was holding me so tightly, as though he feared he'd never see me again. He knew nothing could stop me from saving Willow.

As we approached the land Frank had bought, I knew for sure he had bought it to build himself a house. It was exactly the kind of spot he would choose, slightly elevated and isolated. He would want his home to be noticed by those passing by, and marveled at, but he would want it out of the way enough

that no one would bother him. I knew the man too well. I was just glad he was dead. It was just one less threat in my life.

“This is where we leave the cars,” Kai told me as Hunter pulled to a stop near some trees and a short distance from the ancient row of houses I could just make out above us, through some woods that led up to the property. It was dark out, just as the guys wanted it. They had decided it would be better to go in under the cover of darkness, and even though it had killed me to wait several hours, knowing Edward had Willow at his mercy, I trusted them to make the best decisions to get her back.

They were all dressed in black, head to foot. Nico and his guys wore tactical gear, while my guys had made do with what they could find in their closets, all in black jeans and sweaters, and strapped with guns, knives, and other scary looking weapons I didn't even want to think of them having to use.

“You stay here with Tyler, right?” Hunter reiterated as he turned to face me. They had brought Tyler from the house, just so he could babysit me in the car, while they went in. Apparently he had some self defense training, and knew how to shoot a gun, so my guys felt better knowing he was with me. I wasn't quite so keen on the idea. I wanted to be with them when they found Willow.

“Maybe I should be closer,” I suggested. “When you find Willow, she...”

“Maddie. We discussed this. You agreed to stay in the car until it's clear. We'll call and have Tyler bring you as soon as it's safe,” Nico cut in.

“Fine,” I sighed, knowing it was just wasting time if I argued. They would never relent. They were too worried I'd get hurt.

“We’ll find her, Mads,” Cam promised as he rubbed his hand up and down my thigh from where he sat at my side. I was most worried about him going in. The guys had asked him if he were sure he could handle it, which had scared me, but Cam was determined he would be fine, and the guys had left it at that.

“You all need to be careful too. I want Willow back, but I need all of you in one piece too,” I demanded as I looked between the four of them.

“Don’t stress, sunshine. We’re good at this shit,” Kai told me cockily as he leaned in and kissed me hard and fast. “Be right back,” he added, then he was gone, closing the door behind him.

“He’s right,” Cam agreed when I turned to look at him. “We’ve got this. Stay here and behave,” he added with the hint of a grin.

“I’m not a dog,” I growled.

“Of course you’re not. But you are stubborn and too brave for your own damned good.”

“I just want her back, Cam,” I told him as I fought the tears that threatened.

“Trust us to do that, Mads, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed as I placed my hands on his shoulders and reached up to kiss him.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“Love you too, gorgeous.” He leaned in to kiss me again, gave me a wink that was sexy as hell, then climbed out of the car too.

I followed him out to where the other guys were already congregating around some blue prints of the old houses that Jax had managed to find and print out. I stayed back as they discussed their plan, wanting to know what was happening, but not wanting to get in the way.

I heard them say several times that Edward should be killed if the opportunity presented itself and I couldn't argue with that. In fact I was fully on board. As long as that man lived he would be a threat to my daughter and there was nothing I wouldn't do to make her safe.

“Maddie?” I snapped from my thoughts and looked up at Nico, who now stood right before me.

“We're going in now. You have to stay here and listen to Ty, okay? We can't do this if we're worrying about you,” he told me firmly.

“I know. I'll stay here,” I agreed. “Please just get her out safely.”

“We'll do everything we can, sweetheart,” he promised as he pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head.

“I know you will.” I hugged him back, but I could hear the others behind us, waiting to move.

“Love you,” I whispered as I reached up on tiptoes to kiss him.

“Love you too,” he returned. As I backed away from him I turned to look for Hunter. He held a hand out when I found him, stopping my approach.

“Don’t you dare come over here saying goodbye.” he told me. “I’ll be fine and expecting my kiss and attention from you when we bring Willow back to you.”

“Fine,” I laughed tearfully. “But you can’t stop me from telling you I love you.”

His face softened and he smiled as he said, “Love you too, baby. Stay safe for us.”

“You too,” I looked to the others behind him, including Nico’s guys. “All of you stay safe, please,” I added.

They nodded and started disappearing into the trees. In seconds they were gone, with no sign they were ever there.

“Come on. Let’s wait in the car. It’s getting cold out here,” Tyler suggested as he opened the door of Hunt’s Range Rover and ushered me into the passenger seat. I wasn’t cold, the adrenaline surging through me keeping me warm, but I got in the car anyway. If I stayed out there I’d struggle to fight the urge to run after my guys and towards my daughter, and I knew it.

The minutes that ticked by as we sat in the car in silence felt like hours. Tyler had his cell in one hand and a hand gun in the other, only increasing my nerves as I sat fidgeting and trying

to keep breathing. Everyone I loved was in danger as I sat there doing nothing, and it was killing me.

“It’s been too long!” I cried when it just got to be too much in my head.

“Maddie, breathe. It’s only been ten minutes. They had to get up there and scope it out. They’re fine,” Tyler assured me.

I looked out of the window again, even though I knew it was too dark to actually see anything out there, then growled in frustration because I couldn’t see anything.

“What if they’re all hurt and they can’t call us? What if Edward had some guys with him? He’s an attorney. He must know some bad guys,” I panicked.

“Bad guys?” Tyler laughed. “God, you’re cute! No wonder Nico fell for you.”

“I’m serious Tyler!” I snapped. “We should go up there, or at least call the cops!”

“We’re staying here, just like they told us to. They’re fine. They have faced much worse situations than this and come out of the other end,” he assured me.

Before I could argue further the sound of three shots echoed through the silence. My heart beat, which was already racing, beat even harder as I looked to Tyler with horror. Was that my guys? Had they been shot? Had Edward seen them coming and shot my daughter? me

“Oh God!” I cried, then I was throwing the car door open.

“MADDIE!” Tyler yelled, but I was already in the woods, running as hard and fast as my body would go to get through those trees and to the house. I had to get to them. I had to save my child and the guys I loved, and nothing was going to stop me!

CHAPTER 28

CAMERON

The first two houses we had circled had been empty, with no signs of anyone having been in them for a decade or more, but as we approached the third we saw a light move through the window – clearly a flashlight.

