


KERRY TAYLOR

A silhouette of a woman with curly hair, wearing a dark dress, is captured in a dynamic dance pose on a beach. She is leaning back with her arms extended, one hand pointing forward and the other slightly lower. The background is a vibrant sunset sky transitioning from deep orange to a bright yellow near the horizon. The ocean waves are visible at the bottom of the frame. The title 'BROKEN LOVE' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters, with 'BROKEN' on the top line and 'LOVE' on the bottom line, partially obscuring the woman's midsection.

BROKEN
LOVE

MILITE SERIES - BOOK TWO

BROKEN LOVE

Milite series – Book two

By Kerry Taylor

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CHAPTER 1

EMILIA

“Hold her down!” Once again in that bathroom, I was pinned down in that chair and surrounded by the thugs and the creepy ‘doctor’. I was fighting with everything in me, desperate to get free even more this time because I knew what was coming.

I screamed as the ‘doctor’ came at me with the needle, knowing if he injected me with it, I would be unconscious and at their mercy to do as they wished to my naked body. I couldn’t let that happen again.

“NOOOOO!” I screamed as I strained my body violently, desperately attempting to get free.

“Baby, wake up. It’s just a bad dream,” the softly spoken words seeped through my consciousness and pulled me from my nightmare. I opened my eyes and found Linc knelt beside me, looking down over me with concern. “Hey, you with me?” he asked.

I studied him hard, taking in every inch of his handsome face and his messy blonde hair. He was shirtless, dressed in just a pair of basketball shorts that hung to his knees. I remembered he looked the same when he laid down to sleep beside me when we went to bed that night.

It had been two days since I got home, and one of the guys, Ty, or Nico, had been with me every minute, except when I peed and showered. I wasn’t complaining. I didn’t want to be alone. I knew it was ridiculous, but I was terrified that as soon as I was alone again, someone would come and take me all over again. It was stupid and irrational, especially since Valton Marku was dead, but I just couldn’t seem to shake the fear.

“Em?” Linc lowered down until his eyes met mine, his face filled with worry and exhaustion.

“I’m okay,” I gasped. As I had been every time I woke up since getting home, I was short of breath, shaking all over, and sweaty. My nightmares were even worse than they had been

before, and I struggled to understand what was real and what wasn't when I first woke up each time.

"Tell me what you need, pretty girl," he whispered. The 'pretty girl' was a bad choice on his part, considering the state of my face. I looked like Two-Face, with the right side - which had been repeatedly hit - having turned entirely into a patchwork of black, purple, and green bruises. Thankfully, a lot of the swelling had gone down, but it was a real mess, and I was far from 'pretty'. I barely looked human.

"Just...I need you t-to hold me, Linc...please, hold me," I whimpered as tears threatened.

I still had no memory of what happened in that bathroom that day, and if I were honest, I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Something was wrong down there. I had a lot of pain, and it was agony when I peed. Not knowing what they had done to me terrified me. If they raped me, would I hurt so much? Was that why I had all the pain? I knew the first time you had sex was painful but was this normal? And if it was, that meant that at least one of those sick sonsofbitches in that room with me raped me. The thought of it made me feel physically sick, and my skin crawled.

Other horrifying possibilities were running through my head too, each more terrifying than the last. There had been instruments on the tray they had out when they drugged me, needles, and medical implements. What if they had done something to me, some medical procedure. What if they'd sterilized me? Could they do that? I had no idea, but I was terrified, and even worse, Nico and the guys didn't know. I was afraid to tell them, partly because they were all beating themselves up plenty as it was, and I didn't want to add to it, and partly because I didn't want to admit the full extent of what happened. Some irrational part of me felt as though it was all my fault for allowing it to happen, and I couldn't shake that, no matter how many times I tried to convince myself that I fought as hard as I could to stop it all from happening.

"With pleasure," Linc said as he moved, his back leaned on the headboard, then he pulled me into his arms. I laid my head on his chest and cuddled into his side, allowing his heat to

seep into my trembling body and make me feel safe once again.

Since I got home, things had been easy with Linc, Jax, and Park. They had all been there the whole time, and when I needed them to hold me, they had. One of them lay with me when I slept and was always there to soothe me after the nightmares. I wasn't sure how I'd have gotten through the last forty-eight hours without my guys and Ty, Nate, and Nico.

On the first night home, Xander King turned up, having been sent by Kyle. He asked to check me over, and I agreed. It was a better option than Parker doing it. I knew Parker would pile even more guilt on himself if he'd seen the injuries on my torso and back close-up.

Xander told me what I already knew; I had bruised ribs down my right side, a mild concussion, and my knee was a mess of bruising and swelling, but not fractured. The rest was superficial, and there was little he could do except get me a brace to help support my knee for a few weeks while it healed and dress the cuts on the soles of my feet.

I spent the first twenty-four hours in bed, sleeping on and off, and eating the various soups and smoothies Nico continued to cook up for me.

I showered, dressed in loose clothes, and ventured into the lounge, the next day, determined not to wallow. I spent the whole day with Nico, my guys, Nate, and Ty watching Marvel movies and eating ice cream, since my throat was too sore for anything more substantial. They all kept me upbeat and made me laugh. It had been a good reminder of all the good that had come into my life, and how very much I had to be grateful for, but it hadn't been enough to push out the darkness that seemed to have seeped into me during those three days at the hands of Valton. I felt as though it found its way in, but no way out, and with every hour that passed, it took a tighter and tighter grip on my thoughts and emotions. I tried hard to push past it and find myself again, but I was terrified more and more that I was becoming lost in the chaos.

Now, I lay in the arms of a man I cared for very much, and I was damned grateful for that too, but still, the darkness was swirling through my mind, trying to pull me back to the images of those three days in that house.

I had so much in my life, more than I ever thought possible. I had a real opportunity to find happiness. The problem was the overwhelming darkness that lingered in my head, waiting to swoop down and drown out all the good, and I had no idea how to even start getting rid of it.

“Try to get back to sleep, Em. You’ve barely been out an hour. It’s not enough. You need sleep to allow your body to heal,” Linc said softly.

“I can’t,” I whimpered as sobs overcame me instantly at just the thought of what I knew I would see as soon as I closed my eyes. “I c-can’t keep reliving it. I’m sc-scared Linc...scared to close my eyes again,” I barely got the last words out before I was sobbing hard. I buried my face against his warm chest to hide the mess I knew I was.

“I wish there was more I could do to take it all from you, baby,” Linc whispered as he pulled me right into his lap and wrapped me even tighter in his arms. “I wish I could click my fingers and take us back before we walked into that club that night.”

“Me too,” I agreed, my words muffled.

“I can’t do that though. All I can do is be here and promise you over and over that you are safe now. We have amped-up security in the building, and Nico has two of our top guys outside the apartment twenty-four hours a day. No one is getting anywhere near us in this apartment, and when you’re ready to go out again, security will stay just as tight until we’re sure this whole thing is over. We thought we could protect you before, but we were wrong. You were taken because we underestimated what we were facing. But we know now, and we will never take a chance with your safety like that, ever again.”

“I know,” I whispered as I lifted my head and met his eyes. “You guys and Nico have told me all of that, but...well, that’s

not what scares me. It's what's in here," I pointed to my head. "Everything that happened is in there, playing over and...and over again. I c-can't...can't get it out," I admitted tearfully.

"It will take time, Em. What happened to you was traumatic, and you were already dealing with PTSD before all of that. You need to give yourself some time to process, maybe even talk to someone – maybe Livy, or even a professional – just someone who can help you process it all."

"Xander said the same thing when he was here, but I...I don't th-think I could...or that I even want to leave the apartment yet, Linc. I'm t-too scared," I hated how weak I knew that must have sounded, but there, in Nico's apartment, with my brother, my best friend, and my guys all surrounding me in a little bubble of safety, I felt better, safer. The darkness of everything that happened was still there with me, but I felt I had more of a chance of keeping a leash on it while my protectors surrounded me. Stepping back out into the real world, facing countless people, some of whom may wish to hurt me again, was more than I could bear to think about, let alone meet.

"Sshh baby. It's okay to be scared after what happened to you. I'm scared too. I don't want you to leave this building ever again," he soothed, "Like I just said, everything will take time. For now, you're safe here. You need to take time to heal. We can ask Xander to come back, maybe talk to him about some meds to help you sleep, or about finding a therapist who could come here to meet with you. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess," I agreed, "But if...if I do see a therapist, do you think...would you guys sit with me? I d-don't think I can go through everything that...that happened on my own...not yet anyway."

"Of course, we will. We told you, we're here, baby, all three of us, for whatever you need."

"Are Park and Jax still here?" I asked. They had been in the lounge with Nico, Nate, and Ty when we came to bed, but I had no idea if they stayed the night, as they had the night before.

“Yep. They texted me that they were sleeping in the lounge if we needed them. We’re not leaving you, pretty girl, not for anything.”

“Do you think...would they come in here and lie with us? I just...I feel safer when you’re all close. Maybe I could sleep if...”

“No explanation needed, Em,” Linc cut in. He very gently lifted me, mindful of my injuries, and laid me back on the bed. “Stay there, and I’ll get them, okay?”

“Thank you,” I watched as he climbed from the bed and quietly strode from the room. I longed to feel the anxious excitement at the sight of his spectacular body that I would have felt before, but instead, all I felt was the overwhelming and completely irrational fear of him leaving me alone for even a moment.

Thankfully before the panic could truly set in, Jax came through the door. He was dressed in shorts too, but he had a t-shirt on, with a huge ‘Superman’ symbol on the front.

“Hey, sweets,” he greeted in hushed tones. The bright smile on his face instantly soothed me somewhat, just as it always seemed to.

“Hey,” I greeted just as Park and Linc followed him in and closed the door behind them. Park was in a pair of sweatpants, and shirtless. He looked all sleep mussed, and I instantly felt bad for waking them up.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping, princess,” Parker playfully scolded as he approached.

“I tried, but I can’t,” I sighed. I was exhausted. I lost count of how many days it had been since I managed to sleep more than two consecutive hours, and with all the injuries on my body, it was taking a toll.

“We’re all here now,” Jax soothed as he laid down on my right side and pulled me into his side. “We’re going to watch over you so you can sleep.”

“I don’t know if I can sleep, but I...I do feel safer when you’re all here,” I admitted.

“We know, beautiful,” Parker crawled up from the bottom of the bed and laid at my other side, wrapping his arm possessively around my waist and placing a gentle kiss on the side of my neck. “That’s because you are safe when we’re all here. We’re not going to let anyone hurt you.”

Linc slid onto the bed last, laying down behind Jax and reaching over him to hold my hand.

“Park’s right, honey, you’re safe. Try to sleep for us now, okay?” Jax whispered.

“Promise you’ll all stay with me?”

“We promise. We’re not going anywhere,” Parker confirmed. It was all the assurance I needed, so I closed my eyes and allowed sleep to pull me under once again.

I slept better with the guys all there, the nightmares fewer and farther between, but I kept the three of them up for a sizable percentage of the night, so I wasn’t surprised when I woke just after nine the next morning and found them all still sound asleep and snoring. Parker still had his arm tightly wrapped around me, and my head was on Jax’s chest. I tried to move my aching arm and realized it was aching because it had been in the same place for hours, my hand firmly in Linc’s. The realization that they all not only stayed all night but held onto me, had me feeling emotional, and I had to blink back tears. It meant everything to me to have them all care so much. I may have been dealing with the worst ordeal I had ever been through, but at least, for the first time in my life, I didn’t have to face it all alone.

Not wanting to wake any of the guys, I very slowly and carefully extricated myself from each of them, then slid down to the foot of the bed. The movement to get there made my ribs throb angrily, but I refused to wake them when I kept them up all night.

Eventually, I made it off the bed, then just stood taking in the sight of the three guys I had inexplicable feelings for, all laid

looking so peaceful and relaxed in sleep. It seemed like so long since I had seen them carefree and happy.

They tried to hide it for my sake, but since they brought me out of that house, they all had a darkness about them too, and I hated it. I knew they all felt guilt over what happened, just like Nico did, but it wasn't anyone's fault I had been taken. Like I told Nico, it was always going to happen. Valton was Albanian mafia, which meant he had a lot of muscle and guns on his side. No one could have stopped him from coming for me, and if his own family hadn't sold him out, he likely never would have been stopped either. The guys could not feel guilt for not outwitting a monster like that. It was crazy. I was just damned grateful that they found a way to get to me and get me out of there. That was all that mattered.

Too tired and shaky to shower and dress yet, I grabbed Nico's hoodie from my closet and pulled it on over my pajamas. I knew my hair was wild because I could see and feel the strands that escaped from my ponytail as I slept fitfully but messing with it was not worth the pain. I had a huge egg on the back of my head from it being slammed into the side of that van and it hurt like a bitch when touched, so I just left my hair well alone and quietly slipped from the room.

Walking was painful because my knee was still badly bruised and swollen and the soles of my feet were a mess after I kicked the door and sides of that cage repeatedly for way too long.

Just that one thought of that damned cage was enough to have my thoughts spiraling back to that cold, dark hell.

"Em? What are you doing?" Ty's voice pulled me back to reality and I looked up as the image that had been overtaking my thoughts receded into the shadows of my mind. I looked up to find him hurrying toward me. He looked good in perfectly fitting jeans and a baby blue button-down. His arm was still in a cast, so his sleeve was rolled up above it, and his face still sported some dark bruising, but he even managed to pull off the 'beaten' look well.

“You should be resting,” he said as he reached me and wrapped his good arm around my waist, obviously noticing my struggle to stay upright.

I was just so exhausted and so sore all over. It also didn't help that eating had become even more of a chore because my throat was still raw and painful. Xander assured me it would heal, and Nico had been making soup and over-running the apartment with ice cream, but I just didn't feel up to eating. There was too much upset going on in my head.

“I can't sleep anymore. I needed to get up and move,” I replied.

“Where are the guys? I thought they were with you?” He started to move with me very slowly toward the living room as we spoke.

“They were, but they were still asleep, so I left them. They're all exhausted.”

“Well, I guess that means I get you all to myself for a while then.”

When we made it into the living room Ty made a beeline for the sofa and carefully lowered me down into my favorite corner seat. In a matter of seconds, he had me wrapped in blankets and pillows propped behind my head and under my swollen knee.

“Are you okay there? Warm enough?” he fussed.

“I'm fine, thanks, Ty.”

“Can I make you some breakfast?”

“I wouldn't say no to some tea,” I replied.

“And to eat?”

“I'm not hungry, Ty, and my throat still hurts.”

“You have to eat something. How about some fruit? Soft fruit? We have bananas and some ripe peaches. I could cut them up for you.”

I opened my mouth to decline, but then met his eyes and saw the pleading on his face. He was worried about me, which

meant they likely all were, and I hated putting them through it.

“Okay, I’ll give it a try. Thank you,” I agreed.

“Great! Here, load up the second ‘Avengers’ movie while I do that, and we can snuggle up and watch it,” he said as he handed me the TV control, then hurried into the kitchen.

“Where’s Nico?” I called as I started searching for the movie.

“He had to go up to the office, but he said you could call if you needed him, and he’d come right back. Do you want me to call him?”

“No. It’s okay. I was just wondering where he was.”

“Nate has been trying to track down Benitez, and he called Nico this morning to say he found something.”

“Juan?” I gasped, “Have they found him?”

“I don’t know, tiger. You’ll have to ask Nico when he gets back.”

I tried to relax, knowing there was no way Nico was leaving me to go after Juan or anyone else for a while. He promised me as much, and I knew he was terrified of not being close if I needed him. I also knew they were still trying to track down Juan and keeping an eye on the Albanians to make sure they didn’t come back at us in retaliation for Valton being killed. I overheard them discussing it all, the day after I got back when they all thought I was asleep. The guys wanted every end wrapped up so they could be sure we were all safe from the whole damned mess, which I got, but after everything that happened, I was even more terrified of any of them facing the monsters of my past. They all wanted me safe in the fortress of the Milite building, and I wanted them all safe in it too. It was our bubble of safety, and I never wanted anyone I cared about to leave it.

Trying not to let my anxieties over the topic rise and lead to even darker places, I focused on the task Ty had given me and found the movie. I hit play just as Ty walked in with a tray laden with plates, cups, and glasses. He made me tea and poured me OJ. To eat, he cut up the fruit he promised, but also

made some toast, and warmed some mini blueberry muffins. There were also a variety of yogurts on offer too.

“Hungry?” I chuckled as he laid it all out on the table before us.

“I just thought if there was a choice, you might try a little more,” he shrugged, “No pressure, but just try to eat something for me, ok? I’m worried about you, Xena. How will you fend off the villains of Washington Heights if you’re not at your fighting strength?” Of course, that worked, and Ty had me giggling, just as he always seemed able to do.

“I’ll do my best, if not for you, then for all the defenseless innocents I pledged to protect,” I laughed, playing along, and feeling lighter for it.

“I missed our marital bliss, Em,” Ty sighed as he settled on the sofa beside me and pulled me in for a one-armed hug.

“Me too,” I agreed.

We sat in comfortable silence for the next hour and watched the movie. Wanting to soothe Ty’s concerns, I nibbled on the food he laid out and even enjoyed the peaches and muffins, polishing off way more than I had in several days. I didn’t miss the way Ty watched everything that passed my lips, and the way he seemed more and more relaxed with every bite I ate.

We were almost at the end of the movie when an almighty commotion broke out, instantly scaring me. I grabbed Ty’s shirt tightly and flailed to turn and look to the apartment door, sure someone was breaking in.

“Em?” Linc’s voice boomed down the hall as Ty pulled me in tightly to his front to soothe me.

“It’s ok, Short Stuff. It’s just the guys freaking because they woke up, and you were gone. You’re okay...you’re safe,” he whispered as he kissed the top of my head, then he covered my ears with his hands and yelled, “Guys! She’s here, and she’s fine. Calm the fuck down. You’re scaring her.”

Linc stormed into the room a second later, still shirtless and looking half asleep, closely followed by Park and Jax.

“I...I’m okay,” I assured them as I looked at each of them. I was a little shaken from scaring myself and still clinging to Ty, but I was okay.

“You should have woken us,” Jax said as Linc took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second like he was trying to calm himself.

“Sorry. I just...I wanted to get up, and you all looked peaceful, so I left you,” I tried to explain.

“It’s fine, baby. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...I just...I guess I freaked when I woke and you weren’t there,” Linc said.

“We all did,” Park agreed as he placed a reassuring hand on Linc’s shoulder.

“I am okay, though. Ty made me breakfast, and we’re watching the second Marvel movie. You guys want to watch it?” I offered, hoping to calm them all.

“Did you eat anything, princess?” Parker asked instead.

“Yes.”

“She did good, Park; fruit, mini muffins, and a cup of tea,” Ty assured him.

“That’s good, angel,” Jax praised, and the smile on his face made me feel it had been worth forcing the food down, to see him relax a little.

“I might go and hit the gym for a while this morning. You okay if I head out for an hour, Em?” Linc asked.

“Of course. I’m fine here with Ty.”

“You should all go, blow off some steam. I’m not going anywhere. Em and I can continue the Marvel movie fest in peace.”

“You guys go,” Park said as he looked at Jax and Linc, “I’ll stay.”

“Ty’s right, Park. You guys haven’t left this apartment once since we got back, and it must be killing you all to miss the gym,” I countered, “Just go. Like Ty said, we’re fine here.”

“We don’t care about the gym Emilia, not when you need us,” Jax said.

“I know, and I’m so grateful to have you all here, especially like last night when I was scared, but right now, I really am doing okay. Ty made me eat more than I have in days, and gave me my pain meds, so I don’t hurt much either. I feel safe and comfortable here with him and the guys outside, so you can all go and do something normal for an hour. You can’t be with me every minute of every day, guys. We need to try and find normal again.”

“She’s right,” Linc agreed.

“In case you guys didn’t realize, that Em’s polite way of telling you to fuck off and give her room to breathe,” Ty laughed.

“Ty!” I cried as I looked at my guys, hoping they didn’t believe him. “It wasn’t. I love having you guys here.”

“We know, princess. It’s okay. Smudge is right though. You must need a little space from us all crowding you. We’ll go for an hour,” Parker agreed with a smile I hadn’t seen from him since before I was taken.

“I’m gonna run up to the office first, see how Nico and Nate are doing,” Jax added.

“Do you know what Nate found?” I asked.

“A lead on Juan Benitez was all he said. Nothing for you to be worried about. Whatever it is, we’ll pass it to the FBI. We’re letting them track the fucker down now. None of us are leaving you.”

“Okay,” I sighed with relief. I didn’t want any of them going against Juan ever again, not after Nico was shot the last time.

“You just rest and have fun with Ty. We won’t be long, and if you need us for anything, no matter how small, you call us, and we can be here in minutes, okay?” Linc lectured as he strode over and crouched beside me.

“Promise,” I whispered, wanting him to feel reassured and focus on having a break from everything. He leaned in and

kissed my lips chastely, the most any of them had done since I got back, not that I was ready for more. I needed time to deal with everything that had been done to me before I even thought about being physical with any of them, but at the same time, I missed the little bits of intimate contact we had started to have before I was taken.

They all turned back to my room then, where they each had a few changes of clothes stored in the back of my closet.

“Those guys are all crazy for you, Em,” Ty whispered once they were gone.

“I’m crazy for all of them too, but that’s the problem, isn’t it?” I sighed. I lay my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, suddenly feeling exhausted.

“Just you wait and see, tiger. I’m pretty sure it’s not going to be a problem anymore,” I opted not to reply to that, just not in the right place to worry about my relationship with the guys at that moment. I cared for them all, and in the future, I hoped whatever we had, could go somewhere great, but it all just felt so out of reach at that moment.

The guys left ten minutes later, all changed into workout clothes, and each kissed me before they left.

I had to admit, I did feel a little relief when they were gone, and the place was quiet, the only sound was the TV.

I needed the guys all around me for the last couple of days, needed them close to maintain any kind of calm and sanity, but now that they were gone, I felt able just to relax a little more, not worried about keeping it together and hiding anything for fear of upsetting any of them or making them feel any more unnecessary guilt over what happened.

“You okay?” Ty asked when I looked up and found him watching me.

“I think so.”

“They’ve been hovering a lot, and I get why. We were all terrified when you were missing, but It’s okay to need a break from them, you know?”

“I think I was ready for a break,” I agreed, “I mean, they’ve been great, and I need them most of the time, but when they’re here, I have to...o-or at least I feel like I have to be okay all of the time.”

“No Em,” Ty groaned as he turned to face me and took my hand loosely in his. “You don’t have to pretend to be okay for anyone. You just feel what you need to feel and screw everyone else. You’re the one who went through all that shit. You do whatever you need to do to get through it,” he said way more seriously than he usually was.

“I just...I don’t want them to blame themselves any more than they already are. I want to be okay, so they can be okay,” I tried to explain. My throat was tightening with each word as tears threatened.

“Jesus Xena. Stop worrying about the guys. They’re big boys and can handle their own issues. You have way too much going on in that head of yours to try and fix them or anyone else. They’d go ape if they knew you were hiding what you’re going through to protect them. They don’t need you to do that.”

“I just want it all to be over...or n-not real, like it never happened. I thought...I thought I was tough, Ty. After everything Juan did to me when I was a kid, I thought I could handle anything, but this...I don...” a sob burst from me, cutting me off, and I curled into Ty as more sobs followed. I was racking with each one as Ty wrapped his arms around me, as much as he could with his cast, and held me against his chest. “I don’t th-think I can deal w-with this though,” I finally got out.

Ty held me as the worst of the sobs died down, then he pulled me up and held my face between his hands, wiping the tears from my eyes with his thumbs.

“Listen to me, Em. You are the strongest person I have ever known. You have lived a life that would have destroyed most people, but not you. It just made you stronger and braver. I have seen how amazing you are every single day since I met you and I know...absolutely know that you can handle this. I

don't even know everything that happened to you, but I don't need to know to tell you without a doubt that you can get past it, because you are one of the most resilient, hard-headed, and tough people on this Earth. You will find your way through all of this, and you will be happy again. Stop doubting your brilliance, tiger."

I wanted to believe him, believe every word he said, mainly because I felt how much he meant every word, but I couldn't. How could I ever get through what happened and come out the other end when every time I closed my eyes, I was strapped to that table in that bathroom, or under Valton's foot, turning blue and unable to breathe? How could I be happy again when every time I swallowed anything, I felt his fingers being forced down my throat or every time the lights went out, I was back in that cage in that attic, with spiders crawling all over me? How could I forget everything that was constantly bombarding my mind without my permission? How could I forget when I didn't even know exactly what they had done to me?

For twenty-two years, I thought I was in hell, and I had been proud of myself for every day I survived. Now I knew that had just been the warm-up because I spent three days in the real hell, and it had been enough to destroy me more than Juan ever could have.

"Em? Are you okay? Talk to me, short stuff," Ty coaxed, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts a little but not completely.

"Yeah," I whispered as I tried to focus on him and get out of my head. "I'm...I'm good," I forced myself to take a breath, realizing only as I spoke that I was breathing way too fast.

"I'm sorry, hun. I shouldn't have gotten into all of this. We were supposed to be having fun," he sighed as he sat up to reach for the TV control on the table. As he released me, the air conditioning kicked in, likely because the guys had been cranking the heat for me, and it hit the maximum temperature. I heard it because it always made a slight 'clunk' when it started up. I didn't really think anything of it until the cool air blasted down on me. It hit my face, and bare arms, and I was instantly taken back to that room, my arms restrained above

my head and all my weight on them and my toes, my wet hair dripping down my back as my whole body vibrated with shivers. My teeth chatter so hard that I get a headache. I felt the icy tears run down my face as the cold air blasted down over me. I felt all the pain and terror exactly as I felt it that day, the panic that the thugs or Valton would come back and do something even worse to me.

“Em? Emilia?” I could hear Ty, but it was faint, like he was far away from me. Then a hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped away, leaping from the seat I suddenly found myself sitting on. I looked around as I fought my way out of the blankets I was wrapped in and got my feet under me, but nothing made sense. I was dizzy, and my chest was burning. I could barely see straight, and I knew I was shaking because my whole being was vibrating. My mind continued to flash between Nico’s living room, and the room where I was cuffed to the wall.

“Emilia, just calm down, honey. You’re okay. You’re safe at home,” Ty’s voice said, but I couldn’t see him as my mind continued to flit, making me crazy with confusion.

Terrified, I started to back away, not even sure who from or where I was going, but just needing to feel safe. I forced myself to focus on the room where I wasn’t restrained. Seeking safety, I ran for the corner, where there was a space small enough between the wall and a bookshelf for me to hide. I scurried into the tiny space and only just fit as I curled up, burying my head into the tops of my knees, and wrapping my arms protectively over it. I clamped my eyes shut, just wanting it all to be over, but still, the images of that room played, as my fears rose, and my pain increased. I was back in hell, with no clue how to get out again.

CHAPTER 2

NICO

“You guys okay if I head down to check on Mia for a while?” I asked as I walked past Jax’s office where he and Nate were now working.

Nate called me that morning with a lead on Juan fucking Benitez. While we had all been doing all we could to take care of Mia, Nate had been trying to get a lead on the asshole and keep a watch out for any Albanians headed our way. I was confident the Albanians wouldn’t retaliate for Marku, but with what Mia had been through, I wasn’t willing to take risks.

Then there was Benitez. I wanted him off the streets. I had no idea if he was still a threat to Mia, but again, I wasn’t willing to take any risks. We all agreed to track the fucker, then turn it over to Ritter, Nate’s FBI contact, and let them take him in. With the charges they had on him, there was no way he’d live to see the outside of prison walls ever again.

Nate had been monitoring Benitez’s email accounts, among other things, knowing eventually he would have to reach out to someone, now that he was on the run and without most of his men. That morning he had done just that and contacted his ‘employee’ at the docks, asking about a delivery, clearly wanting to grab a shipment he had coming in to make some fast cash. We had been waiting all morning for the reply to come through, detailing the shipment, but there had been nothing.

Now Jax was looking through all incoming shipments into the New York port, where this guy worked trying to pinpoint one linked to Juan Benitez. At least we knew he was in New York. I’d already given Ritter that detail and he assured me they were closing in on Benitez, which was a relief.

“Sure man, go. I’ll call you if anything comes up,” Nate replied. I gave them a chin left and hurried to the elevator.

I was anxious to get back to Mia. That morning was the first time since we brought her home two days ago that I had left her, and I had hated it. I knew I couldn't be at her side forever, but for now, when she was hurting and as scared and shaken up as she was, I needed to be there for her as much as she would allow me.

It tore me to pieces the second I saw her in that fucking cage, restrained and gagged, left in the freezing cold completely naked. I couldn't even comprehend what she had been through, and I hated myself for allowing it to happen. I wanted to find Valton Marku and kill him with my bare hands, but I couldn't because Linc already put a bullet between his eyes. I couldn't even go to her because she hadn't wanted me to see her like that. Instead, I walked away and allowed my brothers to take care of her. It had been an unbearable hell just waiting for them to bring her out so I could see just how badly she was hurt.

The relief I felt once we got her home and Xander checked her over, assuring us she would heal eventually, had been the greatest of my life. I understood everything else Xander said about the trauma of everything she endured, and how it would be the harder thing to deal with. With my childhood, then time in the military, I knew trauma, but as long as Mia was there and healthy, we could deal with all of that. I could get her through anything if she was there by my side. She was my sister, one I lived for twenty-two years not knowing, but now that I had her, I could never lose her.

As soon as I walked into my place and heard Ty's voice, I knew something was wrong.

"Em? Please look at me," he was pleading, sounding terrified and desperate. I hurried in and closed the door as quietly as I could, the whole time taking in the scene in the corner of my living room.

"Ty?" I said softly, not wanting to scare Mia any more than she already looked.

"Nico! Thank God!" Ty cried as he jumped up from where he had been crouched before her and turned to me. "I don't know

what happened. We were talking and then she just zoned out. I tried to get her attention and she just...freaked. She won't even look at me."

"It's ok. She's having an anxiety attack," I explained softly, keeping a tight hold on my own panic at seeing her so terrified. I recognized the signs of an anxiety attack. I had seen my fair share, including a few from my brothers after the IED explosion that ended our careers. "How long has she been like this?" I asked as I pulled my gun from my holster and placed it on the dining table, then moved slowly toward them.

"I...I'm not sure. A few minutes?"

"Let me try and get through to her. Can you get me a blanket and a bottle of water?" I asked, more to give him something to do to calm his panic than anything else.

"Yeah," he nodded, then hurried off.

"Mia?" I said softly as I dropped to my knees a few feet away from her. She was curled into herself and squeezed into the tiny gap between my bookshelf and the wall. Her whole body was shaking, and I could see her pajama pants were soaked with tears where her head lay on her knees. It was her breathing that worried me most though. It was way too fast, and her gasps were short and desperate. She'd pass out if it went on. "Sweetheart? Can you hear me? It's Nico. I'm right here," I spoke slowly and tried to keep my tone gentle, not wanting to startle her. "We're at home right now, Mia and you're safe. Can you feel the wood floor beneath you, and my bookshelf at your back? Can you hear my voice right now and smell the cinnamon plug-ins you made me buy so the place would smell like Christmas? You're home, *Tesoro*. I'm here and I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

For a moment I worried she wasn't hearing me, but then her toes wiggled against the floorboards, and I knew she was coming around.

"Mia, can you look at me?" I asked softly.

"It...th-the...air con...can you...I can't," she whimpered between her fight to breathe. I didn't understand why, but it

was clear she wanted it off, since it was on already. I looked up to Ty who heard and was already running to the controls.

“Ty is turning it off now, sweetheart, okay?”

“O-k-a-y,” she started trying to get a little more air in as the air-conditioner powered down and the room became silent.

“That’s good, Mia. Just keep trying to take slow, deep breaths for me,” I coaxed. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually, her jerky breaths were a little deeper, though still way too fast. Feeling sure she was back in reality I slowly reached out and placed my hand over hers where she dropped it to her side.

“Can you look at me now, *Tesoro*?” I pushed gently. She took one more, jerky inhaled, then slowly turned her head just enough for her eyes to look up into mine. I slowly lifted my hand and pushed her wild hair back out of her face, tucking it behind her ears.

“Hey,” I whispered, forcing a smile for her benefit.

“Nico,” she rasped; her throat still rough from whatever she had been through. We still had no idea of specifics though and my imagination was running wild and killing me with every notion it came up with.

“I’m here, sweetheart. Your hand feels frozen. Can you let me pick you up and get you warm?” I asked.

“O-okay,” she agreed shakily. She lowered her other arm and lifted her head.

I moved a little closer and slowly slid my hands under her knees and back, then lifted her up. As I stood, she crumpled against me and rested her head on my shoulder. She was even paler than before, and she looked completely wiped-out. She grabbed a handful of the side of my shirt and clung to it tightly.

“Bring that blanket, please Ty,” I instructed as I moved over to the sofa and sat with her on my lap.

“Just gonna cover you up, tiger, get you nice and warm,” he explained as he draped a thick wool blanket over her and tucked it in all around.

“Th-thanks Ty,” she whispered when he was done, and I was relieved to hear her say his name. She was back, but she was exhausted.

“Just try and slow your breathing down now, Mia. It’s still way too fast. Breathe in and hold it for two seconds, then out for two. Can you do that?”

She nodded and I listened as she tried hard to hold each breath for two seconds. It took longer than I would have thought, but eventually, she calmed enough to do it, slowing her breathing.

Ty sat at the other end of the sectional, just watching her, his face filled with worry.

“She’s okay,” I tried to reassure him as she finally started to breathe at a more reasonable pace.

He nodded, but his gaze remained on her. It was clear that he cared for her very much, and I was grateful for it. After everything Mia suffered in her life, she needed as many good people in her corner as she could get, people who would care for her, love her, and protect her. I knew Ty would do all those things. It was who he was.

“Nico. I...I’m sor...”

I cut Mia off quickly, scared she’d upset herself further. “Not now *Tesoro*. You’re exhausted. Just rest. Ty and I are here with you. You don’t need to worry about anything but getting some rest, okay?”

“Listen to your sexy brother, Em, rest. We can talk later if that’s what you want. We’re not going anywhere,” Ty added.

It worked, when Mia’s mouth turned up in a little smile at his remark, then she stopped fighting and allowed her eyes to close. Within minutes she was quietly snoring, deep in sleep.

“Thanks Ty,” I whispered once I was sure she was out.

“What for? I was useless? I didn’t have a clue what to do,” he sighed.

“You make her smile. She’s going to need that more than you could know over the coming months. She’s going to need you.”

“I’ll be here Nico. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I appreciate it.”

“She’s my best friend. Where else would I be?” he said simply. After a few moments of silence, he spoke again, “Why do you think that happened?”

“I don’t know, but it definitely had something to do with the air conditioning. When did it come on?” I asked.

“Just before this started. I didn’t even consider it, but...yeah, that could have been what set her off to begin with. The timing was right.”

“We need to get her to talk to someone. We can’t take care of her if we don’t know what could trigger her,” I sighed. Maybe I could speak to Livy, I thought. If anyone could understand what Mia was trying to cope with, it was her.

“I’ll make sure the air conditioner is shut off for now, so that won’t cause this again.”

“Thanks. Where are Linc, and Parker?” I was shocked not to find them there fussing over her as they had been since the second, we got her back. While I was happy that they were there for her, and as much as I saw how deeply they each cared for her, I found it very hard to step back from taking care of her.

Ever since she came into my life, I felt that she needed me. She had been strong and fought to be independent, but she had also been desperately alone and scared. I had seen the fear in her that very first night, and for every moment since, I had done all I could to make her feel safe and protected. I tried to be there for her in every way she needed, and she had very slowly allowed me to, to the point where she started to turn to me when she needed to. She allowed me to take care of her, and I loved every moment of it. I missed so much of her life; years in which she suffered more than I could bear to think about. That was why I was determined to take care of her, because she deserved that care, and so much more. She deserved to feel loved and safe, and I refused to fail her in that respect. Yes, taking care of her soothed a need in me too, a

need to protect and nurture, but it was more than that. She was my baby sister, and I had this overwhelming instinct that refused to be ignored, that she was mine to protect.

I failed her again, by allowing her to be taken, and I would never stop beating myself up over that, but worse still, I couldn't assuage my guilt because the guys were taking away my ability to take care of her.

I had known it would happen – that she'd fall in love one day and I'd have to let go, but I never expected it to be so soon, and I never thought it would be in one of the most traumatic times of her life.

I found it so hard to step aside and allow them to take over that role, but I had been forced to, by the way they were with her, and by the need I saw in her eyes for them. They made her feel more safe and secure than I could. They soothed her when she was scared or upset. She needed them more than she needed me, and as much as I hated it, I knew I had to accept it. I would always be in her life. No one could ever push me away, and that was what I held on to. She still needed me; shown by the way she was contentedly sleeping in my arms. It felt good to know that, even if it did make me a selfish asshole.

“Em told them to go to the gym and take a break. I think she just needed some space. She let go after they left and opened up to me. I think she's been putting a brave face on for them – for all of us - and it just got too much.”

“I've noticed that. She smiles, but she's forcing it,” I agreed.

“She needs to talk to someone, a professional. She can't deal with everything that happened if it's just trapped in her head, eating at her,” Ty wisely pointed out.

“I agree. I'm going to call Livy, see if she can come over in a few days when Mia's feeling up to it. If anyone can give her good advice in this situation, it's her.”

“I think that's a good idea but talk to her first, Nico. She won't like it if we start organizing things behind her back. She values honesty.”

“I will,” I agreed, knowing he was right. Mia had been through hell in her life. She was strong and tough. Sheltering and babying her wasn’t the way to get her through this.

“I’m gonna head next door to shower and change while she’s sleeping. You gonna stay with her?”

“Yeah. I’m good. Thanks again Ty, for everything.”