Now we were all circling the place, Nico, Kai, and me at the front, Parker, Hunter, and Linc at the back, and the others covering the windows at the side. There was no way this fucker was getting away from us. This ended here, that night. Edward Foster would not live to threaten Maddie or Willow ever again.

“We’ve got movement in the front again. He’s definitely in there,” Nico said through the comms.

“What are you thinking?” Parker asked.

“Surprise him. I doubt he has Willow in the room with him. He doesn’t have that much patience,” Hunter suggested.

“I agree. I have a flash bang. We’ll breach and take him down fast,” Nico ordered, and we all agreed. I just hoped the flashbang which would give off a bright flash of light, didn’t send me spiraling into a damned flash back, The guys didn’t need me losing my shit.

I had been working hard to get myself together since Maddie arrived. I saw my therapist every week and talked about all of the hard shit I had never wanted to rake over again. I took the meds he gave me, and they did seem to be working most of the

time. My nightmares happened less often, and I hadn't had a panic attack once, despite me leaving the house to go out several times. I was far from healed, and I had a lot more shit to overcome, including what happened to my brother, and the abuse I suffered as a kid, but I was on the right path now, and with Maddie and Willow in my life, I felt optimistic I could get there one day.

First we had to get Willow back though, because if anything happened to her, we would lose Maddie right along with her. Hell, I wasn't sure there would be any coming back for any of us if that beautiful, clever little ray of light were taken from us by this no-good piece of shit.

Nico moved ahead of us. He was the biggest, and we knew one kick of the old wood door from him and we would be in. He had his gun in one hand, and the flashbang in the other.

"Three," he started the countdown as we silently moved up the porch steps and approached the door. I had my M18 in hand, ready to take the first chance I got to end that motherfucker. "Two, one!" Nico gave the go signal as he kicked the door wide open, slamming his foot into the handle with huge force.

We looked away as the flashbang lit up the room momentarily, temporarily disabling anyone who was in there.

Edward Foster was relaxed back on an armchair that looked centuries old, his cell phone in hand and a gun on the rickety old table at his side, beside an open bottle of scotch.

The room around him was dimly lit with a camping lantern that sat on a sideboard to the side, and I scanned all around me quickly for any sign of Willow. We didn't want her to witness what came next.

“Don’t even fucking twitch!” Nico growled as the guys came barreling through the back and pointed their guns at Edward’s back.

“How the fuck did you find me?” Edward cried, clearly scared by our abrupt arrival.

“You fucked with the wrong guys this time, asshole!” Kai spat back at him. “Where’s Willow?”

“Fuck you!” Edward hissed. He moved for the gun at his side and Nico, Kai, and I all fired instantly. Three shots center mass and he was gone. The sound of the bullets instantly took me back to the day I lost Ev. I could feel him in my arms as bullets flew all around us. I could feel his blood soaked hand clutched in mine as he slipped away from me.

“Cam?” A hand landed on my shoulder, pulling me back and I blinked rapidly until Kai stood before me.

“I’m good,” I assured him, then I forced a breath in. “I’m good.” I put my hand on his shoulder in thanks for him pulling me back.

“Find Willow. She has to be here,” Hunter barked. I turned to where Edward was now slumped in the chair, and saw Nico grabbing his cell from the floor and pocketing it.

“Grab anything the FBI could use for their case. I have a contact we can use to clean this up,” he told us all.

We started to fan out to search the shit hole, but paused when we heard movement outside. Nico backed up, raising his gun,

as we all took defensive positions.

The footsteps were coming towards us fast and we all braced for there being more fuckers with this waste of space. I tried hard to ground myself, determined not to slip away at the sound of bullets this time. I needed to be here, to protect my brothers and Willow, who was likely in one of the rooms at my back. I couldn't fuck this up.

The footsteps pounded up the porch steps and Nico stepped forward with his gun raised, the rest of us at his back.

“Fuck!” Nico hissed as he lowered his gun quickly, just as a scream broke out from outside. A scream I recognized. “What the fuck, Maddie?” Nico growled.

“It's me! It's me!” Maddie cried, like she feared Nico would make the mistake of shooting her, clearly panicking and terrified.

“I know, sweetheart. I know,” Nico soothed as he hurried over and pulled her into his arms. “That's why I lowered the gun. It's okay.”

“Fuck, Maddie. You're fucking fast!” Tyler appeared behind her, doubling over to rest his hands on his knees as he panted hard.

“Great work, pretty boy!” Nico teased him.

“She's so fucking fast, Nic. I couldn't catch her,” Tyler gasped.

“What the hell, Maddie? We could have shot you!” Hunter raged, and I knew why he was angry. My heart was still pounding from the sound of her screaming as she had.

“I’m sorry. I...I know I promised, but then I heard the shots and I panicked. Where’s Willow? Is she okay? Please tell me she’s okay!”

“We haven’t found her yet. We need to search this place,” Nico explained. At hearing that Maddie pulled out of Nico’s arms and stormed inside, only stopping when she saw Edward’s slumped body. She froze, slamming her hand over her mouth.

“Is he...is he dead?” she asked as she looked to me.

“Yeah. He went for his gun,” I replied.

“Good. You’re all okay?” she asked as she looked between us all.

“We’re all good, sunshine,” Kai assured her. She nodded, then moved forward as she called for her daughter with determination.

“You’ve got yourselves a good one there,” Lincoln laughed as he slapped Nico on the back.

“We know,” Hunter agreed as he looked to me with a grin. “Let’s find our kid and get out of here,” he added. I couldn’t have agreed more.

MADDIE

“WILLOW!” I called as loud as I could as I ploughed through the filthy, dilapidated house. The guys were right behind me, but they stayed quiet, allowing me to be the one calling out for her, and listening carefully for any reply. But no reply came, which terrified me. Willow would call out to me if she heard me, I knew she would.

I went through two bedrooms, ripping open the closets and calling for my daughter over and over, but the rooms were empty, and there was no sign she had been in either.

“Where is she?” I cried as I came out into the dark hall way and ploughed into Kai.

“We’ll find her, Maddie. She has to be here,” he tried to soothe me as he took my hand and led me to the next open doorway.

“What if she’s not? What if he hid her somewhere and now he’s dead? We may never find her!” I panicked.