“No thanks needed,” he stood and headed out; the door beeping locked behind him.

I looked down and smiled at how peaceful she looked asleep. It was the calmest I had seen her since she had been taken and I found comfort in it, as I assured myself, she would overcome this and be happy once again. I would make fucking sure of it.

EMILIA

I jumped awake, panicked at the sound of raised voices. As soon as my eyes opened, I sat bolt upright and realized Nico was still holding me.

The raised voice was Parker’s. He and Linc were coming back into the apartment and both looking at me in Nico’s arms with alarm.

“What the fuck happened?” Park demanded.

“Ssh. You’re okay sweetheart. It’s just the guys,” Nico soothed at the same time. He placed a hand on my shoulder and urged me to lay back again, which I did. My whole body was aching.

“Park! Keep it down,” Linc hissed, then he was in front of me, crouched so we were eye to eye.

“You okay, baby? Did something happen?” he asked more gently.

“I’m good,” I replied, but my voice was hoarse, my throat even sorer than it had been.

“She had a panic attack, a bad one, but she’s okay now. Just exhausted, hence her trying to sleep,” Nico threw a glare at Parker as he spoke.

“Sorry,” Parker approached and stood behind Linc. “I’m sorry princess. I just panicked.”

“It’s okay. I really am fine,” I croaked.

“I’ll get you some water,” Parker hurried off to the kitchen.

“Do you know what brought it on? Should we talk about it?” Linc asked, looking from me to Nico and back.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to decide if I had the strength to talk about what happened in that house. There was no way I could tell them everything, but I also didn’t want to lie to any of them.

“I...it was the air conditioning,” I replied honestly.

Parker returned with a bottle of water, which he unscrewed and handed to me.

I took a few small sips, wincing with the pain each swallow caused to my poor abused throat. I really needed to stop shouting and crying or it would never heal. That was easier said than done though, with the nightmares and flashbacks I was dealing with.

“Ty and I guessed that was it,” Nico said, but the guys looked puzzled. Who could blame them?

“I don’t understand, firecracker.”

“It...it was a...a p-punishment,” I whispered. I dropped my eyes to my fidgeting hands, unable to look any of them in the eye as I recounted that awful day. “The first time I woke up there...my clothes were gone, and I only had my...my underwear on. He c-came into the room and he g-got mad. He dragged me into the bathroom and threw me u-under the sh-shower. He set it to cold and held me there with a foot...on m-my back. It went on and on. I was s-so cold,” I was crying as I felt Valton’s foot pressing on my back again as my body shivered wildly on those freezing hard tiles.

“It’s ok, Em. Just take your time. We’re all here with you,” Linc soothed as his hand gripped my knee and squeezed reassuringly.

“When he st-stopped, these two men came in and grabbed me. They...they cut off my underwear, so I w-was naked, then they put cuffs...on my wrists. The cuffs hooked to a bolt in the

wall in the bedroom...like high up so I could only stand on my toes. They left me there, still dripping wet and shivering, then the...the air conditioner came on. I don't know how long I was there. I passed out eventually, but that's why... today, when I felt the air conditioning on my skin again...it just...I lost it," Tears were running down my cheeks, but I refused to allow any sobs to follow. I had fallen apart enough for one day.

"I'm so sorry, Emmy," Parker whispered. He stepped forward and brushed his knuckle gently over the tear tracks on my right cheek.

"Mia, I know Xander asked this, but I want to be sure. They didn't...did they touch you? Hurt you in *that* way? It's okay to tell us sweetheart if they did. We need to know so we can help you."

"I wasn't r-raped, Nico," I whispered, though I wasn't a hundred percent sure on that, and the issues I was having when I peed said otherwise, but I couldn't talk with them about it. "One of the men...he tried to get handsy with me, but the other one stopped him...said Valton would kill them if he caught them touching me."

"Motherfuckers!" Linc hissed.

"I think maybe it's time to think about finding someone professional to do some therapy with, *Tesoro*. Everything you've been through, not just Marku, but everything before with Juan too, it needs to be processed so you can find a way to move on from it. You know you have all of us, but I think you need more than that."

"Xander said he knew someone...a woman who helped Livy. Maybe...maybe we could ask him?" I suggested. I wasn't sure how I felt about talking to a stranger about my life, but Nico was right, it was time to deal with the mess of darkness that was swirling around my head.

"I'll call him, get him to set something up," Linc offered.

"Where's Ty?" I asked, as I looked around for him.

“He just went next door to shower and change. He’ll be back,” Nico replied.

“Did I freak him out?”

“A little, but he was okay. He was just worried about you, like we all are.”

“I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“Hey, you are not a mess,” Linc scolded gently. “You have been through so much, Em, and I think you’re dealing with it amazingly well. I am, as always, amazed at how strong you are. You’re doing great, so stop doubting yourself.”

“I just want to be me again,” I sighed.

“You just need to give it time. Like Linc said, you’ve been through a lot. You need time to let your injuries heal, and for your mind to find a way to deal with it all. Just give yourself a break, beautiful. You’ve only been home a few days,” Parker added.

I knew he was right. It was hard to just get up and be the Emilia I was before, when I was so battered and bruised; just standing was a battle. I did need to give myself time to heal physically. Mentally, I knew it would take a lot longer, and I was skeptical that I would ever really be who I was before, not after everything that happened, but I hated being as weak as I felt in that moment. I had always been small, and quiet. I cowered beneath Juan and his minions and did as they bade for the most part, but I felt strong too, because I took it all and found a way to carry on. I got up each morning and went to school, no matter how beaten I was beneath my clothes. I made good grades and took care of my mom. I found a way to survive, and it made me feel a strength I hadn’t even realized I held within me, until Valton and his men had stolen it from me in that house over those three days. Now my strength was gone, and I just felt so very vulnerable.

“Will you... would you guys teach me to defend myself?” I asked. I needed to start finding ways to build back that small reserve of strength again. I needed to feel able to protect myself and not have to rely on others to do it for me.

“You don’t need to defend yourself, Mia. We’re not going to let anything happen to you again. I’m not taking any more risks with your safety,” Nico growled.

“I know Nico, and I love you for that, but things happen in life – especially to me,” I turned so I could see him properly, “I hope that you’re right and I will never need to use self-defense, but I would rather know it, and never need it. It will help me feel stronger too if I know I can handle myself. Please Nico. I...I need this. I don’t want to be weak anymore.”

“You have never been weak, Emilia,” Linc said firmly. “But if you want to learn some self-defense, then you’ll learn some. Jax is the best person to teach you though. He’s into martial arts and he’s the best at hand to hand between us.”

“Nico?” I looked up to him again.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt,” he finally gave in. “But not until you’re fully healed, okay sweetheart? You need to give those ribs time to fix before you start pushing yourself.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

“We’ll talk to Jax about it,” Parker added.

“Thank you, guys.”

It would be a start. No more being weak. I was going to find a way to drag myself out of the darkness Valton dragged me into and find my strength. I knew it wouldn’t happen overnight, but I also knew it would happen. I refused to give up. I had been a victim for too long. No more.

CHAPTER 3

EMILIA

“Guys! Just go! I promise you I’m fine. I’m just going to watch some TV, maybe bake something later. Ty said he’d come around after his meeting this morning, so I won’t even be alone for long,” I cried three days later as we all sat at the dining table eating the breakfast Nico cooked.

For those three days they had all been in the apartment with me - Jax, Linc, and Parker sleeping in my room with me every night to chase away my nightmares. We all binge watched boxsets and just relaxed, but the guys were fussing over me so much and I was finding it suffocating. I loved having them all there, and I would never take that for granted after so many years alone, but I just needed them to back off a little.

That was why the night before I declared they were all getting back to work. There was no reason for them to be at home with me any longer. I could get around fine. My ribs and knee still hurt, but not more than I could handle. The headaches from my concussion were a bitch, but they were happening less frequently and even if the guys were there with me, there was little they could do. The best thing for all of us, was if we just got back a little piece of normal, starting with them all going back to work.

“We’ll go when Ty gets here then, baby,” Linc countered.

I knew they didn’t want to leave me, but they were being crazy. There was security outside the apartment twenty-four hours a day, in a highly secure building. Nothing was going to happen.

“No. This is getting ridiculous guys,” I declared. “I know you’re worried about me, but I’m doing okay. I haven’t had an anxiety attack since that one with Ty and Nico three days ago. I’m healing well and I can do everything for myself now. I just want things to get back to some semblance of what they were before.”

“We understand, Mia, but what if you’re alone and you have another anxiety attack? Or if you fall asleep and have a nightmare? I just don’t think you’re ready to be alone yet,” Nico argued.

“If I start to feel anxious, I can call you. You’re two minutes away, so that’s a non-issue. As for nightmares, I can handle it if it happens. I dealt with nightmares for years before I met you guys. I can deal with those too. I know you’re worried, but I must be able to stand on my own two feet at some point.”

“I agree, but not yet, princess. You’re rushing things too much. I also agree, us all getting back into reality is a good idea, but we’ll wait for smudge. Once he’s here we’ll all head to the office. That way you’ll get your piece of normal, and we won’t be out of our minds with worry,” Parker bartered, like this was some kind of business deal.

“And what about the other days?” I cried, annoyed. “You can’t ask Ty to give up his life just to babysit me?”

“Let’s just say for the next week, someone stays here with you. It doesn’t have to be Ty. One of us can stay while the others work. After a week we can talk it over again, okay?”

“No, not okay, Parker! I’m so sick of you all seeing me as weak,” I was tearful as I pouted like a spoiled toddler, but I just felt so defeated.

“Em, not one of us sees you as weak, angel. You’re the strongest of all of us. I see how hard you’re fighting to overcome this, but you can’t just click your fingers and be okay again. That’s not how trauma works. You have to give it time and while you do, we want to be here for you, supporting you. You fought on your own for a lot of years, but you’re not on your own anymore, so just let us help, okay?” Jax said calmly. He was sitting beside me, and I felt comforted as he took my hand and held it in his.

“He’s right, firecracker. It’s not a hardship to take care of you. It’s an honor, so just let us in and stop fighting it. We care about you and that’s not gonna change, no matter what,” Linc added.

“I’ll try,” I acquiesced. How could I not when they were all being so sweet about it?

“Why don’t you go and get dressed? Smudge will probably be here by the time you finish. It was an early morning meeting he had with his editor,” Parker suggested.

“Okay,” I agreed as I stood. I looked between them all and felt bad for trying to push them away. “I really am grateful to you all for everything you do for me. I don’t want you to doubt that. I just...I want to be strong again too.”

“We know, sweetheart. You will be. Just stop trying to rush it though. Allow your body and mind the time it needs to heal first,” Nico replied.

I nodded, knowing he was right. I was trying to rush things, but that was because I hated every moment that I was as weak and vulnerable as I felt.

I leaped awake with a start two days later. I looked around trying to work out what caused me to wake, and realized it was morning already. The guys, who had all been asleep around me when I dropped off in the early hours of the morning, were all gone, and I was alone.

Then I realized what woke me as shooting pain shot through my core. It had been getting worse and worse over the last few nights, but this was unbearable. I still had no idea what was causing the pain and I had been hoping if I pretended it wasn’t happening, it would go away eventually. I didn’t want to know. I couldn’t handle knowing what those sick bastards had done to me while I’d been drugged, but it seemed to pretend it was no longer going to work.

It was agony to make myself get out of bed, and I was clammy and shaking as I pulled on the softest yoga pants I could find, along with my comfort blanket - otherwise known as Nico’s hoodie. In too much pain to shower or really do anything, I just scraped my hair into a messy bun on top of my head, then I slowly headed for the living room, praying the guys and Nico had all cleared out.

I was relieved to find Ty sitting on his own at the island in the kitchen, working away on his laptop. He had been with me every day since the guys went back to the office. He worked from his laptop, so he assured me he was happy to hang out. He wouldn't be now though. I hated laying my latest drama on him, but he was the only one I could tell, and I knew I needed help.

"Hey," I whispered as I tentatively moved toward him.

"What's wrong?" he asked the second he looked up at me.

"Why are you all sweaty? And you look off-color too. Are you sick?" He jumped to his feet and was instantly at my side, leading me to sit on the stool beside where he had been sitting.

I opened my mouth to try and explain, but no words came out. Instead, a sob erupted from me. I put my hands on the counter and rested my head on them as I just sobbed.

"Em? Come on tiger, tell me what's going on."

I could feel his hand rubbing soothing circles on my back. It took me a moment to compose myself enough, then I lifted my head and looked to where he stood beside me.

"S-something's wrong Ty," I whimpered. "I...I th-think they... they raped me," I admitted, in a whisper so small I wasn't sure he would even hear it.

"Fuck," he whispered, then I was in his arms, being held and comforted as I just cried. "It's going to be okay. It's all going to be just fine," he soothed, but how could it be? He held me as I cried for quite some time, then as I calmed, he held my forearms and lifted me so he could look into my eyes.

"Tell me everything, honey," he said softly.

I took a deep breath and nodded, knowing I had to. I needed his help, and he was the only one I felt comfortable talking to about it.

"Th...there was a doctor...or at least, Valton said he was a doctor anyway. They br-brought me into this big bathroom and there was a table...like a medical table, you know?" My voice was trembling badly as I spoke, but Ty's hands on my arms helped me keep going. "I was strapped down...to the table. I

fought when I realized what they were going...to do...saw the...supplies.”

“Jesus Em.”

“They...they drugged me, Ty. I passed out and I don’t know... I just...I was sore, down there afterward, but I don’t know what they...what happened. And now...something’s wrong... down there,” I whimpered. “It hurts so much, and I think...I think they r-raped me.”

Once again, I was in Ty’s arms, being held even tighter as I just cried and cried all over him. “I just...I don’t want to tell the guys, Ty...I can’t!”

“I’m sorry Em,” Ty whispered as he held me. “So sorry. I’ve got you. I’ve got you now,” he repeated his words over and over, just soothing me until I found the strength to take a breath again.

“What am I going to do?” I murmured into his shirt eventually.

“We’re going to call Xander,” Ty said, perfectly calm. “He’ll be able to set us up with whoever you need to see.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital Ty. I’m...I’m scared.”

“I know, but I’m going to be there with you. I promise I won’t leave you. We’ll deal with this together, okay? And when you’re ready, I’ll help you tell the guys.”

“I can’t!” I cried. “They blame themselves. This will make it so much worse.”

“They need to know, Em. You can’t deal with this without telling the men you love. They have to know if you guys are ever going to have a relationship,” I knew he was right, but it was too much to worry about at that moment. “Let’s just get you taken care of first, okay? We can worry about all of that later.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

“I’m going to call Xander and Nate.”

“Nate?”

“We need some security to watch your back while we’re at the hospital. Anyone who works for the guys is going to tell them where we went. If we explain things to Nate, he’ll keep it secret until you’re ready.”

“Why can’t we just slip out?” I asked, hating the idea of having to tell anyone else.

“I’m not taking that risk with you, after what happened. Plus, there’s no way the guys outside the apartment will let us leave alone. Nate is our best option.”

“Okay but can you...will you tell him? I can’t...not again,” I whimpered.

“Of course, I will. Don’t worry. I’m going to handle everything, and get you taken care of. I know it’s terrifying, but I’m here short stuff, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Ty made me a smoothie and settled me on the sofa with the TV on, telling me to try and drink as much as I could. Then he made his phone calls in the kitchen. I could hear the murmur of him speaking, but not the words, and I was relieved for that. I didn’t want to know what he was telling Xander and Nate, not specifically.

Around thirty minutes later Ty walked in with my chucks and my coat. He already had his boots and jacket on, and I knew it was time.

“Okay tiger. Xander arranged for us to see a gynecologist at the hospital. He’s going to meet us there, too. I spoke to Nate, and he told the guys we wanted to go shopping, but you were nervous about the security you don’t know, so that’s why we wanted Nate.”

“Was he...mad?” I asked shakily.

“What? No! Of course not. He was worried sick about you, but not mad. Why would anyone be mad? Nothing that happened is your fault.”

“I just...I should have fought harder...I sh-should have gotten away,” I whimpered.

“You had no chance of escaping from there, Em. The guys said they took down a dozen men around that house when they went in. You fought as hard as you could, but they drugged you, tiger. Do not blame yourself. You haven’t done a damned thing wrong,” Ty growled, sounding so different from his usual playful, upbeat self.

“I’m so sc-scared, Ty. I don’t think I w-want to know what they did,” I whimpered.

“Together, remember? We’re going to do this together. I’m going to be with you through every moment if you want me to be. I’ve got you,” he was crouched before me now, his hand reassuringly squeezing my uninjured knee. All I could manage in reply was a nod, but his words helped. I had no choice in getting help, but I stood a better chance of getting through it with Ty at my side.

“Let’s get your shoes on, ok? Nate’s going to be here any minute.”

NATE

As soon as the elevator doors closed on the office I doubled over, bracing my hands on my knees and took a few deep breaths.

Taking Ty’s call, in front of the others, had been hard to handle, hearing him say Emilia had likely been raped, was not an easy thing to hear while hiding your emotions. But Ty had been clear she wasn’t ready to tell the others yet and I had to respect that for now. She needed me and I wouldn’t let her down.

Parker, Linc, and Jax hadn’t been happy their girl called me to escort her shopping, and not them, but I made up some bullshit about her needing clothes for dates with them, to reason as to why they couldn’t go. They had taken that, delighted that she was willing to leave the apartment, and think about things like dates again. I hated lying to them, especially when they all looked so hopeful about Emilia getting better, but I did it for her because she had been through enough. If she wanted to keep this from the guys for now, then I wasn’t going to deny

her that, but I would try to convince her to tell them sooner rather than later.

When I walked into Nico's apartment Ty was just helping Emilia with her coat. She looked up at me and her eyes were red and puffy. She looked clammy and pallid.

"Hey trouble," I greeted, trying to feign a smile for her.

"Hi," she whispered, but the sound barely came out and her bottom lip was trembling as she fought not to cry. It was more than I could take.

I may not have been as involved in Emilia's life since she came to live at Milite as my brothers, but I cared for her a great deal. She had become like the little sister I never had, and I hated seeing her in pain.

I hurried over and pulled her into my arms, needing to comfort her.

"We've got you," I whispered as she wrapped her arms around my waist and clung to me tightly. Her whole body was shaking, and she was way too hot. I guessed she had a fever and wondered if maybe the pain she was in, was an infection.

"I'm s-sorry I made you lie to the guys," she cried.

"Don't worry about that. Right now, all that matters is taking care of you, okay?"

She nodded as she stepped back and swiped at her tear-stained face. Ty stepped up beside her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"We should go. Xander will be waiting for us," he said as he threw me a pained look. It was obvious this was killing him just as much as it was killing me.

If there was anything I could do to go back and take every bit of Emilia's pain from her, I would do it in a heartbeat. She suffered so much in her life so far and yet she survived through it all. She was brave and tough. She also came through it all with a kind heart which was a miracle. She deserved to be happy, not broken as she looked in that moment.

As we headed out of the apartment, I silently swore to do all I could to help her through this and keep her safe along the way. It wasn't enough when she was about to endure more torment, but it was all I could do.

I wasn't her brother by blood, or madly in love with her. I was just her brother's teammate really, but she was family, and in the short weeks I had known her, she wriggled her way deep into my heart. I cared for her as I would my own flesh and blood and I would do all I could to take care of her until she was ready to open up to the others.

EMILIA

"Deep breaths, Xena," Ty whispered as he all but carried me into the entrance of the hospital. Nate was at our back, on high alert for trouble as always.

I was shaking badly and clinging onto Ty way too tightly. He had his arm around me, and I was tucked tightly into his side, my whole body shaking and my legs like Jell-O.

"Tyler," Xander was striding toward us when I looked up. He was dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt, under his gray pea-coat.

"Xander, thanks for meeting us," Tyler greeted.

"No problem. Nate," he gave Nate a chin lift in greeting as he spoke, then he looked down at me, "Hey, sweetheart."

"Hi."

"I'm so sorry you're going through this, but I promise we're going to get you taken care of and stop all of the pain, okay?" he said gently.

I nodded as more tears ran down my face. I sobbed and buried my face against Ty's jacket again. The poor guy was going to need the thing dry-cleaned when this was over.

"She's really shaken and scared. I promised her I would stay with her," Ty explained as he held me even tighter.

"If that's what she wants then it shouldn't be a problem, but they will need to conduct examinations. It may get uncomfortable for both of you."

“If she wants me there, I’m there,” Ty said firmly, much to my relief.

“Can we just get her somewhere quieter?” Nate cut in. “She’s shaking like a leaf, and she needs to sit down.”

“Of course,” Xander led the way and I stayed burrowed against Ty as we walked down a few long, busy corridors. It was the first time I left the apartment since the guys rescued me and I was finding all the strangers around me terrifying in a way I never felt before.

I had always been wary of people crowding me and touching me – it triggered my anxiety before, but now it was worse. Just having them around me, was terrifying me and I was convinced Valton was hiding amongst them, just waiting to jump out and take me again. It was ridiculous because Valton was dead, but my brain couldn’t seem to comprehend that.

Thankfully, Xander led us into an unoccupied room before I had a full-on meltdown. It looked like an office. There were two wide leather chairs in front of a large oak desk and Ty eased me down into one, then took the other right beside me.

“You’re seeing Dr. Green. I’ve known her for over ten years and consider her a friend. She’s highly regarded in her field, but she’s also just a very kind, caring person. She’ll take good care of you, Emilia,” Xander explained.

“Th-thank you...for arranging this for me,” I whispered in return.

“Of course. I’m just glad you felt brave enough to tell someone. I understand how hard it must be to talk about, but you did the right thing telling Tyler this morning. If you hold trauma in, it will just eat away at you. It’s best to let it out and deal with it.”

It made sense when he put it like that, but it wouldn’t make it any easier to sit the others down and tell them what happened; to tell my brother and the three guys I was crazy for that I didn’t even know whether I had been raped.

At that moment, the doctor walked in and greeted us all. She was an older woman, in her fifties maybe, with graying brown

hair, cut short. She had a kind smile and warm eyes, which helped to put me a little more at ease.

Xander and Nate stayed while I talked her through everything that I told Ty that morning. I was tearful throughout, but Ty had an arm around me and soothed me. Halfway through Nate stepped forward too and I felt his hand on my shoulder, squeezing it encouragingly, assuring me he was there. It helped to know I wasn't alone, and I managed to get through everything I felt the doctor needed to know.

“Okay, I'd like to examine you now, Emilia, see what we're dealing with before we decide how best to treat you. I'm going to need you to strip from the waist down, so you may prefer privacy.”

“I want Ty to stay!” I cried. I was already on the verge of fleeing, and just dying of whatever was wrong with me, over letting anyone touch me down there. If I had to do it alone, I was gone.

“Sshh, it's okay tiger, I'm staying. I'm not going anywhere,” Ty soothed.

“I'll wait outside until you're finished,” Xander said. “Just text if you need me for anything,” he added, then he left the room.

“I'll go too,” Nate said as he crouched down beside my chair so I could see him. “I'll be right outside the door the whole time, so you don't have to worry. You're safe, okay? I've got you.”

“Thank you, Nate,” I blubbered. I was shaking so hard that the words vibrated.

He flashed me a reassuring smile, then stood and followed Xander out, closing the door behind him.

“If you could just go behind the curtain and strip from the waist down for me. If you lay on the table, and cover yourself with the sheet that's provided, then let me know when you're ready,” Dr Green instructed as she pointed to a curtained area in the corner of her office.

I nodded and stood, but my legs would barely hold me up. I really wasn't sure I could do this. It was so much like what

happened to me in that bathroom, and I was losing my grip on my emotions.

Ty stood and all but carried me across the room into the small, curtained area. As soon as I entered my breathing sped up and my heart started to pound way too fast. The shaking got even worse if that was possible and I knew I was losing all control.

“Ty...I c-can’t do this,” I gasped breathlessly as I slipped out of his grip and fell to my knees.

“Em! Fuck! Just breathe,” he cried as he dropped to his knees before me.

“I can’t. That...” I pointed to the table I was supposed to lie on. “...that’s the same...it’s all happening all ov-over again,” I gasped as I fought to breathe.

Ty glanced at the table, then back to me. He took a deep breath, then lifted me clear off the ground and sat me in his lap. He wrapped his arms tight around me and buried his face against the side of mine.

“I’m here, Em. It’s not the same because you’re not alone. I’m here, and I will not let that doctor or anyone else hurt you,” he promised. “I know you’re scared, and you’re right, this is a lot like what those sick fucks put you through, but we need to know what’s going on with you, so we can get you better and this is the only way. I’m here though. We can get through this. Together, remember?” I took a deep breath and focused on the feel of Ty’s arms around me, clamping my eyes shut and trying to block out everything but him. I took in the smell of his spicy aftershave, the feel of his soft jacket, and the way his hand was rubbing circles on my back. I clung to it all to ground myself and slowly I gained back enough control to squeak out a reply, “Together.”

“Just keep concentrating on your breathing. If it gets too much you just tell me and we’ll take a break, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Ty helped me to stand and then pull off my coat. He folded it and placed it on a chair beside him as I reluctantly pushed down my yoga pants.

“Steady yourself on my shoulders,” Ty directed as he bent down and pulled my pants free of my feet.

“Good job we...we’re married, huh?” I joked half-heartedly, attempting to hide my embarrassment of him having to help me undress.

“Marital bliss, baby,” he threw me a wink, which made me smile. “Okay tiger, let’s get you laid under the sheet, then you can take off your underwear, okay?”

I nodded, but I couldn’t make my body turn to even look at that damned table, let alone lie on it.

“I can’t,” I whispered tearfully when Ty just stood and waited.

“You want me to just lift you on there?” Ty offered and I nodded, knowing it was the only way I was moving anywhere except the hell out of there.

Ty scooped me up before I could think too much about it, which helped.

“Gees Xena. It’s straight to the grocery store on the way home. You weigh nothing. Have to get you fattened up with some ice cream and junk food,” he declared as he lowered me down. I knew he was trying to keep my mind busy, and it worked a little.

“And Captain America?” I asked, trying to keep my mind busy too.

“Absolutely. As soon as we get home, short stuff. It’s a date,” he leaned down and kissed my forehead as my back hit the hard table.

“Oh god!” I sobbed as the image of that marble bathroom flashed before me, the feel of those two thugs slamming me down onto the hard surface as pain shot through my battered body. I grabbed Ty’s arm and pulled my upper half away from the table until I was sitting up with my face pressed into his shoulder.

“I’m here, Xena. Listen to my voice and squeeze me as hard as you need to. Just focus on me and then you’ll know you’re not there.”

More images fought their way to the forefront of my mind, but I pushed them back by doing as Ty said and focusing on him.

“How are we doing in there?” Dr. Green called.

“We’re going to need a few more minutes,” Ty called back, and I instantly felt bad for the fuss I was making. The doctor squeezed me in and I was taking up way too much of her time.

“I’m sorry,” I whimpered.

“Don’t be sorry. We’re in no hurry. You can take as long as you need. The doc will understand.”

“Nate and Xander are out there. I need to get it together.”

“Stop worrying about them. They would tell you the same. I can’t even comprehend how traumatic this must be for you. We’re not going to rush it. You need to take as long as you need to get through it as calmly as you can.”

“I’m okay. We should keep going,” I whispered as I forced myself to breathe through my crying.

“I’ll put the sheet over you and then you can take off your underwear, okay?”

I nodded and very reluctantly released the grip I had on his arm. Without a hold on him my fear ratcheted up tenfold and the images pushed straight to the front.

“Get the hell away from me, you freak!” I screamed at the doctor as he approached me. I arched my back and kicked my legs, but it didn’t work. The tallest thug slapped my face and yelled, “calm down!” in my face.

“Hold her down!” The doctor barked. The two thugs pressed me down onto the hard table as the doctor injected something into my arm. I fought as hard as I could to fend off the darkness overtaking me, but nothing will hold it back.

“Em! Em, look at me. Open your eyes!” Tyler’s frantic command had me snapping my eyes open to his handsome face right in front of mine. “That’s it. Now just breathe, nice and deep. Try and slow down, okay?”

“I...can’t...do this!” I gasped. “I want...to...to go...home... please Ty...please take me home,” I pleaded breathlessly.

Ty’s eyes became tearful too as he looked at me again. “I’m so sorry honey, but you know I can’t. Whatever is going on, it’s hurting you and we need to fix it. We’re almost there now. Let’s just get through this and I swear I’ll get you home and cuddled up on the sofa as fast as I can. You’re not alone, Em. I’m here. Together, yeah?”

It was the pain in his face as he spoke that time that strengthened my need to just get through this. It was hurting him seeing me hurting and I wanted to ease that for him.

I quickly removed my underwear and Ty straightened the sheet, so I was covered, then Dr. Green came in.

By the time she entered I was calmer, but had a death grip on Ty’s arm, pulling it so close to me that he had to lean over me to get low enough, but that helped too because he blocked my view of the doctor and meant he was turned to my face so he wouldn’t see anything neither of us wanted him to.

The examination was a living hell, a mix of pain in the moment and flashbacks of that damned bathroom that day. I held on to Ty so tight I was sure I must have hurt him, but he never complained, he just held me back and whispered soothing words to me. He did everything he could to keep me in at that moment with him, but still, the nightmare flashbacks came unbidden.

By the time it was over I was sweating, shaking, and gasping. I cried nonstop, and both my sweater and Ty’s shirt were soaked with tears. Most of all though, I was just exhausted – completely and utterly wrung out.

“Okay, Emilia. It’s all over. You did well. Put your clothes back on and take a seat and we can go through everything, okay?”

I nodded, crying too hard to speak.

“You may just have to give us a few minutes. That was really upsetting for her,” Ty warned her.

“Take the time you need. Can I get you anything?”

“Some water would be great, please,” Ty requested. The doctor nodded and then left us.

“You did so great, tiger. Just like the warrior princess I knew you were,” Ty soothed as he just held me. “It’s over now. We can get you home and get our Chris Evans fix. How’s that sound?” He chuckled, but his heart wasn’t in it and we both knew it.

“Th-thank you. I...I know that...it must have been hard. Thank you...for staying,” I whispered. I didn’t have the energy to talk any louder.

“It was hard to see you hurting Em, but I wouldn’t have been anywhere else when you needed me. I will always be right where you need me.”

“I love you, husband,” I smiled a little for him, a real smile because Ty could always make me smile, even in the darkest moments.

“Love you too, little wifey,” he kissed my forehead again, then lifted me until I was sitting up with my legs hanging off the table. Thankfully, he kept the sheet in place.

“Let’s get this done and get the hell out of here,” he declared as he picked up my clothes and started to help me dress.

As soon as I stood, my legs were buckling beneath me. I had been so tense throughout the whole exam, every muscle in my body taut, and that along with my upset had taken everything I had in me.

Ty was ready of course and hurriedly had his arm around me, holding me up. He led me over to sit in the leather chair I vacated before, and Dr. Green, who was behind her desk, handed me a cold bottle of water.

“Would you like Xander and your other friend to come back in?” she asked.

“Em?” Ty looked at me.

I thought it over quickly. I was likely going to have to tell the guys and Nico everything when I got home anyway. They’d demand answers when they saw the state I was in, and I hated

lies. I didn't know Xander well, but I trusted him and knew him knowing everything could help me if I had questions later. Most of all I was terrified of what was about to come out of the doctor's mouth, and I wanted the comfort of people I had come to like, or care for around me.

"Let them in," I agreed.

Dr. Green nodded and left the room again. While she was gone Ty took the water from my shaking hand and unscrewed the cap.

"Just take small sips," he instructed as he handed it back to me. I managed to get a little down, in the hopes it would soothe my poor throat, then handed it back to him. He placed it on the table and took my hand in his, just as Xander strode in, followed by a worried-looking Nate.

"What the fuck? What did that doc do?" Nate growled as soon as he met my eyes. In an instant he was on his knees before me, holding my free hand and looking me over closely.

"I'm okay, Nate," I whispered.

"It was really hard for her...the examination, but she dealt with it like a hero," Ty added.

"Of course, she did," Nate smiled, but I saw the panic in his eyes. "She's the toughest of us all," he kissed my cheek, then stood and took his place as before, behind me with his hand reassuringly on my shoulder.

"Okay," Dr. Green began, "Emilia, I can tell you all the pain that you're in is being caused by a nasty infection. Luckily, we caught it early enough that a course of antibiotic pills should solve it. I'll get you the prescription before you leave, and you'll have to take them three times a day with food. I'll see you again in a week for a follow-up, but I don't anticipate any complications."

Ty let out the breath he had been holding, but I didn't. She was avoiding the question we both needed to know the answer to, but never wanted to ask.

"That's the easy part. Now the tough part. The cause of the infection. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but there are

signs that you were sexually assaulted.”

A sob burst from me, but the next was stopped by an almighty thud. We all looked around and found Nate beside a huge hole in the door of the office. His fist was bleeding, and he was panting hard.

“Nate!” I cried. I moved to go to him, but Ty stopped me with a hand on my knee and went instead.

He put his hands on Nate’s shoulders and whispered to him as I just let loose of my sobs.

I had been raped. I had been drugged and raped, by those thugs, or that doctor. It had to be one of them, or...No! I couldn’t think any worse than it has been just one of them. It couldn’t have been Valton because when he came into the room he asked if I was a virgin, and the doctor told him yes, I was. He obviously lied, because, by the time I woke from that exam, I was no longer a virgin.

“Emilia, sweetheart. You have to breathe.”

When I looked up, shocked by his voice, Xander was kneeling before me with his hands gripping my upper arms. The room around him was blurry and I couldn’t make my mind focus on what else he was saying.

The last shred of myself I managed to protect from the monsters who found their way into my life, had been taken from me and I just didn’t know how to begin to process that. I had been destroyed since I was four years old, physically, and mentally. Now I had been sexually assaulted too. Every piece of me had been torn apart by monsters. What was there left?

“EM!” Ty yelled my name and it snapped me out of my meltdown enough to meet his eyes. His face was right in front of mine, and I realized he had sat back down and lifted me into his lap.

I had no idea when Xander stepped back and Ty returned, but I was relieved to have him close again. We were nose to nose, and his arms were wrapped around my whole curled-up body. “That’s it, tiger, keep those eyes on me. Can you feel my arms? Smell my aftershave. Focus on all of that and come

back to me. You're okay. You're safe and you're not alone. Together."

"T-together," I mumbled as I tried hard to focus on everything, he told me. I could feel his heart beating hard where his chest touched mine and I started to tap my index fingers in rhythm to it.

"I could give her a mild sedative," the doctor offered and my whole body tensed again.

"No!" Ty snapped, "No sedatives. They sedated her there."

"It will just be mild, just enough to calm her a little. It won't knock her out," Xander went on.

"No! Just stop! She's gone tense again. You're scaring her. No sedative. She can handle this panic attack and come back. Just give her some time," Ty commanded.

"Ty and I are not going to let anyone give you any drugs, trouble. We've got your back, I promise you," Nate was closer now, bent down beside Ty's chair maybe? His words did calm me. I knew they both would protect me.

"Em, you're doing so great, just keep focusing on me, push away everything else and come back to me," Ty whispered, He started to rub his hand up and down just a little on my back and I concentrated on that, on each brush-up and then down. I tapped to his heartbeat too and within minutes the multi-tasking stopped me from thinking of anything else. I started to breathe, each breath longer and longer until finally, I got a full one in, then another. My face was nestled into Ty's shoulder, and when I turned it to look around a little Nate was there, knelt, just watching me, his hand gently on my shoulder.

"Hi trouble," he whispered with a smile.

"Hi," my throat was feeling pretty raw now, and I grimaced at the pain just from that one whispered word.

"Water," Nate demanded as he held out his hand. Xander hurried to pass him the bottle, which he opened and held to my lips. I took a few small sips, and it helped a little.

When I sat up a little, I met Ty's gray eyes, a stark contrast to how pale he was. I'd clearly scared him.

"Hey you," he greeted.

"I'm okay," I whispered.

"I know, but maybe just stay right there so I can tell right away if that changes, okay?"

I wasn't going to argue. I felt safer there in his arms as if the truth couldn't get into our little bubble. I was really starting to wish I had been honest with my guys though because it would have been good to be in the arms of one or all of them right then.

"Would you like me to go on Emilia, or would you like a break?" Dr. Green asked.

I turned to look at her – poor woman. She had no idea what she'd agreed to when she told Xander she'd see me.

"Carry on, please. I...I need to know," I replied, then I turned in Ty's lap, so I faced her. My knees were pulled up to my chest and I wrapped my shaking arms around them.

"Okay, so, I found some small tears and abrasions. They won't require stitches and are already healing, but it will be tender for a while in that area until you have healed fully."

"Can you...do you know if...if there was more than one?" I whimpered, the last word coming out as a half sob.

"I'm afraid I can't determine that. The injuries you have sustained show a vicious attack, so it is possible it was more than one offender."

"Oh, God!" I whimpered.

"Keep breathing for me, Em," Ty coaxed as he wrapped his arms around me again. "You're here. You survived. You can survive this too."

"I've taken some swabs to run tests for STDs. I'll also need to take some blood and there will be follow-up blood tests taken in ninety days from now, then again at six months from now."

“Sorry. Why do you need to follow up blood tests?” Nate asked.

“Some STDs such as aids, syphilis, or HIV don’t show until sometime after.”

“Ty,” I sobbed as I turned in his arms and buried my face against his chest. My entire body was wracked with sobs. It was too much. This would never be over for me. Six months from now, when I thought maybe I was starting to get a handle on things, I could have a blood test and find out I have some devastating disease, a disease that could kill me! How could any of this be real?

“Together, remember. I’m here and I’m never going anywhere. Whatever happens, you will not be alone.”

“We’ll all be here, Emilia,” Nate added.

“I’m sorry to add more to your troubles, but there is also a risk of pregnancy. It’s too late for me to give you a pill to avoid that, so you will need to be aware and look out for symptoms; nausea, breast tenderness, and fatigue are usually the most obvious. Of course, if that happens, you have options, and I can help you with those if or when the time comes.”

“Nico,” I whimpered. “Please...get Nico,” I didn’t care how weak or pathetic it made me. My world was falling, and I just wanted my big brother. I wanted my guys too, but how could I be with any of them now? I could have a deadly STD or be pregnant.

“I’ll call him, tell him to come,” Nate hurried from the room as I continued sobbing.

“I’ll give you all some time while I arrange the blood tests and the antibiotics. Use the office for as long as you need, and just let one of the nurses outside know when you’re ready for the blood test.” Dr. Green said. “This is my card, and you can call me anytime if you need anything at all.”

“Thank you,” Tyler replied.

I knew I should thank her too, but I just couldn’t make myself do anything but cry and cling to Ty.

“I’ll go with her and get everything ready so you can get finished up and get out of here as quickly as possible,” Xander added, then he was gone.

“Em, I know this is devastating, but we can get through it. You’re my warrior princess. There’s nothing you can’t beat,” Ty said softly.

“N-not this,” I cried, my words muffled by his shirt.

“Yes, you can,” he insisted. “If you let this break you, then those fuckers win. If you can’t come back from this, then they succeeded in taking you from us, and I will not let that happen, and I don’t think you will either. You can’t let them win, tiger. You have to show them that no matter what, you are stronger than them.”

His words hit a chord with me. He was right, I would hate to let any of the monsters who hurt me win in the end, but I was just too tired to find the strength I needed to feel strongly about it. Instead, I took a deep breath and told Tyler, “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

I moved my head back enough so I could see his face as I spoke. “Tell me th-that tomorrow, and maybe...maybe it will work,” I whispered. “But today...I’m done Ty,” I hid my face again and let the sobs run free.

Ty must have understood what I needed because he stopped talking and just held me.

CHAPTER 4

NICO

I ran into the hospital, not even knowing what I had done with my SUV. I barely even remembered driving there.

The second Nate told me Mia was at the hospital and asking for me, my brain focused on one thing only, getting to her.

Nate wouldn't even tell me what happened. Just asked me if I was with Linc, Parker, or Jax, then told me they could not know what he was about to tell me. I had no idea why Mia didn't want them knowing, but as soon as he said she was in the hospital I didn't give a shit. I just raced to get to her.

Nate had given me directions of where to go when I arrived, and I had them memorized, so I raced down the crowded halls and stopped before the office he told me they would be in.

I threw the door open in my panic and it smashed against the wall behind it hard. Nate was instantly on guard, blocking my path, but he moved the second he saw it was me.

Then I saw my sister, curled up in Tyler's arms, clinging to handfuls of his shirt like it was the only thing keeping her on this earth. She was shaking harder than I would have ever thought possible and she was gray.

"What the fuck is going on?" I growled menacingly. They had gone out shopping. How had they ended up here? At the sound of my voice, Mia looked up and her eyes were red raw, her face blotchy with tears.

"Nico..." she sobbed, and I instantly scooped her up from Ty and held her tight.

"I'm here, *Tesoro*," I soothed as she clung to me just as she had been to Ty.

"Sit down Nico," Tyler offered as he stood from his seat.

"Someone better tell me what the fuck is going on, right now!" I hissed, not wanting to upset Mia anymore by yelling as I

wanted to. I took the seat Tyler offered and got Mia settled on my lap. She didn't even look up at me, just buried her face into my t-shirt and sobbed.

"Em didn't tell us everything. She was scared you guys would feel even more guilty," Ty started as he took the seat beside me and placed his hand on the small of her back. "Marku brought in some doctor while he had her, wanting to know if she was a virgin. The doctor...drugged her. She didn't know what he'd done while she was out, but she's had some pain...and she was worried, so I called Xander and brought her in this morning."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" I demanded.

"She didn't want you to know, and I thought it more important to get her treated than try to convince her." Knowing he did the right thing, I put a cap on my temper, but I was not happy Mia kept this from us. She needed to learn to come to me. I nodded once, so Ty went on. "The doctor did an exam...which was very like what happened in that fucking house. It was bad Nico, but she got through it."

That explained a part of why she was so badly shaken, but I was dreading hearing the other part.

"Just tell me," I growled when he stopped talking.

"She was raped. I'm sorry Nico."

I had never felt anything like the rage that went through me at that moment. I'd lived through literal warzones, seen innocent people killed, seen men I worked with killed, but I'd never felt anything like what was coursing through me at hearing those words. If Mia weren't in my arms, I'd have destroyed the whole fucking building around me with my bare hands.

"Is she...will she be okay? What did the doctor say?" I asked instead.

"She has an infection, so she needs some pills for the next week, then a follow-up, but the doc said she thought it would heal up fine. The thing that's really shaken Em is the risk of STDs and pregnancy. She'll need to be tested for the next six months to rule out the big STDs like HIV and aids."

Fuck! I wasn't sure I could do this - do what Mia needed me to do and stay calm and hold her. I needed to scream and yell, to smash things and let out some of the rages coursing through my veins at the knowledge of what those fuckers had done to Mia.

"This doctor? Was he in the house when we raided it?" I demanded.

"I have no idea Nic, but I doubt it. Mia told the doc he was older, so I guess you'd have noticed if he were there."

That was where my anger was going, I realized as I took deep breaths. Murder wasn't how I worked, but the fucker who drugged and raped Mia was going to die a very long, very painful death at my hands. I'd make fucking sure of it.

"The others worked for Marku, so I guess you likely got them," Ty added.

"Others?" I could barely get the word out through my clenched teeth.

"Nico, just breathe, brother. Remember Mia. She needs you. She asked for you," Nate placed a hand on my shoulder as he spoke and I realized he was right, I needed to calm down, but it was damn near impossible.

"There were three of them," Ty continued, his voice even quieter for Mia's benefit. "The doctor, and two of Marku's men. The doc didn't know if...how many..." he stopped and swiped at his eyes.

I could tell he was hurting, and I was so fucking grateful to him for being there with Mia through this nightmare. Thank fuck she felt able to tell him. She would have never coped while holding all this pain inside.

"Mia? Can you hear me?" I whispered to her. Her sobs had become quieter, and I knew from the way her body was gradually slipping more and more into mine, that she was close to passing out with exhaustion. I was more relieved than I could ever say when she moved her head up just enough for her eyes to meet mine.

"Want...to go...home," she whispered.

“Okay sweetheart. We’ll go home. Whatever you want.”

“She needs some blood taken first, then we can go,” Ty explained.

“I’ll see if someone can come in here and do it,” Nate was out of the door as he spoke, and I was grateful he too had been here for her. I just wished she’d have come to me, so I could have been there. It was tearing me apart to think of what she had been through in that office without me. When I met her, I wanted to stop all the suffering she had been through in her life, but I was failing epically at that. I had to do better to protect her. She couldn’t handle any more pain and I knew it. She was strong, but eventually everybody breaks if pushed far enough, and she was as close as she could get to broken. I had to do all I could to stop her from going over that abyss.

Mia was almost asleep as the nurse took her blood, so she was at least spared that trauma. I sent Nate to see Lola as we left the hospital, hating how pale and shaken he looked. He needed someone to talk through it all with, and I needed to be with Mia, so couldn’t be that someone.

The whole way home she slept in Ty’s arms in the back of my SUV. She had completely exhausted herself with the trauma of the day, and I selfishly felt relieved for it. I couldn’t bear to see her in any more pain.

When we got her home, I carried her straight through to her room and tucked her under the comforter. Ty and I pulled off our boots and jackets and took our places at either side of her, neither of us able to leave her alone. The nightmares would be coming, and we knew it.

“I need to tell the guys,” I said after a while.

“She didn’t want them to know this morning.”

“I know, but they’re going to be here soon, wanting to see her and there’s no way they won’t guess something bad is going on. I need to tell them, Ty. They should know.”

“I agree. She’s going to need them now, more than ever.”

“What if she’s pregnant?” I asked, so close to tears as my anger receded and made way for pain. She just looked so small, and innocent curled up between us. The thought of anyone hurting her physically pained me.

“She’ll handle it. She’s tough Nico. She can get through anything, especially with all of us at her side.”

“I hope she can. I can’t lose her,” I confessed as I swiped at a single tear that escaped.

“You won’t lose her. We won’t. We’re going to get her through this.”

Just then the door of the apartment opened, and I knew it was the guys. They were the only other people who could get in.

“Do you want me to tell them?” Ty offered.

“No. I should do it. I have a feeling I may have to stop some fists from being thrown.”

“Just try to keep them quiet. She really needs to sleep.”

“I’ll try,” I assured him as I placed a kiss on Mia’s forehead, then stood and made my way out to the living room, dreading what I had to do with every step.

“Nico? You okay? You look pale?” Linc asked as soon as I stepped out. They were all in the kitchen, getting beers from the refrigerator.

“No, I’m really not,” I sighed.

“Where’s Emilia? Has something happened?” Jax asked as he looked around.

“Mia’s okay. She’s sleeping and Ty is with her, but we need to talk guys,” I walked over to the sofa and flopped down into it, exhausted.

“What’s going on?” Parker asked as he took the armchair opposite me. Linc and Jax stood behind him, but I motioned for them to sit. They took seats on the sectional to my right and waited as I braced myself to tell them the news that damn near broke me not an hour before.

“As soon as I tell you this, you’re all going to want to smash shit up, but I need you not to. Mia has been through enough and she needs to sleep. We can’t wake her up.”

“Fuck Nico. Just tell us,” Linc growled, anxiously.

I took another deep breath and readied myself to destroy the three men before me, my brothers. I knew as soon as I told them, their world would tumble down around them, just as mine had, because they loved her, not in the same way as I did, but just as much, and this, it would break us all almost as much as it would break her.

EMILIA

The sun was just rising when I opened my eyes. Squinting through the bright light, I looked to the window and found the blinds hadn’t been closed.

I knew Linc was behind me, his arm around my waist and his quiet snore right in my ear. Jax was laid on his back in front of me, one arm behind his head and the other laid possessively on my hip. I had no idea when they had come into the room, but I was soothed by their presence.

For a few minutes I just laid still, running through everything that happened the day before. Tears filled my eyes as the doctor’s words ran through my mind over and over again. I had been raped, and I would possibly be dealing with some terrifying physical repercussions as a result.

Letting the tears run free down my cheeks, I looked to Jax as the realization that I could be pregnant hit me once again.

What would I do if I were pregnant? How could any baby that came from what happened to me, be anything but an awful reminder? And yet, I didn’t know if I had it in me to terminate the pregnancy. I knew women did it all the time, and I would never judge anyone for making that choice, but I just wasn’t sure I had it in me. But I could never ask the guys to stay with me through that. They deserved so much more than dealing with a pregnancy on top of all the other chaos that was my life.

There was also a possibility I had aids, or HIV. How could I pursue anything with the three guys I was crazy for, when that

was hanging over my head? How could I ever have a relationship with anyone if it turned out I was positive for either of those? I understand there were likely thousands of people in the world at any given time, who had aids, or HIV and managed perfectly happy relationships too, but I just didn't know enough about it all to see how that could work for me. I didn't know enough about any of what was happening to me to understand anything! I had been raped and I didn't even know by whom, or even how many! It was too much! It was all just too much!

I was short of breath as I carefully removed Linc's arm and Jax's hand from me. I knew my anxiety was getting a hold of me and I had to get out of there. I sat up and was shocked to find Parker curled up at the foot of the bed, his hand right beside my ankle like he had been holding onto it.

I slid out of the small gap between the guys, and out of the bed, but stopped abruptly when I found Ty asleep on the floor, with just a pillow and a blanket, and Nico snoozing in the armchair in the corner. They were all still fully dressed and looked rough, as though they had been up most of the night.

As I looked between them all, I realized the guys knew. Nico or Ty, or both must have told my guys everything, otherwise there's no way they'd all be in here, sleeping with me. My guys would have demanded to know why Ty and Nico were in there too, at the very least, and Nico wouldn't lie to them. He couldn't – they were his brothers. I wasn't even mad. It was actually a huge relief. At least I wouldn't have to tell them and go through it all again, and they should know. It would make it easier when I had to end whatever was going on between the four of us later. It would kill me to do it, but I had to. I had to let them walk away from the nightmare my life was.

I crept from the bedroom and out into the living room. It was strange to find it so silent. Since Nico and the guys rescued me, there had always been someone out there, cooking, or working, or watching TV. The place hadn't once been as silent as it was in that moment.

I used to love silence. When I lived in the compound, silence meant safety. It meant Juan wasn't in my presence, and that

my mom wasn't demanding anything of me. It meant I was going to be allowed a brief reprieve from the recurring cycle of abuse, fear, and isolation that my life had always been. In my old life silence had been the only time I ever had to look forward to; brief and very rare moments where I could just breathe and let my guard drop.

Since meeting Nico and the guys, that all changed. I didn't need silence to make me feel I was safe anymore. Instead, I needed the guys around me. If they were there, being loud and laughing and joking, I knew no one would hurt me. Now when I was surrounded by silence, as I was in that moment, I felt fear. I felt the darkness that now consumed me, taking its opportunity to sneak up on me with terror filled flashbacks that would cripple me with anxiety.

I looked down to my shaking hands as I stood before the tall windows. Anxiety already had a hold of me, and I knew it. I was trembling all over and short of breath as everything that I was thinking and terrified of, raced through my mind and melded with images of Valton and that doctor.

"Hold her down!" the doctor yelled, and once again I was back in that bathroom, restrained on that table.

I was barely aware of what I was doing as I stumbled to the door of the apartment and unlocked it. All I could think about was making the horror movie, playing endlessly in my head, stop.

I threw open the door of the apartment and just ran. There was a guy just outside the door, but I fled past him, ignoring when he called after me. I just had to get away from the silence, from everything and everyone. I needed to be able to think straight for just a few moments. I needed all the pain and fear to just stop so I could breathe again.

JAX

"Nico!" The raised male voice woke me instantly. Within a split second I was on my feet and looking for Em to protect her from the voice I didn't recognize. As I looked up, I saw the others all doing the same, leaping up at the ready.

The problem was, the space where Em had been curled up all night, sleeping surprisingly well, was now empty.

“Where is she?” Linc asked from where he stood beside the bed next to Parker.

“Nico!” The bedroom door was thrown open and Jay, one of our employees, burst in.

“What’s going on?” Nico demanded as he stormed toward Jay.

“Your sister just ran out of here and she looked upset. I called after her, but I dare not touch her. I’m pretty sure she was having a panic attack,” Jay explained quickly.

“Where did she go?” Parker called as we all set off running after her.

“The stairs. Eddy is guarding the front lobby, so he won’t let her leave.”

“Shit!” Nico growled. We all left the apartment, not one of us with shoes on. When we hit the staircase Nico stopped and leaned over the rail, looking both up and down.

I stepped up next to him and did the same, then froze in terror when I felt cold air breeze down over me. It took me a moment to process the sound of wind whistling down through the open space.

“The roof terrace door,” I gasped, as my brain finally caught up.

“Why would that be open?” Ty asked, still sounding half asleep.

“FUCK!” Parker yelled as he set off up the stairs first, leaping them three at a time. Nico followed and Linc and I were right on his heels, Ty trailing slightly behind us.

“She wouldn’t do that, right?” Linc gasped as we ran harder and faster up those stairs than any of us had ever moved before.

“No, of course she wouldn’t,” I agreed, trying to convince myself as much as anyone else.

When Nico told us everything the night before, it destroyed all of us. When we found her in that house, bound and gagged in that fucking cage, we had all been devastated that the woman we loved had been hurt in such a way. It filled all of us with guilt because we knew we failed her. We told her we would protect her, then we allowed her to be taken.

Seeing every bruise on her body, hearing every scream of her nightmares, and witnessing the hell her flashbacks caused her to relive over and over – it had been soul crushing. To know anyone put hands on the woman I loved was more than I could handle, but I kept a lid on my anger for her, because she needed us to be gentle and soothing to get her through everything she was trying to deal with. Then Nico told us she had been raped last night and that lid had come off. I felt rage fill me to a degree I never knew before and I had no idea what to do with it, since the fucker to blame for all of this – Valton Marku – was already dead.

Parker stormed from the apartment as soon as Nico finished telling us everything the night before, and Linc started pacing up and down, not saying a word. I was desperate to just punch something to get rid of some of my rage, but Nico warned us about waking Em, and I knew he was right. She needed to sleep after everything she had been through that day, and I couldn't wake her just because I was unable to contain my temper. So instead, I had gone to the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of whiskey I knew Nico kept. Nico joined me, and we'd just silently drank, as we worked through everything. Linc joined us after a while, then Parker came back too. We'd finished the bottle of whiskey and opened another, barely a word spoken between us. After everything we had seen and lived through – that night, trying to deal with the knowledge that the woman we all loved in some way had been hurt in the worst possible way and we had been powerless to stop it – we all broke, and we knew it.

Now, as we all raced up those stairs, telling each other she wouldn't do anything stupid, I knew we were full of shit. If just being told what happened to Emilia had broken all of us, how could we expect her to deal with it? How could we doubt that after everything she had been through in her life so far,

she wouldn't consider just ending it, and making all the pain stop? I prayed to God that I was wrong, but I also knew that there was only so much trauma one person could endure before life just became too damned hard. Em endured more than anyone I had ever known. Yes, she was strong, but even the strongest of people had a breaking point.

“Everyone calm the fuck down!” Parker yelled when we reached the top. “We have to go slow and calm. If she...we don't want to scare her if she's...” Park couldn't finish the sentence, but we knew. If she stood on the edge and we all ran out there frantically, she could stumble, or just leap.

“She's not!” Nico growled as he shoulder barged Park aside and walked out onto the roof of the building.

The sun was out and shining down on the snow-covered terrace. It was bitterly cold, and the wind whipped around us as one by one we followed him out, filled with dread at what we would find.

EMILIA

It was a beautiful, but cold morning. As soon as I got to the roof, I walked over to the spot where Nico and I made snow angels just weeks before. I stood staring at it as the cold wind whipped around me and pulled me back from the darkness.

My teeth started to chatter almost immediately, and I was trembling with the cold now, as well as anxiety, but being there, feeling the snow beneath my bare feet and remembering how very happy I had been with Nico that early morning weeks before, it pulled me from the panic attack I had been drowning in. I took in deeper and deeper breaths of the bitter cold, wonderful fresh air and pushed back the darkness little by little.

As I stood there, I realized it was a make-or-break moment in my life. I was at the lowest, darkest point I had ever been.

Until the day Valton's men had taken me, I always held onto a part of myself that somehow kept me feeling I was still whole, even through everything that had been thrown at me. I refused

to say I was broken – heavily fractured maybe – badly bruised - but never broken.

I could no longer say that. That piece of me I held onto, had been taken and I felt utterly broken. As I stood on that roof, I could feel every single piece of what I was, laying shattered, and torn around my feet. Inside I felt nothing but fear and darkness. Everything I had ever been, as gnarly and twisted as it was, was gone and I just had no idea who I was anymore, or who I could ever be. I had no clue where to even start to pick myself back up and wasn't even sure I wanted to.

But that was the choice I faced, and I knew it. Either I decided to just give up and let the darkness win. Nico and the guys would fight it, but eventually I could just fade away and let go of everything I fought so hard for, for my entire life to cling to. It would all be over, the pain, the memories, the struggle. I wouldn't have to face the consequences of what those monsters had done to me in that bathroom. I wouldn't have to deal with any of it anymore. I could just stop fighting for once in my life.

Or I could keep on fighting. I could find the strength I needed to gather up all those decimated pieces of myself and put them back. It would be a long journey, and I doubted I could ever build myself up as I had been before, but maybe if I tried, I could find a new version of me. One that was scarred and fractured, but no longer broken. Maybe I could find a way to fix myself and carry on trying to live. It was a terrifying notion, especially since I would have to do it without my guys, but I would have Nico and Ty. Livy was my friend, and I was hopeful she would be at my side if I needed her. I had more support than I ever thought possible and that made the terror of going on a little less.

I took a deep breath and looked to the snow where Nico and I laid one happy morning, what felt like a lifetime ago. I wanted that moment back. I wanted to feel the happiness and excitement I felt with my brother as we made snow angels and hurled snowballs at each other. It had been one of the greatest, most carefree moments of my life.

I experienced so little of that kind of happiness in my twenty-two years. I remembered playing golf with Jax, and the moment he kissed me. I thought of kissing Parker under the stars and the thrill I felt when Linc asked me out for the first time in my entire life. I felt contentment each time they held me and just smiled at me. I wanted to feel all of that again in my life. I wanted to get to know my brother even more. I wanted to laugh with Ty again and make Nate smile with chocolate cake. I wanted happiness. I wasn't sure it would be so easily attained when I was such a broken mess, but I wasn't so sure I was ready to give up the fight to try.

“MIA!” Nico’s cry was desperate and terrified. I looked up hurriedly, terrified he was hurt or in danger, but he seemed unharmed as he barreled into me and swept me up into his arms. He held me like a child against his front, so tight I could barely breathe. Linc, Jax, and Park were right behind him, closely followed by a very pale looking Ty.

“Jesus sweetheart. What are you doing out here?” Nico whispered as he lowered his head and rested his lips against the top of my head.

“I...I just needed to clear my head,” I replied, confused by how shaken up all the guys seemed to be. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?” I asked as I looked to Linc for an answer.

“Nothing, baby. You just scared us, running out like that,” he was trying to smile, but it was forced.

“I’m sorry. I just...I needed some air,” I tried to clarify.

“We know, angel. We overreacted. We didn’t mean to scare you,” Jax stepped forward as he spoke and rubbed a hand up and down my back, Nico refusing to let me go.

“What the fuck were you thinking running out like that?” Parker yelled, scaring me with the ferocity in his words.

“Park!” Linc snapped as he glared across to his brother.

“I...I’m sorry,” I whimpered, tearful that Parker was so angry. His tone reminded me of the way Juan would yell, and my adrenaline starts to surge. I knew Parker wouldn’t hurt me, but my body didn’t seem to agree.

“Sshh, *Tesoro*. It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize,” Nico soothed.

“Oh, so we’re going to just let her run off whenever she feels like it then?” Parker snapped.

I glanced up at him and he just looked so angry.

“Enough Parker!” Jax raged. “Fuck off and calm down!”

But Parker just went on like Jax hadn’t even spoken. “Don’t you realize how much fucking danger you’re in? Do you want to be taken again? To be raped and beaten again?”

“Parker!” Tyler yelled far more terrifying than I would have ever thought him capable of, as he stepped up to his brother and shoved him back hard, “Shut your mouth and get out of here, right now!”

“I’m just...”

“Listen to your brother and go, Parker, before I really lose my shit,” Nico growled menacingly.

“She was reckless!” Parker bellowed. “She can’t just...” Before anyone knew what was happening, I found myself passed off to Linc, watching on as Nico strode over and punched Parker hard in the face. Parker stumbled back but stayed upright.

“Nico, don’t!” I cried as I flinched at the sound of flesh on flesh.

Nico stepped back from Parker as he glanced to me, and then back. “Get out of my sight!” he roared.

“This is bullshit!” Parker spat as he stormed back into the building.

“Come on, firecracker. Let’s get you inside and warmed up,” Linc said softly as he headed inside just behind Parker.

I watched over his shoulder and Jax put a calming hand on Nico’s shoulder and led him in too.

I felt so guilty as Linc carried me down the stairs. I caused Nico and Parker to argue by running out like I had, and I hated it, hated that they fought and Nico struck him. I never meant to

make so much trouble. I just wanted space to think clearly. I hadn't thought I was in danger up there on the roof.

"I'm so sorry Nico," I told him as we all walked back into his apartment. "I wasn't thinking. I just...I needed some space. I thought I'd be okay up on the roof."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Nico turned to face me, his features softening as he spoke. "You are safe up there, but just...next time tell one of us, okay? You scared us. We thought...never mind," he shook his head and went to the kitchen, but I wasn't letting him leave it there. I had seen the fear on his face when he spoke just now.

"You thought what?" I demanded as I wriggled for Linc to put me down.

"It doesn't matter, Em," Linc said as he clung to me.

"Put me down, Linc," I growled. Thankfully, he heard my annoyance and lowered my frozen feet to the floor. I instantly stormed into the kitchen where Nico was making coffee.

"You thought what?" I asked again. "You thought I was going to...what? Jump? Kill myself?"

"Mia..."

"You did, didn't you?" I saw it all over his face. I turned to look at Jax and Linc, then Ty and it was written all over each of their faces. They all come sprinting onto that roof because they thought I'd be standing at the edge, ready to leap to my end.

"It was a really hard day for you yesterday, Emilia. We just panicked when we saw the door to the roof open," Jax explained more calmly.

I turned to look at him as he spoke, and it quelled the anger I was feeling. He just looked so scared and worried - they all did. How could I be mad at them for thinking the worst when I'd been up there contemplating whether to just give up?

"Guys..." I sighed as I collapsed my trembling frozen body onto a stool at the island.

Ty grabbed a blanket from the back of the sectional and hurried over, wrapping it tight around me.

I smiled, silently thanking him, then sighed in relief when he sat beside me and took my shaking hand in his.

I looked up to Nico, who was frozen in place, just watching me. I looked to Linc and Jax who were also just waiting for me to say something.

“I’m not going to do that.” My voice trembled as I spoke, “I... I thought about it this morning, I’m not going to lie. I considered how much easier it would be if I just...just gave up, stopped fighting, and gave up.”

“Em, don’t,” Ty whispered as he put his head on my shoulder and wrapped an arm around my waist.

“Things are bad now,” I went on. “I...I’m scared,” I whimpered.

“You’re not alone. We’re here, baby. We’re all here for you,” Linc stepped forward and took my free hand in his. He kissed the back of it, then kept a hold, rubbing soothing circles with his thumb over the back.

“I just...I don’t know how I keep going after...after *this*...after what he...they did to me. I don’t know anything...ex-~~except~~ that I don’t want to give up,” I sniffled. I looked to Nico and made sure I met his eyes as I told him, “I’m not going to stop fighting, Nico. I’m not leaving you.”

“Damned right you’re not,” Nico agreed, emotionally.

“We would never have let you give up, short stuff,” Ty added as he gave me a reassuring squeeze.

“We’ll get through this together, Em,” Jax was right before me now. I looked up into his blue eyes and fought tears as what I had to say next hit me.

“Linc, Jax. You know how much I care for you guys, and Park when he’s not yelling at me,” I said as calmly as I could. “I...I think I’m f-falling in love with all of you,” I admitted.

“The feeling’s mutual,” Linc cut in, which just made it even harder to say what I needed to.

“But we can’t keep doing this...us. It was already messy and c-complicated, but now it’s just...it’s impossible.”

“Em...” Jax began.

“I can’t ask you guys to be with me through this. It’s too much. I...I’m not okay. I’m not going to be for a long time, if ever. I could have some aw-awful STD or be pregnant. On top of everything else...I’d never ask any of you to take it on,” I was sobbing as I spoke because it hurt so much to let them go. It was the last thing I wanted, but I had little choice. “I...I really h-hope that we can st-still be friends, but I’d understand if you...if that’s not p-possible.”

Ty wrapped his other arm around my chest and held me even tighter against his front as sobs shook me.

I was looking down to the floor when Linc’s sock covered feet appeared. I felt his cold finger press under my chin a little and lift my face until my eyes met his ocean blue ones.

“Listen to me,” he demanded. “I don’t care about any of that, Emilia Gallo. I don’t care how broken you think you are. I’m not falling in love with you. I’m already there. I love you, and I want to be by your side no matter what’s to come. You can’t push me away. I’m going to be here no matter what, as your friend if that’s what you need, but I’d rather it be as your boyfriend.”

I was crying even harder at his words, but before I could utter anything else, Jax had taken his place before me.

“I love you too, Emilia. I’ve been trying to deny it because it seems too quick, but every time I see you, I just feel...whole, in a way I never felt before. You complete me and there is no way anything you just said is going to make me walk away.

“I have no idea what’s going on with Parker, but I don’t care what he wants or needs anymore. I care about you and what you need. I’m all in, angel. If you want a relationship with all three of us, or just the two of us if Parker’s out, then I’m good with that. As long as I have you in my life, I’m happy. Just... please don’t ask us to walk away because I can’t. It’s too late for that.”

I was a wreck in Ty's arms. If he'd have let go, I'd have just slid from the chair into a ball on the floor. I was sobbing hard at the guy's beautiful words, and the way they were both looking at me now, with love and hope that I wouldn't push them away.

"I...I love you g-guys too," I whimpered. "Both of you, but what if...if I'm pregnant? I can't...can't abort a baby. I couldn't. I can't ask you guys to..."

"Em, you're not asking us to do anything. We want to be here. If you're pregnant and want to go ahead, then we'll be there. We'll love the baby if you want to keep it because it's a part of you. It won't be easy, but nothing worth having ever is," Linc interrupted.

"We're all in, Emilia, no matter what. Just stop fighting it and let us be here for you. It's the only place either of us wants to be, at your side," Jax added.

Unable to form words through the raw emotion flooding me, I reached out for the both of them instead. In an instant Jax took me from Ty's arms and held me tight against his chest. Linc rubbed a hand up and down my back as he rained kisses down over my cheeks and forehead.

"It's going to be okay. We've got you, pretty girl," he whispered into my ear as I clung to Jax, my arms wrapped around his neck and my face buried against his shoulder.

"Why don't you guys take her to get changed and warmed up? I'll make some breakfast, so she can take the pills the doc gave her?"

"That good with you, angel?" Jax asked, and I silently nodded.

I wasn't ready to be out of their touch yet. It was soothing me like nothing else could.

"Wh-what about Parker?" I asked as Jax started to walk toward my room.

"Don't worry about him, Em. He'll come back apologizing when he realizes what an asshole he was being," Ty called.

“He was bleeding.”

“He’s a big boy. He can take care of himself,” Ty replied flippantly.

“He’ll be fine. He just needs to cool off,” Linc added. “He was only being such a douchebag because he was terrified. He loves you too, Em. He just has a much harder time dealing with that fact.”

“Emotions terrify Parker,” Jax explained. “He’s lost so many people in his life. He gets scared that if he has feelings for someone, they’ll disappear on him too.”

I nodded, understanding where Parker’s earlier anger had come from much better after their brief explanation. I still hated the way he yelled at me, but it made sense. He lost his parents and some of his teammates – I knew that much. If he lost other’s too, then no wonder he was scared. It didn’t excuse his behavior, but I got it. More than anything I just hoped that he would come back, so we could at least talk everything over. I was worried about him.

PARKER

“FUCK!” I roared as I slammed my fist into the punching bag again and again.

I stormed from the roof to my apartment where I’d throw on my gym gear, then came straight down here to beat the shit out of something.

My face was throbbing where Nico, very rightfully, punched me and I hadn’t even bothered to wipe away the blood from the small cut.

He had been right to punch me. Even as I was yelling at Emilia, I knew how much of an ass it made me, but I had just been so fucking terrified as we raced up those stairs to her, already half convinced that she would have jumped and ended my life, right along with hers.

It hit me as we raced to her, how very much I was in love with her, and how much it would destroy me if we were too late. I never felt that for another woman, ever. The guys called me a player because I never slept with the same woman twice, but

there was a reason for that. I liked it that way because it never gave me the opportunity to get too attached, to fall in love as I had with Emilia. People I got attached to tend to die, like my parents and the guys we lost from our team on that last mission. Like my best friend growing up, who had been laughing and yelling at me one minute, and dead in the street the next, killed instantly by some drunk driver.

People I cared about, died, and now I was in love with Emilia! It was too much, and I was terrified. It's why I had gotten so angry on that roof with her, why I intentionally tried to sabotage what we had by treating her as I had. It was messed up, but it was the best way I knew to protect myself from being hurt again. I couldn't lose her. I would never survive it. I loved her so fucking much; more than I ever thought it could be possible to love a woman.

Everything was just so fucked-up. I wanted her more than I ever wanted anything, and yet I just made damn sure she didn't want me.

Even if she did forgive me, I wasn't sure I could ever be what she needed me to be. I tried hard since we got her back, to put up with Linc and Jax being with her too, to bite my tongue when I watched them each kiss and touch my girl, but it killed me. I told them I didn't share, and no matter how much I tried, that hadn't changed. I didn't want to share her. She was mine and I wanted her all to myself. Knowing Emilia needed all of us didn't even help me overcome my selfishness. I did not want to share her, which I knew would likely leave me out in the cold while Linc and Jax won her. Maybe that was why I sabotaged things that morning too, to end it myself before it all fell apart. If that was the case though, shouldn't it hurt a whole lot less than I was hurting at that moment?

CHAPTER 5

EMILIA

A week passed, and I exited Dr. Green's office after my follow up. The infection I had been dealing with was cleared up, and thankfully the pain I had been in stopped a few days earlier.

Results had come back on the blood and swabs taken, and I had been cleared of all the more minor STDs, and thankfully, wasn't pregnant either. It had been a huge relief, but the threat of those terrifying STDs still hung over me and would for months to come.

"You okay, angel?" Jax asked. He was at my side, his arm wrapped around me and snuggling me into his side as we moved through the crowded halls of the hospital and out toward the parking lot.

"Yeah. Let's just get out of here," I replied. I hated being in that crowded building, surrounded by strangers shoving and brushing against me.

It had been a tough week. My nightmares had been worse than ever, as they morphed from flashbacks of what I remembered, into terror-filled scenarios of what I thought could have happened while I was unconscious in that bathroom.

Thankfully, Linc and Jax had been with me every night and were always there to soothe me when I woke up screaming, sweating, and trembling.

Days were easier. After two days of fussing over me and watching me like a hawk, I lost it and demanded the guys get back to work. It helped me more than I could say having them all at my side, but it also started to suffocate me once again. Linc and Jax fussed a lot and never left me on my own, but Nico and Nate had been the worst. Ever since Nate went through everything in that doctor's office with us that day, he had been ridiculously protective, hanging out at Nico's place and jumping up every time I moved. Nico had been the same, neither of them letting me lift a damned finger. It had been comforting to see how much they cared, and I had been reassured that I wasn't alone in everything I was going

through, but I also knew I needed to be able to stand on my own two feet if I was going to find my way through everything.

That was why I demanded they get back to work. They had been resistant, but Ty assured them he would be staying close and keeping an eye on me.

Once the guys were out of my hair, I started trying to take back some control. I made a routine for myself, so I could stay focused, and Ty helped me to stick to it – always my cheerleader, constantly encouraging me and telling me I was doing great.

I started going to the gym with him each morning. I could only manage thirty minutes of light exercise because I was still healing and because my head injury still caused lightheadedness and headaches which stopped me, but the workouts helped me to feel I was getting stronger.

After the gym I hung out with Ty until lunch, then we cooked for ourselves and the guys. After we ate. I would take the guys their lunches up to the office, then spend a couple of hours in Nico's office, working. The guys fussed about me working and we're always coming in to check on me, but I enjoyed the distraction. It allowed me to focus on something and block out the darkness that seemed to be fighting me for control at every moment.

At three in the afternoon, Ty would arrive in the office and drag me away, back to Nico's apartment. There we would cook dinner together. Ty always managed to keep me busy and make me laugh, pulling me into the present, where I needed to be if I started to drift off.

Evenings were my favorite part of the day. Nico, Linc, Jax, and Nate always came to the apartment in time for us all to eat together. I just loved when they were all around the dinner table with Ty and me. It always got loud and boisterous, which no longer scared me. Instead, it made me feel I was home, surrounded by family.

The only issue was Parker. After he stormed off from the roof that morning a week ago, none of us had seen him. He had

taken a personal protection job for some senator who was traveling to Washington and would be gone for almost a month. Usually, the guys would hand jobs like that to their employees, but Parker volunteered to do it, obviously desperate to get away.

It hurt to think he had been trying to get away from me, but what else could I think after the way he yelled at me when I last saw him? I was pretty sure he decided I was too much trouble and took the job to make some space between us. The guys didn't agree, telling me he had run because he feared his feelings, and that he would come back when he was ready.

Either way, Parker was gone, and I missed him so damned much. I understood if he didn't want me anymore. I was too much trouble, I knew that, but it still hurt my heart not to see him each day. I cried every time I realized I really lost him, but there was nothing I could do. I messaged him a few times, but all I ever got back was a one-word reply, so it seemed he really was done with me.

I knew it was greedy and selfish to want him when I already had Linc and Jax, but each of them held a piece of my heart, and with Parker gone, the piece he held was missing. It just left me feeling empty somehow. I missed him so much.

Jax opened the door of his silver sports car when we reached it and I happily slid into it, desperate to be away from the chaos of the hospital.

As Jax closed the door and rounded the car to the driver's side, I just lay my head back against the headrest, closed my eyes, and took deep breaths.

Over the last week, my panic attacks had been erratic. There had been days when I had three or four, and days where I hadn't had any. The guys had all been amazing at helping to get me through everyone, especially Ty who had been alone with me for several of them, but I was also learning to get a handle on them before they really started, by myself.

I had been to the first session with the therapist Xander recommended, April. She was going to be seeing me once a week for a while, and I liked her. She taught me the breathing

techniques to deal with my anxiety and so far, they had been helping if the attacks came on slowly, like the one I was dealing with after being surrounded by strangers in those hallways, that morning. The problem was, a lot of them came on so suddenly I didn't have time to even realize.

"Hey," Jax said.

I opened my eyes and looked across to where he sat beside me in the car. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah," I sighed, "Just crowds, you know?"

"I know, honey," he picked up my hand and wrapped it in his much larger one. "Just relax now. I have a surprise planned."

"Surprise?" I was wary. I barely left the Milite building in the two weeks since the guys rescued me. I just wasn't ready to face the terror of the real world yet.

"Don't look so worried. It's just going to be you and me. There won't be another soul in sight. I promise," he assured me.