“IN HERE!” I heard a voice I didn’t recognize, bellowing loudly. The alarm in the voice had me panicking even more as I ran towards it, with Kai and the others right behind me,

I ran into the kitchen of the house, just as Parker lifted Willow out of what looked like a pantry. She was too still in his arms, her always pale skin looking even paler in the light of the flashlights the guys were shining on her. Lincoln, Jax, and Nate were all in the room, my guys all behind me.

“Willow!” I cried as I ran to where Parker was setting her down on a table that sat in the center of the room.

“Maddie, wait!” Hunter cried, and he wrapped his arms around me, holding me back.

“Let me go!” I screamed as I fought to get to her, but Hunter feared exactly what I did – that we were too late – and he wanted to spare me, but there was no sparing me anything if my child was dead. I’d already lost one. I couldn’t lose Willow too.

“She’s breathing!” Parker announced as he put his ear to her mouth. Hunter released me and I tripped over my own feet getting to her in a rush, crashing over the table at her side.

“Willow, can you hear me, peanut?” I asked.

“He drugged her,” Lincoln said as he held up a syringe which he’d picked up from the counter.

“What the fuck? Is she okay?” Nico growled.

“What did he give her?” Parker asked. He was holding her wrist as he looked at his watch and I realized he was checking her pulse.

“Midazolam. The vile is empty,” Lincoln replied. “It doesn’t say how much was in here. I don’t think he got this from a legit source,” he added as he held up the vile with foreign letters under the name of the contents.

“We need to get her to the ER,” Kai said.

“He’s right. Who knows what the fuck was in there,” Nico agreed. They were all panicking as much as I was. Willow

wasn't responding to me as I smoothed back her wild hair and spoke to her. Her clothes were covered with filth and she had clearly been crying a lot, her face blotchy and red, but otherwise I couldn't see any sign he'd hurt her.

"Go. I'll call Roth at the FBI and clean up here," Parker said as he approached Nico. Nico handed him a cell phone from his pocket as he thanked him, while Hunter approached me and scooped Willow up from the table.

"Let's go, Mads," Cam told me as he appeared at my side and ushered me out of the room.

"Thank you," I said as I turned back to Nico's teammates.

"You're family now, Maddie. You're stuck with us," Jax laughed, and I forced a smile. They had no idea what they had done for me that night and I knew I would never be able to thank them.

We ran from the house behind Hunter, who was hurtling towards the trees and back to the car with Willow clutched to his chest. I worked hard to keep up, desperate to get Willow to the hospital as soon as possible. Thankfully, Cam stayed close and managed to catch me and keep me upright when I tripped over two tree roots in the darkness of the woods. I worried about Hunt tripping and falling with Willow, but those guys seemed to have night vision or something as they navigated the darkness perfectly.

When we got to the car we all leapt in and Hunter laid Willow in my arms in the back. She still wasn't moving and in the light in the car I could see her coloring was looking a little gray. I had to reassure myself she was still breathing by placing my hand on her chest and feeling the movement of it going up and down.

“How long, Hunter?” I asked as he started the car.

“The nearest hospital is about fifteen minutes away,” he told me.

“Hurry, please.”

“I know, baby. I’ll get us there,” he promised.

Kai, who was sitting beside me, ran his hand over her wild hair as he looked to her with all of the worry I was feeling.

“She has to be okay,” I whispered as a tear slipped down my cheek.

“She will be. She’s strong, just like her mom,” Nico told me from where he sat at my other side. He leaned in to wipe away my tears.

“How c-could he do this...to his own daughter, too?” I cried.

“He was a monster, Maddie, but he’s gone now. Frank too. They can never hurt you or Willow again,” Hunter told me and the relief I felt at realizing he was right, was immense. I just needed to get Willow through this and we would be safe.

“You’re going to be okay, honey,” I told her as I kissed her cheek. “Everything will be okay now, I promise.”

CHAPTER 29

MADDIE

I sighed deeply as I rested my head against the window frame and looked out at the view over the city, alight in the dark.

It had been a long night. Hell, it had been a long damned month.

When we got Willow to the hospital they took her blood to try and find out what she had been drugged with as they did their best to counter act it. I hadn't been allowed to be with her for a while as they determined exactly what had happened to her, but Nico had quickly cleared that up by having his FBI contact, who had arrived at the house where Edward's body now sat, call, and clarify we weren't a threat.

By the time we were allowed into the room she had been placed in, they knew what she had been drugged with and were giving her the correct meds to flush it out of her system. They said there wasn't anything much to worry about, and that she should wake up soon. They didn't find any more injuries on her except for some slight bruising around one of her wrists, but it was still too much for me. No one should ever be able to bruise and drug my child, and certainly not her own father!

The FBI had arrived shortly after that and we'd all needed to give statements about what happened. Nico's contact explained to us that Frank had been under investigation for some time because he had ties to some mafia family in Chicago that I had never heard of. They suspected he was taking bribes from them and passing them information on cases against their people. That week a RICO case had been made and Frank was part of it. That was why he had shot

himself. He'd rather be dead than face the repercussions of his actions, which sounded about right. He was a coward at heart.

I had worried the guys would face charges for killing Edward, but they assured me it wouldn't be the case. It was self defense and there was ample proof that Edward had kidnapped Willow.

"You should sit, Mads. You look exhausted," Cam said as he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

"I am, but I think I'll fall apart if I sit," I confessed.

"I think you're allowed to fall apart. It's been one hell of a week," he sighed.

"I'm just so glad she's safe. I just need her to wake up."

"She will. The doc said the drugs should be almost out of her system now."

I turned in his arms and rested my head on his firm chest, sighing with contentment when he wrapped his arms around me. I looked to the room. It was filled with people. Nico, Kai, and Hunter all sat in chairs at Willow's bedside, watching her intensely, willing her to wake up and look at them just as I was.

Sam and Garth were leant against the wall in the corner, refusing to leave until they knew Willow was okay.

At the other side, snuggled on a sofa that barely fit them all, were Emilia, Lincoln, Jax, and Parker, and Nate was perched on the arm beside them all. Tyler was sat on the floor in the

opposite corner, his phone in hand so he could send updates on Willow's condition to a very worried Livy, who had heard what happened from Emilia.