Trusting him completely I nodded and smiled. It would be nice to have some time alone with him. It had felt like forever since we were alone.

"Em, we're here," Jax's voice roused me from the snooze I had been taking as we drove to his surprise location.

I opened my eyes and found him leaning in close, looking so handsome and sexy, with his wild hair and deep blue eyes.

Without overthinking it, I lifted just enough to softly kiss his lips.

"What was that for?" he asked as a huge smile spread over his face.

"Because I wanted to," I shrugged, then I looked out the window to see where we were. Ahead of where Jax parked stood a two-story, bright white, modern house with huge panoramic windows in every room, it seemed. I looked behind

us and found we were parked on a wide, immaculate drive and behind us were tall metal gates, now closed.

“Erm...where are we?” I asked nervously. This looked like someone’s home.

“My house.”

“Your house? You...you own this?” I gasped as I looked up at the huge cube-like, modern structure once again.

“Yep. I bought it when we left the military. We were all injured and in dark places after the things we had seen. This place was what we needed. We all lived here until we set up Milite. Now I just keep it as our beach house,” he shrugged.

“Beach house?” I looked around again and almost squealed when I looked past the house and saw the backdrop. The house was set on its own, with not another building in sight, and behind the house, past the well-manicured lawn that circled the property, was the beach! “Oh my God Jax!” I cried, “I’ve always wanted to see the beach!”

“You’ve never been?” he asked with surprise. “There are beautiful beaches in New Mexico.”

“So I’ve heard, but I was never allowed to go.”

“Well, I’m glad I get to show it to you for the first time then,” he smiled, “Let’s go,” he got out of the car and was instantly at my side, helping me to step out too.

Jax took my hand and led me to the trunk, where he had a backpack and a blanket, both of which he pulled out.

“Whatcha got there?” I asked, feeling lighter and more excited than I had in weeks.

“Lunch. Let’s eat, then we’ll explore the house and take a walk on the beach, okay?”

“Sounds perfect,” I agreed.

Jax led me around the back of the house where a huge deck led out to the sand. Thankfully, the snow cleared up a few days before, so I could see the sand. We stepped up onto the deck and over to a huge fire pit which was sunken into the ground

in the center. Jax pressed a few buttons on the side and instantly the thing lit up and was roaring with fire.

“It’s gas. Much easier than trying to light a fire,” Jax chuckled when I looked to him questioningly. “We have heaters out here too. I’ll just turn them on,” he hurried over to the house and opened a small plastic box that was attached to the wall.

Instantly, I felt heat blast out of two wall mounted heaters above where he stood. Instantly the chill of the cold December day was gone, and I was toasty warm.

Jax laid a blanket out beside the fire pit as I just stood and gawked at everything around me. The house was beautiful, but nothing compared to the first beach I had ever seen in real life.

I closed my eyes and just relaxed as I listened to the gentle lap of the water against the shore. It was perfect and I felt calmer than I had in some time.

“Come and sit down now, angel,” Jax called. When I opened my eyes, he had laid out plates of food; sandwiches, fruit, and chocolate brownies – my favorite!

“This is amazing Jax,” I gasped as I moved to sit down at his side on the blanket.

“I thought it would do us both some good to get out of the apartment for a few hours.”

“I love it here,” I sighed. “Thank you for bringing me.”

“It’s worth every second to see you smile like that,” he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me into his side.

I wrapped my arm across his waist and clung to him too.

For the next hour we nibbled at the picnic Jax laid out, and just chatted, laughing, and joking along the way. For that hour I forgot the horror of everything that happened and just enjoyed my time with one of the guys I loved.

When we were both full, Jax packed away the food again and laid out on the blanket.

I happily snuggled into his side, my head settled on his chest and my arm tight around his waist. It was perfect as we just held each other, warmed by the fire and the heaters, watching the calm lull of the water against the sand. I completely understood why Jax bought this place for the guys to take time to heal. It was the perfect place to just take time away from the world, and just be.

“Are you cold, Em?” Jax asked after a while.

I had been so peaceful and relaxed I was starting to drop off.

“I’m perfect,” I replied lazily.

“It feels like forever since I heard and saw you this relaxed and happy.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been this relaxed,” I sighed. “It’s this place. It’s just so peaceful and isolated. I feel like we’re in a bubble, far away from everyone and everything else. It’s exactly what I needed,” I moved, sitting up enough to look down at Jax, so he could see the smile on my face, and know he had given me something amazing by bringing me to this place. “I don’t know why...what it is about being here, but I just...I feel like I can breathe more here. Like the darkness can’t touch me while we’re here.”

“Then we should stay here,” he declared. “I’ll call Linc, tell him to get our shit and come over. We can stay here as long as you want.”

“We can’t Jax. You both need to be near the office. You guys can’t drive all that way back and forth each day,” I sighed, wishing it were possible.

“We’d find a way to make it work. I don’t care as long as it helps you to feel better.”

“And I love you for that,” I leaned in and kissed him chastely on the lips. “But there’s Nico to think of too. After everything, he’s not ready to let me go yet. He’s still blaming himself for everything and I’d worry about him if we moved here. Plus, I have my job and I like going to the gym,” I went on, “Maybe we could spend weekends here though? That would be nice.”

“Whatever you want, we will do,” he agreed. “I love you, Emilia. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to see you happy.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, then I took the plunge and lowered my lips down to his, kissing him again, but harder this time, begging him silently to take over and kiss me the way he had before Valton and that whole fucked-up mess. I understood why he and Linc now held back. They thought I was traumatized and didn’t want to pressure or rush me, and they weren’t wrong. I was traumatized, but it didn’t change the way I felt about them – and Parker – or the complete trust I had in them not to hurt me. I wasn’t sure how things would be if we progressed past kissing. Maybe I would freak out on them, but I wanted them to kiss me. I could deal with kisses and touches; I craved them.

As if he heard my pleas, Jax buried his hand in my hair and pulled me tighter against him as he took complete control of the kiss, his tongue tangling with mine as I wrapped my hands around his wide shoulders and clung on tight.

When we pulled apart, I felt a little dazed, but in the best possible way. I laid back down, my head once again on his chest.

“You okay?” He asked as he wrapped both of his arms around me and held me tight.

“More than,” I sighed. “I really needed you to do that, Jax.”

“Me too. I’ve gone to kiss you like that a few times, but I didn’t want to rush you,” he explained.

“I know, but you don’t have to be scared to kiss me or touch me. I’m not sure...I don’t know if I’m ready to do more, but I want you to kiss me and touch me. I need you to. I refuse to let those fuckers take what we have from us.”

“I won’t let them take anything else, Em. I swear that to you,” he whispered as he pulled me in even tighter and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll talk to Linc. We’ll stop holding back so much, but if or when you’re ready for more, you’ll have to tell us. We don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for.”

“I can do that,” I agreed.

“That’s a deal then. Do you want to look around the house? I need to take a leak.”

“You go. I just want to stay here for a while if that’s okay. I’ll check out the house before we go,” I was so comfortable, right beside the fire, in that perfect place. I wasn’t ready to move and burst my bubble of bliss just yet.

“Okay honey. I won’t be long,” he kissed me again, then slid out from beneath me.

I curled onto my side as I heard his boots walk across the deck. I lay facing the water, my head resting on my arm. It was amazing how soothed and settled I felt laying there, in the middle of a freezing Chicago winter, amongst the nightmare that was my life. The beautiful peaceful surroundings, and the amazing way Jax made me feel seemed to have magically blocked everything out. I knew it wouldn’t last, but I was determined to enjoy every second as long as it lasted.

I hadn’t even realized I closed my eyes until the sound of Jax’s boots on the decking roused me again. He stopped right next to me, and I waited for him to lie back down and curl around me as I wanted him to. When, instead, he just stayed where he was, not doing or saying anything, I opened my eyes and looked up with a smile on my face.

“Emilia,” the voice whispering my name was not the one I wanted to hear. I sat up as hurriedly as my still tender ribs would allow and started to back away in a shuffle when I realized it wasn’t Jax standing over me. “I’ve been waiting for you,” Steve - the crazy stalker from Raffy’s - said as he took a step toward me. I backed up again, but realized the shuffling was too slow.

How the hell was he even there? In the chaos of everything that happened I hadn’t even thought to ask about Steve. After being taken by Valton’s men, I almost forgot about Steve grabbing me at the bar too. But I thought he had been arrested?

Deciding to leave the twenty questions until later I leapt faster than I had ever moved before up to my feet and set off running for the house. I screamed for Jax as loud as I could just as I reached the still open sliding door.

Steve was hot on my heels, but I managed to get through the door, once again screaming for Jax.

“Stop running Bitch! You’re mine, this time!” Steve growled.

I hesitated for a second as I entered the house, no idea of the layout, and it was all the opportunity he needed to catch up and grab my arm. He wrenched me hard into his front and wrapped an arm around my chest, restricting my movement. That didn’t stop me from fighting though, and I could hear Jax yelling my name as his heavy boots sounded, thudding down wooden steps.

In my desperate fight, hands and feet flailing behind me wildly to try and hit something, my fist slammed down into Steve’s groin. He roared in agony and shoved me forward. I landed hard against a huge, solid looking dining table. It knocked the wind from me, and I tumbled onto the tile floor as I fought to breathe through the panic.

When I looked up, Steve was fleeing back outside and Jax had just run around the corner.

“Em! What the fuck? What happened?” He yelled as he hurried towards me.

“Steve!” I cried. “Go Jax...get him! He just...r-ran out there!” My stomach was already feeling bruised and throbbing from being pushed into the table, but I knew from experience I was mainly just winded.

“I can’t,” Jax looked down to me, clearly torn.

“I’m fine. Please Jax...just stop him.” I needed this to be over. Valton was dead. Juan disappeared. Steve was the last threat looming over me, and I needed it to be over.

“Call the guys and lock this door behind me!” Jax yelled as he ran out of the house too.

I took a deep breath, then got to my feet. I was shaking badly, but my anxiety wasn't trying to take a hold of me, so that felt like progress.

I hurried over and locked the sliding glass door closed, then looked out to where Jax was chasing Steve down the beach. Jax was much faster and almost caught up already. Knowing he would need help once he had Steve, I pulled my cell from my coat pocket and dialed Linc.

"Hey pretty girl," he greeted after just one ring.

"Hey," I gasped, realizing for the first time how short of breath I was.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" Linc asked right away.

"Why isn't Steve in jail?" I asked.

"The police didn't have enough to charge him without your statement. Why? What happened?"

"He's here. Jax...he brought me to the beach house and Steve must have followed us. He's here and Jax is chasing him," I looked out of the window again. "He...he caught him. He...he told me to call you guys."

"Are you hurt?" Linc demanded.

"No. I...I'm okay. I'm good," I assured him, and myself.

"I'll call CPD, have them send out a unit to pick that fucker up. Has Jax got him?"

"Yeah," I replied as I looked out of the window again and watched Jax haul Steve, who now had his hands restrained behind his back, to his feet.

"Good. Are you okay? Can you try to take some deep breaths?"

"I'm okay," I assured him as I calmed down.

"Nico, Nate, and I will head over there now."

"You don't need to, Linc. We were going to head back soon anyway. There's no point in you guys driving all the way out here, just to go back."

“I’m worried about you. You sound really shaken up,” he sighed.

“I am a little, but I’m okay. I’m not freaking out, which is good, right?”

“It is good, baby. I’m proud of you,” Linc’s praise felt good, and I soaked it in. “Where’s Jax now? Is he okay?”

“He’s walking back up the beach. He has a hold of Steve.”

“Okay. I want you to go through to the living room now. Just on the right when you come out of the kitchen. Wait there until Jax gets that scumbag secure. Can you do that?” Linc asked calmly.

“Yeah, but what about Jax? He might need help?”

“Don’t worry about Jax. He knows what he’s doing. We just need you safe and out of the way for now, okay?”

“O-okay,” I agreed, even though I hated leaving Jax alone to deal with that asshole.

I walked out of the kitchen I stood in and to the right. The space was mostly an open floor plan, but there were some walls separating the areas. As I rounded the corner I walked into a huge wide, open living room. It was filled with white furniture, including a huge white linen sectional with two matching armchairs. The floor was a dark, polished oak and there were beach scene canvases on every wall. It was a beautiful space, but I couldn’t fully take it in as I heard the glass door open followed by raised voices.

“You can’t stop me!” Steve roared, “She’s mine! MINE!”

“Em? Are you okay?” Linc asked.

“I...yeah. I’m in the l-living room,” I told him, clutching my cell tight as I spoke into it.

“Good girl. Just sit tight. Nate called CPD and they’re sending a car out.”

Steve started to yell again, but before he even got started, I heard the - way too familiar - sound of fists on flesh and

everything was suddenly silent. For a second, I panicked that it was Jax who was hurt, but then I heard his voice.

“Emilia?” He called, then he appeared before me. “Are you hurt? Did he hit you?”

“I’m good,” I assured him as I hurried toward him. As soon as we met, I was in his arms and wrapping my own tight around his waist. “Are you?”

“I’m fine. Steve’s out cold. That Linc?” He nodded to the cell I completely forgot I still held in my hand.

“Oh, yeah. Nate called CPD.”

“Let me talk to him, angel. You need to sit down. You’re shaking,” he took the cell from me, then led me over to one of the armchairs.

I happily sank down into it, feeling exhausted as the adrenaline that had been coursing through me, plummeted. I tried to relax, but I couldn’t. I was just so pissed off! How could these things just keep on happening to me? I didn’t think I was a bad person. I worked hard my whole life to protect my mom and help others. What could I have possibly done in my life to bring down so much fear and pain? Why did awful things keep on happening to me?

Realizing the negativity was getting me nowhere except a big ole’ pity party, I took a deep breath and tried to consider the flip side – Steve had been caught. Surely, now the police could charge him and lock him away. At least then that issue would be taken care of, and it would be one less thing for me and the guys to worry about. With Valton dead and buried, and Juan on the run from the FBI, maybe I could finally lay all my monsters to rest once and for all and start to find a way to move forward.

Jax and I needed to follow CPD back to the local precinct once they picked Steve up, and we both made statements and photos of the new, angry bruises on my torso were taken.

The sun was setting by the time we were able to leave, and I was completely wiped out, both physically and emotionally.

The detective I dealt with assured me Steve would face charges for what he had done though, so it had been worth it.

I slept most of the way home, but I had been restless and Jax had been forced to pull over twice to calm me when I woke from nightmares.

I was so happy when we walked into Nico's apartment and found the guys all waiting for us. I headed straight for Lincoln, who was watching TV on the sofa with Ty. He stood as I approached, then wrapped me in a much-needed hug.

"I was so fucking worried," he whispered as he held me.

"I'm fine, and Steve is in custody."

"Jax?" Linc looked across to where Jax flopped down into an armchair.

"She has some bruising on her stomach, but the medic at the precinct cleared her."

"He hit you?" Linc growled.

"He shoved me against a table. It's just some bruises, nothing to worry about. I'm just glad it's all over," I released my grip on Linc and stepped back. Nico and Nate had been working on their laptops when we walked in but were now standing right behind me, and I knew they were freaking out too.

"Really guys, I'm fine. Just tired," I assured them both as I turned and faced them. "I just can't believe the police let Steve go after what happened at the club."

"They couldn't charge him without your statement. I meant to follow it up once you were safe, but with everything...I guess I forgot," Nico said guiltily.

"Don't you dare start blaming yourself Nico," I snapped. "It has been crazy around here since you guys got me out. Steve Mills has been the least of our worries."

"She's right, bro. At least the cops have him now," Jax agreed.

"All's well that ends well," I joked.

"You're safe. That's all that matters," Nico gave in and smiled a little as he spoke, "Have you eaten?"

“Not since lunch, but I’m not that hungry. I’m too tired to be hungry.”

“I’ll make you a bagel and some tea. You can’t go to bed on an empty stomach.”

I groaned in protest, but Nico was already in the kitchen, ignoring me.

“Just let him do this for you. He’s been worried sick since you called Linc,” Nate suggested, so I gave in and sat on the sofa between Linc and Jax.

“Everything go alright at the hospital this morning?” Linc asked as I lay my head on his shoulder.

“Yes. She said to finish the pills I have, but everything looks good. All the test results came back clear too – so far anyway. I’m not pregnant.”

“Well, that’s good news, right?” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders, so I snuggled even further into his side, enjoying the heat coming from him.

“Right,” I agreed with a nod. “Now we just have to get the all-clear on all of the other tests too.”

“You will. Everything will be fine, baby. I know it will.”

“How was your day?” I asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Boring. Every time I poked my head into Nico’s office, all I saw was his ugly mug behind the desk,” he sighed playfully, making me laugh.

“Don’t worry. My ugly mug will be back behind there tomorrow afternoon.”

“There’s nothing ugly about your face, Em,” he assured me, making me blush.

I hadn’t exactly been looking my best for the last two weeks, and I knew it, but to know he still found me attractive made me smile.

“She loved the beach house. I said we’d head up there on the weekends,” Jax cut in. He pulled my cold feet up into his lap

and he was holding them in his hands, warming them up. I was so comfortable laid out between them.

“That’s a good idea,” Linc agreed. “It’s so peaceful there.”

“It is. I loved it and I didn’t even get a chance to see all the house yet.”

“We’ll go after the holidays,” Jax promised. Him mentioning the holidays shocked me. With everything going on and the fact I hadn’t even left the apartment, I forgot it was that time of the year.

“What date is it?” I panicked. I had so many plans for the holidays and gift ideas for each of the guys. I was going to cook my first ever turkey and Nico and I were going to get a tree. I would be devastated if it passed us all by because of me.

“It’s the twenty-second. I was going to ask if you wanted to get a tree with me tomorrow if you’re feeling up to it?” Nico asked as he walked in and placed my food and tea down before me.

“Yes!” I cried excitedly. “I definitely want to do that please, Nico.”

“Great. We’ll head out in the morning. Ty wants to come too. Guys?” Nico looked between Linc, Jax, and Nate.

“I can’t. I still have to get Lola a present, so I’m gonna be out shopping,” Nate groaned dramatically.

“I have that meeting for those private contracts, but I should be back in time to help you guys decorate,” Jax said as he looked to me apologetically.

“Well, I’m in,” Linc answered last. “Keira and Livy are crazy about the holidays, and I think some of it rubbed off on me.”

“Good, this will all be a first for Mia and me. We’re gonna need all the help we can get,” Nico laughed.

And just like that, the four of them managed to make me feel so much lighter. I was excited about what the next day would bring, and laughing along with them all, the worries of what happened earlier in the day pushed aside for the time being. They were each the light to my darkness, and when I was with

them, they tipped the scales for me, pulling me away from the mess that was my thoughts and memories. They made me feel safe and happy, and I needed that more than anything. I needed them and I knew it. I would never stop counting my blessings for them being brought into my life right when I needed them most.

CHAPTER 6

I was like an excited child in the Christmas tree lot Nico had driven Ty, Linc, and I to, running up and down the rows of trees trying to find the perfect one.

Eventually, I found the perfectly shaped, six-foot-tall tree that looked just like the ones I had seen on TV shows and imagined having for so many years as a child.

While two guys loaded it into Nico's truck, we went into the store that was set up in a huge warehouse beside the lot. Ty pushed the cart and Nico, Linc, and I chose decorations and piled them in. I decided I wanted it to be all silver and white, just like a tree I had seen in a magazine earlier in the week, so the guys stuck to my guidelines.

I laughed when Nico was just as excited and enthusiastic as I was, throwing way more lights and decorations into the cart than we could possibly need to decorate one tree. When I pointed that out, Linc told me decorations weren't just for trees, that we could decorate the whole apartment, which sounded amazing!

On the drive home, Nico's truck bursting with everything we bought, he pulled up at a bakery and we all followed him inside. I squealed excitedly when I saw the counter was chocked full of beautifully iced holiday treats. The guys let me pick, and I might have gone a little overboard, but it all just looked so good!

When we got back to Milite, Ty and I carried in the bags of decorations, while Nico and Linc navigated the huge tree into the elevator.

"This is so exciting!" I squealed as we all walked into the apartment.

"Just take it easy, baby, or you'll tire yourself out before we're done," Linc fussed.

"I'm good, Linc," I assured him. I leaned down to where he was crouched, cutting the tree free of the net and kissed his cheek. "I hope Jax makes it in time to help."

“He should be here soon,” Nico replied.

“Come help me unbox these decorations while they set the tree free, Em,” Ty called from the kitchen.

I leaned in to kiss Linc again, just because I could and I needed to, then headed over to help Ty.

“Have you spoken to Parker this week?” I asked as we quietly worked away pulling glass decorations from the packaging.

Ty was the only person Parker called in a non-work capacity since he left on the security assignment he’d taken.

I missed him so much. I knew he’d been a bit of an ass, but I also understood that I scared him – scared them all – and he’d just freaked out. I wasn’t even mad. I just wanted him to come home. I was worried about him, and I hated that he hadn’t returned any of the texts I sent him with more than a one-word answer.

“He called last night. He’s okay; just burying himself in the job. He asked about you again though. He misses you,” Ty replied.

“Did you ask him to come back? I don’t want to have the holidays without him here,” I asked Ty to tell him, in no uncertain terms, that I wanted him to come home. Parker may be confused, but I wasn’t, and I wanted to make that clear. I wanted him back. I hated the distance between us.

“I did and he said he’d think about it.”

I wanted to cry at that. How angry was Parker if he had to think about coming back? Did he not even want to date me anymore? Was that why he was staying away?

“Don’t do that, tiger. He’s in love with you. Him running away had nothing to do with you. He just needed some time to get his head straight and I don’t think he’s done that yet. He just needs some time.”

“I know,” I agreed, tearfully. I couldn’t talk about it anymore. It hurt too much to think I lost him. I knew that sounded crazy when I had two other guys who cared for me and who I was falling in love with right in the next room, but for some

inexplicable reason, I knew I needed Parker too. I had no idea if it could ever become a reality, but there was no hope if Park wasn't even in the same state.

“You guys ready with those decorations?” Linc called. I glanced up and saw the tree was up and now covered with the strings of lights we bought.

Knowing I needed to get back to the happy mood I had been in earlier and stop thinking about Parker, I swiped at my eyes, wiping away the tears.

“Em...” Ty whispered as he placed his hand supportively on my arm.

“I’m good. Just... need a minute, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll take everything over and get started,” he agreed, then picked up the large box we loaded all the decorations in and walked into the living room.

I busied myself gathering up the packaging that we’d tossed on the counter as I took deep breaths to recenter myself.

“You ok, firecracker?” Linc asked as he snuck up behind me and snaked his arms around my waist. I was startled a little but relaxed the second I heard his voice.

“Yeah. I just...I wish Parker was here too,” I admitted.

“He’ll come around, baby. Just give him some time.”

“That’s what Ty said too. I just miss him.”

“How about I try calling him tonight, see if he’ll talk to me? No promises I can get him to come home, but I might be able to work out what’s going on in his head.”

“Will you?” I cried, feeling hope he could talk Parker around. I turned in his arms and reached up to hold his face between my hands as he nodded. “Yes please, Linc. I know it might not make a difference, but it’d make me feel better knowing you had spoken with him.”

“Then I’ll do it tonight, okay?”

“Thank you,” I sighed with relief. I reached up on my tiptoes and kissed his jaw – the only place I could reach. Linc bent

down until his lips met mine and we quickly descended into a heated, passionate kiss, our tongues tangling, and my hands buried into his short hair. He was pressing me close to his body and fully controlling the kiss. It was wonderful, and I got so swept up I forgot where we were and that my brother and best friend were also in the room.

Ty clearing his throat had me landing back in reality with a bump. I pulled away from Linc and looked around guiltily. I almost laughed out loud when I saw Nico keeping himself very busy moving tree branches with his back to us. We clearly made him uncomfortable.

“Get a room, guys! Gees!” Ty joked as he grabbed a star decoration and walked over to the tree. Nico finally turned to look at where I was still wrapped up in Linc’s arms.

“Shall we get on with this?” He asked, and I nodded in reply. When Nico turned back to the tree, I looked back up into Linc’s eyes and we both laughed.

“Think that was more PDA than Nic can handle,” Linc said as he leaned down to kiss my lips just once, then pulled away.

“Yeah, maybe we should hang out at your place if we’re gonna do that.”

“No objections here,” he whispered, and the heat in his eyes had me squirming and my skin flushing. My body was clearly on board with where his thoughts were going. The problem was, I was pretty sure my mind wasn’t. After Valton and what went on with that ‘doctor’ I was unsure how I would react if things got intimate between me and any of my guys. I was pretty sure I’d freak on them though and that terrified me.

“We...we should go and help,” I stuttered as I tried to get a full breath in. When Linc took a step closer I backed out of the space I stood in and hurried into the lounge. I needed some space to just think. I needed more time before I went any further with any of them.

“Start with the biggest decorations,” Ty instructed, and I was grateful for the reprieve.

Maybe one day I would be ready to move past kisses and light touching with the guys, but I wasn't there yet. I needed to discuss it with April, my therapist, and maybe I could pay Livy a visit too. I wanted to see her since I escaped Valton, but I was also intimidated. She had been through so much worse than anything I experienced, and she was so amazing. She had overcome it all and found this amazing life for herself. I felt weak and pathetic going to her with my issues in comparison, but maybe it was time. I couldn't discuss sex with Ty. It was too awkward, and Livy was the only girlfriend I had. I needed to talk to someone.

It had taken us all afternoon to get the tree looking perfect and all the surplus decorations on the walls, furniture, and anywhere else in the apartment we could adorn. Jax joined us mid-afternoon, and we all had great fun, laughing, joking, and covering each other in glitter. We were all hopped up on sugar, having eaten all the goodies I picked out at the bakery and Nico put on holiday music. It really had been one of the greatest times of my life.

Now I was happily nestled on the sofa between Jax and Linc looking at the Christmas tree dreamily. It was so beautiful, lit with the fairy lights, which caught the glittery and crystal decorations we had chosen and made them sparkle. The whole apartment was like a winter wonderland, and it was more special than anything I ever could have imagined when I was a lonely child, watching everyone around me celebrate while I was stuck in Hell.

"It's perfect," I sighed to myself.

"We did a pretty great job, didn't we?" Jax agreed. Nico and Ty had gone out to collect Mexican food for dinner, so the three of us were alone.

"We did," I nodded. "When I was a kid, I used to see these families celebrating the holidays on TV shows and wish I could just have a small piece of the happiness they seemed to get from it. I was desperate for a tree with lights, or the big, happy family meal, but we never celebrate any holiday. Juan

said they were a waste of time and money and lost it with me for asking.”

“Em, I’m so sorry, baby,” Linc whispered as he took my hand and rubbed it soothingly.

“I didn’t tell you to make you feel bad. I told you so you could understand just how much this...all of this,” I waved my hand all around the room, “and how much having all of you guys to celebrate with this year, truly means to me. It’s more than I ever could have hoped or wished for as a kid.”

“You are more than I could ever have hoped or wished for, Emilia,” Jax leaned in as he spoke and picked me up from my seat. He set me in his lap facing him and instantly pressed his lips to mine. The kiss was short, but passionate and a little wild. Jax had his hand at the back of my head, pulling me in hard against his mouth as we frenziedly dualled tongues. I was holding onto his very firm, very wide shoulders, just trying to cling on as he kissed me senseless.

It wasn’t until the kiss ended and I pulled back enough from Jax to get a breath in, that I realized Linc was sitting right beside us. For a moment I was scared to look over, worried he’d be mad, but when I finally got up the courage, he was just smiling at me.

“That was hot,” he said, the heat from earlier back in his eyes. It both electrified and terrified me the way he could make me feel with just one look.

“I...I should move. Nico...he’ll be back and he...earlier...he shouldn’t see me like this,” I bumbled as I all but threw myself off Jax’s lap. I got tangled on his leg as I stood and stumbled like the klutz I was, but I managed to catch myself before I landed on my face. “I’m gonna make tea. You guys want tea?” I asked, my voice way too high pitched.

“No thanks, angel. I’m good,” Jax laughed as he adjusted himself where he sat. That just had me blushing and running away even faster.

The guys were both quietly laughing when I got into the kitchen, and I knew I’d made an idiot of myself. I couldn’t

help it though. They just got me so hot and flustered - so worked up - that I worried I would push for things to go further. And that terrified me because I really wasn't sure I should let things go further with what happened to me, and with Parker gone. We agreed we wouldn't go past kissing while we were all dating. It was all just so damned confusing!

Thankfully, Nico and Ty walked in with bags filled with food a few minutes later.

"Okay sweetheart?" Nico asked when he walked into the kitchen.

"Yep, of course, I'm fine," I said way too loudly, and animated.

Ty looked over at me with a confused, worried look and I shrugged and started helping Nico lay out the takeout containers on the counter.

"Em?" Ty was right behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Can you come to my place and help me look for something?"

I glanced around at him, confused, but he didn't give me time to question, just grabbed my hand and pulled me out of Nico's apartment. The guys, who were all piling their plates up, never even asked where we were going.

"Ok, start talking," Ty demanded the second he had us closed in his apartment.

"About wha..."

"Don't bullshit me, Xena. You were fine when we left, and when we get back, you're acting weird, shaking, and hiding in the kitchen. Did the guys do something? Did they make you uncomfortable?" He growled, clearly pissed if I told him they had.

"No! Well, not really. It's not their fault. We just...we've been kissing a lot and some like...light touching. I like that, it's good, but lately I've been feeling like...like I w-want more. The guys obviously have too because they get this...this look. I just...I don't know if I can actually...you know? Not after everything. And there's Parker to consider too. Everything is

just so confusing. My head hurts Ty,” I cried. So much for not dragging him into this.

“Woah, woah, woah,” he laughed as he stilled my flailing hands in his. “Deep breath, short stuff.”

I did as he said and took a deep breath to try and calm myself.

“You’re getting way too stressed out about all of this. You need to just relax and stop worrying. You will know when the time is right to move to the next level with the guys, and it won’t be while you’re feeling this fear. If you try to push while you’re scared and worrying like this, it cannot end well. You need to go at your own pace. The guys will follow your lead. And you need to stop worrying about Parker. He chose to walk away. If things with Linc and Jax progress while he’s off sulking, that’s not your issue, it’s his.

“Dating is supposed to be fun and exciting, Xena. It’s not supposed to cause you anxiety and meltdowns,” he laughed.

“I just...I’ve never done any of this before, and with three guys...I made it so much harder for myself,” I sighed.

“Three guys mean three times the fun and excitement if you let it be. Just relax and stop stressing. Just let things happen naturally when you feel ready.”

“And what if I’m never ready? What if I can never get over what happened?”

“You need to be open and honest with the guys. Tell them what’s worrying you. They’re good men, Em. They’ll understand and do all they can to help you, but you need to let them in first.”

He was right, of course. How could I ever overcome my issues and move forward with the guys if they had no idea what my concerns and fears were. I needed to have a very uncomfortable discussion with them, and I knew it.

“Fuck, Em! You’re gonna knock them dead,” Ty gasped when I stepped out of my room, ready to head up to the office’s Christmas party.

Nico and the guys had gone early to help set up. Ty helped me to do my hair and make-up and was escorting me up there.

I felt pretty in one of the dresses Ty and I picked out when we were shopping so many weeks ago – my favorite one. It was dark, deep red, and had lace above the sweetheart neckline and down my sleeves.

Ty helped me curl my hair, after we watched a tutorial together on YouTube, then I applied some light makeup, with a red lipstick.

I had on the matching heels I picked to go with the dress, and I was feeling pretty good. I couldn't wait to see my guys in their suits.

Ty was in a suit too. It was charcoal gray and looked as though it had been tailored for him. He had a white shirt underneath, open collar and he looked great.

“Are you sure I look okay?” I asked him as I pulled at the hem of the short dress.

“Okay? Em, you're a knock-out. The guys are going to be drooling,” he assured me. “Shall we go?” He held his hand out for me to take, but I hesitated.

“I'm nervous. I don't like a lot of people around me anymore,” I admitted.

“We don't have to go. I told you I'm more than happy to get in my PJ's and hang out watching Christmas Eve shows and eating junk,” he offered again.

“I know, and I'm tempted, but I wanted to see the guys all dressed up.”

“Then how about we head up there? You can see the guys, maybe have a dance or two, then if or when it gets too much, you let me know and we'll leave, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Thank you, Ty,” he was so good to me. I had no idea what I would do without him in my life.

“No thanks needed. Now come on. Let's get up there so I can see your brother in his sexy suit,” he joked, making me laugh.

I took his hand and tried hard not to twist an ankle in the heels as we headed out of the apartment and up to the top floor.

When the elevator opened and loud music assailed me, I released Ty's hand and wrapped both hands around his arm instead, needing a better grip. I could hear lots of voices chatting and laughing, and I was shaking with nerves.

"Deep breaths. I've got you, short stuff," he whispered as he placed his hand on top of one of mine where they tightly gripped his arm.

When we walked into the main area of the office, I was surprised at how different it looked. All the desks had been cleared out and there was a large dance floor with a DJ booth set up beside it.

In the back corner there was a long bar set up with three guys tending it. There was also a huge buffet set up near the windows that seemed to go on forever. The whole place had fancy lighting, holiday decorations, and the music was loud and fun. I couldn't believe how much the guys had done to make the party special for their employees.

"Do you want a drink?" Ty asked as we headed for the bar, me still clutching his arm tightly.

"Can I have a white wine spritzer? I had one when I was out with Livy, and it was good."

"Sure thing," Ty smiled as he led me to the bar. He pointed to the small space we stopped before and I reluctantly released him and stepped forward. I was nervous with people either side of me, but it only lasted a moment, because Ty stepped up right behind me and caged me in with his arms, his hands either side of me on the bar top.

He stayed there as he ordered my drink, along with a beer for himself. Once the drinks were made, he grabbed his, so I followed and took mine, then I was securely tucked under his arm again, pressed against his side.

"Let's find the guys and your sexy brother," Ty purred, making me giggle. Nico was going to slap him around his head tonight.

I saw Jax first. He was standing near the DJ booth, having a conversation with the young guy who was in there doing the music. I stood at the edge of the dancefloor, just staring at him across it. He looked so handsome in a navy suit with a baby blue shirt underneath. The shirt was unbuttoned just enough to see a hint of the light hair on his chest. He just looked so confident in that suave outfit, all confidence and charm. His wild messy hair was just the perfect antithesis to his designer suit. He was perfect.

When those dark blue, sapphire eyes locked on mine and he grinned, I was a goner.

“Go get him, tiger. I’ll be close if you need me,” Ty said into my ear so I could hear him over the music. He took my drink from my hand and smiled.

I reached up and kissed his cheek, then headed across the dancefloor. Jax was striding towards me, and we met in the middle.

“You look amazing, angel,” he spoke into my ear and the feel of his warm breath running over my skin had me shuddering and breaking out in goosebumps. He smelled amazing and I couldn’t stop myself from reaching up and wrapping my arms around the back of his neck.

“You clean up pretty well yourself,” I purred as close to his ear as I could get – closer than usual, thanks to the torturous heels I wore.

He bent down so he could chastely kiss my lips, then he smiled again, devilishly.

“Since we’re in position, on the dancefloor, how about a dance?” He offered.

Not wanting to have to release my hold on him, or the bliss I felt in that moment, I nodded my agreement.

He did some kind of signal with his hand and the song changed from the upbeat one that had been halfway through, to a slower John Legend one.

Jax wrapped his arms around me, his hands rested just above my butt, and we started to sway.

I knew there had never been a more perfect moment in my entire life than that one right there, in the arms of the man I was falling for, safe, loved and so wonderfully happy.

“This feels like a dream,” I whispered as I pressed even closer into him and lay my head against the front of his shoulder.

“I know, but it’s not. It’s real honey. It’s all real. You make me so damned happy.”

“You make me happy too. I...I love you Jax. I know it’s all so complicated and messy, but I know I love you,” I admitted.

“Good. Because I know I love you too – have for a while if I’m honest.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, looking up at him.

“It means we love each other. We don’t need to complicate it more than that for now. Let’s just have this perfect dance and be happy.”

I sighed in contentment as I lay my head back on his shoulder and just soaked in every perfect, magical second of that beautiful dance in Jax’s arms.

I wished over and over that the song would never end, and I would never have to leave Jax’s arms, but inevitably it did end. The only thing that soothed my disappointment was Jax’s gentle kiss.

“Linc’s waiting to get his hands on you,” Jax told me as he pulled back and turned me to face where Linc stood at the side of the dancefloor, watching us. “Go to him now. I’ll catch up with you guys soon,” he kissed me once more then gave me a tiny shove towards Linc. I turned and smiled at him once more, before hurrying over to Linc.

“Hey, you,” I greeted as I took him in.

He was dressed in light gray tailored trousers, with a matching vest. Beneath it he wore a black shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and displaying those spectacular forearms.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he smiled as he wrapped his hands around my waist and pulled me closer. “You look so fucking perfect in

that dress. It was driving me crazy watching while Jax had his hands on you.”

“You should have joined us,” I teased with a mischievous wink.

“You’re such a little minx when you want to be, Emilia Gallo,” he said, with that heated gaze once more lasered in on me. “Come on, let’s dance before I do what I really want to do, and rip that dress off.”

I was blushing as he took my hand and led me back onto the dancefloor, but the heat I felt running through me could only be good. I never felt so desired in my life.

I danced for over an hour, switching between Jax and Linc. Ty appeared after a while and demanded his dance with me. The music turned up tempo by then, so I had a few dances with him, my guys refusing to dance to anything that required more than gentle swaying.

Surprising the heck out of me, Nico appeared, after a while, and happily joined in as Ty and I stood shaking our bodies and swinging our arms above our heads, to a fast pop song. He could really move too. I was gob smacked, but Ty of course, was loving every second of it as he pawed at Nico as we all danced facing each other in a little circle. I had to agree with Ty, Nico looked very handsome in his black suit with a gray shirt and darker gray tie. He suited a more formal look.

“I need a drink,” I called, completely exhausted and my feet killing in the shoes which pinched. Nico and Ty abandoned their jackets about thirty minutes ago and Ty had Nico’s tie loosely around his neck. They both looked hot and sweaty too, but we had been having so much fun together. I couldn’t take in how relaxed and happy Nico was. It was a beautiful sight to see.

“Come on Ty. Let’s take a break,” Nico called as he wrapped his arm around Ty’s shoulders, and the other around mine, and pulled us toward the packed bar.

I couldn’t help the giggle that burst from me when Ty looked around Nico and threw me a cheeky wink, clearly delighted

Nico had him in a half hug.

“I have to pee!” I called over the music as we passed the ladies. “Get me a soda and I’ll meet you at the bar.”

Nico nodded to Ty, signaling he should come with me, and I didn’t even bother protesting. It wouldn’t get me anywhere and I knew it. Instead, I took Ty’s hand and followed behind him. I saw Linc and Jax sitting at a table off to the side with Hal and Eddy, laughing about something. They were watching me too and sent me a smile and chin lift as I gave them a little wave.

“I’ll wait here,” Ty yelled as he pointed to the wall outside the ladies’ room. I nodded and headed in, busting to pee.

Once I had taken care of business, I stood at the sink washing my hands and checking my make up in the mirror. I looked flushed and a little clammy, but still presentable.

I was at the hand dryer when the door opened and a tall blonde with a short pixie cut walked in. She was dressed in a tiny little red sequined dress, and she had legs that went on and on. She was gorgeous. She had a large, gift-wrapped box which she set down at her feet, then she looked herself over in the mirror.

“You’re Emilia, right?” she asked when the hand dryer stopped.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Great. I work in the office, and I got stuck with handing out the ‘secret Santa’s’ this year. I’ve been looking for you. This one is yours,” she pointed down at the large gift on the floor.

“Secret Santa?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah, we do it every year.”

“But I didn’t buy a gift for anyone. I didn’t know I was supposed to,” I explained, feeling guilty. Had someone mentioned it and I’d forgotten. I hoped some poor person wasn’t missing a gift because of me.

“No, it’s fine. It all worked out. I just needed to give you this. It’s the last one,” she pushed the box toward me with her foot,

then turned and headed for the door.

“Happy holidays,” she said with a smile.

“You too,” I just managed to say before she was gone. I was still confused about what was going on, and who the hell she was. I certainly didn’t recognize her, but I was also excited at the prospect of a gift.

I placed my purse on the counter and crouched to look over the box. It was a cube and wrapped perfectly in red and white candy cane printed paper. Sure enough, there was a tag with my name written in block capitals, so it was really for me.

Like a naughty toddler I glanced to the door, then knowing no one was around, I tore it open excitedly. Under the paper was just a brown box with no writing to indicate what it was. More curious than ever I opened the unsecured flaps and pulled out several sheets of scrunched up gold tissue paper. Underneath it was a small sheet of plastic. I pulled that away and gasped at the smell that came out with it.

I should have stopped then, should have known whatever was in there was not good, but I had to know, so I tossed the plastic aside and looked in. The scream that came out of me at the sight I found was the loudest and most blood curdling of my life. I threw myself back away from the box as I fought to breathe.

“EM?” Ty raced in yelling my name and was instantly across the space and crouched before me. “What is it? What happened?” He demanded.

I was curled up, my face buried in my hands as I sobbed, shook, and fought to breathe. Ty pulled my hands from my face and started running his hands over me, looking for injury.

Seeing how worried he was for me, I pointed behind him to the box. I was too frantic for words yet.

He turned just enough to pull the box closer and when he pulled back the flaps I looked away, not able to see it again.

“What the fuck?” He gasped. “Where did this come from, Em?” He asked as he closed it up and pushed it away. He held

out his hand and I put mine in it, needing his comfort. “Em?”
He prompted.

I looked up and met his eyes, but all I could do was shake my head.

“I have to get the guys,” he said as he moved to stand.

“NO!” I all but screamed. “D-don’t l-leave me!”

“I’m not leaving you,” he assured me as he stood and reached down to lift me from the floor.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, clinging on to him so hard there was no way he could leave.

He pulled out his cell and hit a contact, then I could hear it ringing as he held it close to his ear where my head rested.

“Ty?” Nico answered, sounding confused.

“Get the guys and come to the ladies’ room right now Nico. Don’t let anyone else in here,” he ended the call before Nico could ask any questions. He placed his cell beside the sink then wrapped both arms around me. “Try and slow down now, Xena. Try to take long, deep breaths. You have to calm down before you hyperventilate,” he directed calmly.

I wanted to calm down so I could tell the guys everything. They needed to catch the woman who had given me the box so we could find out who sent it, but breathing was proving impossible, the situation worsened by my unstoppable sobbing and violent shaking.

I was no calmer by the time Linc came barreling through the door, followed by Jax and Nico.

“What the fuck is going on?” Linc asked as he walked straight over to Ty and I and rubbed his hand up and down my back.

I instantly grabbed onto him, needing his safety.

“She screamed bloody murder and I ran in,” Ty explained as he quickly passed me into Linc’s arms.

I clung to him just as I had Ty, my legs tight around his waist, my face buried against his neck.

“What happened? Is she hurt?” Nico barked as he looked me over, assessing me. Ty nodded to the box and all three of them looked down to it.

“I...It’s Juan,” I gasped.

“He was here?” Jax growled, as he looked around like Juan may be lurking in a stall or something.

“No. I-in there...the box. It’s Juan.”

Linc turned around so I was looking at the wall as Nico bent to open the box. I heard all three of them gasp, followed by curses.

I didn’t need to be facing the box to see Juan’s lifeless eyes looking up at me from his decapitated head. That was an image that would never leave me.

“Mia? Who gave this to you?” Nico asked as he appeared before me where I looked over Linc’s shoulder.

“A w-woman. She...she said she w-worked at the office. She told me th-this was my s-secret Santa.”

“Fuck! She’s not safe here. We need to get her downstairs,” Linc cursed as he gripped me even tighter.

“How do we know she’ll be safe there? Whoever gave her this got it into the building easily. It’s obviously someone we employ because they’re the only ones with access,” Jax reasoned.

I clung on even tighter, probably squeezing the life from Linc, but I was terrified. I had thought all of this was over and now someone sent me Juan’s head in a freaking box! Why? Who would do that?

“It’s going to be okay, Em. The guys and I will protect you,” Ty assured me as he rubbed a soothing hand up and down my back.

“Jax, get Hal, Eddy, and Jay. They can escort you, Ty, and Mia back to my place and stand guard while Linc and I investigate this,” Nico commanded. Jax nodded and looked over to me.

“Be right back,” he assured me, then he jogged from the room.

“I need to know what this woman looked like, *Tesoro*, then you can get out of here and back home,” Nico said calmly.

“Why w-would anyone...s-send *that*?” I whimpered as I looked down at the closed box. “Is this...is it Valton? Is he beck? Is h-he going to t-take me again?”

“No, Em. I promise you baby, Valton Marku is dead. I fired a full clip into him. He’s gone. He can’t hurt you again,” Linc assured me as he lay a soothing kiss on top of my head.

“Then who? W-why?”

“I don’t know, but we will find out, sweetheart, starting with the woman who gave the box to you. That’s why I need her description,” Nico prompted.

“Sh-she was tall and blonde. Her hair w-was short, and she had on a r-red dress...sequins all over it. I d-didn’t recognize her though.”

“I saw her walk in and back out. She had short, bleach blonde hair and her dress is hard to miss,” Ty agreed.

“That’s good. I’ll go take a look around when Jax comes back. He can check the surveillance cameras when he gets to yours,” Linc told Nico, then he looked at me, “It’s all going to be okay. We’ll get to the bottom of this. You just take care of yourself for me, yeah? You’re safe. We won’t let anyone hurt you again,” he put his finger under my chin and gently turned my face to his. His kiss was soft and soothing, cementing his words.

Jax walked in right after with Hal, Eddy, and Jay – three of the Milite employees at his back.

“The three of you good to watch my place until Linc and I can get back?” Nico asked curtly.

“Whatever you need, Nic,” Eddy replied, and the others nodded as they glanced down to the box and back to Nico.

“Thank you. I know it’s Christmas Eve. I appreciate it,” Nico replied with a nod.

“Jax, I need to go and start looking for this blonde,” Linc told him as he approached. Jax nodded and I was smoothly passed

between them.

I took a deep, calming breath in as I wrapped myself around Jax, soothed by his familiar scent and the strength of his hard body beneath me.

“I got you, angel,” he whispered as he put a hand on the back of my head and eased it down onto his shoulder.

“I’ll be at your place as soon as I can, baby,” Linc bent so his face was before mine as he spoke.

“Be careful,” I gasped, worried for all of them. What kind of psycho sent a severed head? Whoever we were dealing with – it was clear they were dangerous.

“Always,” he threw me a wink, as he leaned in to kiss me, then he was gone.

“Clear my place before Mia goes in and then lock it up tight,” Nico commanded.

“I know. I’ve got this Nic,” Jax assured him.

“Linc wants you to check the cameras, see if you can get an image of this woman. Tall, short blonde hair, and red dress.”

“I’ll help him,” Ty offered. “I know what she looks like.”

“W-what are you go...gonna do w-with that?” I looked at the box shakily.

“I’m going to call in the CPD. Don’t worry, *Tesoro*. I’ll handle this,” Nico promised as he placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. “Get her out of here guys and take care of her. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“I got her,” Jax replied, then we were leaving the ladies’ room, surrounded by Milite’s employees and Ty closest at my side.

Outside in the office, the party was still in full swing, everyone laughing, dancing, and enjoying themselves. I wanted to go back thirty minutes and be there with them, back on the dance floor with Nico and Ty; happy.

I clung to Jax as we passed everyone and stepped onto the elevator. When we got to the apartment Jax put me down and Ty instantly wrapped an arm around me, still quaking,

shoulders to steady me. Jax and Eddy went in to check the place was safe as we stood in the hall with Hal and Jay. The silence was deafening, the only sound was my gasping breaths.

“Okay guys,” Jax told us as he appeared at the door. Eddy stepped out and Ty helped me inside.

“We’ll stay out here until we hear otherwise,” Eddy assured Jax. He thanked them and then closed and locked the door.

“What do you need, Em?” Ty asked.

“A shower. I c-can still smell it,” I whispered.

“I’ve got her Ty,” Jax cut in. He put his hands on my waist and lifted me until I was clinging to his front like a spider monkey once again.

“I’ll make some tea and find a movie we can watch,” Ty said as Jax carried me towards my bedroom.

I was still shaking and gasping a little as he took me right through to the bathroom, but I was calmer. Jax leaned into the shower stall to turn it on. As the water heated up and steamed up the glass cubicle I clung on tight and tried to work through image after image of Juan yelling at me, and hurting me, and reconcile each with what I had just seen in that box. I was trying hard to keep it together, conscious of the fact I already put the guys through so much.

It had just been such a shock. I had seen a lot in my miserable life – seen Juan and his men make grown men scream in agony and terror. I lived through my own life filled with agony and terror, but that – the severed head of the man who featured in my nightmares – it had been so gruesome.

“Angel? You with me?” Jax asked softly.

“No. Not really,” I whispered.

“Can you stand while I get your dress off, then we can get you in the shower and warmed up, okay?”

“You’re coming in with me?”

“I don’t have to, but you’re shaky and I’m concerned about you being in there alone. It’s just a shower, honey, I promise.

Nothing else is going to happen tonight when you're so upset. I'll keep my boxers on."

"W-what about m-my...my scars?" I panicked. I had gotten close to the guys recently. Having them with me night and day left us no other option, but I had been very careful to always change in my bathroom, not ready for them to see the ugly roadmap of my violent past.

"We've been through this, Em. I want to see your scars. They're a part of you – the part that shows just how amazingly strong you are. They will never change my feelings for you. I love you."

I took a deep breath and tried to believe what he said – that my scars were more to him than the disgusting, brutal reminders of everything ever inflicted on me in my life so far.

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly. I was pretty sure he was underestimating just how bad the scars were, but I knew if the relationship with the guys was ever to work, they would have to see eventually.

I was still terrified as he lowered me to the floor though, sure he would turn away from me as soon as he saw my back.

He pulled off my shoes one at a time, followed by my dress, as I stood holding my breath, waiting to hear his revulsion.

I heard his small gasp as my naked back was revealed to him, but he shocked me when I felt his lips press kisses across my shoulders.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he kissed, and I couldn't help the silent tears that ran down my cheeks. This man amazed me with his tenderness and kindness. They all did. I was so lucky to have him and Linc want me, especially when I was so damaged and messed up. I knew that, but it didn't soothe the pang I felt in my chest over Parker. I missed him so much.

"You're perfect, angel," Jax told me as he appeared before me and took my hands. He led me to sit on the closed toilet, much to my relief, since my legs had been wobbling under me and I wasn't sure they were going to keep me up.

I watched avidly as Jax unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off, revealing his beautifully built, perfectly sculpted torso. His skin was golden, like he'd been working in the sun, or out surfing as his image suggested he should. He had a smattering of body hair down his chest, and I liked it.

Then he took off his socks and pants and stood before me in nothing but a pair of black boxers. He really was perfection, his legs just as muscled and toned as his top half.

I saw a few puckered scars down his right side and wondered if there were more on his back.

“Come on, sexy lady,” he smiled as he grabbed both of my hands and pulled me to my feet. “You want to keep these on, or take them off?” He asked as he ran a finger down my black bra strap.

“Off,” I replied.

Jax was going to see me naked at some point and I needed everything gone. I could smell the foul odor that had come from that box. I felt like it clung to every inch of me, and I needed to wash it away. It wasn't like he could be repulsed by me without underwear after what he'd just seen on my back.

Jax very quickly reached around and unsnapped my bra, pulling it loose and letting it fall onto the pile of clothes off to the side. I gasped as my breasts were exposed to him, but he didn't make it awkward, which I appreciated. Instead, he knelt at my feet and pulled off my panties, adding them to the pile.

He stood and reached a hand into the shower to check the temperature, then ushered me in, under the spray. He stepped in and wrapped his arms around me from behind, one around my waist and the other just above my breasts. The feel of his hands brushing over my bare skin had little electric zings shooting through my body and I felt the need to press my thighs together when things started to stir down there. I couldn't help it. It just felt so amazing to have his naked flesh pressing against my back and his hands running over me.

“Can I wash your hair?” He asked softly.

I didn't want him to remove his hands from my body, but I wanted to get rid of that smell more.

"Yes please," I replied.

I relaxed even more when he had my hair wet, and he started to massage shampoo into it. It made my scalp tingle in the best way, and those tingles travelled throughout my body.

When my hair was rinsed Jax picked my shower gel off the shelf and put some on his hands, then he was washing me, rubbing his hands over my arms and up to my shoulders. Then he turned me and rubbed his hands over my back and down over my butt cheeks, so close to where I was crying out for attention, I swayed a little on my feet.

Jax was instantly at my back, his arms wrapped around me again, supporting me so I didn't fall. He used the soap he had on his hands to rub over my stomach from behind, then he ran his hands up and gently over my breasts and puckered nipples.

"You're so beautiful Emilia. This body is so sexy and perfect. Never feel conscious of showing it to me again, do you understand?" He said, all breathy and sexy as I groaned at the sensation of his hands washing my breasts and setting me alight in a way I had never known before.

"Yes," I gasped in reply.

"Good girl," that small bit of praise made my entire body hum with need even more. I was disappointed when Jax stopped his ministrations and turned me to face him. "We're gonna get out now, okay? Before I go back on my word that this would just be a shower."

"What if I want it to be more too?" I asked breathily.

"Jesus Em. You're killing me here," he groaned, and I could feel his hardness pressing into my belly as I nestled even closer against him. "We can talk about that if you still want it another time, but right now you've had a shock and you're upset. I don't want to push you into anything when your head may not be quite straight," he explained.

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but I was grateful he was looking out for me, as always.

He leaned down and kissed me with every bit of pent-up frustration I was sure he was feeling, and it was enough to appease me for the moment, even if it did leave my body humming with a desperate desire for more.

He helped me to dry off then wrapped me in a huge warm towel. When we got to my room, he lowered me down until I sat on the edge of my bed, then he went to my closet and found pajamas.

“I can do that, Jax,” I objected, but he just smiled as he walked back out with a set of my warmest flannel PJ’s. They had little dogs all over the blue background and were my favorites.

“I know, but I want to. Let me look after you, okay?”

I nodded, not wanting to argue. I liked him looking after me too, especially if I got to see him for a bit longer in just the towel he wore around his waist.

He helped me as I pulled off the towel and put on my comfy PJs, then I sat and watched as he pulled a pair of boxers and joggers from the bag of his stuff, he brought over just the day before.

He and Linc both brought bags of their clean clothes and toiletries to keep in my room since they started sleeping there with me every night. It made it easier for them to get ready in the morning, rather than them having to go back to their own apartments on the next floor up.

“You just gonna ogle me while I change?” Jax asked with a devilish smile.

“Only fair since I showed you mine,” I shrugged playfully. I was playing a game I clearly wasn’t equipped for, as illustrated when he removed his wet boxers and I blushed so badly I had to turn away before I even really saw anything. I was such an inexperienced, weird, loser.

“Okay, it’s safe to peek,” Jax laughed. When I turned back to him, he had on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, his feet bare. “You’re cute when you get all shy,” he added.

“I’m sorry. I just...I haven’t...” I floundered.

“Jesus Em. Don’t be sorry. I love how innocent you are. Cutest damned thing I’ve ever seen,” he sat beside me on the bed and pulled me in for a half hug. “You’re perfect. I wouldn’t change one damned thing about you.”

“And you are crazy,” I laughed.

“Crazy for you,” he quickly placed a kiss on the end of my nose, making me laugh even more. “Come on, let’s check on Ty and I need to get to work on that surveillance footage.”

I sighed as I took his hand and followed him out of the room. The short reprieve from the hell that was going on outside the bedroom walls had been nice, but now it was back to reality.

CHAPTER 7

LINC

It was almost four in the morning by the time the forensics team from CPD finished going over the box, bagged the evidence, and left. Nate, who sent Lola home and stayed to help, also left an hour earlier.

Nico and I were exhausted and seriously pissed that the blonde who gave Em the box, slipped in and out so easily. We had an image of her from surveillance cameras in our office, and we had given that to the cops too, but I had already done a search on her and came back with nothing.

We watched on surveillance footage as she used a staff fob to get into the building and straight up to the party. She then watched Emilia and waited for the opportunity to get her alone – in the bathroom. She left the building as soon as she strode from the ladies’ room and disappeared out of range of any of our cameras. None of our staff knew her face when questioned, except for seeing her that night, but no one questioned her being there, because some of the guys brought wives and girlfriends and had assumed she was one too.

I called Kyle and sent him the image, desperate to know what was going on and why anyone would kill Juan Benitez and send his head to Emilia? It made no sense. Kyle assured me that he would find the woman, if there was anything to find and that reassured me some, knowing both our teams were working on it.

“Come on. Let’s check on the others,” Nico urged as we locked up the office, both exhausted and worried sick about Em. If she was in danger again, I worried what it would do for her sanity and peace of mind. She was already hanging on by a thread and this – it could push her over the edge.

When we got to Nico’s place we told Hal, Eddy, and Jay to go home, thanking them for working on Christmas Eve at such short notice. They shrugged off our thanks and headed out.

With the building completely empty for the holidays, except for the two of us and everyone at Nico's, I used my cell to lock everything down automatically, rolling shutters over the windows on the ground floor and arming a security alarm on all possible entry routes. Thankfully, when we designed the building, we shelled out a lot of money on security and it was paying off now.

"We good?" Nico asked.

"All secure," I agreed, then followed him into his place.

My eyes instantly searched out Emilia and I let out a small sigh when I saw her curled up on the sofa with Jax, laid almost on top of him, fast asleep.

Ty was sleeping in the armchair opposite, a blanket wrapped around him as he loudly snored.

"You find her?" Jax asked softly, having woken instantly at the sound of us entering.

"No. She was long gone before we even started looking. She had a fob," Nico explained.

"I can cross reference the entry data with the security footage and find out whose fob she used," Jax suggested.

"That's what we were hoping," I agreed as I leaned over and placed a feather light kiss on Em's forehead, just needing to touch her. "How's she been?" I asked.

"Upset. She knows deep down that Valton is gone, but she's also convinced this is him, come back for her again."

"I'm thinking it has the Albanians written all over it," Nico admitted reluctantly. He was in the kitchen, pulling a beer from the refrigerator.

"That's what I was thinking too, but why would they? Morin told you to get rid of Marku."

"He did," Nico nodded. "But that doesn't mean all of the Albanians wanted the same thing."

"Fuck! If this is them..." Jax hissed. He didn't need to finish.

We all knew already. If the Albanians were after us, this was going to get very messy and likely very bloody. They were not people you wanted to fuck with.

“Let’s just find out who the woman was first and go from there. Whatever happens, we need to keep Mia out of it as much as possible. She’s dealing with too much. We can’t put any of this on her,” Nico said firmly, and I agreed. My girl was strong and tough, but she had been through way too much. I really wasn’t sure she could take anything more at that time.

“Agreed,” Jax said. “Linc, why don’t you take Em and get some sleep. I’ll start looking into how that woman got into the building.”

I looked at Nico, not happy to go to bed if there was more that I could be doing to stop whatever was going on.

“He’s right, bro. You should sleep. Mia’s excited for tomorrow, so no matter what is going on, we need to make it special for her. We can’t do that if we’re dead on our feet,” he agreed.

In all the craziness I had forgotten tomorrow was Christmas day. Nico was right though. Em had never been allowed to celebrate before so we all agreed to do everything that we could to make it special for her. We couldn’t allow whatever the fuck was happening to ruin it.

I nodded, and happily bent down to scoop Em up from Jax. As soon as I turned her into my front she snaked her arms around my neck and sighed my name sleepily. It filled me with a peace I hadn’t realized I needed.

After the events of the night, and realizing, once again, a threat had gotten to Em without us protecting her, I had been on edge and nervous. Having her in my arms soothed me.

As soon as I got to her room, I lay on the bed with her still in my arms. She snuggled into me, nestling her head on my chest beneath my chin and lowering her arms, tucking them between us. When she let out a small sigh of contentment, and then resumed her quiet snoring, I couldn’t help but smile.

Growing up, I had only seen relationships as toxic. The men my mom brought home were scumbags who used to hit her and abuse her. They usually slapped me around too and always ended up running off having stolen from the very little we had to start with. Seeing that destructive pattern again and again, I had told myself I would never fall in love or be in a lasting relationship. Then I found Kyle, and I saw the relationship he and the guys had with Livy – the way they loved her unquestioningly, and would do anything for her, always doing all they could to keep her safe and protected. That changed my mind that love wasn't real because I had seen it for myself. Love – true love did exist. I just never for one minute imagined I would ever find it for myself. After the mess that my childhood was, and then as fucked up as I had been when I got out of the military, I resigned myself to never having what Kyle and my brothers had. I had been okay with it too, not sure I really had it left in me to be what any woman would need.

Then Emilia came into my life and turned everything on its head, because I fell for her so damned hard from the first time that I saw her. Now I love her. I knew it without question, and I also knew I couldn't live the rest of my life without her at my side. The fact she loved Jax, and Parker too didn't bother me. I wasn't a whole man. Too many pieces of me had been chipped away throughout my life for me to ever be whole, but with my brothers I knew we could give her all she needed and so much more. We could give her the love she had missed for so long and make her happy as she deserved to be. Most of all we could protect her and keep her safe, as we guided her through this darkness and found some light together.

“I love you,” I whispered as I kissed the top of her head.

She sighed again, and so did I as I peacefully slipped into sleep with the woman I loved in my arms.

EMILIA

I sat at the table, surrounded by the guys I was falling in love with way faster than I ever thought possible, my best friend and my amazing brother, feeling both amazingly fortunate and completely confused. Just the night before my world had once

again come crashing down around me, and yet, somehow, the amazing guys in my life found a way to make me push it all aside and enjoy my first ever Christmas celebration.

After a restless night, filled with nightmares of Juan, and Valton rising from the dead to come for me once again, I had woken to the reassuring security of being surrounded by Jax and Linc.

When they both awoke shortly after I did, they pulled me from the comfort of my bed and into the living room where Nico and Tyler were already up and in the midst of laying out a wonderful breakfast. We ate together while playing holiday music. It had been magical with snow falling heavily outside the windows and the twinkle of the Christmas tree.

Next had been presents, all of us sat in the lounge around the tree as Nico passed out the colorful parcels that seemed to have magically appeared under the tree overnight.

I had been completely overwhelmed by the beautiful gifts I received. Jax gave me a beautiful delicate gold and diamond bracelet and Linc gave me a necklace with a diamond star pendant that matched the small stars running along the bracelet. They were the most beautiful things I had ever owned, and I was a little nervous to wear them, terrified I would break them.

“You doing okay baby?” Linc asked, placing his hand over mine where I had been nervously fingering my new bracelet.

I turned my hand under his, linking our fingers as I looked up into his beautiful blue eyes and smiled.

“I’m good,” I assured him. I glanced across the table to where Nico was beginning to clear away the plates, everyone having finished eating the turkey dinner I helped him prepare. It had been delicious, and we had all eaten way more than we should have, the whole time laughing and chatting away happily, no one mentioning a thing about what happened the night before. There seemed to be some unwritten deal between the five of us that for that one day we would put aside everything we had all been through and just enjoy being together. It was the greatest gift any of them could have given me – just one day to forget

everything and enjoy the wonderful people in my life, one day of happiness where none of the darkness inside of me could torture me as it seemed to do so relentlessly.

“Who wants desert?” Ty asked as he grabbed a stack of plates from Nico and jumped to his feet. We all groaned in perfect synchronicity, not one of us able to even think about eating another thing – all except for Ty of course, who seemed to have an endless pit for a stomach.

“He’s trying to kill us,” Jax moaned from where he sat on my other side.

“I agree Ty. I’m going to slip into a food coma if I even look at any more food,” I concurred.

“Why don’t you find us all a holiday movie to watch, *Tesoro*? We can just chill out for a while. Dessert will wait until later,” Nico suggested, and I was more than happy to oblige.

“Great plan,” I agreed with a smile. “And I know exactly which movie I want to watch.”

“Please tell me it’s not a cheesy romcom,” Jax pleaded, looking to me with those puppy dog eyes he did so well.

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in and placing a chaste kiss on his lips and making him drop his pout and smile. He was so handsome when he smiled, and I wished I had the amazing new camera Nico gifted me that morning to snap a picture of the moment.

“No romcoms,” I assured him with a smile. As we stood, he and Linc each took one of my hands and led me over to the sofa. The relationship between us seemed to, suddenly, be moving very fast, but I wasn’t worried because it just felt right. Being with the two of them made me feel safe and at peace. Yes, I had concerns about how things would work moving forward because, for one, I had many, many issues that I knew it would take time for me to deal with and that would impact the way things could progress. And then there was Parker. I hadn’t heard a word from him despite reaching out several times, and so I resigned myself to the fact he didn’t seem to want me, but that didn’t stop me from wanting him. I

had the exact same feelings for him as I did for Linc and Jax and without him I felt like a piece of me was missing. Could things move forward while I was holding onto those feelings? Could the three of us be together happily while Parker was always there on the outside?

“Elf?” Ty laughed as he and Nico walked in a few minutes later.

I had the movie all loaded up and ready to go, happily nestled between Jax and Linc on the sofa.

“Is that okay?” I asked as I looked between them all. “I saw a clip of it on some show and I’ve wanted to watch it ever since. It looked funny.”

“It’s fine, short stuff. It’s just not what I expected you to pick.”

“It’s a good choice, sweets,” Jax assured me, giving my hand a squeeze where I clutched his.

Nico and Ty sat in armchairs, and we all got comfortable. The heavy snowfall outside made the day dark and gray, but it was perfect at in that moment, leaving the room in shadow, lit only by the television and the lights on the Christmas tree. I felt wonderfully content as we all just watched the hilarious movie in a comfortable quiet. It had been one of the greatest days of my life, which was crazy after what happened the night before.

The movie ended and the guys chose the next one - an action movie, of course. I watched a little, but before long I was dozing, my head on Linc’s chest and my feet in Jax’s lap. I was tired, having had a restless sleep that night, and too comfortable to fight the fatigue any longer.

Linc had his arm wrapped around my waist and Jax was soothingly running his hand up and down my calf, both of them giving me the comfort I needed, knowing they were there as I slept, keeping my nightmares at bay.

“Em, baby. Wake up.”

I jumped with a start at Linc's voice and the feel of his hand on my waist shaking me slightly. I opened my eyes to find Nico racing out of the apartment and Ty rushing over to where Jax sat furiously typing into his laptop at the kitchen counter.

"What's going on?" I asked with worry as I hurried to sit up.

"Someone is trying to enter the building. The alarm was tripped at the main entrance," Linc explained.

I could feel the tension radiating off him, and from the guys across the room.

"Who? Do you think...could it be linked to last night?" I asked shakily, just the thought of seeing Juan's head in that box making me feel physically sick.

"We don't know, but we need to get you somewhere safe," Linc was already on his feet and pulling me to mine as he spoke.

"What about Nico? He's not going down there alone, is he?"

"He's just going to scope things out. He'll be fine. He knows what he's doing and Jax is checking the camera feeds."

"He's right, angel. We've got this but we need you to be safe," Jax agreed as he briefly looked up from his computer to give me a reassuring smile.

I glanced from him to Ty, who just nodded his agreement.

"Come on, baby. It's going to be okay," Linc tugged my hand leading me from the lounge and through to Nico's room.

"Where are we going?" I asked, hating to leave them all when danger, brought on by me, could be on its way.

"There's a panic room in Nico's bedroom. We installed them in all the apartments when we designed the space," Linc hurriedly explained, then I just watched as he opened Nico's walk-in closet and opened the top drawer of a dresser. Inside was a keypad and after he typed in a long number, the whole back wall of the closet started to slowly slide back.

"There's a computer showing all the security feeds in there, and a phone. Watch the cameras and if things look like they're

going bad, call 911.”

“I don’t like this,” I admitted shakily.

“It’s going to be okay, baby,” he gathered me into his arms and held me tightly. “Just stay in here no matter what, do you hear me? No matter what happens, what you see, you do not open this door unless one of us tells you to, or the cops arrive and tell you it’s safe. Promise me, Em – promise me you’ll keep yourself safe.”

I clung to him as tight as I could, torn between the feeling of never wanting to let him go, and wanting to run back out of that room and do all I could to keep Jax and Nico safe. I was terrified something would happen to them, but I also knew deep down that me being out there would just make whatever was about to arise a whole lot more difficult for them. So instead, I forced myself to take a deep breath in, then I released Linc and looked up into his eyes.

“I promise,” I agreed. “Just be safe too though, please?” I ran my hands down from his shoulders and over his firm arms, dragging out the moment that I had to let him go.

“Always, baby,” he leaned in and kissed me, then gently pushed me back into the safe room. I was shaking, and close to tears, but I held them back, already seeing the worry on his face.

I managed to force a smile, hoping it would reassure him as the door slid closed once again, separating us, and leaving me feeling completely devastated.

It took me a moment to pull my emotions back enough to think straight. I glanced around me to find a room a little smaller than my bedroom, lined with shelves filled with what looked like weapons, water and some food. In the corner there was a large desk, lined with three computer screens. I hurried over and turned them all on. As they powered on each had a display split into sixteen sections, all showing different angles of surveillance throughout the building.

I clicked each screen onto different angles of the lobby, where Linc said the alarm had been tripped.

At first the whole area looked empty and still, but as I watched on, I saw Linc and Nico moving stealthily into the space. They were both wearing bullet proof vests and had guns in their hands, moving in perfect rhythm with each other, as if they had done it a thousand times before. It should have reassured me, eased the deafening terror screaming at me that something was going to happen to the people I loved, but it didn't. My brother and the men I loved were out there, in danger while I hid away, and nothing was going to make that situation easier.

Needing to check on Jax and Ty I backed up the screen and looked for cameras near our apartment. I could see the door from the angle of the hall, but there were no cameras in the apartment.

I looked up, wondering if I could call out to them, but the walls and door of the whole room seemed to be lined with some kind of metal and I was sure the space would be soundproof.

Unable to do anything else I sat back on the chair which sat at the desk and pulled up the images of the lobby once again. Nico and Linc were out of sight again, but I was sure they were there somewhere, hiding, just lying in wait. I just hoped more than anything that whoever tried to get in, had given up and gone. Nothing could happen to the guys. I'd never survive it if it did. I needed each and every one of them and I wasn't afraid to admit it. I may have arrived in Chicago determined to learn how to survive alone, but since then I learned a very different lesson – true strength wasn't being able to struggle all alone, it was being brave enough to admit you needed help.

CHAPTER 8

JAX

“The lobby looks all clear,” Nico said into the comms. I was on my laptop looking through the security feeds for any sign of what tripped the silent alarm at the front entrance.

Surveillance footage from outside the building showed three figures dressed in dark colors tampering with the security panel for the shutters. It took them a few minutes to realize they were not going to be able to override our system before they took off around the building.

“They’re heading for the back of the building,” I told the guys as I stood and started pulling on my bulletproof vest. “There’s three of them.”

“Any possible ID’s?” Linc asked.

“No. Can’t see their faces, but they’re coordinated and smooth. I’m thinking of the ex-military,” I explained as I watched the three dark figures work their way around our building checking every possible entrance point.

“I’ve called a contact at CPD. They’re sending units,” Nico said.

“I’m on my way down now,” I double checked my Glock was fully loaded as I spoke. Nico and Linc were moving through the building towards the back entrance. We all knew if these guys were going to penetrate the building, it would be through there. The security wasn’t as high tech as it was around the front, so if these guys were determined enough, they would get in.

“I’m coming down too,” Ty declared.

“No. I need you to stay here and protect Emilia. If she comes out of that room, you have to put her back in. We need to know she’s safe,” I said firmly. I had no idea who these guys trying to breach our building were, but it was very likely they had something to do with the head delivered to Emilia the

night before. If they were there for her, we would make damned sure they never got to her.

“Okay,” Ty nodded as he glanced down the hall toward Nico’s room. “Should we call some of the other guys in?”

“No. We can handle this and CPD are en-route. Just keep her safe, Ty, please,” he nodded once, and it was all I needed. Knowing he’d do what was necessary to keep my girl locked safely in the safe room I turned and strode from the room.

“We’ve got movement at the back door,” Nico said into the comms as I raced down the stairs towards the ground floor. “They’ve blown the entry system and are taking out the hinges.”

The fact they had explosives which they used to obliterate our door locking system confirmed what I already knew – these guys were professionals, and very likely linked to the Albanians.

I reached the ground floor just as the back door was ripped from the wall. I just had time to slip into a small alcove in the large training room which the back door of the building opened into, before the three intruders strode into the shadow filled room. I scanned the area around me and found Linc to the left, crouched behind a huge stack of training mats, and Nico across the room in the doorway to the adjoining room.

The room was too dark to see details, but the three guys who were now in our building were clearly in shape and carrying automatic weapons. As they advanced further into the room, Nic clicked twice on the comms, giving us the signal to move in, obviously wanting to stop these men before they got any further into our sanctuary.

“Stop right there!” Nico yelled as the three of us stepped into view and raised our guns. As expected, the three men shot and dove for cover. I ducked back as bullets flew towards me, then started to return fire, aiming for the dark figure closest to me, now ducked behind the refrigerator we stocked with water for workouts and training. When he had to stop to reload, I took my opportunity. The bullet hit him in the shoulder, and he went down long enough for me to run over and kick his gun

from his reach. He tried to put up a fight briefly, but with a bullet in his shoulder and a gun pointed at him, he soon gave up. I turned him onto his front and zip tied his hands behind his back in a matter of seconds. Around me the shooting quieted, and I knew the others had likely taken out their targets too.

As Linc and Nico called ‘clear’, confirming that they had taken down the other intruders, I pulled up the sleeves of the sweater my guy was wearing and confirmed what we all knew. These guys were Albanian mob. The tattoos up both of his arms were unmistakable. Somewhere along the way in all this mess we fucked up and now we were screwed. The Albanians were after us, or Emilia, or all of us and they were not going to be an enemy we could easily deal with. This was going to get very fucking dangerous and very messy and the realization that the woman I loved was at the center of it all was terrifying.

“Who sent you here?” Nico demanded as he loomed over the guy he had taken down. When the guy who sat on the ground before Nico just spat blood and looked defiant Nico growled and hit him, but before we could ask anything else the sound of police sirens rang out in the street. Within a minute a dozen CPD officers were in the building and taking custody of the three intruders. They cuffed them and led them out to cars as we all just watched on, all raging that we hadn’t had time to find out what the fuck they had been up to coming into the building and who sent them.

I was the last to give my statement to the officers on scene. Linc had already given his and headed up to check on Emilia and Nico was across the room making arrangements for someone to come out and secure the building for the night.

Once I was finished, I pulled out my cell and hit Parker’s contact. I didn’t give a shit what he was dealing with. It was time he got his head out of his ass and came back. We all needed him.

“Jax,” he answered on the second ring. It was clear from how rough he sounded that I had woken him.

“Park. You need to come home tonight,” I said firmly.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The Albanians just breached our building. We stopped them, but they’re not going to give up. We’re all in deep shit here and Emilia is in danger. We need you.”

“I thought we were in the clear with them?”

“So did we, but clearly someone took issue with us killing Marku. This is going to get bloody. We need you, man. Mia needs you. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but it’s time to get the fuck over it and get back here.”

“I’m on my way,” was all he said before he hung up.