It was so strange to me, to have so many people who were concerned not just about my daughter, but about me too. I had never had that before, not really. Well, not other than the time the guys had been there for me when we were kids. Apart from that I had always been alone, and I wasn't sure if I had ever really known or understood what true family was until the day before, when my daughter was taken and they all rallied around to get her back. It meant so much to me and I was so grateful for all of them.

Willow moaned, the sound little more than a squeak, but we all moved, the guys jumping up as I hurried to her.

"Willow, can you hear me, sweetie?" Kai asked as he smoothed his hand over her forehead. I almost collapsed with relief when her eyes started to flutter open, Cam steadying me instantly as he pressed into my side.

"Kai?" Willow said, sounding a little hoarse and very groggy.

"Hey sweetie," he greeted as a huge smile stretched across his face.

Willow smiled a little, then froze as fear filled her eyes. She reached out and grabbed Kai's fingers, clutching them tightly. "Daddy! He's bad!" she cried, and I fought not to sob. She had gotten away from Edward before with a fractured arm, but no real mental scars, which had been my only relief at what she had been through. This was going to be different. That bastard had terrified her and this would leave scars that I hoped we would be able to heal by surrounding her with love and safety. But I doubted it would be that easy and I knew my child had

many sessions of counselling and nights plagued by that monster ahead of her. And that was on me. I married that monster. Everything she had suffered, and everything she would face as a result was on me.

“Daddy can never ever hurt you again, Willow,” Hunter told her as he leaned in close and smoothed a hand over her forehead. “He’s gone, pumpkin. You and mommy are safe now.”

“Mommy?”

“I’m right here, honey,” I assured her as I leaned down and pressed my forehead to hers. “I missed you so much.”

“I was scared, mommy,” she whimpered, her little lip wobbling. “But I tolds daddy that Nic Nic, Hunter, Kai and Cam would get him!” she added with a determined nod.

“They got him, peanut, and they saved you,” I told her with a sad smile.

“They’re like superheroes!” she cried as she looked to them again. The guys smiled at her, clearly happy with that moniker. Willow turned back to me and urged me closer. When I leaned in she put her hand to my ear and whispered loudly, “You could marries them, mommy, and then we can stay wiv them forever and ever.”

“You think so, huh?” I asked as I stood back up and looked to the guys, who were all smirking.

Willow nodded with a wide grin, then looked around, confused.

“Mommy where are we?” she asked.

“We’re at the hospital, honey. We had to check you were feeling okay when we found you. How do you feel?” I asked.

“It hurts up here,” she groaned as she pointed to her head, and my tummy too.”

“I’ll get a doctor,” Cam said as he left my side and headed for the door.

“And I’ll find a bucket,” Nico added as he left too, making me laugh. Willow had traumatized the poor guy the day she threw up all over him.

Willow sat up a little and looked around again. When she saw Sam and Garth her eyes lit up. “Sam! Do you got cookies?” she asked.

“No, little miss, but I promise to bake you every kind you want when we get back home. How does that sound?” he offered as he stepped forward.

“I likes cookies!” Willow agreed as she looked to me mischievously. Then her face dropped, her lip wobbling as tears filled her eyes.

“What’s wrong, honey?” I asked as I leaned into hug her close.

“Mr. Roar. Daddy...he...he putted him in the fire and he’s all gone!” she wailed, then she clung to me as she cried hard.

That bastard! I'd kill him all over again given the opportunity! How could he be so evil? To his own daughter too.

"No, munchkin. I don't believe that. Mr. Roar was the most awesome Lion ever. I'm sure he just did some magic to make himself disappear. We just need to find him again," Hunter told her, and while I appreciated him trying to comfort her, I had no idea what we would do when we didn't actually find the toy for her. I looked to him with raised eyebrows and he just smiled.

"You think so, mommy?" Willow sniffled as she looked up at me.

"Well, he was the most awesome lion, wasn't he?" I hedged.

"Yep. Can you finds him, Hunter?" she asked as she turned to him.

"Of course I can. I'm a superhero, remember?" Willow smiled and clapped her hands a little. "You just give me a little time, okay?" Hunter requested.

"Okay," Willow agreed happily. I just really hoped he had some kind of miracle he was about to work, because I didn't even want to think about how upset Willow would be otherwise.

The next few days were tough. Willow was released from the hospital after one night of observation. Physically she was fine just as soon as the drugs were out of her system, apart from a few small bruises and scrapes. But the real damage Edward

had caused was all mental. Willow was scared to sleep alone, so she had spent each night curled up beside me in my bed. She was much clingier with all of us than she had been before too, refusing to be more than a few feet from any of us at any time. It was completely understandable after what she had been through. I was so angry with Edward for doing what he'd done to his own child. How could he? At three years old she was waking, screaming, from nightmares. She was terrified, and it was all because of him and his selfish, idiotic actions. A huge part of me really wished he'd still been alive when I walked into that house he had been in, so I could have laid into him.

The investigation into his death had been closed, and the guys assured me there wouldn't be any repercussions from it. The investigation into Frank was still ongoing, but of course he would never face the punishment for any crimes he committed anyway, now he was dead.

I sighed deeply as I mulled all of this over. I had found a rare moment alone, Cam and Kai keeping Willow busy with a huge tub of craft supplies they had ordered for her. She was in the kitchen, laughing and chatting away happily as she made some creation covered with glitter and sparkly paper. I could hear her from where I laid out on a lounge beside the pool.

I had just needed some time alone. Willow had barely left my side for the days since we got back from the hospital, and that wasn't just because she was being clingy – it was because I couldn't stand to have her out of my sight after the fear of losing her.

The guys had all been amazing. Sam too. They had rallied around Willow and I, doing their best to keep us busy and to make us both smile. It helped more than they could know for me to see Willow smiling and laughing with them each morning after I had been up all night with her nightmares.

They did everything they could to make her feel safe and to keep her busy so she wouldn't dwell on what she'd been through. They'd gone a little crazy with gifts for her, but I couldn't object when everything they gave her made her smile so brightly.

Then, that morning as we arrived in the kitchen for breakfast, Willow had left her seat beside me at the table and gone to help Sam make breakfast for the first time since Edward took her. She chatted away to him as she worked beside him, and the guys and I all shared smiles as we listened and watched, relieved she was feeling more comfortable.