I let out a sigh of relief as I put my cell back into my pocket. Whatever the fuck we were in the middle of, it was going to take all of us to get out of it and to keep Emilia safe. We had to all stick together. It was the only way we were going to get through this.

EMILIA

I was shaking as I watched the security feed on the screen in the panic room. There had been so much shooting and I had been completely terrified I was about to watch one of the guys be killed.

Now the cops had whoever tried to break into the Milite building in cuffs and were dragging them outside. Jax, Linc, and Nico were all safe and talking to cops too and it seemed it was over, but my heart was still pounding so hard it was deafening.

The guys had been amazing, obviously very capable at what they did, taking down the three, armed men in a matter of minutes, but they had been the longest minutes of my life, my heart in my mouth the entire time. I was desperate to run out of that room and go to them. I’d be no use of course. I couldn’t even shoot, and I didn’t have a gun, but I felt the need to do something to protect the men I cared about. I hated sitting there just watching and knowing they were in danger. Especially when I knew it all had to be because of me. There was no way it was a coincidence that this was happening the

night after I received Juan's head in a box! This was to do with Valton, and I knew it. That scumbag may be dead, but what he had done to me wasn't over and I knew it.

I jumped from my dark, terrifying thoughts as the door to the panic room beeped and started to slide open. I had no idea how long I had been lost in the darkest part of my mind, but I guessed it had been a while because when I glanced up at the screen, I saw the police were clearing out. I heard the door of the panic room beep, then begin to slide open.

"It's me, baby. It's okay, it's over," Linc assured me as he strode into the room.

I couldn't help the sobs of relief and terror that burst from me as I jumped up from the chair and ran into his arms.

"Linc!"

"I'm here, Em. I'm here," he soothed as he picked me up and held me tight.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and held him just as tight in return.

"Is...is everyone okay?" I asked shakily.

"We're all fine and the police have the bad guys. We're all safe," he walked from the panic room with me in his arms and headed through to my room. "You're freezing, firecracker."

"I'm fine," I tried to tell him as he sat on my bed and pulled the blanket from where it was folded at the bottom.

He wrapped it around me, tucked it between us, cocooning me in its warmth.

"Was it Valton's men? Were they coming f-for me?" I asked.

"We don't need to talk about it now. Right now, I just want you to try and calm down for me. You're shaking and way too pale."

"I was so scared," I admitted.

"You don't need to be. We're good at what we do. We can handle this."

Wanting to escape the nightmare of what just happened I hid my face against Linc's chest and cuddled as tight into him as I could. As he just sat and held me, I managed to calm a little and catch my breath, as I told myself over and over that it was done, and my guys were safe. That was all that mattered, for the time being at least.

"You're still shaking. How about I run the bath for you? See if we can get you warmed up?" Linc suggested some time later.

"Will you stay with me? I d-don't want to be alone...not yet."

"Of course, I will. I'm not ready to leave you either," he assured me as he kissed my tear-stained face. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Stay here for just a minute while I get the tub filling up," he set me on the bed, and I instantly laid down on my side, exhausted.

As I curled into myself Linc strode through to the bathroom, and I heard the water start filling the tub.

Within a minute Linc was back and he wrapped himself around my back and enveloped me in his arms.

For a few minutes we just lay there in silence, then I turned in his arms, needing to see his face. "This is never going to be over, is it?" I asked, hopelessly.

"Yes, it is. The guys and I will make sure of it. Just give us a little time to get it done. In the meantime, I promise you, baby, we will keep you safe. We're not going to allow anyone to hurt you ever again."

"I've put you all in danger. These guys...they're mafia, Linc. They won't think twice about just killing us all."

"That's not going to happen. We can handle this. I'm not going to lie, we haven't dealt with anyone like this before, but it's not just us. I have my brothers and the resources of their company, as well as our company and all the guys who work for us. We'll get through this; I know we will. I'm just worried about you."

“Me?”

“You’ve been through so much already. You shouldn’t have to deal with all of this too.”

“As long as none of you get hurt, I can handle things. I just need all of you to be safe.”

“We will be,” he assured me, but it didn’t stop my fears.

Even as naïve as I was, I knew the Albanian mafia were not people you wanted to cross. I had some idea of what they were capable of, and it terrified me.

“Come on. The bath should be ready for you now,” he said as he stood and held his hand out to me.

I took it and followed him through to the bathroom. I couldn’t help but smile when I found he filled the tub with mountains of bubbles and lit the room with candles.

“I was trying to make it relaxing for you,” he explained, looking a little awkward and embarrassed.

“It’s perfect,” I reached up and placed a kiss on his jaw – the closest I could get to his lips because he was so tall. “Thank you.”

“Do you want me to wait outside the door?” He offered, but after what just happened, I wasn’t ready to be alone, so I shook my head.

I knew exactly what I wanted and needed from Lincoln at that moment, but I was scared to ask him.

“It’s ok, baby. Just tell me what you need,” He encouraged me when I started to fidget beside him awkwardly.

“I...I don’t want to be alone,” I admitted. “Would you...would it be okay if you...if we both got into the tub?” I could feel the heat rising in my face as I said it, and I instantly wanted to take it back. I looked to my feet, scared to look up to his face and find him laughing at me.

“Look at me, pretty girl,” he whispered as he gave my hand, which he still held, a squeeze.

I slowly looked up until I met his bright blue eyes.

His face was soft and relaxed, no sign of him laughing at me or being annoyed. “Are you sure that’s what you want right now?” He asked.

“I...yes. I mean...not...not *that*. I’m not ready for *that*, but I w-want you to just hold me. It’s okay though...if you d-don’t want to,” I floundered, my words stuttering and unsure as I tried to explain what exactly I was feeling.

“You’ll never hear me turn down an opportunity to have you in my arms, Em,” he smiled, and it instantly calmed me. “Let’s get undressed and jump in. You’re so cold. We need to get you warmed up.”

“Okay,” I agreed. My hands shook and I wasn’t quite sure where to look as I started to remove the sweater I wore.

Linc was undressing much more quickly, and I knew that because I could see the growing pile of his clothes on the floor in front of me. I wanted to turn and look at him, see his toned and sculpted body which I had only glimpsed a few times when he quickly changed or dressed in my room, but I was scared to look at him and see disappointment or horror in his eyes when he saw me without my clothes.

“Em? What’s wrong? Do you want me to keep some clothes on? I can do that. It’s no problem.” He asked.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look up to where he stood. He was in his boxers and t-shirt, looking at me with concern.

“I...I’m just nervous about you seeing me wi-without my clothes,” I confessed.

“You can take off as much or as little as you like, firecracker, but whatever you choose, don’t be worried about my reaction. I am going to love whatever parts of that sexy little body you are willing to show to me,” he made his eyebrows dance up and down suggestively which had me giggling a little.

“It’s just the scars, Linc. They’re going to be so clear to see in this light.”

“Good. I want to see them. They will remind me how amazingly strong the woman I love is.”

“I don’t feel very strong right now,” I sighed.

“You have been through so much already, and now all of this is going on. Give yourself a break. Just the fact that you are standing right now shows your strength. The way you never give up – the way you never stop fighting to overcome every awful thing that happened to you – it’s amazing. You amaze me,” he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me.

I leaned into him, needing his strength and his warmth to comfort me. For several moments we just stood holding each other, me taking strength from the powerhouse before me.

“Do you want to get into the tub alone? I won’t be offended if you’ve changed your mind. I can stay in here with you or wait outside the door. Whatever you need, baby. I just want you to get in and get warmed up right now. We need to stop this shaking,” he was right, I was still shaking badly – the lasting result of the adrenaline that surged through me earlier.

“I want you to get in with me and...no clothes. We’re together. We’re going to s-see each other naked at some point. Might as well be now,” I said with a confidence I wasn’t really feeling. It wasn’t that I was scared to be naked with Linc. I loved him, and so what I said was right, it was going to happen at some point. I was just so new to all this relationship stuff though and I was nervous, not to mention terrified the hideous scars on my body would repulse him and take him from me.

“Okay then. How about I turn while you get undressed and climb in? Would that help?” He offered and I let out the breath I had been holding.

“Yes. Thank you.”

As soon as he turned his back to me, I hurried to take off my clothes and I climbed into the tub. Once I was in, the bubbles completely covered everything but my head, and I felt a lot more relaxed about the whole thing – maybe even a little excited to get to see all of Linc and to feel him against me, skin to skin.

“I’m in,” I announced once I was settled.

The smile Linc gave me when he turned, and his gaze met mine had me feeling all hot and flustered. He was too good looking for his own good. I had no idea what he saw in me. He could have any woman he wanted.

I watched on with my jaw slightly agape as he pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing his perfectly sculpted torso to me. I had seen it before of course, but I would never get over how breathtaking he was.

“You sure you’re okay with me taking these off?” He asked as he ran a thumb under the band of his perfectly snug boxer shorts.

I swallowed the huge lump in my throat and forced my eyes from his crotch up to his face. I couldn’t find words, so I merely nodded.

I knew without a doubt I was coming across as a completely clueless, naive idiot to Linc, but I couldn’t help it. This would be the first time I would see a man naked, and the fact it was a man I was lose-my-mind crazy for, made it even more nerve wracking. All the fluttering and excited zings I had felt in the shower with Jax were rushing through me once again. It was both thrilling and terrifying.

Of course, the second Lincoln started to drop his boxers I panicked and looked down to the water, feeling way too awkward if I just sat and watched like some kind of pervert.

“You’re so damned cute, firecracker,” Lincoln was laughing as he placed one foot into the tub beside me. “Shuffle forward,” he directed.

As I did, he stepped into the tub and slid down behind me until I was cocooned between his legs, my back against his warm front and his arms around me.

As soon as I felt his heat at my back my nerves left me, and I relaxed back against him. No other moment in my entire life felt as perfect as that one right there – safe, warm, and loved, wrapped in the arms of a man so perfect and wonderful I never even dared to dream he could exist, let alone be mine.

“This okay?” He asked as he leaned forward and kissed the side of my head.

“Yes,” I sighed as I allowed my head to rest against his chest and my eyes to close. After the drama of the night - of me thinking I was going to lose someone, or everyone I loved - being there with Linc was exactly what I needed. “Every night should end like this,” I told him after a while. I was so relaxed my eyes were feeling heavy. The weight of Linc’s arms, one around my waist and one around my chest, was just the comfort blanket I needed to sleep apparently.

“You’ll hear no arguments from me or Jax,” he replied, making me smile.

“Do you really think this thing between the three of us can work?” I asked sleepily.

“If we want it to and I know I do. Jax too. We love you, Em. I’m not saying it’ll be smooth sailing. This kind of relationship takes work and a lot of communication, but I don’t see why we can’t have what Livy and my brothers have. I think we could all be very happy.”

“What about Parker? Do you think he will ever agree to be a part of what we have?”

“I don’t know, baby. He loves you. Anyone with eyes can see that, but I’m not sure he could ever learn to share you like Jax, and I am willing to. I’m just not sure that’s who he is.”

With every word Linc was confirming what I feared, and it cut me up inside, because I loved Parker too and I wanted to be with him, but there was no way I could ever let Jax, and Lincoln go, in order to be with him. I loved them both just as much and I needed them. Maybe it was greedy to want and need all three of them, but it was how I felt and no matter what I did to try and change that thinking, I couldn’t.

“I love him too,” I admitted to Linc. “But if he can’t be a part of what we have, then there’s nothing I can do. I hope he’ll change his mind, but I won’t try to force him. The ball is in his court right now, I guess.”

“Just give him some time. I have no idea which way he’ll go, but no matter what, you have Jax and I. We can handle whatever comes, together.”

“I know and I also know how crazy lucky I am to have both of you. I don’t know how I’d have gotten through the last weeks without you both.”

“We’re not going anywhere, Em. You’re stuck with the both of us now.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” I sighed happily. As I lay back against him and closed my eyes, I considered what a long way I had come since the day I fled from Juan’s compound.

I arrived in Chicago so completely alone and terrified. I had no idea what real love was and what it felt like to be cared for. I had been so very lonely, and I didn’t even know it.

Now I lay in the arms of one of the men I loved, in a beautiful home I shared with a brother who would do anything for me, surrounded by friends and family. Even knowing my past was still chomping at my heels couldn’t take away my wonder at how my life changed so completely. I was so lucky to have so many amazing people at my side and I knew it. I just hoped that the horror of my past wouldn’t take any of them from me. I’d never survive it. I resolved to do whatever it took to make sure that would never happen – to hold on to the happiness I found. I wanted as close to a happy ending as I could get, and I was ready to fight for it with everything left in me.

CHAPTER 9

JAX

I walked into Nico's apartment over an hour after the CPD cleared out of the building. While Nico dealt with the guys securing the busted back door, I had been through the entire building security system to ensure it was as tight as it could be. We weren't taking any more risks with Emilia. Once I was sure we were all secure for the night I hurried to get back, wanting to check in on my girl and see for myself that she was doing okay.

Linc texted me as soon as he got to her, reassuring me she was a little shaken, but doing okay, which allowed me to do what I needed to do with the system without needing to rush down and see for myself, but now I was done, I was desperate to get eyes on her. It had been a hell of a night and the only thing that would make it better was having Mia in my arms.

Nico was on his laptop at the kitchen counter and Tyler was asleep in an armchair when I walked into the dimly lit family room. It was almost four in the morning, and I was completely exhausted, but there was no way any of us were sleeping knowing the Albanians were coming for Emilia. We needed to get her somewhere safe, and we knew it.

"How is she?" I asked the second Linc emerged from the hallway that led to the bedrooms. He was changed into shorts and a scruffy t-shirt, but it didn't make him look relaxed. The tense set of his jaw showed his worry of the shit storm we were all in.

"Sleeping for now. She was really shaken up and it's taken me forever to stop her trembling, but she's doing better. You?"

"Just worried about Mia. She really didn't need this on top of everything else she's trying to handle right now," I sighed.

"We need to get her out of this building. They've shown they can get to her here. We need to go somewhere off the grid until

we plan our next move,” Linc said, voicing exactly what I was thinking.

“The beach house?” I suggested.

“That’s the next place they’d look for us. A simple property search on us would give them the address.”

“Then where? If we rent anywhere, it’ll trace back to us. Maybe we’re safer just staying here. We can double security and keep Mia on lock down,” I suggested.

“She’s not in the right headspace to be locked away, surrounded by security she doesn’t really know. It’s going to fuck with her head and her anxiety even more if we do that,” Linc pointed out, and I knew he was right.

“You guys discussing options for Mia?” Nico asked as he walked up and sat on the arm of the sofa near where we stood.

“Yeah. Linc thinks she needs to get away from here,” I explained.

“I agree. She’s not safe here right now. I think the two of you need to take her as far away as you can.”

“What about you?” Linc asked.

“I need to stay and sort this shit out. I have to do whatever it takes to make it safe for her to return home when she’s ready and to keep our sorry asses alive.”

“She won’t like that. She’ll want you to come with us,” I reminded him. There was no way Mia was going to let Nico put himself at risk without a huge fight.

“I’ll make her understand. Question is, where are you guys going to go?”

“I have an idea. Jake’s parents have a vacation place in Maui. If they’d agree to let us use it, I’m sure Kyle could help us get there under the radar.”

“She loves the beach,” I agreed.

“That sounds like a good plan to me. See if you can make it work, bro. The sooner we get her away from here the better. I

have no idea why these fuckers are coming after us, and until I find out I want her safe.”

“I’ll make the calls,” Linc assured him.

“There’s something else. Parker’s on his way back. I called him and told him to get his ass back here.”

“Good. It’s about fucking time he got his shit together,” Linc nodded.

“Let’s just deal with him when he gets here. I think you guys should take Ty with you. He’s good with Mia and he’ll be safer with you.”

“Agreed,” Linc and I said at the same time. Tyler was as much our kid brother as he was Parker’s and we all wanted him safe.

“What’s your plan?” Linc asked as he looked at Nico.

“I need to talk to Morin and find out what the fuck is going on,” Nico growled.

“You can’t meet with him alone. He could be the one behind all of this,” I pointed out.

“I doubt it. I’m pretty sure he wanted Marku dead when he gave the go ahead, but I’ll take precautions and bring some guys with me. It’ll be fine.”

“It’s the fucking Albanian mob, Nic. I don’t think fine is a word I would use,” Linc warned him.

“I have to get to the bottom of this, for Mia. She needs all this shit to be over, and so do we.”

“Not at the expense of losing you. She’d never recover if that happens,” I told him flatly. Mia needed Nico. He was the only family member who ever cared for her, and she had come to depend on him in some ways since she found him. I knew she would never ever get over it or forgive herself if Nico was killed trying to clean all of this mess up.

“I can handle this, and you know it. Nate and the guys will have my back. Just get my sister away from here and keep her fucking safe. That’s your only responsibility. I can’t lose her

either,” Nico told us, showing a rare glimpse of emotion as he said the last.

“We’ve got her, bro,” Linc assured him, and I agreed. We could and would keep Mia safe, but I fucking hated that it meant we wouldn’t have Nico’s back. For so many years it had been the five of us, always looking out for each other and working every issue together. Splitting our unit up just didn’t feel right and I knew it. I think we all did, but what choice did we have? We had to keep Mia safe, and I knew that was priority because Linc and I, and Parker if he could be honest with himself, would never survive losing her, but at the same time I wasn’t sure any of us would ever survive losing Nico either. We were in a fucked-up situation with no right answer. All we could do was follow our instincts and hope we were doing the right fucking thing. Our instincts never let us down before. I just hoped they wouldn’t this time either.

EMILIA

“No way, Nico!” I snapped. I slept terribly, giving up after just a few hours, exhausted and too scared to close my eyes any longer. The nightmares weren’t getting any easier to cope with, every detail of them so very real, easily convincing me every time that I was back in that house with Valton.

Now Nico and the guys were trying to tell me I had to leave and hide out while my brother put himself in the line of fire of the monsters I brought into all of their lives. To say I was pissed was an understatement.

“Baby...” Linc began as he reached for me, but I stepped out of his reach and held up my hand.

I knew they were all exhausted too, having been up all night working, but I was not in the mood to be placated.

“No. Don’t even try it. I’m not running away and leaving Nico to clean up my mess. It’s not happening,” I angrily told him.

“Mia, listen to me,” Nico interrupted as he moved closer until he stood a few feet opposite me.

“No. I’m not leaving you,” I cried, the last word broken by a sob as emotion overwhelmed me. “I won’t do it, Nico. I won’t

let you b-be hurt because of me.”

“I’m not going to be hurt, *Tesoro*. I can clean this whole mess up, but not if I’m worrying about you being in danger. I need to know for sure that you’re safe so I can concentrate on what I need to do. I cannot watch you be hurt ever again. It almost killed me, Mia. Do you understand that? It’s my job to protect you and I failed. I can’t...won’t allow that to happen again,” he said firmly.

“But I’m supposed to just run away and allow you to put yourself in danger?” I snapped, tearful, and angry all at once.

“I’m trained for this type of situation. It’s my job,” he countered.

“Why can’t I just stay here and help? I know these guys. I know what they’re capable of.”

“We know that too, angel. That’s why we want you far away from here,” Jax added from where he was sitting on the arm of a chair to my right.

“We should all stick together. Wouldn’t that be safer? Safety in numbers, right?” I pointed out, looking at Nico with pleading eyes. I couldn’t leave him. I loved him and I would never ever get over it if anything happened to him because of me. He said he wanted to protect me, but I wanted to protect him too.

“Mia, you have to do this for me, sweetheart. I need you to go with the guys and be safe, and I promise everything else will work out. I’ll make sure of it, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that Nico. These guys are crazy dangerous, and you know it.”

“I won’t be alone. Nate will have my back and I have all our security teams if I need them,” Nico assured me, not that it helped.

“I spoke with Ky and Kade and they offered Nico anything he needed too and assured me they would have his back. Nico’s right, Em. He can’t focus on the mission if he’s worried that you’re at risk. Distractions like that will be what gets him hurt,” Linc stepped forward and took my hand as he spoke, and this time I let him, needing the comfort.

“The guys should stay with you then. You need your team,” I said, hating the thought of the guys I loved being at risk too, but knowing they worked best as a unit.

“No, sweetheart. I need the guys to be at your side, keeping what is most precious to me safe. You need them too. They’re the only ones I trust to protect you.”

“I hate this,” I declared through the tears that were running down my cheeks. “I never should have come to you. Then you guys wouldn’t all be mixed up in this mess.”

“Don’t say that baby. The day you found Nico was the best damned day of our lives,” Linc said as he pulled me into his side and wrapped his arm around me.

“He’s right, Mia. Having you in my life makes me so happy and I want it to stay that way. That’s why I need you to go and let me do what I’m best at,” Nico was almost pleading, his eyes locked on mine, imploring me to give in. I hated it, but I knew he was right. I was nothing but a weakness if I stayed, a vulnerability whoever was after us could use to hurt the guys. I took a deep breath and pushed down every instinct that was screaming at me how wrong this all was, then I stepped forward, releasing Linc.

“You have to promise me you’ll be careful Nico,” I whimpered tearfully as I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed the life out of him. “You are the only family I have, and I need you. I can’t l-lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, *Tesoro*,” He assured me as he held me back. “Everything is going to be good. We’re all going to be just fine.”

I was crying so hard into his shirt that I couldn’t find words to reply to him, but even if I could I found it hard to believe everything could ever work out, not when I knew all too well the monsters that were coming for us. Valton Marku and Juan may well be dead, but for some reason, someone linked to them was pissed and came for us. Someone who chopped off a man’s head, gift wrapped it in a box and sent it to me, couldn’t be anything other than a ruthless monster and the thought that I was going to flee and leave my brother to face that was

terrifying. I wanted to at least stand at his side and help him. I wanted to be there to protect him, but deep down I knew the guys were right. I had no actual skills that would help Nico. By being there I would only distract and hinder him. I had to go, and I knew it, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

“Come on, sweetheart. Calm down now. There's no need for all of this. I'm going to be alright. We all are,” Nico soothed as he ran a hand up and down my back. I tried hard to pull myself together, but I was just so overwhelmed. I hadn't slept, I was terrified, traumatized and now I had to leave Nico who had become my safe place. It was just too much and that was why I was sobbing so broken heartedly.

“What's going on?” Parker's deep voice instantly had me pulling away from Nico to look around. When my eyes locked with his, a relief I had never known swept over me. Without him a piece of me had been missing and now he was back I felt so much more whole. I just prayed he was back to tell me he changed his mind – that he wanted me as much as I wanted him, but the way his eyes shifted from mine in a matter of seconds wasn't a good sign.

He walked into the apartment and closed the door behind him, dumping a large bag just inside.

“I want the guys to take Mia somewhere safe. She's not so keen to go, though,” Nico explained.

“Glad you're back, bro,” Jax said as he gave Parker a chin lift in greeting.

“Take her where?” Parker asked, but he still didn't look at me. His eyes were flitting between the guys, completely avoiding mine.

Knowing my hopes were useless – he didn't want me, I walked across the room and tucked myself against Jax's side, needing his strength to get through the moment without bursting into yet more tears. I refused to let Parker see how devastated I was,

“Maui. Jake's parents have a house there. It's unlikely they'll trace it back to us,” Linc replied.

“And who exactly is ‘they’? Do we even know who we’re dealing with?” Parker sounded pissed.

“Not for sure, but it’s got to be the Albanians. Someone is obviously pissed Valton Marku was killed. Why else would they go after Juan Benitez? They must have used him to find out who killed Valton. Now they want revenge,” Nico explained.

“Do you have a plan?” Parker asked.

“Get Mia out of here, then I’m going to see Morin and get some answers.”

“You could be walking right into a trap,” Parker pointed out.

I looked up to Nico with worry. Was he going to be killed if he went to meet his guy?

“We can discuss this later,” Nico snapped. “Are you actually back?”

“For now.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Jax asked. He tightened his arm around me, holding me tighter and I realized I must have flinched at Parker’s words, the impact of them like a slap to my face. He was going to leave again. Not only did he not want me, but he was also walking away from his brothers because of me.

“I don’t know,” Parker shrugged. “But I’m here now,” The nonchalant way he spoke and stood was heartbreaking and more than I could take.

“I...I need to...Ty. I was s-supposed to go to his place. I have to...to go,” I stuttered as I pulled away from Jax and headed for the door of the apartment. I had to get out of there before I lost it again. I had to get away from Parker and his indifference to the way he was tearing me apart.

“Em?” Linc moved toward me, but I just backed away.

“I’m fine. I have to go,” I said as calmly as I could. I took a wide berth around Parker, refusing to look at him again. I rushed out of the apartment and past the guards in the hall,

next door to Ty's place. Thankfully the door was unlocked so I walked right in and slammed the door closed behind me.

"Tiger?" I heard Ty's voice as I leaned back against the door. I closed my eyes to try and keep the tears at bay, but they ran free regardless. "Em? What's wrong?" Ty asked, and I felt his warm hands as he placed them on my shoulders.

"P-Parker. He c-came back," I blubbered.

"What did my douche-bag brother do now?" Ty sighed as he took my hand and led me over to the sofa.

I took a seat and tried hard to hold back any more tears.

"Nothing. It's not h-his fault," I replied a little more composed now. "He just...he doesn't want me, Ty; and it hurts. I love him."

"He does want you. He's just an idiot."

"No. He couldn't even look at me. You didn't see him."

"I didn't, but I know him better than anyone. He loves you, Em. He's just terrified of those feelings and that, mixed with his inability to share is making the prospect of this very different relationship fuck with his head. Just try to give him some time."

"I don't want to force him to be in this relationship if he doesn't want it."

"No one ever makes my brother do anything he doesn't want to, short stuff," Ty assured me, and it did make me feel a little better. Maybe he was right, maybe there was hope yet.

NICO

I closed my eyes and tried to settle into the tiny fucking plane seat as we took off. It had been a last-minute booking, so I was stuck in coach, in a seat I did not fit into. I usually always book business class because of my size. I needed the extra leg room, but there hadn't been an option on that flight, and I'd taken the first available seat. I had to get to New York to meet with Morin again. If anyone knew what the fuck was going on, it would be that crafty old fucker.

I couldn't stop thinking about Mia when she left the apartment earlier that afternoon, to head off to the airport with the guys. She had been crying as she held me like she'd never see me again. It broke my fucking heart, but also made me all the more determined to sort whatever the fuck was going on and bring her home again.

"She'll be alright, Nic. The guys have her," Nate spoke from my side, obviously picking up on what was worrying me.

"I know," I agreed. There was no one else on earth I would trust to keep my sister safe. I knew there was nothing they wouldn't do to protect her, even Parker who seemed seriously fucked up about his feelings for her.

We had all been shocked when Parker put his foot down and told us he was going wherever Mia went. It was clear since the moment he walked in that he was messed up over his feelings for her. He hadn't even looked at her except for the first moment when he walked in. It's why Mia fled from the apartment all emotional. That's why we were all so confused when he wanted to go with Mia and the guys. He loved her, that much was clear, but I doubted that would be enough to get him beyond his caveman ideas about what kind of relationship Mia wanted, would mean. Parker didn't share and I just didn't see him changing on that any time soon. I just hoped that if he couldn't be a part of what Mia, Linc, and Jax had, it wouldn't mean we would lose him. He was my brother and part of our team. I didn't want what he had going on with Mia to cost us all years of brotherhood and friendship, but I feared it might.

"I don't like this. Why the fuck are we meeting here?" Nate asked, not for the first time.

I understood why he was twitchy – we both were. We were standing in the middle of a deserted construction site at almost midnight, completely in the open. We were sitting fucking targets and we knew it.

"This was the only time and place he would agree to meet, and I need this meeting. He has to know who is after us."

“And what if they just drive up and shoot us?”

“They won’t. If Morin wanted me dead, he had the perfect chance last time I met with him. He wanted Valton Marku dead. We did him a favor.”

“Let’s hope he’s going to return that favor now then,” Nate grumbled as two sets of vehicle lights pulled onto the site and headed right for us.

My hand instinctively dropped down to hover over where my Beretta was in the holster beneath my jacket. I hoped like hell I’d have no use to pull it out, but I was prepared just in case, as was Nate.

“Mr. Gallo,” Morin greeted as he stepped from the black Range Rover. He was dressed in slacks and a sweater, looking a lot more casual and relaxed than the last time I met with him. Six suited guards stepped out of the two vehicles and formed a wide circle around us. It was clear to see they were all armed. “Apologies for the venue, but our meeting needs to stay a little more private this time.”

“And why is that?” I asked as I tried hard to appear relaxed. It was very hard to do when we were surrounded by heavily armed guys, but I didn’t want to give anything away to Morin.

“It seems there are a few people in my organization who took issue with the killing of Valton. I can’t be seen to be a part of it. You understand, yes?”

“Who? Who am I dealing with here?” I asked.

“His brother, Besart, is your biggest problem. He is looking for vengeance, and there are a few who agree with him,” Morin explained.

“You gave the okay to get rid of Valton Marku. You wanted him gone.” I pointed out.

“I did, but I underestimated how many were loyal to him,” Morin admitted.

“Well, that’s just great,” Nate grumbled.

“So, what am I dealing with? How do I stop all of this?” I asked.

“The brother. He is the one leading all of this. If you take him out, the others will let it go.”

“And who will come after us then for taking him out?” Nate asked, his annoyance at the whole situation obvious.

“Besart Marku is not a popular member of our organization right now. His irrational behavior since the death of his brother has brought us way too much attention. Take him out and this whole mess will be resolved. That is the only advice I can offer,” Morin told us.

“Any idea where I can find him?” I asked.

“You have no need to go looking for him, Mr. Gallo. He will find you,” Morin said, then he turned and climbed back into his car, followed by all his guys, then they were gone.

“Well, that was fucking great,” Nate growled.

“We know who we’re facing now. It’s a start,” I reasoned.

“And what do we do now? We can’t just go around taking guys out, Nic. It’s not what we do.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I sighed, exhausted. “Let’s just find out where he is for now. We’ll work out what the fuck we’re going to do with him when we’ve got him.”

Nate was right of course. We didn’t take people out just because it made life easier. It wasn’t who we were, but we could track the guy down and stop him before he came for us again. For now, that had to be the focus. What happened after that I would figure out later. I just needed this guy off the street and to know my sister and my brothers were all safe.

This was all my mother’s fault. She was the one who brought all these criminals into Mia’s life. She was the reason we were all in danger right now, but I would be the one to clean it up. It would be my final ‘Fuck you’ to the woman who abandoned me all those years ago, and to the woman who allowed Mia to endure hell for so many years. I wouldn’t allow Mia to endure any more hardship. I would protect her as she deserved to be protected. I would not let her down.

“On the plus side, at least it’s not the whole Albanian mob coming after us,” Nate pointed out as we headed back to our rental vehicle.

“Yeah, thank God for small mercies, huh?” I agreed.

CHAPTER 10

EMILIA

It was dark by the time Jax drove in through the tall metal gates of Jake's parents vacation home in Maui. The place looked amazing, with the perfect blue ocean and white sand backdrop, but I was too tired, angry, and upset to really take any of it in.

The flight felt like it went on forever with Parker sitting a few seats away from me and trying very hard the entire journey not to meet my eyes. He was yet to say one single word to me, and I had no idea why he even wanted to come with us. He was just making what was already a tense and difficult situation much harder and if I were honest, I didn't want him there. Not when he was making it so painfully clear he didn't want to be there.

"This is awesome, right tiger?" Ty enthused as he opened the door and held out a hand to help me down from the SUV.

"Yeah, it looks great," I agreed, trying to sound as excited as he seemed to be. I stepped out of the car and looked around me. The house was on one level and seemed huge. The driveway was gravel and in the center was a beautiful flower bed, filled with exotic blooms. The house looked sleek and modern.

"It will be perfect for us all to just relax," Linc added as he rounded the car and took my hand in his.

I smiled, but I couldn't help but think there was no way I could relax for even a moment knowing Nico and Nate were in New York meeting with the Albanian mob - monsters who were, in all likelihood, out to kill us.

"You guys' head in. I'll get the bags," Parker announced from somewhere behind me.

I refused to turn and look at him.

"I'll help you," Ty volunteered.

"No, I got it, smudge. Go and take a look around."

“Let him bring it all in, Ty. It will keep him busy. I’d hate for him to have to spend time with us when he so clearly doesn’t want to,” I snapped. It was bitchy but I was just so tired and on edge. I’d had enough for one day.

“Emmy...,” Parker began, but hearing him say my name like that was more than I could handle.

“Let’s head in,” I called over to him, instead. I strode for the front door with Jax, Linc, and Ty close behind me.

As we walked into the palatial house, I could take none of my surroundings in. I was too busy fighting with everything I had left, not to cry. So, what if Parker didn’t want me? Why would he? I needed to get over it and focus on the two amazing guys who did want me. It was so much easier said than done though when Parker was just as much a part of me as Linc and Jax were. Without him, I knew a piece of me would always be missing. For someone who already had so very many pieces ripped away over the years of abuse and horror, I really wasn’t sure I could afford to lose another.

“You want to take a look around, angel?” Jax asked. We were all standing in the grand entrance way, surrounded by a sparkling cream marble floor and expensive furniture. It really was a beautiful place from what I could see, but at that moment all I wanted was some space to have a cry. Nico was off doing who knew what and risking his life, attempting to stop more mobsters coming after me, and Parker seemed to hate my guts. It was enough for one day – that was for sure.

“I’m pretty tired from the trip. You guys’ mind if I just find my room and get some sleep?” I asked instead.

“Of course, baby. I guess it has been a long day. I’ll come with you,” Linc offered.

“No, it’s early. You guys take a look around and spend some time relaxing. I’ll be fine on my own for a few hours,” I assured them.

“You sure?” Jax asked.

I forced a smile as I walked over to him. “Very,” I replied as I reached up and kissed him chastely on the lips. I turned to

Linc and did the same, then took my overnight bag from him and walked right up the wide marble staircase without once looking back to them. If I saw even one of them looking at me with worry, I'd crumble, and I knew it.

"Take the front bedroom, firecracker. It's the biggest and it has a tub you're going to love," Linc called after me.

"Okay," I agreed, hurrying my climb to get out of sight before the first tear fell.

The room Linc described was easy to find because it was the only one at the front of the house and it spanned the full width. It had a small lounge area which led through to the biggest bed I had ever seen. I threw my bag on the bed without even putting on the lights, and rushed straight into the adjoining bathroom, locking the door closed behind me.

I started the bath, which was a huge Jacuzzi tub, running, knowing the guys were likely to come up and check on me soon. They wouldn't question me being locked in there if they thought I was in the tub. I just needed some space and privacy to lose it a little bit and I didn't want the guys to see me. I had fallen apart and cried so very much since I met them. I didn't want them to see me that way anymore. I wanted to look strong, even if it was abundantly clear to me that I wasn't.

It made no sense, since the second we touched down in Maui the heat hit us, but I was suddenly freezing cold and shivering. I shucked my clothes and stepped into the heat of the tub. It was only half filled but the water was enough to warm me some.

I sat in the middle of a tub so big I could almost swim in it, my knees pulled up to my chest and my arms wrapped around them and allowed the tears to come. I stifled my sobs by burying my face in my knees and I just let go.

I was so overwhelmed and angry. Why did things always have to be so tough? I thought I escaped my past the day I fled from that compound - the day my mom killed herself to set me free. At that point I was pretty sure I endured far more than one person should ever have to and I was hopeful my life would turn a corner. It hadn't been easy, but I'd found my feet and a

life for myself, then I found Nico, and everything seemed to fall into place. I had a family, and I was falling so fast for the guys. Just for that short period things seemed so good, then Valton found me again. My past came back to hurt me once again, and this time in the worst possible way. I escaped that, and while I wasn't exactly unscathed, I was finding my way through the trauma. Now, just when I started to hope I'd find my feet and move forward once again, someone else linked to my past was coming for me and my family. Now Nico and Nate were in danger because of me and the thought of losing them was soul destroying. I brought all this trouble to them. If I stayed away, they would never have been mixed up with the Albanians and I was so angry with myself for that. I was angry I had to endure all of this at all. Why did some girls get happy childhoods that allowed them to grow into whole, balanced adults, while I was handed a childhood filled with violence and fear? When would it end? When did I get my chance at a quiet life filled with contentment and peace? Would I ever have that or was I doomed to face the worst life could throw at me again and again?

I was wallowing in self-pity and I knew it, but it was just all too much to deal with. I was falling apart at the seams, and I just didn't know where to start trying to get past the misery and pull myself back together.

"Em? You okay in there?" Linc knocked on the door as he spoke. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my breathing.

"Just having a soak," I called back hoping he wouldn't hear the tremble in my voice.

"I knew you'd love that tub. Couldn't resist jumping in, huh?"

"No, it's huge. I...I'm gonna be a while in here."

"No problem. Take your time, honey. Just yell if you need anything. We're out on the deck just below your window so we'll hear you."

"Will do. Thanks," I agreed, then I listened until I was sure he left the room again. The water was still running, the tub almost filled to the brim, so I shuffled forward and turned off the taps.

I lay back, my head resting on the lip of the bath and my feet nowhere near the other end. The tears stopped but the anger and pain were still coursing through me. I could hear my therapist, April's voice telling me bottling up my feelings and hiding them away was not healthy, but in that moment I didn't care. I put the guys through enough and I refused to let them see me in that state again.

I have no idea how long I lay there blankly, just staring into space and allowing my dark thoughts to run wild through my mind, but it was a knock at the door that pulled me back to reality.

"Mia?" Jax's call through the door sounded worried. "Are you okay in there?"

"She can't still be in the tub," I heard Linc say. "Em?" More of a pounding knock followed, pushing me into action.

I sat up in the bath, the water around me cold and my hands shriveled badly.

"Give me a minute," I called back.

"You've been in there for hours. Are you alright?" Linc asked.

"I...I must have fallen asleep," I lied. "I'm getting out now."

"Open the door, sweetie. We're worried. Let us see you," Jax said.

My limbs were stiff and sore as I got to my feet and stepped from the cold water. As soon as the cool air of the air-conditioned bathroom hit me I started to tremble. I had to stop my mind from sending me back into a flashback of me being in a similar environment but cuffed to a wall. The guys were worried already. I couldn't spiral into anxiety and make it worse. Instead, I grabbed a towel from the counter and wrapped myself in it tightly. A glance in the mirror showed my face was a little blotchy from crying but my eyes weren't red. It would have to do because judging from the tone of the guys' whispers to each other they were getting increasingly worried and were liable to break the door down if I didn't open it.

They were both standing facing each other right outside when I opened the door. They turned to me and looked me over closely, in perfect synchronization.

“Sorry guys. I fell asleep. I was just so tired,” I lied to them. I hated lying, but they didn’t need to know about the way too long pity party I just had for myself.

“You could have drowned, Mia,” Jax gasped as he looked from me to the tub behind me.

“He’s right. You should have had one of us stay with you if you were feeling that exhausted,” Linc agreed.

“I’m fine. Stop worrying. I didn’t drown. I’m just a little cold,” I tried to soothe them.

“I’m not surprised. It’s been hours. That water must be freezing cold by now,” Linc sounded irritated, but the way he wrapped an arm around me and started rubbing a hand up and down my back to try and warm me contrasted. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

“Have you guys heard anything from Nico?” I asked as Linc led me over to the bed and sat beside me.

Jax started looking through my bag and pulled out a pair of shorts and t-shirt pajamas.

“He called earlier. He and Nate are in New York and they’re both fine,” Linc replied.

“For now,” I grumbled as I took the pajamas from Jax and pulled the t-shirt on over my towel.

“Stop this, angel. You’re upsetting yourself for nothing. The guys know what they’re doing. They’re going to be safe,” Jax sighed.

“How can anyone be safe when they’re dealing with mobsters?” I snapped as I stood and angrily pulled on my shorts. Once I was dressed, I pulled the towel from my body and threw it across the room, then I hid my face in my hands as more tears came.

“Em,” Linc stood to comfort me, and I went willingly into his arms. “Jax is right. The guys have this,” he soothed.

“I just want it all to be over,” I whimpered “I c-can’t handle anymore,” I didn’t care how weak that made me sound. I wasn’t superwoman and I had been thrown far more than I could deal with.

“It’ll be over soon,” Jax whispered as he took his place at my back. His arms snaked around my front, and I found myself safely sandwiched between the two of them, wrapped safely in two strong sets of arms.

“We’ve got you until then. You’re not dealing with any of this alone. We’re here, baby,” Linc added. Being between the two of them, so completely cocooned in their safety and warmth made me feel calmer than I had in days.

“Can we lay like this? Can you...will you just hold me...both of you?” I asked, suddenly feeling completely exhausted now that a little peace washed over me.

The guys didn’t even speak. They just worked in perfect harmony. Linc stepped away to pull back the sheets as Jax swept me up into his arms. In a matter of moments, I lay in the middle of the huge bed and Linc was stripped down to his boxers. As he climbed in and wrapped himself around my back, his arms snaking around my waist, Jax stripped off his clothes. Once he was down to his boxers too, he crawled into the bed and lay in front of me. His arms wrapped around me, and I snuggled into his firm chest.

“This good, firecracker?” Linc asked.

“More than,” I replied. I had never in my life felt more secure or safe as I did right there. My guys had me and I knew it. No one could hurt me and the cocoon they made seemed to somehow chase away all the dark thoughts too. For the first time in so very long, my mind was quiet, and I was exhausted. In a matter of minutes, I was sound asleep.

PARKER

It was after four in the morning, and I couldn’t sleep for shit. It had been the same ever since yelled at Emilia and walked out of the Milite building. I hated the way things were between us

and between my brothers and I, but I couldn't seem to pull my head out of my ass and fix it.

Needing eyes on her I slipped from my room and moved silently down the hall. I opened the door to the master suite as slowly and stealthily as I could, knowing one of the guys would be with her and would hear me if I made any sound at all.

The room was dimly lit with a small lamp beside the bed, and I could just make out Emilia fast asleep between Jax and Linc. She looked so settled and peaceful wrapped up in both of them. It filled me with both relief that she was finding some peace when she slept and raging jealousy that she wasn't finding that peace in my arms.

I closed the door silently behind me and darted off down the stairs away from the happy picture I just intruded on. I didn't belong in it. I couldn't be like Lincoln and Jax; I couldn't lie with her and hold her while my brothers did too. It didn't feel right to me. If Emilia was going to be mine, then she had to be *all* mine. I didn't have it in me to share and I knew it. It was why I yelled at her that day and why I had been hiding from everyone I cared about ever since – because I was madly in love with her, and yet I knew I could never have her.

I tried, when we got her back, to make it work and just be there with the guys to take care of her and give her what she needed. I had even gotten good at faking that I was cool with the whole arrangement, but I wasn't. I loved my brothers, and I would do anything for them, but when I was forced to sit back and watch them put hands and lips on the woman I loved, it killed me. I wanted her to be mine, but she couldn't be. Any fool could see the love in her eyes for Jax and Linc. She needed them. I was pretty sure she looked at me that same way, maybe even needed me too, but I just couldn't handle the package that would come along with her if I were to grab what I wanted. I couldn't spend the rest of my life jealous and resentful of my brothers just because they loved her too and were far more able to share.

No, I couldn't live that way. It was why I had come to the conclusion I had and why I was so damned pissed off. I

couldn't have Emilia and if I wanted to hold on to my brothers and my family, I needed to accept that decision and move on. I could never be a part of the future she was making for herself and pretending for one more moment that I could be, just wasn't fair on any of us.

I resolved to tell her my decision as soon as possible. I could never be a part of her relationship with the guys, but I would always be there for her. It would kill me to watch them together from the sidelines, but not as much as losing her from my life completely would.

CHAPTER 11

EMILIA

The guys were still wrapped around me when I woke early the next morning. Bright sunlight shining through the open drapes was what had awoken me. I slept better than I had in weeks, and I felt so much better because of it.

The sound of the waves lapping against the sand was what roused me from bed. It had taken a while to negotiate my way out from the guy's arms without waking them, but eventually I managed it, leaving them to sleep.

I went straight over to the large glass doors which opened onto a balcony and pulled back the thin billowy drapes. The view that awaited me was breathtaking. All I could see for as far as I looked was golden sand and bright blue ocean – the exact color of Linc's amazing eyes. The sun was beating down and I could already feel the heat of the day.

Needing to get out there and feel the sand between my toes for the first time in my life I hurried to get myself ready and dressed. Knowing it was going to be hot, I pulled on a pair of shorts I usually wore for bed, and a cami. It wasn't ideal but I only had Chicago winter clothes and I'd melt in them. The guys assured me we'd find suitable clothes as soon as we could, so the make-do outfit was only temporary.

I walked through the house and down the wide marble staircase with my mouth agape the whole time. The entire place was a sea of marble, expensive looking artwork, and designer furniture. I must have passed five bedrooms and countless bathrooms. How rich were Jake's parents anyway?

When I got downstairs things just got even more lavish, with a sunken living room and a kitchen big enough to cook for an entire country. There was a dining room with twelve place settings and a cabinet full of silver and fancy dinnerware. I was completely terrified to touch a thing for fear I'd tarnish it.

Instead, I moved through the house and to the glass doors that spanned the entire back wall of the kitchen. I unlocked the end

door and slipped outside, closing it quietly behind me.

Looking up the opulence of the house continued into the garden - if you could call it that. I found myself standing on a deck bigger than any I had ever seen before. It was filled with comfy looking rattan furniture, all of which surrounded what I thought was some kind of fire pit. Off to the side was a huge table and ten chairs and an entire outdoor kitchen. Ahead of me, where the deck ended was a patio the size of a football field, and in the center of it sat a huge, glistening, rectangular swimming pool. It was framed by loungers and off to the side was a building which I assumed had showers and changing facilities. The whole place was insane and once again I wondered who exactly Jake's parents were to have such a mansion as a holiday home!

The best part though was what was calling me, and that was what awaited at the end of the long stone patio and the view that was framing the whole beautiful garden – the crystal blue ocean and golden sand.

Barefoot I walked past the swimming pool and all of the splendor of the house, needing to answer the ocean's call. When my feet hit the sand I stopped for a moment, not expecting it to be as comforting and warm as I found it. I was sure, later, when the sun got stronger, it would become too hot to walk on, but at that moment it just felt perfect. I smiled as I took a few more steps, the tickle of the fine sand an alien but enjoyable feeling. I had never been on a beach before. Jax had taken me to see it, but we'd never actually gotten to step onto the sand. It was a long-awaited dream of mine and the excitement that filled me as I strode through the sand, spurred me on. I started running or at least tried to. Running on the sand was quite a trial, but I needed to get to the sea. I felt like an excited child, desperate to have the waves lapping at my feet – to know how it felt.

I hesitated only for a moment when I met the water's edge, unsure momentarily, but the second the water washed over my toes for the first time all uncertainty was gone, and I knew I had a crazy smile on my face. I stepped in further and further until the water was washing in and out up to my ankles. The

sand beneath was soft and felt as though it moved with the waves.

I walked a little down the beach, just enjoying every wave as it came in and washed over my feet. Eventually, I stopped and sat in the sand, wanting to feel more of the ocean against me. When the first wave washed in and the cool water surrounded me, soaking me up to my waist I laughed out loud. It felt amazing and as I looked around, I knew I had never been in a more magical place than right there. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Emilia?” Parker’s voice startled me when it came sometime later. I was still sitting in the waves, my hands behind me and my face to the sun. I opened my eyes and squinted, Parker’s frame shadowing me enough to see his face. He was standing behind me, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt tight enough to make me drool. He still looked pissed, but at least he was acknowledging me.

“Hey,” I greeted, then I looked to the ocean again not wanting him to see the desperation in my eyes as he talked to me.

“You doing okay?” He asked.

“Look where we are. Who wouldn’t be okay surrounded by this?” I replied.

“Can I sit with you?” He moved around and stood beside me. He was barefoot too, and I tried not to follow his muscular legs up and gawp at him.

Instead, I nodded and sat up, my hands moving to fidget with the sand between my legs.

“You like it here?” He asked.

“Sure, but I wish we didn’t need to be here. I’m worried about Nico and Nate,” I admitted.

“I spoke to Nic this morning. They’re back in Chicago and they’re fine. They have a lead they’re following today,” I was relieved to hear they were back home safe.

“What lead?” I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked into his eyes for the first time.

He was sitting beside me in the sand now, the waves washing over him too. He looked so good, the sun shining down on his golden skin.

“They spoke to the guy Nico made contact with before and he told them this is all down to Valton Marku’s brother. He wants revenge.”

“He had a brother?” I asked, shocked and horrified. If this was personal, it could not be good.

“Apparently. The guys are on top of it though. They’ll be fine,” he assured me.

“Oh yeah, just fine. Some crazy Albanian is out for revenge, sending heads and breaking into high-security buildings, but I shouldn’t worry, right?” I snapped sarcastically.

“This is good news. At least we know the whole damned family isn’t coming after us. It’s just one guy and a few people he has working for him. We’ve faced much worse.”

I sighed, stopping any more of my fears from pouring out. There wasn’t anything Parker could do if I told him how terrified I was that something would happen to Nico, so it was no use to keep saying it.

“So, you’re talking to me now then?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been an asshole. I’ve just had a lot on my mind,” he sighed.

“If?” I laughed.

“I really am sorry. I just...I needed time to think,” he seemed to be struggling with whatever he had to say, so I turned to face him, wanting to give him my full attention.

“Think about what?” I asked.

“This...us. I...fuck! I love you Emilia, I do. I didn’t need to think about that. I think I’ve been falling for you since the first moment I saw you.”

“I love you too, Park.”

“But it’s not that simple, is it?” He almost growled.

“It can be, if you let it,” I told him, hating that I already sensed where this was going. I was going to lose him.

“That’s just it, I can’t. I’m so fucking sorry Emmy. I tried, I really did, but I can’t do this. I can’t be a part of what you have with the others. I can’t share you with them. It’s not who I am. I love you so fucking much, and I would do anything for you, but I can’t be a part of a relationship like that.”

“Maybe if you just give it some more time,” I whispered, trying to hold back my heart broken tears.

“I’ve tried...when you were recovering, I tried and it was killing me, princess. I can’t sit back and watch the others hold and kiss you. If you’re mine, I need you to be only mine and I can’t ask that of you. I see the way you feel for Jax and Linc. You love them and you should be with them.”

“I love you too, Parker, so much,” I squeaked, my tears making my throat tight.

“It just can’t work. I’m sorrier than I can say, but I can’t do it – not even for you,” his eyes were glassy, and I knew it was hurting him just as it was me.

Wanting to make it easier for him I nodded and took his hand in mine. “I understand,” I told him.

“It’s the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make, believe me, but it’s my only option. I can’t lose my brothers and I can’t lose you. If we can’t be together, I still want you in my life. Do you think we can still be friends?”

“Of course, we can. I need you in my life too,” I agreed, but inside I was breaking. Yes, I had Linc and Jax, and maybe the fact I wanted Parker too made me greedy and selfish, but I loved him. I loved all of them and I knew without him, a piece of me would always be lost – the part of my heart I had given just for him.

But he was right of course, I would rather he be in my life as a friend than not at all and I needed to keep on telling myself that.

He opened his arms and I shuffled until I was close enough to his side that he could pull me in for a hug.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held on tight, fighting not to cry anymore.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t make this work, Emmy. Believe me, I wanted to, but I just can’t. If I force it, I know I’ll end up losing you and my brothers. I couldn’t live with that,” he explained as he held me tight.

“I’m sorry what I need is so complicated. I just...I love all of you.”

“You don’t need to explain or apologize. You haven’t done a damned thing wrong. This is all on me. Just know, no matter what, I will always be here for you.”

“Ditto,” I held on to him tight as we just sat in silence, the only sound was the waves lapping up around us. I never wanted to let him go, but I knew I would have to, eventually. He made his decision and I needed to find a way to live with it. Parker was never going to be mine because I could never wholly be his. Life really sucked sometimes.

The next week passed uneventfully. The guys and I spent a lot of time on the beach, sunbathing and playing around in the sea. We hung by the pool and spent long evenings around the electric fire pit. Ty and I took long walks on the beach at sunset, taking in the beauty of it all and making the most of the spectacular place. I was so grateful to have them all there with me. Parker was there too of course, but he was distant. Linc, Jax, and I tried hard not to be too affectionate in front of him, but if we ever shared a kiss or a hug in front of him, he always made some excuse and disappeared. I knew he was hurting because I was too, but there was nothing to be done except finding a way to move forward.

I was sick with worry for Nico and Nate the whole week, and every time I spoke with them, I ended up tearful and terrified. They were just taking such risks simply by being there when this Besart Marku – Valton’s brother – was chasing them. They were working hard to track him down, but so far, they had very little to go on and it worried me sick that the monster

after me knew where they were, while they had no idea where he was.

To say we were in such a heavenly, idyllic place, it had been a tough week for me. I lost Parker, my brother was in danger, and once again some depraved psycho was after me. All of it brought back the darkness within me, with a vengeance. My panic attacks were back and more intense than ever, as were my nightmares. The guys were with me, and they were amazing, but the anxiety of everything happening was a lot to deal with.

I was worried about Tyler too. He had been so quiet since we arrived. He still joked around in front of the guys and plastered on his happy smile, but he wasn't fooling me. When he thought no one was watching the smile would slip and he just looked so broken. I had known something was going on with him since the day we met but being there triggered something and made whatever he was dealing with much harder. I continuously asked him if he was alright and told him over and over that I was there should he need to talk, but he just told me he was fine and shrugged off my worries. I wanted to push him, but I wouldn't. I knew what it was to just want to be alone with your problems. I wouldn't force him to talk to me. Instead, I was just waiting and hoping that he would come to me eventually. Until then all I could do was be there for him and worry - a lot.

"The steaks are ready, firecracker. Come and eat now," Linc called as he stuck his head around the glass door. I was sitting at the kitchen counter, once again on Jax's laptop researching the Marku crime family. The guys didn't know that was what I was doing. They thought I was looking up college classes, in preparation for applying next year.

Really, I had no idea what I thought I would find that Nico hadn't, but I just needed to feel that I was helping in some way. I hated sitting there in that paradise, relaxing and having fun when at every moment Nico and his guys were putting their lives at risk because of me.

I found very little and certainly nothing of value to help Nico. Mainly it was news reports of various arrests and court dates

involving the family. They had a page on Wiki but the information it held was basic and useless. I managed to find a photo of Besart Marku – Valton’s brother – in a news article about a murder trial he faced several years earlier. Of course, that ended in a mistrial and the slippery son of a bitch had gotten off.

The likeness to his brother was undeniable though and it had taken me several attempts to look at the image fully without spiraling into dark memories. Eventually, I managed it by focusing on the differences. Besart was younger, by at least ten years, and his hair had a curl to it that made it look a little wild. The eyes though, were just the same, and they seemed to leap from the page and look right through me.

“Em? Come on, baby. You need to eat,” Linc prompted as he strode toward me.

I tore my gaze from those cold eyes and looked up at him. He was smiling lazily, and he looked so relaxed in his shorts and bright blue t-shirt.

“Sorry, I’m coming now,” I told him as I closed all of the pages on the laptop and closed it.

“Did you find something that caught your attention?” He asked as I jumped down from the stool and rounded the island to go to him.

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “There’s a lot of courses to choose from.”

“Well, you have plenty of time to decide,” he assured me as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and led me out to the deck.

“Decide what?” Jax asked. He was standing at the grill, cooking steaks, and looking damned good doing it in navy board shorts and body sculpting tee. He had a beer in his hand and looked perfectly relaxed. When he dipped his aviators to look at me as I stepped out, it took my breath away.

“She was looking at college courses again,” Linc replied.

“I thought you already settled on business?” Ty asked from where he sat at the table with Parker opposite.

Realizing I was still frozen, gawping at Jax, I snapped my mouth shut and started to walk again. Unable to resist, I walked right over to him and reached up on tiptoes until I landed a kiss on his lips. As he returned the gesture his smile became even fuller, setting my heart aflutter. As I turned to sit with Park and Ty I took a quick glance at my two guys, now standing side by side at the grill, and wondered for the millionth time how I ever got so lucky.

“I’m not sure about business now,” I told Ty as I took a seat beside him. I couldn’t help the way my gaze drifted across the table to Parker. He was busily concentrating on his phone, obviously trying not to look at me in return. It was the way it had been since the morning on the beach when he told me he was out, and I hated it, but there was nothing I could do to change it. He made his decision, and I was trying really hard to respect it and keep him as a friend. “I saw some courses on crime scene investigation and criminal psychology. I think that could be something I could really be interested in.”

“You want to work for the police?” Ty asked, seeming shocked.

“Maybe, I certainly have background knowledge of criminals,” I shrugged and grabbed a handful of chips from a bowl in the center of the table, wanting to busy myself so I wouldn’t stare across the table.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea after everything you’ve been through?” Parker asked.

I glanced up and found those gray eyes lasered on mine.

“I think it would be a good way to use everything I’ve been through for something good. I want a career that will help others and I think being involved in police work in some way would allow me to do that.”

“But you wouldn’t want to be a cop, right? I don’t think Linc, and I could handle you going out into life or death situations every day,” Jax asked, looking concerned.

“No. I don’t exactly have the stature to be a cop,” I laughed. “But I was thinking maybe something to do with scenes of

crime, or victim liaison. I haven't decided yet, but it's something I'm considering." My life to that point seemed to me to have been such a waste. Whatever I decided to do next, I wanted it to be worthwhile. I wanted to make a mark on the earth and help people who have felt as powerless as I had.

"Nico won't stand for it," Parker said flatly.

"Actually, I already talked with Nico about it, and he agreed it would be a good option for me. He said my experience would make me a great victim liaison," I told him smugly.

"Well, I don't agree. What happens when you have to walk into a crime scene, and it triggers a panic attack?" Parker snapped, clearly pissed now.

"That's not fair, Park," Ty interjected but I spoke over him, pretty pissed myself.

"It would be years of school and training before I walked into a crime scene and in that time, I plan to see April regularly. I'm dealing with my anxiety Parker, and I don't appreciate you throwing it in my face."

"She's right, Parker. That was out of order," Linc backed me up.

I was glaring across the table at Parker, waiting for his comeback. It was clear he did not agree with my career plans and was pissed off. That meant he was either going to lash out further and say something else horrible, or he was going to storm off. I got my answer when he stood up so angrily and violently that his chair crashed loudly to the ground behind him.

"Fuck this," he growled. "You're not my problem now," he stormed into the house, slamming the glass door shut behind him so hard I physically jumped, startled by it.

"Ignore him, tiger. He's being a real asshole lately," Ty sighed tiredly.

"You okay?" Jax asked as he walked over and placed a plate filled with steaks on the table.

“I’m fine,” I lied. I hated the way Parker was behaving and I felt a pang of overwhelming guilt that it was all my fault, but what could I do? I loved him, but I loved Lincoln and Jax too and I couldn’t walk away from them. This was the way things had to be. That wasn’t my decision. It was Parker’s.

“Let’s eat,” Linc sat opposite me and started to fill his plate with steak and salad.

“I should talk to him,” I said, more to myself as I turned to look at the house. I couldn’t see Parker inside, but I guessed he’d gone to hide in his room as he had many times before.

“Leave him, Em. He’s being a complete douche. He needs to sort himself out, and fast,” Ty put a hand on my arm to still me as he spoke.

“He’s having a hard time right now,” I reasoned.

“Ty’s right. If you go in there, he’s just going to take his shit out on you. Just leave him to calm down,” Jax agreed.

I nodded and busied myself filling my plate, but I felt too sick to eat. I hated what this whole mess was doing to Parker and more than anything I wanted to help him in some way, but how? The predicament we were in was one of his own making. I loved him and he loved me. Things could be so simple if he would let them, but he wouldn’t, and I had no idea how I could fix that. It was hurting me just as much as it was hurting him, and I wasn’t going around pissing everyone off. He just needed to find a way to live with the decision he made, and I wasn’t sure there was much I could do to help him with that. It was on him, and I was pretty sure he knew that too.

CHAPTER 12

NICO

I lay in bed completely exhausted, but unable to sleep. It had been over a week since the guys took Mia to Maui, and Nate and I were getting fucking nowhere!

We knew Besart Marku had a crew of his own, around ten men strong. Through a contact Nate had in New York we also knew that Besart and his gang ran a very lucrative drug import business. We found links between him, Valton, and Juan Benitez – Mia's piece of shit stepfather. We had enough to go to the cops, but I didn't want that. If Besart was arrested, he had enough money to hire a top attorney and wiggle his way out of the charges. He had done it plenty before with a list of charges on his rap sheet as long as my arm, but no prison time served. He was a slippery little fucker, and I wasn't letting him get away this time. If Mia and my family were ever going to be safe, he needed taking out and I was more than willing.

Problem was we couldn't find him. He disappeared from the face of the earth and every lead we got took us nowhere. I needed to find him and end this whole fucked up mess, for Mia's sake if nothing else. I had spoken with her on the phone several times and I knew she was desperate to just come home. She loved Maui of course – who wouldn't? But she just found her home with all of us, and she was missing it, not to mention worrying herself stupid the whole time she was away.

I turned over again and tried to adjust the pillow under my head. I needed to sleep. It had been days since I last got more than an hour and I was beat, but it was proving impossible to shut off my brain. I tossed and turned for a few more minutes, then got pissed and launched the damned pillow across the room. I sat up, deciding I'd rather get to work on my laptop than lie there unable to sleep, when a loud boom rattled through the building, shaking the whole damn thing.

I might have wondered what the hell was going on had I not heard that exact sound so very many times in the time I served.

It was an explosion, and it had to have been within my building considering the way it had shaken and the alarms that were now blaring loudly.

I was still pulling on my shirt as I ran from my apartment. The power had gone out and the emergency lighting kicked in.

“Boss? What’s going on?” A voice called as I hit the staircase.

I looked behind me and found Eddy running down behind me. “It was an explosion. From the sound, I’m guessing in the parking lot,” I explained as I jumped down the flights of stairs as fast as I could move. There were a few sets of boots pounding down the stairs from further up – I guessed the few guys who had been working the night shift at the office.

As I neared the underground parking lot it became clear I guessed correctly. There was dust in the air and a definite smell of smoke and explosives. Car alarms were blaring along with the building’s security and smoke alarms. As I opened the door to the lot, I just hoped to God no one had been down there.

JAX

“We’re both here, Nic,” I told him. Linc and I were sitting at the kitchen counter, hunched over my cell. It was the middle of the night. I had been perfectly settled in bed beside Mia, loving every second of having her quietly snoring in my arms when my damned cell started vibrating. A text from Nico asking us to call him back without Mia.

I hated leaving her when she was so settled and so damned cute, but for Nico to contact us at that hour I knew something bad was going on.

“What’s going on?” Linc asked, clearly anxious. We both were. We hated not being there with Nico when he needed us. We were a team and always had been since the day we met.

“Where’s Parker?” Nico asked.

“Your guess is as good as ours. He stormed off about four hours ago and hasn’t come back,” Linc explained.

We both felt for the guy. I couldn't even imagine what it must be like to want Mia and not allow yourself to have her, but it was his choice, and it was the wrong one. We all knew it, everyone but him. It didn't excuse his asshole behavior though, and we were sick of it.

"Just tell us what's happened," I demanded.

"Besart Marku just blew up three of our company vehicles in the underground lot."

"Fuck," I gasped.

"How'd you know it was him?" Linc asked.

"Who the fuck else would do that?" Nic snapped. "Plus, we caught a license plate on the exterior cameras. It links back to his shell corp."

"Was anyone hurt?" I asked.

"No, thank fuck. The lot was empty."

"Is the building safe?" Linc asked.

"We're good. He used C4 so it was enough to obliterate the cars, but the structure is fine," Nico replied, much to our relief. We all worked hard for that building and our business. We were proud of what we achieved and none of us wanted to see it go up in smoke.

"He's escalating," Linc said.

"Yeah. The question is, what's his endgame?" Nico asked.

"Revenge. We killed his scumbag brother. Now he wants us all dead," I speculated.

"Any progress on finding him?" Linc asked.

"No. The guy's a fucking ghost. This might be our first lead," Nico sounded exhausted when he spoke. It was obvious he was burning the candle at both ends to catch Marku.

"You want us to come back?" I offered.

"No. Mia needs to be far away from this bullshit. She's safe there. It needs to stay that way."

“We could get some guys over here, and she has Ty. She’d be safe,” Linc suggested.

I hated the idea of leaving her, but Nico was right – Emilia was safe. He clearly needed the back up.

“No, she needs you guys there. I can handle this. Just watch your backs too. This Marku is a piece of work, and I don’t doubt he has ways of tracking you guys down if he wants to,” Nico warned.

“We’ve got her, bro. She’ll be fine. You just watch your back. This is getting very fucking messy,” Linc told him.

“No shit,” Nico sighed. “I’ll be fine. Just keep my sister safe, yeah?”

“We got her,” I assured him.

“I gotta go. I’ll call tomorrow,” with that Nico hung up and Linc and I sat looking at each other in shock. Besart Marku had blown up our fucking building! What the hell were we mixed up in? It was crazy.

“This is so fucked up,” Linc said.

“We’re getting in over our heads. Nico must see that. A severed head, an armed raid of our building, and now a bomb. It’s more than we’re equipped to handle,” I ranted. I hated knowing our brothers were facing that slippery fucker without us at their backs.

“D-did you just say bomb?”

We both looked up at the sound of Mia’s frightened voice and found her standing in the doorway in her tiny pajamas, her eyes wide and worried.

“Is Nico hurt?” Her eyes were glassy, filled with tears and I couldn’t have stopped myself from going to her if I’d tried. In an instant I had her in my arms.

“No, angel. Nico is fine. No one got hurt,” I assured her.

“What happened?” She looked up to me with those wide green eyes and I was a goner. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for the beauty in my arms, and I knew it.

“There was an explosion in the parking lot of our building. Three cars were blown up,” Linc explained.

“Oh God!” she gasped. “Was it him...Besart Marku?”

“Yes, but Nico’s on it. He’s going to catch this guy now. This was the lead he needed,” Linc told her with a confidence neither of us really felt.

Nico was the best at what he did, but this guy was proving to be a slimy son of a bitch to deal with.

“This is too much. Nico can’t get any more mixed up in this,” she cried. “They just blew up a damned building! He’s going to get himself killed.”

“He has plenty of back up and he knows what he’s doing. He’ll be fine, firecracker,” Linc assured her.

“No he won’t. This whole thing has gotten way out of hand. We should go to the police.”

“It won’t help. Marku has faced charges numerous times. His piece of shit attorney gets him off every damned time. We need to handle this if we ever want it to be over,” I explained.

“I just want Nico to be safe,” she cried tearfully.

“He will be. That’s all he wants for you, honey – to be safe. You have to let him handle this,” Linc said.

Clearly unhappy with the situation Emilia deflated and went into herself, not saying anything more as silent tears ran down her face. Linc and I looked to each other, knowing we should say something to comfort her, but the truth was, we couldn’t. We didn’t have any more words of assurance because we, too, were worried Nico was getting in way too deep.

Instead, we all silently walked up the stairs and into Mia’s room. We all wordlessly climbed into the bed, taking the positions we had that first night, Linc and I surrounding the woman we loved and trying to soothe her in the best way we knew how – just being there for her. I wanted to promise her that everything would be fine, but I knew damned well it was likely a promise I couldn’t keep.

EMILIA

I couldn't sleep that night. My mind was running wild with images of my brother being killed by those monsters. I laid still long enough for the guys to drop off and now I needed to move. I couldn't bear to lie there any longer and see the awful images running through my mind.

Once I negotiated my way out from between the guys, I pulled on Jax's hooded sweater over my pajamas and headed downstairs as quietly as I could.

I wanted to call Nico, desperate to hear his voice and know he really was okay as the guys told me, but I didn't want to wake him if he was sleeping.

Instead, I headed for the kitchen, resolved to make a cup of tea, and take it out to the deck. At least the sounds of the waves would drown out some of the noise in my head.

Movement outside the glass doors had me pausing before I entered the kitchen. It was hard to see, since the lights weren't on out on the deck, but eventually I realized Tyler was out there, sitting on the steps that led down to the patio, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

Worried, I bypassed the kitchen and headed straight outside. It was still warm out, but the breeze had me shivering a little.

"Ty?" He turned to look at me at the sound of my voice, and I knew instantly he had been crying. Even in the dim light I could make out the redness around his eyes.

"Go back inside, Xena. It's too cold out here," he sighed, sounding slightly slurred.

"Well, you should come inside too then," I told him as I stepped down and took a seat on the step beside him.

"I'm good right here," he took a long drink from the bottle in his hand and grimaced a little at the taste.

"You going to tell me what's going on?" I asked as I took the bottle from his hand and took a gulp myself. The drink was way stronger than I expected, and I guessed my grimace was much more comical than Ty's. It burnt a fiery trail down my

throat and right when I silently swore, I wouldn't try that again, a warmth filled me that I found comforting.

"You drink whiskey now, huh?" Ty laughed half-heartedly.

"Sure," I shrugged as I took another drink.

"Just ease up, short stuff. It'll knock you on your ass. You don't hold your alcohol too well," he took the bottle from me and set it aside on the step.

"Maybe I want to be knocked on my ass right now," I sighed.

"Why? What's going on?"

"Nope! I'm not telling you a damned thing until you tell me what's going on with you," I said stubbornly. Whatever Ty was dealing with had been locked away too long. He needed to tell someone, and I decided it was going to be me. I couldn't just stand by and watch him hurting any more.

"Not now, Em. There's already so much going on," he sighed.

"That's exactly why you need to tell me. You've been holding this in for too long. It's hurting you, Ty. You can't keep it buried and deal with it alone anymore, not when we all have so much other bullshit to deal with. Just talk to me...please," I reached my hand out, and placed it on his knee, imploring him to just trust me and open up.

For several moments he was just silent, as he looked out to the ocean, his face filled with pain and indecision. Just when I was beginning to think he wasn't going to speak again he placed his hand over mine on his knee.

"I was in Italy for almost a year," he began. "It's such a beautiful country. I...I guess I'd been there about three months when I met him. I was out at some club with a guy I'd met at a conference. The club was packed, but as soon as my eyes met those bright green ones on the dance floor, I was his," he stopped and took in a deep shaky breath.

I scooted a little closer and put my free hand over his, holding it in my two hands, trying to let him know I was there.

"We had our first real date the next day...w-we couldn't wait to see each other again. He was a medical student, training to

become a pediatrician. He was so fucking smart...a-and funny. He could always make me laugh. We just fit...you know? I never believed in soul mates or any of that bullshit, but we were meant to be together, Em, I know we were.”

“What was his name?” I asked, trying not to let my own emotion, caused by the pain I felt radiating from him, show.

“Fabio,” The word trembled badly, and I knew Ty was crying, but he didn’t look at me, his eyes fixed on the ocean. “We dated for two months, then he moved into my place. We were so...so in love. We had plans. Fabio had a year of training left, then we planned to come to the states together. We were going to get married. We even talked about kids. He was it for me.”

“What happened Ty?” I asked. He needed to get it out.

“We’d been dating for six months. It was our anniversary and Fabio booked this fancy restaurant. He was an amazing cook and he loved to eat at the best restaurants. That night we had the most amazing evening. We were so happy.” Again, he took a deep breath.

I dreaded whatever he was about to say next.

“It was a beautiful, warm night and Fabio...he wanted to walk home. We h-had to walk through this park. I never even thought...I mean, we’d walked through there so many times before. This night though, we were jumped. There were four guys, all yelling in Italian. I don’t know what they were saying, but it was for sure some homophobic bullshit. Fabio... he tried to calm things down. He was talking to them, but they...they weren’t listening.” A sob burst from Ty, and I couldn’t stand it. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him into a tight hug.

He buried his face against my shoulder, and I could feel him shaking with sobs.

“I’m so sorry, Ty,” I whispered as I held him, tears trickling down my own cheeks.

“I tried...I tried so damned hard to stop them, but two of them...they grabbed me while the other two...fucking animals...they laid into Fabio. By the time I got free and took

two of them down it was too late. They all ran off but Fabio... he was down and th-there was so much blood. He made it to the hospital, but he had a brain bleed. He...he died on the operating table. He was only twenty-four years old.”

“Fuck, Ty. I’m so sorry,” it was so stupid to keep on saying that, and I knew it, but I had no idea what else to say. The man Ty loved had been taken from him by small-minded animals. Because of what? Because they didn’t agree with the relationship Tyler and Fabio had? Because they were looking for trouble? It was horrific to even think about and so damn unfair. How could anything ever make that better?

“We...we took a holiday just before...before I lost him. We went to Sardinia for a week, and it was the greatest week of my life. I guess being here...it just reminds me of him so much. It’s been hard. I miss him, Em. He was going to be my entire future and now...” The sentence ended with a sob and Ty buried his face against my shoulder again.

“I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. What happened was so brutal and unfair,” I tried to soothe. “But Fabio loved you, Ty and he would want you to go on and find happiness. Your future hasn’t gone. It’s just going to be different from the one you envisioned. You have to find a new future now and live it to the fullest for both of you.”

“You make it sound so easy,” he whispered.

“I know it won’t be, but all we can ever do is keep on moving forward. That’s what you must do now.”

“I’d ask how you got so wise, but I already know,” he sat up and swiped at his eyes.

“Did they catch them? The men who jumped you? Please tell me they are locked up for the rest of their lives?”

“Yeah, it was a nightmare talking to the cops with the language barrier, but eventually I identified them from some mugshots. The two who killed Fabio were charged with murder and got a minimum term of twenty years. The other two got away with some bullshit assault charges. They’ll be

out in three years. I left the day after the court case ended. I couldn't stand being there without Fabio."

"No punishment would ever be enough for what they did to you, Ty, but at least for now they're locked up and they can't hurt anyone else," I took his hand between both of my own again and just held it, trying to comfort him in some way. Nothing would ever seem enough though – not now I knew what he had been through. I couldn't even think how I would go on if I watched one of the men I loved be beaten to death.

"For now," Ty agreed.

"You need to tell the guys. They're worried about you too."

"I know. I just...it's awkward. I've never really brought any aspect of my love life around them. They accept me for who I am...I know that, but me being gay has never really been something we talk about. You know what they're like...all macho, ex-military."

"They love you, Tyler, and I don't think they'd bat an eye if you talked to them about your love life. They will want to know what you're going through right now. They'll be pissed to hear you've been bottling all of this up," I told him.

"You're right. I guess I just didn't want them to see me like this...it...it's not who I am. They all know fun-loving, happy Tyler."

"They're your family. You don't always have to put on a happy face for them. They can handle this side of you too. You're entitled to feel the way you do. You lost the man you love. You're allowed to be messed up by that."

"I'll talk to them, but not now. They have enough to deal with. Once all of this is over and we're all safe though, I'll tell them then."

"In the meantime, I'm here if you want to talk. I love you too Tyler. Whatever you need you can always count on me."

"I know, tiger, thank you," he kissed the top of my head and wrapped his arms around me. For a while we just sat like that, clinging to each other, and contemplating all the terrible that

was in the world. I was just so damned grateful that we all had each other to get us through.

“So, I told you my stuff. What’s going on with you?” Ty asked after a while.

I sat up and took a deep breath.

“Nico called the guys a while ago. Valton’s brother blew up three of the company cars in the underground lot tonight.”

“Fuck! That’s insane!” Ty gasped.

“Yeah, I know. Luckily no one was hurt, this time. It’s only a matter of time though.”

“And you’re totally blaming yourself, right?”