So when the craft supplies arrived and Willow asked Kai and Cam to help her, I felt able to slip away. I was close enough to hear her if she needed me.

In all of the worry and chaos of the last few days I hadn't had time to think about Noah, nor to deal with my grief over losing him. I missed him, That was what kept on going through my mind. I wanted to hold him again. I wanted him to be with me.

The anger over the unfairness of him being taken from me, plagued me, as did the guilt that I just couldn't seem to get over – guilt that his death was solely on my shoulders. I couldn't stop going over and over the days before, trying to work out what I had done wrong. Was it because I was so stressed out? Was it because I didn't eat enough, or sleep enough? Was it what Edward did to me earlier in the pregnancy? Would my son be with me at that moment if I had just been brave enough to escape Edward the day I found out I was pregnant again?

“Hey, what's wrong, sweetheart?” I looked up, startled by Nico's voice, and found him standing over me. He was dressed in shorts and a black polo t-shirt, his Ray Bans hiding his eyes

from me. It was odd to see him looking so relaxed and casual. I had never seen him in shorts before, except for when he changed for bed.

“Huh?”

“You’re crying?” he perched on the lounge beside me and cupped my face in his hand, swiping at a tear with his thumb.

“I’m okay,” I assured him as I sat up and swiped the tears from my face.

“You can talk to me, Maddie,” he sighed.

“I was just thinking about Noah,” I admitted. “I miss him.”

“You don’t need to hide your feelings from us. You’ve been through so much. I don’t know how you’re staying as strong as you are. You amaze me,” he told me.

“I don’t feel strong.” Tears filled my eyes and my throat tightened with emotion. “I feel like a wreck, Nico. I lost Noah, then I almost lost Willow too. I w-was so scared,” I whimpered.

“I know, sweetheart. I was too.” He pulled me into his arms and held me against his chest. “But Willow is here and she’s safe.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But she’s not okay. Her nightmares are terrifying and she’s not herself. I’m so worried about what all of this will do to her.”

“It will take time, but we’ll make sure she gets through it, Maddie. She has regular appointments with Dr. Finn to process it all properly, and she has all of us. We’ll make her feel safe and keep her happy and eventually the memories of what that bastard put her through will fade. She’ll be okay, sweetheart.”

“I can’t believe my three year old daughter needs therapy. How did I fuck everything up so badly?”

“No, Maddie. This isn’t on you. What happened to Willow was all down to Edward. He was a monster, and I’m just grateful him and his sonofabitch father are gone from this earth,” Nico growled.

“I married that monster, Nico!” I cried as I sat up and looked at him. “I stayed the first time he hit me, and for years and years after that. I had a child with him, knowing what he was!”

“Maddie...”

“No, Nico! It is my fault. It’s my fault he hurt Willow! It’s my fault he took her and traumatized her! I should have walked away so long ago, but I was too much of a damned coward and now my daughter is a wreck and my son is in the fucking ground!” I was yelling by the time I finished, my chest heaving with the exertion and the anger flowing through me. “I killed him,” I squeaked as all of the fire disappeared. I buried my face in my hands and started to cry. “I killed Noah.”

Nico moved closer to me on the lounge, then he lifted me up and set me down in his lap, surrounding me with his huge arms.

“Maddie. What happened to Noah was not your fault. The doctor said it happens sometimes. It’s so fucking unfair, and completely heart breaking, but it is not your fault. Do you hear me?”

“Edward kicked me, Nico...that last night. He laid into me. What if...?”

“No, *Amore Mio*. You protected the baby from him. You had two sonograms after that, and saw the doctor and she assured you the baby was doing just fine. Losing Noah wasn’t your or anyone’s fault. It just happened. You cannot blame yourself for any of this. You did the best you could in a really shitty situation. You protected Willoe from Edward and when you couldn’t do that any longer, you got her the hell out of there. Listen to her, Maddie,” Nico said. I lifted my head enough to hear my daughter laughing uproariously from the kitchen. “She’s happy and safe, and she is going to stay that way, because we are all going to make sure of it.”

“I just want her to have a better life than I had. I want her to have a real childhood, filled with happy memories,” I sniffled. So far all I had given her was nightmares.

“She will. You don’t have to do it alone anymore. She has all of us to give her that life and those memories now. I get that our relationship is new and uncertain, but we love you both so much, and I know we have an amazing future together, ahead of us. We’re gonna make those happy memories for you too. You’ll see,” Nico assured me.

His words were a balm to my frayed soul, and I reached up and kissed him, the taste of my tears between us as my lips tangled with his. He wrapped his hand in my hair and adjusted the angle of my head so he could deepen the moment and I went with it, needing him.

As the passion between us rose, I found myself straddling his thighs and tugging at the hem of his shirt, not caring about where we were and who could see and hear us, just desperate for the feel of his skin against mine. When I was with them, the pain was less and I needed the reprieve I knew I would feel if I could get Nico naked against me.

But before I lost all sense, the moment was broken by Willow squealing loudly. I instantly pulled away from Nico and scrambled to get to my feet. I tried to run to my daughter and almost tripped over Nico's feet in the process.

"Slow down!" Nico chuckled as he caught me before I landed on my face. He set me on my feet and turned me to face him. "She's okay, Maddie. That sounded like an excited squeal," he assured me.

I paused and listened, then took a breath when I heard her excitedly chattering away. She was okay.

"I should check on her," I told Nico as I looked to him with some embarrassment.

"Come on then." He stood and wrapped his arm around me, leading me towards the open sliding doors into the kitchen.

My eyes instantly searched out my daughter. She was in Hunter's arms beside the table where she had been playing with Kai and Cam. She had glitter all over her forehead and hands, and I winced when I realized Hunter was in a designer suit. It was going to be covered in glitter and glue.

He had been at the office all day – his first day back at work since we lost Noah. He had been reluctant to go, but the others assured him they would stay with us and that we would all be fine.

“Mommy” Look! Hunter founded Mr. Roar!” Willow cried with delight as she held up an exact replica of her stuffed Lion.

“That’s awesome, peanut!” I replied happily. “He must have been on an adventure, huh?”

“He sure has!” Hunter agreed. “He searched all over the city to find Willow. He almost made it home too. I found him right down the street on his way to you, munchkin.”

“I missed you so much!” Willow told the lion as she crushed him to her chest. “Thank you, Hunter. I knew you could finds him.”

“We couldn’t have our girl upset now, could we?” Hunter said, then he leaned in to kiss the top of her head, only further covering himself in glitter, but he didn’t seem to care.

“I love you, Hunter,” Willow told him as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. I was instantly choked up by it, especially when I saw how taken aback Hunter looked by her words.

“I love you too, Willow,” he told her in a rough voice, that exposed his emotion, as he hugged her closely.

Hunter placed Willow on her feet, then she dragged him over to the table, to show him what she had made. She called Nico over to come and take a look too, and she chattered away

about the ice palace she had made, and the penguins and polar bears who were going to live there. They all surrounded her, smiling and joining in with her crazy conversation.

I just stood back and watched, my eyes filled with tears and my throat tight with emotion. They loved her, I realized. They weren't just humoring her, or making her happy to please me. They really loved her and wanted to be a part of her life. They would be amazing father figures in her future, if I allowed them to be. They would make her happy and keep her safe. That was all I had ever wanted for her.

I knew a relationship with four guys wouldn't be easy, but as they kept on telling me, as long as we loved each other, we could make it work. And I wanted it to work, because I loved them too, and I couldn't imagine my life without the four of them in it. We had a long road ahead of us, but I wasn't scared, because that road was bright and promising and I knew we would all walk it together.

EPILOGUE

Four months later....

I knocked on Cam's office door, even though I knew he was the only one in there. I heard him call out so I walked in and paused in the doorway.

"Hey. Nico said you needed me," I asked as I looked to where he sat behind his desk. I couldn't hold in my smile as I took in how amazing he looked sat there in his black slacks, white shirt, and grey vest. He looked so different to the broken man he had been when I first arrived at the guys house. His appointments with his therapist, working with Nico and some good nights of sleep had changed him so drastically. He smiled all of the time now, and he wasn't as anxious about being in

public any more. He still didn't like crowds, but he was working on that, and it had been months since he had a panic attack. He still had the occasional nightmare, but they weren't as violent as they were previously, and I was usually able to wake him before it got bad. He still missed Everett of course. We all did. But Cam was working hard to find his way forward and we were all so proud of him.

"Lock the door," he told me as he looked to me mischievously. I loved this side of him. It was the side I used to know when we were kids – full of fun and up to no good.

"Cam, we can't," I giggled, but I was already closing the door behind me. "We can't be late tonight."

"We won't be late if you lock that door and get your cute ass over here," he teased.

I locked the door and hurried across his spacious office. He had decorated the place himself, painting the walls a bright, modern pale gray. Framed artsy photographs of the city hung on the walls. The desk was antique and made of dark oak. It dominated the room, but looked great, especially with Cam sat behind it.

I bypassed the two leather arm chairs that sat before the desk and went straight to Cam. He grabbed my hand and pulled me over until I was between his legs where he sat in his leather office chair. I placed my hands on his shoulders and looked into his beautiful blue eyes.

"What can I do for you, sir?" I asked as I fluttered my eyelashes.

Nico and Cam had opened the office three months ago, and since then it had been doing great, the kind of business they offered seeming to be in demand. Nico dealt with the clients while Cam did a lot of the office based work and liaised with the employees they had hired. It seemed to work for them and they both seemed happy and excited about the venture.

I worked in the office and manned the reception desk a few hours a day, several days a week. At first it had just been a distraction to stop me drowning in my grief over Noah.

I'd like to say that eased, but it didn't really. I guess the grief lessened as time passed, but the pain didn't. When Noah died, he took a part of me with him, and I knew I would never get that piece back. I could never be whole after losing my child, and it hurt whenever I thought about him. I knew that would never go away. I knew it would always hurt to know he wasn't with me, where he should be. But as the months had passed I had found a way to live with the pain. I could put it away deep inside of me and smile with my daughter and the men I loved. I could be happy and I could keep going, but he was always with me, and he always would be.

Now I was in a better place, I worked at the office because I liked being there. It gave me a sense of purpose to organize the office and keep the guys in line with paperwork, plus working with two of the guys you loved, had its perks.

"That fucking skirt is killing me, Mads," Cam growled. I looked down at myself as if I had no idea what he was talking about, but I had chosen my outfit especially for him, knowing it would drive him wild. He had a thing for short skirts and I was actually becoming confident and brave enough to wear them now. The guys with their endless compliments and seeming devotion to my body and getting their hands on it, had done that. I didn't think I was gorgeous or anything, but I

believed the guys when they told me I was sexy and I dressed like I believed it too.

“You don’t like it?” I asked innocently. My skirt was a tight fitting black and white plaid. I had paired it with a white shirt which I had purposely left a few buttons open on. I was also wearing some heeled pumps and I had curled my red hair just the way Cam loved it.

“I fucking love it. That’s the problem. I’ve hardly gotten a damned thing done today thinking about you, bent over my desk.” He slid his hands up my thighs and under the tight fabric.

“Well, that’s no good Mr. Lewis. Maybe I should wear trousers to work in future. Wouldn’t want to distract you,” I teased.

“Don’t you dare. You look sexy as hell in this little outfit,” he purred as he pushed my skirt up higher and higher until it was around my waist. My heart beat sped up in anticipation.

It turned out having four guys to satisfy sexually had been a lot easier than I thought, mainly because they had turned me into an insatiable sex maniac! I only had to look at one of them, or feel their touch and I was ready to go. It didn’t help that they were all so sexy and handsome.

“Cam...” I gasped as he slid his finger under the edge of my panties, toying with me.

“You ready for me, Mads?” he asked with a knowing smirk. “Have you been sat out there waiting, just knowing what this tight little skirt would do to me?” He slid his hand into my panties and touched my clit with the lightest of touches.

“Cam, please...” I cried out as I closed my eyes and threw my head back.

“Bend over my desk, gorgeous. This is gonna be fast because we can’t be late, remember?” I squeaked with disappointment when I realized he was right, we could not be late home that night. It was Willow’s birthday and Sam had a party planned for her. “Don’t worry. I’m gonna make sure I take care of you,” he added. I was bent over his desk, my weight resting on my hands and my head hanging down to watch Cam behind me as he dropped his pants and boxers.

“I’m ready Cam...please,” I begged when he pulled my panties down and slid his hand between my legs.

“So wet,” he said huskily. “That all for me, Maddie?”

“Yes,” I admitted, then I sighed with relief when I felt him line himself up at my entrance. He pushed inside of me and I cried out at the instant sensation of pleasure as all of my nerve endings came alive. I had been waiting all day for this, ever since I decided to wear the tiny skirt to work that morning.

Cam’s thrusts were hard and fast, and I braced myself against the desk and cried out with delight at each one. I tried to keep my voice low, mindful we were in the office, but before long I lost all rational thought and control, as he drove me higher and higher until my orgasm was right there. Cam moved his hand around my body, his finger finding my clit. He pinched it, as he leaned against my ear and whispered, “Come for me, Mads.”

At his command I fell apart, wave after wave of pleasure drowning me as I collapsed down flat on the desk. Cam

followed right after, and then we just froze there over the desk together, panting hard.

“Love you, Mads,” Cam whispered and I felt him kissing down the back of my neck.

“I love you too,” I told him. He lifted his weight from me, pulling out, so I stood too and turned to face him. I ran my hand through his recently cut hair and smiled. He looked so relaxed and care free. It was a beautiful sight.

“We should clean up. We need to get home,” he suggested. “But you should definitely wear that skirt more often,” he added with a smirk.

“I might just do that, Mr. Lewis,” I returned, then I strode past him, stopping to grab my panties from the floor as I made my way to his private bathroom that adjoined his office.

When I got in there and looked in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. I had filled out a little in the last couple of months and my cheeks were aglow with color. There was a spark in my eyes again and I was smiling. I had a confidence I had never had before and most drastically of all the changes, I was happy and content. The guys had done that for me. They couldn't fix all of the pain and regrets I would live with forever, but they were able to help me get past those things and look forward. They gave me a present filled with love and happiness, and a future filled with possibility. It was more than I ever dreamt I would have.

“Daddy Cam! Daddy Nico!” Willow cried when the three of us walked through the door. I loved hearing her call them that.

She had only asked if she could do that a week before and, at the time, the guys had been too choked up to answer her. Instead I had, telling her she could call them all daddy if she wanted to, and she had been delighted. She had gotten so close to all four of them in the months we had been there. They doted on her and they were never too busy or too tired for her, no matter what. They spoiled her, and not just with superficial things like new toys. They spoiled her with their time and attention too. They often took her out, to the zoo or the park. They took her out for ice cream, or to whichever museum or attraction she had heard about and decided she had to go to. They took turns to tuck her in at night with me, and read her bed time stories. Basically, they acted like the father I had always wanted her to have, only now she had four.

“Happy birthday, little mouse!” Cam cried as he bent down to scoop her up into his arms. She was dressed in the new dress she had bought with Kai for the occasion. It had a toile tutu and was in tones of orange and yellow, with lions printed all over the bodice. She adored it and had been bursting to wear it all week. She was also wearing the shiny red military boots she had talked Nico into buying, when he was out with her, buying himself a pair of work boots, that looked very similar, except his were black and not shiny. She idolized these guys and was turning into even more of a tom boy with their influence. I adored it though, and was more than happy with them being her role models. I knew no better people than the men I loved.

“You gots to see my party! Sam gots lots of balloons and he mades a giant cake!” she cried with excitement.

She had been at daycare that afternoon. She went two afternoons a week to get her prepared for starting kindergarten in a few months. The rest of the time I worked, she was home with Sam, and usually one of the guys too.

Sam had prepared the party decorations with Hunt and Kai's help that afternoon while she was at daycare, so it had all been a surprise when she arrived home. I had wanted to help too, but the guys had needed me in the office for an important meeting. Sam had been so excited about it all, I had just let him take control.

"Lead the way then, princess," Nico told her as he ruffled her wild hair.

"Come on mommy!" Willow called to me as she pointed for Cam to head out to the yard.

"Coming, honey," I smiled as I linked my hand with Nico's and headed out.

"I think she's happy," Nico chuckled.

"I'd say so," I agreed, unable to take the smile from my own face. Willow had bounced back from Edward's kidnapping wonderfully. She had attended two sessions a week with the therapist for a month. Gradually the nightmares got less and less until they seemed to stop all together. With the love and support of the guys and her new extended family she seemed to have healed from it all, and she was once again a care free, boisterous three year old, much to my relief.

"Holy crap!" I gasped when Nico and I stepped out of the doors. Sam had gone insane!

The garden was overrun with animal themed decorations. There were animals made up of balloons everywhere you looked. There was a balloon arch over the door, and hundreds of balloons in bunches all around us. At the back of the garden, past the pool, there were two bouncy houses and a

bouncy slide, all being manned by Linc and Jax, who stood before them.

There were tables and chairs laid out on the patio, around a huge, long table laden with a buffet of all manner of food. The cake was the biggest I had ever seen, made up of four tiers, each with animals adorning the edges. It was like a wedding reception, an incredibly over the top, animal themed wedding reception.

“Did you see my cake, mommy? Its gots animals!” Willow cried as she appeared at my side and grabbed my hand.

“I see it, honey. It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. I gots presents too!” she squealed as she pointed to a table at the side, stacked high with brightly wrapped packages.

“Wow! I hope you said thankyou for your gifts,” I reminded her.

“I did, mommy. Can I goes on the bouncy house now?”

“Sure, peanut. Go ahead,” I agreed. She released my hand, but didn’t run off as I expected. Instead she wrapped her arms around my legs and hugged them. I bent down when she released me and hugged her tight.

“Are you happy?” I asked her as I held her.

“Uh-huh. The happiest ever!” she cried. “Are you happy, mommy?”

“Yes peanut. I am,” I assured her as I glanced up to where all four of my guys now stood together with beers in hand, laughing and joking.

“Are you gonna marry them, mommy?” she asked. “I wants to stay wiv them forever.”

“Me too, Willow. Don’t worry. We’re not going anywhere,” I assured her.

“Good!” she squeezed me once more, then released me and ran off to play with Livy and her guys kids. They had all come over for Willows birthday. Livy and her four guys, and their four kids, and Mia and her guys too. They had been staying with us for the last couple of days and as crazy as the house had been, it had been nice to be surrounded with the new family I had acquired.

“You okay, baby?” Hunter appeared at my side as I stood.

“I think Sam went a little overboard,” I laughed.

“Well,” Hunter ran a hand through his hair and looked to me nervously. “Me and the guys might have had a little something to do with this.” As if they heard hm mention them, the others all approached.

“You guys did this?” I asked as I looked around me again.

“You don’t like it?” Kai asked, looking a little crushed.

“Like it? It’s amazing, but it’s a four year olds birthday party,” I laughed. “It’s a lot,” I added when they looked confused.

“We wanted to spoil her,” Nico cut in.

“Well you definitely succeeded.”

“She’s enjoying herself. That’s all I care about,” Cam told me. I turned to follow his eye line and saw Willow holding hands with Livy’s youngest, Eliza. They were jumping up and down together and laughing happily.

“It’s amazing, you guys, and Willow is over the moon. Thank you,” I told them all.

“We lit a candle for Noah too, so he knows we’re thinking about him,” Kai told me as he pointed to the kitchen window, where a candle was lit inside.

“Thank you,” I told him as emotion hit me hard. It was a tradition we had started for Noah, lighting a candle, and putting it in the window when we celebrated a birthday or a holiday, and I knew it would be one the guys would help me maintain in the future. It made him a part of our family and helped me to feel he was still with me in some way. It wasn’t enough, but it was all we could have. That and the pictures that hung in my room, so I could see him whenever I wanted or needed to.

“Daddy Hunter. Quick!” Willow cried excitedly. Hunter looked to her with a huge smile and waved that he’d heard her.

“I’ve been beckoned,” he joked as he handed his beer to Nico and leaned in to kiss me. “Love you, baby,” he told me, then he was running across the garden to Willow.

“I need to check the grill,” Kai said as he turned to kiss me too. “You look beautiful by the way.”

“I need to change,” I laughed as I looked down at my short skirt. It wasn’t exactly child party friendly.

“Well I’ll need to see you in that skirt some other time, sexy lady,” he kissed me again, gave me a wink, then strutted off, leaving me blushing.

“You doing okay?” Nico asked as he stood beside me and wrapped his arm around my back.

“Yeah,” I sighed as I looked around me. Livy and Emilia were sitting at a table with Cole and Matt – two of Livy’s husbands. They were smiling as they chatted. Livy’s other husbands – Kyle and Kade were at the grill with Kai, drinking beers and pointing to whatever he was turning, likely critiquing his work. Kai laughed and gave Kyle a shove, looking relaxed.

I wasn’t the only person who had acquired a family when Nico became mine. The guys had too and I knew they were happy about it. They, like me, hadn’t ever truly had family before, except each other. Now we had so many people in our corner, as well as each other. It was amazing.

Willow was happily playing with all four of Livy’s kids, even the two older ones making the effort to join in and play. Sam and Garth were filling plates with food at the buffet table, smiling as they chatted.

To my right Hunt and Cam were chatting with Parker, Emilia’s other guy, and they both laughed loudly at something he had said. They too looked so carefree and happy.

I couldn't help but think about how far we had come from the lost and lonely foster kids we had all been when we met. We weren't lost or lonely any more. We had each other and we had family. I wasn't scared of the future or where it may take us. Whatever came, I knew I would be strong enough to face it with them at my side.

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading 'Break my Fall.'

This was a tough one for me to write. While I always try to ground my books in my own tough experiences in life, losing a child is the hardest thing I have ever faced, and was therefore extremely tough to put into words.

Our beautiful baby boy, Jacob, was born sleeping in August 2011 at 33 weeks. He had a full head of beautiful, dark hair and he was so perfect, but he never opened his eyes or got to take his first breath. We miss him every day.

Much of what I wrote in this book was based on my husband and mine's lived experience of what we went through, and the pain we felt afterwards, and even still, twelve years later. No pain compares to that of losing a child. It is a pain that never heals, in my experience.

I wrote this book in the hope it would help others who have been through their own loss. It's a topic that is not talked about much, but that does happen more than people realize.

As always, I would be incredibly grateful if you can leave a review, even just a few words to tell me what you enjoyed. It means more than you can know.

Thank you.

If you loved 'Pieces Of Us' and want to read Evie's story now that she's all grown up, check out details of my next release – 'Keep Breathing' - on the next page.

COMING SOON!

**Keep Breathing – Book one in the
'Fighting For Tomorrow' series.**

Evie:

Eight.

That was what he called me. I didn't have a name. I wasn't a person. I was a number. I was just the next in his sequence of kills.

But he didn't kill me. He set me free, and he told me to run.

That's what I've been doing for the last year. Running. Surviving. Fighting just to breathe through this new hell I find myself in.

Then it's on the news. They found numbers seven and nine. The number killer has struck again.

Knowing I should be there with those two girls, dead and mutilated in the woods, makes me realize I have to stop surviving and find a way to live.

I want my life back. I have parents who love me, brothers who I know will be tearing the world apart to find me, and a career I worked damned hard to earn, but he has taken it all from me with his threats and the terror he has instilled so deeply within me, I can't even begin to fathom how to get it out again.

He let me go, but fear is still holding me prisoner.

Can I ever find the strength to stand up for, not only myself, but the ones who came in the sequence both before and after me? Can I find the strength to stop him before he finds number ten?

Just when it feels as if I'm losing the fight to keep breathing, four guys stumble into my life at the most unlikely of times. I feel a connection with each of them like I've never known before, but will it be enough when the truth comes out? Can I keep them safe when the number killer decides he's not quite finished with me just yet?

Keep Breathing – Available for pre-order on Amazon now!

Releases March 31st, 2024!

‘BREAK MY FALL’ TRIGGER WARNING

This book addresses some dark subject matter which some people may find triggering. Content includes domestic violence, including physical and sexual abuse of the FMC. While some of the physical abuse and violence is detailed, the sexual abuse is only alluded to.

There is also one very short incident of violence towards a child (from the ex-husband)

Pregnancy is also a part of this book, resulting in the loss of a child and still birth.

If you have further questions regarding the triggers and/or content of ‘Break My Fall’ or any other of my books, you can contact me directly through my author pages on Facebook and Instagram.

ALSO BY KERRY TAYLOR

Shepard Security Series:

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Something Other than Pain

Something Other than Darkness

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