“Well, who else can I blame? I brought the Marku family to you guys. It’s my fault Valton is dead, and his brother is out for revenge. It’s all my fault this is happening, and it will be my fault if Nico, Nate, or anyone else is hurt, or worse, as a result of this whole mess.”

“That’s such bullshit.” Ty groaned. “It was Valton Marku’s fault he was killed. He fucking kidnapped you, Em! He deserved exactly what he got, and his damned brother is going to end up in the ground too, right alongside him. None of this is your fault. It’s all down to a group of psycho criminals. They need to be stopped before they hurt some poor innocent the way they hurt you. You just have to trust Nico to do that, and he will. He knows what he’s doing, and he will bring all this craziness to an end.”

“At what cost, though? How many more people are going to be hurt? What if Nico is too damned close to the next bomb, they leave for us?” I cried.

“Nico is a highly skilled, highly trained machine. This will not be the first time he has dealt with psychos, bombs, and death plots. Just trust in him, Em. Trust that he can protect you. This Marku might be a slippery motherfucker but Nico is one of the scariest, most lethal men I have ever met. He is not to be fucked with, and someone messing with his family? He is not going to let them get away with that.”

“I just need it all to be over.”

“I know, honey. It will be soon. You just need to be strong and patient. The guys will end it,” he soothed. “Come on. Let’s head in. You’re freezing cold.”

“I was going to make some tea. I couldn’t sleep,” I explained as we both stood and headed inside.

“I’ll make us both some. You want to watch a movie?” Ty offered and I couldn’t help but smile a little. No matter what hell was going on in my life, he was always there offering me the sanctuary of goodies and a movie.

“Chris Hemsworth, Chris Evans, or both?” I laughed.

“Both, of course! Why have just one when we can have them both?”

“Avengers it is then,” I agreed as I headed for the lounge to load up the movie we tended to watch over and over again, together.

We spent the rest of that night watching the movie and laughing together. Eventually we fell asleep at either end of the sofa. It was always so easy being with Ty and now, knowing what he had been through, it made so much more sense why. We were both broken, but together we found some peace. We simply understood each other and soothed one another’s frayed edges. I had no idea what I would do without him in my life, and hopefully I would never need to find out.

CHAPTER 13

EMILIA

I was so damned nervous. Linc pulled me aside earlier in the day when I had been sunbathing on the beach with Jax, to tell me he was finally taking me for our date that night.

I'd been so excited about getting one on one time with him when he'd told me, but then I had to get ready, and the nerves started.

I barely brought any damned clothes with me, having left in a rush. We'd been shopping the week before and I bought what I needed, as had the guys, but it had all been swimsuits, shorts, and thin, casual tees and vests. I hadn't for one second considered I'd need something for a date.

Just when I was about to tear my hair out, and sat on my bed surrounded by the few unsuitable options I ripped from the closet, Ty knocked on the door.

"Your fairy godfather is here!" He announced, then he presented me with a bag from what looked to be a boutique judging by the name.

Inside I found a beautiful off the shoulder pale pink floral sundress and a pair of heeled sandals. It was perfect and exactly my size too. I hugged the crap out of Tyler in thanks.

Now I stood before the mirror in my room fidgeting with the hem of the dress, trying to contemplate if I had ever looked so delicately feminine in my whole life.

"What's wrong, Xena? Don't you like the dress?" Tyler asked. He helped me to curl my hair and kept me company as I applied the small amount of make-up I knew how to.

"I love the dress. I just...do you think it's too girly? For me, I mean? I'm not really that feminine, am I?" I asked nervously.

"You are crazy, Emilia Gallo," he laughed. "You're completely feminine, with your tiny frame and delicate features. The dress looks perfect on you. Linc is going to be blown away," he assured me.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure! Now go. You’re already late. He said to be ready at seven. It’s almost a quarter past.”

“What?” I gasped, “Why the hell didn’t you say something?” I grabbed my sandals and started pulling them on as I hopped from the room.

“It’s a girl’s prerogative to be late!” Ty called after me, laughing the whole time.

Linc was waiting in the entrance hall as I walked down the stairs. He smiled up at me and I was once again swooning at his breathtakingly handsome face. He really could be a model on the cover of some fancy men’s magazine.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” I said nervously.

“No problem. You look beautiful, baby,” he took my hand and pulled me in until I was pressed against him, then he reached down, and kissed me. “Are you ready to go?” He asked as he released me from his hold and took my hand.

I nodded with a smile, still reeling from the amazing kiss, and he led me from the house and out into the beautiful evening sun.

“Are you hungry? I thought we’d get dinner first?” He asked.

“Sure,” I agreed. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and I was hungry. “I searched online for restaurants around here and I think I found one you’ll like. It’s not fancy, but the food had good reviews.”

“Sounds good. I’m not a fan of those fancy places anyway,” Linc unlocked the SUV we hired, parked just ahead, and opened the passenger door for me. He took my hand and helped me as I climbed in. I couldn’t stop my gaze as it wandered, then watched intently as he closed the door and jogged around the front of the SUV to jump in the driver’s side.

The drive to the restaurant was short and filled with comfortable conversation about safe topics like the beautiful place we were in.

When Linc pulled up outside the restaurant I was instantly in love because it was on the beach! Tables filled a large deck, every one of them with a perfect view of the glittering, amazingly blue ocean.

We were greeted by a waiter in a bright blue Hawaiian shirt. He sat us at a small table right at the front of the deck, with a direct view of the beauty before us. It was so romantic with a lit candle at the center. It was the perfect place for a date, not too fancy, but in the most spectacular location. Music was playing in the background, and it just felt welcoming and relaxed.

“Is this place, okay? I know it’s not as fancy as Jax would choose,” Linc asked nervously.

I looked out at the breathtaking view before me again and smiled. “It’s perfect, Linc. I don’t like expensive restaurants. They just make me feel uncomfortable. I have never, and doubt I will ever again, eat anywhere as beautiful as this,” I assured him, waving my hand out to the ocean, indicating the beauty we were seated before.

He reached across the table and put his huge hand over mine.

I instantly felt sparks rush through my body at his touch, once again filled with feelings of want and need that were so new and exciting to me.

I looked up and met his ocean blue eyes, his stare intense. I felt so very much for him, and it all hit me in that moment. I may not have truly experienced love before, but I knew without a doubt I was madly in love with Linc and with Jax. I felt a pang in my chest as I factored Parker into those feelings too, but I knew I had to stop thinking about him in that way. He had made his choice and I had to respect it, even if it killed a small part of me that belonged to only him.

As we ate and chatted away, the chemistry between us just continued to grow. Linc would casually take my hand or brush a hand over my arm or thigh until, by the time the plates were cleared from our table, I was a bundle of built-up tension and desire.

I knew my body was crying out for the spectacular man before me, but my mind was still so nervous and unsure. I just didn't want to go ahead and give into my desires, only to completely freak out on Linc once we got into things. After everything I just had no way of knowing how my anxiety would rear its head if we move things forward.

"That food was so good," I sighed, and I wasn't exaggerating. I had just eaten the greatest steak of my life.

"I'm glad you liked it. You want to get out of here?" He asked.

I knew it was an innocent question, but to my overheated, greedily needy body, it had me imagining things I only ever read about. Heat rushed over me, and my heart pounded as I dared to look into those eyes once again. Yes, I wanted to get out of there, and straight back to a bed. I was needy and so hot as I zoned out imagining what he would look like standing naked before me, a vision of perfectly defined muscle and golden skin. The need I felt was so strong that it scared me. I had never felt so desperate to be touched before and I couldn't decide if I should just go ahead and take what I wanted or try to slow things down and be more cautious. Overall, I was just terrified that if I completely freaked out, I would mess up everything I built with the guys. Would they really still want me if they saw the full extent of how messed up, I was?

"Baby? You okay?" Linc asked. I hadn't even realized I completely zoned out on him as a million thoughts were running through my mind.

"Sorry," I said guiltily. "I was miles away. What did you say?"

"That's okay," he smiled and once again placed his hand over mine. "You want to head out? We could take a walk on the beach?"

"That sounds good. I need to walk all that food off," I laughed, relieved that my dilemma was over for the time being at least. He wanted to take a walk. I could handle that.

"This is heaven," I sighed happily. Linc and I were walking hand in hand down the golden sandy beach. I had my sandals

in my hand and the warm sand felt amazing under my bare feet. The sun was setting on the horizon creating the most wonderful glow in the sky all around us. It was like the greatest romantic mood lighting ever and the effect was not lost on me.

“Almost,” Linc replied, then he stopped and turned to face me. He placed his hands on my waist and pulled me in close.

“Something’s missing,” he told me, with a sexy smirk.

“It is, huh? What would that be?” I asked, grinning to myself.

“This,” he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. Instantly all the desire and desperate need I felt earlier rushed back over me at his touch and I dove headfirst into the deep, passionate kiss. As the intensity of the moment grew, so did my disregard for everything I had been worried about earlier. Suddenly, all I cared about was getting closer and closer to Linc until we were only one person. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my body against his. In seconds he realized exactly what I needed and had me lifted in his arms. Once we were face to face, the kiss became even deeper and I wrapped my legs tight around his waist, needing to feel him as close as I could get to him. I ran my hands through his short hair as his hand roamed up and down my back, only increasing the wildness that was consuming my every nerve ending.

“Linc!” I cried. It was too much. I needed more. I needed him to satisfy the overwhelming feelings inside me.

“Tell me what you want, baby. Tell me what you need,” he whispered between kisses down my neck.

“You,” I gasped. “Touch me...please...y-you have to touch me. It’s too much...I need...please Linc.”

“I’ve got you, firecracker,” he kissed me again and then started to walk further down the beach. Just ahead there was some kind of resort with luxurious loungers laid out in neat lines. There was a couple just beyond them walking away from us hand in hand, but other than that the beach was empty, much to my relief, since there was no way, I was making it back home. I needed Linc right there and then. There was no more

room in my mind for worries and inhibitions. There was just him and my desperate desire for him.

He lay me down on the first lounge we came to and settled over me, caging me in with his arms, one on each side of my head.

“Are you doing okay?” He asked as he studied my face.

“Yes,” I replied without a shred of doubt. “I want this, Linc... please.”

“You have the reins here, Em. You tell me if you need me to slow down or stop and we will.”

“I trust you,” I told him with every bit of conviction I could gather in my needy, addled state.

Linc looked filled with pride at my comment. He kissed me, at first gentle and sweet, but within moments it increased in intensity until we were nipping at each other and teasing, each of us desperate for more. I was writhing beneath him, desperate for his hands to wander from where they were wrapped around my back.

Finally, when I was more desperate than I had ever felt in my life, his hand found its way under the top of my dress. He toyed with me at first, brushing his fingers along my collarbone and around my neck. The whole time I silently urged him to move, to get to where I needed his touch so wildly. Slow – so very painfully slow, he stroked his way to my breasts. His hand brushed over one of my nipples and I moaned loudly.

“That feel good, baby?” He whispered into my ear, sending goosebumps all over my skin. He started kissing up my neck and I feared I would combust with the desperate want that was consuming me.

“So good,” I gasped.

“You’re so beautiful. So damned sexy all needy before me,” his hands continued to knead and explore my breasts, sending feelings shooting through me that I had never known before – wonderful, amazing sensations that were just driving my need for more higher and higher.

Linc moved one hand down to my thigh. As he began to slowly stroke up and down, getting higher and higher with every pass, I was sure I would explode with need.

“Linc!” I cried, not even sure what it was I wanted him to do. More, was all I could think. I needed more, but before Linc could oblige shouting broke out from just a short distance up the beach. Linc moved his hands and instantly straightened my dress, covering me as he looked around us.

“What is it?” I asked, feeling dazed having been so suddenly ripped from my pleasure haze and back to reality.

“It’s a group of teenagers, probably from the resort,” he took my hand and pulled me up to sit on the lounge chair.

“Well, they have great timing,” I grumbled.

“Enjoying yourself, were you?” He laughed, a huge grin on his face.

I felt a little embarrassed at how desperate I must have sounded to him, and I could feel my face heating up and turning bright red.

Linc caught me as I tried to drop my gaze to the ground, his finger catching my chin and directing my gaze back up to where he now crouched before me, “Don’t hide from me, firecracker. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I was enjoying myself more than I can fucking say, too.”

“Sorry,” I whispered as my eyes met his. “I just...I’ve never... you know. I d-didn’t know how I would feel, but that...it was nice.”

“Nice?” He questioned, a sexy smirk on his face. “I can do so much better than nice, baby. I think we should head back to the house, and I can show you exactly what I have to offer,” he made his eyebrows dance up and down suggestively and all my nerves left me as I burst out laughing.

The shouting, which continued in the background, was now getting closer. I looked around and found a group of five teenagers walking toward us, all laughing and shoving at each other.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here,” Linc said as he pulled me to my feet and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. We headed down the beach which was now almost completely in darkness.

“This was a perfect date, Linc. Thank you for bringing me here,” I sighed contentedly.

“The nights not over yet, not unless you want it to be?”

“I don’t want it to be,” I told him excitedly. I had been so unsure, but after just a few moments of Linc’s hands having been on my body I knew I could handle taking things further with him. More than that, I wanted to – needed to. When he touched me, every thought and worry in my head had been obliterated and all I could think of was him and how very urgently I needed him. Those thoughts were still consuming me, and as we headed back to the car all I could think was we needed to hurry and get back to the house so I could continue this new, exciting journey of discovering a whole new side of the man I loved and our relationship. I had never thought I could take things to that level with my guys, but at that moment, I couldn’t think of anything else. I guessed it came down to trust and I trusted Linc and Jax with my very life. I knew that they would never hurt me and clearly that was enough to get me past the issues I had been worrying I would never overcome. It had gotten me to the point that I was desperate for Linc to touch me again anyway. I guessed I would find out how much further I’d be able to go once we returned to the house. I couldn’t wait!

The house was silent when we walked in and I guessed the guys were all in their rooms, much to my relief. It would have been awkward if I dragged Linc to my room with them all watching. Nothing would have stopped me from taking what I wanted though. I wanted Linc - I was sure of it, and I was sick of not taking what I wanted. If Linc was willing, then nothing was stopping me.

“Will you come to my room?” I asked him as we walked through the house hand in hand.

“Of course, I already told Jax I’d sleep with you tonight.”

“And if I want us to do more than sleep?” I asked shyly.

Linc stopped us in the middle of the hall and turned so we faced each other.

“Baby, we can do whatever you want to do. It’s like I said earlier – you hold the reins. You have complete control here,” he said softly.

“So, you’re at my mercy?” I joked, smiling up at him.

“I am. Do with me as you please,” we were both laughing as we hurried up the stairs and into my room.

Linc closed the door as I walked over to the bed and sat down to remove my sandals. The pause in the playfulness between us had me feeling nervous again.

“Let me do that,” Linc knelt before me and pushed aside my fumbling hands, undoing the tiny straps on my sandals which I had been struggling with.

“S-sorry. I’m just kinda nervous I guess,” I admitted.

“Nothing to be nervous about. It’s just you and me. We’re not going to do anything you don’t want.”

“I know. I just...I’ve never done this.”

“I’ve got you, Em. I’m going to take care of you and make you feel good. I just need you to tell me if anything doesn’t feel right or if you need us to slow down or stop, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed as I ran a hand over his hair, loving the feel of the smooth strands between my fingers.

Linc leaned in and started to kiss me, at first slowly but it quickly turned into something much more ferocious and needy. When he stopped his hands wrapped around my waist and he hoisted me up the bed. When I landed with a bounce I squealed and laughed, but my giggles died out when Linc got up on the bed on his knees and straddled my waist, his eyes filled with the lust and need I was feeling inside.

“Just to be clear, you say stop and we stop,” he whispered as he caged me in, leaning over me on all fours.

“Okay,” I agreed, but he didn’t need to tell me again. I trusted him unequivocally. I had no doubt that he would respect my needs.

He trailed kisses down the right side of my neck, trailing them down over my shoulder, teasing the side of my breast over my dress, then down my stomach and to my thigh just below the hem. He continued down my leg, setting my whole body alight.

“Can I take this off?” He asked as he came back up to my thigh and teased a finger under the hem of my dress.

“Yes!” I gasped as I started to slip the straps from my shoulders to help him get it off faster.

He pulled the dress over my head and tossed it behind him, then lowered down to continue his trail back up my left leg.

I almost cried out when he skipped over my center and up my stomach, right back up to my neck. He was teasing me, and it was killing me. I needed him to touch me.

“You’re so fucking perfect. This body...I just need to touch every inch of you,” he whispered.

“Yes! Do it Linc...please,” I cried, my brain overcome with the need for him to do just that.

“Your wish is my command,” he replied playfully. He slid a finger under either side of the waist of my panties and looked to me for permission, which I gave with a vigorous nod. He slid my panties down then set to work on my bra, unclasping it with ease and sliding it off. Both items were discarded to the floor in an instant, and then I lay there before him, completely naked.

He started to trail kisses up and down my body exactly as he had before, but this time when he reached my breast, he moved over to my nipple and swirled his tongue around it. The unexpected, but wonderful thrill that sent through my body had me arching up off the bed at the first contact.

“Steady, firecracker,” he soothed as he continued his ministrations on my nipple. When he started to pull away, trailing kisses lower and lower, I moaned in protest, but soon

settled down when his mouth found its way to my center. At first, I was a mix of desperate need for something down there, and nervous over what it would feel like and how it would affect me, but at the first touch of his tongue I threw my head back and cried out in joy. It felt unlike anything I had ever known and in seconds I was awash with the overwhelming feelings that were building within me.

“Oh God! Lincoln!” I cried as a wild, all-consuming feeling built up inside me, making me feel I was at the edge of a cliff, about to dive off whether I was ready to or not – it was both incredible and terrifying.

As I dove headlong off that cliff, I reached down for his head, needing to have him with me as I gave into the terrifying climax that washed over me and made my body feel out of control in the most sublime way.

“I’m right here, baby,” he soothed, clearly understanding what I needed. He once again caged me beneath him and kissed my neck, while his hand took over where his tongue had been, pushing me higher and higher until I was crying out wantonly in his arms, indescribable pleasure the one and only thing I could feel or think of.

As I came down from the amazing high I clung to him tightly, my arms around his shoulders, feeling safe as long as I knew he was with me in that wonderful, but uncertain moment.

When I opened my eyes Linc was leaning over me, studying my face, a small, satisfied smile on his face.

“I didn’t think you could get any more beautiful,” he spoke. “But I was wrong. Seeing you completely let everything go just then was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I felt embarrassment flush my cheeks, but I refused to give in to it. What we had just done had been incredible and I wanted more.

Rather than try to speak, which I knew would result in me nervously babbling, I pressed my lips up to his and kissed him with every bit of passion I could throw at him.

He returned the kiss and once again our movements became frenzied, nipping at each other's lips as our hands roamed wildly.

Taking the initiative and hanging onto the bravery I was feeling, I moved so I was kneeling beside him. I broke the kiss and placed my hand in the middle of his chest and pushed until he lay where I had been.

"This is all wrong," I declared as I started to unbutton the shirt he wore. "I'm naked while you still have entirely too many clothes on."

"Is that so?" He smiled when I nodded. "And how are you going to fix that?"

"I'm going to strip you naked," I couldn't help but giggle when those words left my mouth. The playfulness and confidence in them felt so unlike me.

I finished unbuttoning the shirt and started to pull it from his arms. He helped me and, in an instant, I had it off and tossed aside. I straddled his thighs and started to work at the fly on his pants, wanting him completely naked as I was.

Linc, obviously feeling as impatient as me, helped, arching his back, and pushing down the last remaining items of clothing between us. Together we got them off and thrown to the floor with the ever-growing pile of clothing we discarded. Once I was resettled over his thighs, I realized he was hard before me. I had never seen a naked man before and I was shocked at how big he was, all over. Panic instantly set in that he was going to be too big. I was fairly petite all over. Was this going to be painful, and if it was, would I completely freak out on him?

"Em? You still doing okay?" Linc prompted. At the sound of his voice, the horrible realization I had just been sitting staring at his penis set in, and I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. It took me several moments of silent self-scolding for being such a loser before I could build up the courage to look at him. "We don't have to do this right now, Em. We can just put some clothes on and cuddle up in bed together instead," he offered, and for a moment I was tempted. It would be so much easier than trying to navigate this whole

sex thing. I was just so clueless, and I hated feeling so stupid and unsure. But I wasn't ready to give in so easily. I loved Linc and I wanted this with him.

"No. I...I want to do this. I want you. I just...is...is it going to hurt?" I asked, unable to stop my eyes from momentarily dropping back down to the source of my fear before darting back up to his.

"Damn Em, you're so fucking cute," he laughed as he pushed himself up to sitting. He wrapped his hands around my waist and lifted me, so I sat in his lap, then he wrapped his arms around my naked, slightly chilled body. The heat and the comfort were both appreciated.

"I just don't want to freak out if it hurts," I admitted shyly, embarrassed I was ruining the whole thing.

"I'm going to do everything I can to get you ready and try to make sure it doesn't hurt, but if it does you just tell me, and we can stop. I never want to harm you. This should be a pleasurable thing for both of us. If it isn't then we shouldn't be doing it. You understand?"

"Yes," I nodded too. "Can we try? I really do want this. I'm just nervous, I guess."

"Nerves are fine. Anything more than that and I need to know, okay?"

"I promise," I agreed. Thankfully he stopped talking and his lips came down over mine.

His arm wrapped around my waist, and I squealed with delight when he flipped us over, so he was on top, and caging me in place with his body. In moments I was once again writhing beneath him with need and he didn't hesitate to oblige, his hand gliding down with a featherlight caress until it met my needy center.

The very first touch of his fingers sent jolts of what felt like electricity through my body, and I couldn't help but cry out. It felt so good and the longer he skillfully played with me, the more and more needy I became. It was like I just couldn't get

enough of him and finally, it all became too much, I cried out his name, with a desperation I never heard from myself.

“I want you...please Linc...I need you,” I cried.

“Are you sure? It’s alright to change your mind,” he said, looking a little unsure.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything...please. I want this Linc, with you, right now.”

“Thank fuck for that,” he chuckled.

He sat up and I cried out as he stopped, just as I was starting to feel myself starting to go over that edge and dive into pleasure again.

“Sshh, I just need to get something,” he leaned over and picked his wallet up from the nightstand. From it, he pulled out a square silver packet. A condom. Of course. In my need to get things going I hadn’t even thought about it. Thank goodness he was taking care of the both of us. I loved Linc but I was not ready for babies.

He slid it over his length, and I tried hard not to think about just how long and wide that length was.

“Linc? Is that...is it going to fit?” I squeaked, feeling suddenly nervous.

He looked at me and I couldn’t get any words out, so I just looked down at where he held himself.

“I’m going to go very slow and you’re nice and ready for me, but if it hurts all you have to do is tell me and we’ll stop.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Knelt over me, he lined himself up with my entrance, but he didn’t push in right away. He leaned down and trailed kisses up my neck, as his left hand brushed teasingly lightly over my nipples and breasts. Within seconds I was calmer, my worries long forgotten and my desperate need to have more from this amazing man the only thoughts my brain was capable of.

Finally, his hand found its way back down to where I truly needed him and I was so desperate I was lifting my hips,

trying to find some friction. His fingers once again set my whole being alight, taking me right to that edge. Just as I was about to go over, he started to push inside of me.

As he slowly slid into me, I was feeling wild with the overwhelming sensations running through me. My toes were curled, and I was hanging tightly onto Linc's shoulders, completely overwhelmed with how good every single inch of him felt.

"We doing okay, baby?" He asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes...good...so good," I moaned. "More...please."

He wrapped his hands around my waist and lifted me up until I was repositioned on his thighs, him still inside of me. The position made him feel even deeper inside of me and I groaned at the pleasure that washed over me.

With his hands still firmly wrapped around my waist, he lifted me up and down again and again, lifting his own hips a little to meet each thrust.

My lips found his and my arms wrapped around his shoulders as I lifted myself up and down to meet his thrusts, needing to feel him deeper and faster, chasing the climax that was building to the point of explosion within me.

"LINCOLN!" I cried uninhibited, not caring, or even thinking for one second about the other guys in the house. I was just completely lost in him and the blissful moment we were in the midst of.

"It's okay, Em. Just let it happen," he gasped.

I cried out once again as that explosion took over and left wave after wave of pleasure flowing through me.

A moment later a guttural growl ripped from Linc as he too got his pleasure, then we just clung to each other, both gasping for breath and covered with a sheen of sweat.

"I'm pretty sure from the smile on your face, but I'll ask anyway," Linc spoke first. "Was that okay? I didn't hurt you?"

"It was perfect, Linc," I sighed, sounding almost drunk. "So completely perfect."

“Yes it was, just like you,” he kissed the top of my head and smiled at me when I looked up to him. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I replied. It was such a beautiful moment; lost in the haze of pleasure I was able to forget everything but that man and the perfection of what we just shared. I never wanted it to end, and I was determined to cling to it for as long as I possibly could.

CHAPTER 14

EMILIA

I woke up with the sun once again. It seemed to be the way in that beautiful place. The second the sun shone through the thin white gauzy drapes I was awake.

Linc was at my back, wrapped around me with one arm over me and the other under his head. We hadn't been asleep long, having stayed up for hours after we made love, just talking, and holding each other. It had been perfect; the whole evening had been perfect. I had never been sure of my feelings for Linc as I was when I started to drop off to sleep the night before in his arms. I was in love with him, and I couldn't for one second imagine my life without him in it.

Deciding to leave him sleeping, I extricated myself from his hold and slipped from the bed, then got ready for the day with a new-found bounce in my step. Being with Linc the night before and knowing that I could be intimate, even after everything, filled me with confidence. Those monsters who hurt me didn't win because I was able to get past what they put me through. After just one night I saw my future and it was happy and content. I saw a life with Linc and Jax, I saw the possibility of a home and kids and holidays. No, I wasn't magically fixed, and I knew only too well it was not going to be easy, but for the first time since I had been taken by Valton Marku, I was feeling hopeful and positive. I wanted to tackle my anxiety head on and find ways to banish it so I could move toward the bright future I saw for the three of us.

But of course, it all hinged on the maniac who was hunting us all down now – Besart Marku – Valton's brother. Since he had blown up the vehicles at Milite, he had been completely off the radar and Nico was unable to track him down. I knew Nico was frustrated and worried about what would come next. He hated that we were all just sitting back waiting for Besart to pull his next stunt to try and hurt our family, but what more could we do? We didn't know where he was or what he

planned. All we could do was be cautious and hope we found him before he attacked us again.

“Morning Xena,” Ty greeted as I walked into the kitchen. He had been a lot brighter since we talked about Fabio.

I knew he was working hard to keep himself busy to avoid slipping back into depression and I agreed it was the best thing for him. I had been trying to hang with him as much as I could, knowing he needed the company and it all seemed to be working. He seemed better. Not healed, but better.

“Morning,” I couldn’t hide the huge smile on my face as I looked across the counter to where he was making coffee.

“I’d ask if you had a good night, but I heard for myself that you did,” he teased, a shit eating grin on his face. My face instantly set alight as I ran around the counter and slapped him on the top of his arm.

“Shut up! You did not hear anything!” I whisper-shouted. I was replaying the night over and over in my head and trying to decide if I really had been that loud.

“Oh yeah, I did. Tiger by name, tiger by nature, huh?”

“Ty!” I cried as I hit him again. I was dying of embarrassment, I was sure of it, “Really? Did you...was I loud?” I asked in a panicked whisper, not wanting anyone else who got up to hear me.

“It’s okay, short stuff,” he said more seriously. I glanced up at him and he smiled. “You were loud, but I was the only one here. Jax and Park went out for drinks. They didn’t get back until after three.”

“Oh, thank God!” I cried.

“Are you okay? Was it what you wanted it to be?” He handed me a cup of coffee and pointed to the stools at the counter. We both took one, side by side.

“I’m good. Better than good. It was awesome, Ty. We had the most beautiful date, then...well, you know. Then we just sat up talking for hours. It was perfect,” I gushed, unable to hold back.

“Good, that’s how it should be. I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too,” I laughed, just as Jax walked in. He was wearing the short black shorts he used for running and nothing else, his perfectly sculpted, bronzed chest on full display for my viewing delight.

“Morning sweets,” he walked right over and kissed me.

I couldn’t resist running my hands down his chest and imagining everything I had done the night before, with Linc.

“Hey,” I greeted, way too breathy. Gees, one night of sex and it was all I could think about.

“You okay? Did you sleep?” He asked as he tilted my face up to meet his and studied me.

“Yep, I’m good. Are you? Ty said you were out late last night. I thought you’d sleep in this morning.”

“Nah. I’m good. We didn’t drink that much,” Jax replied. “I’m going to take a run. Where’s Linc?”

“Sleeping. I’m fine. I’ll stay with Ty,” I assured him, knowing exactly what he was worrying about.

He and Linc were worried about the threat coming to find me and they had been very careful about not leaving me alone since the first day we arrived in Maui. I wasn’t arguing. I knew how easily things could go bad. I had been kidnapped. I wasn’t taking any risks ever again, so I was more than willing to give in to their over-protectiveness.

“Ty?” Jax looked over to him.

“We’re all good. We’ll stick by the house until you’re back,” Ty agreed.

“Okay, I won’t be long, and I have my cell if you need me,” he kissed me again and then was gone out of the back door in a flash.

“I hope you know how freaking lucky you are, tiger. Not one, but two hot guys,” Ty sighed.

“I do,” I replied, and I did. Not only were they both hot as sin, but they were also kind, funny, smart, and protective. I was

head over heels in love with them and I would never stop thanking my lucky stars that they were mine, but none of that stopped me from wishing it was three guys I was thanking my stars for. I loved Parker too, and no matter how hard I tried to pretend otherwise, those feelings would not stop.

We tried over the last week to be friendly and nothing more, but it was stilted and awkward, usually ending with Parker losing his patience and storming off. I missed him, missed the caring, gentle side of him he had shown when he took care of me after I was rescued. That man, that patient, funny, affectionate guy, was gone and in his place was a deeply unhappy, angry version I was struggling to spend any time with. I just didn't know what I should do. I wanted to try to talk with him again about us, to make sure he really was sure of his decision, but the one time I tried, he lost his temper and flipped a table, then disappeared for over twelve hours. After that I decided to give him space to figure things out, just hoping eventually he would come back to me, as a friend if nothing else. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was better than losing him all together.

“What do you want to do today?” Ty asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Go home to Nico,” I sighed, just as I had every time Tyler or one of the guys asked me that question. We were in paradise, and it really was the most spectacular place I had ever been. Things were good with my guys, and I was having a great time with Ty, but really all I wanted was to go home. I was worried sick about Nico being hurt and I hated that he was dealing with it all alone. I missed him too. He had become such a big part of my life since I found him, and I hated being away from him for so long. It had been almost three weeks and we barely even spoke, the guys deciding we should keep calls limited to avoid Besart tracking where we were. I just wanted it all to be over and everyone I loved and cared for to be safe.

“Soon Xena, I'm sure we'll be able to go home soon,” Ty soothed, but I knew he, like me, had no idea when this would be over, and we'd be able to go home. “In the meantime, how about we hit the beach?”

“Sure,” I agreed, painting a smile in place. We were stuck there until Besart was caught; might as well make the most of it.

NICO

Three weeks! Three fucking weeks since Mia left, and I still had absolutely nothing to get to Besart Marku. I called in every favor I was owed, every marker with my military contacts, played every card I possibly could, and still I had no idea where the lowlife was holed up. All I knew was that he was hiding, and not just from me. It seemed Besart Marku pissed off the family he worked for one too many times. Word was, he brought way too much police attention onto them with his drug imports, which fit with what Morin had told me. They wanted him gone and the word had been put out.

Unfortunately, that meant the fucker had gone underground and I couldn't find a fucking trace of him.

In the meantime, my sister was way too far away from me for my liking, my team was out of action and our business was going to shit. I needed to end this so we could all get our lives and everything we worked so hard for, back on track. Most of all I just wanted Mia and my brothers to be safe.

“Nic? Come on, man. Time to call it a day,” I looked up and found Nate standing in the doorway of my office. I was sitting on the floor with every document we found regarding Besart and his criminal enterprises spread out around me, just hoping like hell something we missed would jump out at me and give us a lead.

“I'm good,” I grumbled.

“You've been at this non-stop for weeks, Nico. We've covered every angle. The motherfucker is a ghost. We can't do anything else right now except wait for him to show himself,” Nate pointed out.

I hated it, but I knew he was right. We were getting nowhere. “And if he doesn't show himself? Mia can't stay in fucking Hawaii forever.”

“He will. We just need to be patient and vigilant,” Nate said confidently. “Come on. Let’s go for a beer and take a break from it all. We can start fresh tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I agreed. I hated to admit defeat, but Nate was right; we had nothing, and I was fried. I barely slept more than two consecutive hours since Mia opened that damned box with Juan Benitez’s head inside. A beer sounded good.

I got to my feet and followed Nate from the office, locking everything up behind us. It would all still be there waiting for me in the morning. Maybe a night off would do me good.

“You owe me twenty bucks,” I told Nate as I left him at the pool table and headed to the bar for beers. He just lost the third game in a row and lost our wager.

“One more game, double or nothing?” He suggested.

“Fine, if you want to give me all of your money,” I laughed. “Rack ‘em up while I get a drink.”

I was feeling good as I headed for the bar. It had been a good idea of Nate’s for us to just leave it all behind and take a break. I hadn’t realized how badly I needed to get away from the search for that fucker. I had been completely lost in it since the day I found out who was after us and it was driving me to distraction. A night off was exactly what I needed. I’d dive in again first thing in the morning, hopefully with a fresh set of eyes that could give us the break we needed.

I gave the girl behind the bar my order and watched as she bent down to get two beers from the refrigerator. She was cute, tall, and blonde with an athletic build and pretty blue eyes. She was totally my type and on any other night I might have been tempted to flirt with her, but not that night. I had way too much going on and I needed to stay focused.

“Thanks,” I told her as I handed her some cash and took the beers. She was clearly checking me out too, and I was pretty sure if I had gone for it, she’d have been interested. Another time, I told myself.

I glanced up to where Nate waited by the pool tables in the dive bar we walked into a couple of hours before. It wasn't our usual choice, but we decided it was wise to avoid our regular haunts. Bombs had been planted in our building after all. We had to watch our backs.

The place was packed with a crazy mix of people, including a huge group of college kids who seemed to be celebrating, judging by their continuous raucous cheers.

I squeezed by their table, shaking my head, and laughing at two skinny guys trying to arm wrestle.

I felt the impact, knowing exactly what it was before I saw a damned thing. I was in the middle of what had become an impromptu dance floor, surrounded by a few of the drunk college kids and a group of women who were clearly at a hen party. They were crammed around me so much that I hadn't spotted Besart, but as I dropped the beers in my hand and turned, there he was, looking so completely out of place in his designer suit.

At the sound of the bottles smashing to the ground girls around me screamed and backed up a little.

"For my brother," Besart was right behind me, his face so close to my ear I could feel his breath on my face. I tried to tell my brain to move, to grab the fucker and take him down, but my body was uncooperative, refusing to move. Once again sharp pain shot through me and I looked down, knowing what it was but unable to process any thought.

I had been stabbed; I knew it. It wasn't the first time it happened to me, but when I looked down, I couldn't see any sign of a wound or blood.

My vision was blurring, and I could feel myself going down, my legs refusing to hold me up. I tried to look around again, to see if that fucker was still there, but I didn't get the chance. All around me screaming broke out as I landed hard on my side.

"Nico!" I heard Nate yell, then everything went black.

EMILIA

“Jax! Don’t you dare!” I screamed frantically, a huge smile on my face. We were in the pool after what had been a blisteringly hot day. We’d all spent it together on the beach, even Parker, and it had been a good day. We rounded it off with steaks on the grill and a couple of bottles of wine. Now Linc, Ty, and Parker were sitting on the deck playing cards and drinking beers, while Jax and I were supposed to be cooling off in the pool. I planned to just sit in the water on the steps and relax, but Jax had other ideas. He had dive bombed into the pool, almost drowning me in the tidal wave he created and now he was swimming towards me with nothing but mischief in his eyes.

“You gotta cool off properly, angel. You look all hot and bothered over there,” he told me.

“I’m fine, thanks. I just want to sit here, I don’t want...” The rest of my sentence was cut off and replaced with a scream as Jax grabbed my foot and dragged me from the steps and into the water. I went under, and by the time I pushed up to the top coughing and spluttering Jax had fled across to the other side of the pool where he now stood watching and laughing.

“Oh, you will not be laughing in a minute!” I cried, trying to sound annoyed even though I loved this playful side of him.

“You were hot. I helped you cool off,” he shrugged, looking perfectly innocent.

“Then please, allow me to return the favor,” I launched myself across the pool towards him, determined to get him. I was mid war cry when Linc yelled.

“Guys!” The tone he used was enough to have us both stopping and turning to him instantly. He had his cell to his ear and the look on his face could not mean anything good.

I went stone cold all over and my heart started to pound so hard the sound reverberated through my whole body. I knew, before he said a word, I knew my worst fears had been realized.

“Nico,” I whispered.

“It’s Nate. Nico has been stabbed,” I heard Lincoln speak, but the words were echoey and tinny, like he was far away. As the words registered my head started to spin and I felt my legs turn to jelly. I started to fall, the water pulling me down and taking me from the reality I couldn’t bear to face. Was he dead? Would that be Lincoln’s next sentence? If it were then I would happily drown not to hear it.

Strong arms wrapped around me, lifting me up. I coughed as I hit warm air and scrambled to touch Jax, knowing it was him who held me. I grabbed onto the arm he locked around my waist and clung to it hard.

“It’s okay. I’m here. I’ve got you,” he soothed as he strode to the steps of the pool where at the top Linc and Ty were waiting, looking worried. Linc held open a huge towel and Jax passed me into his arms.

“Deep breaths, baby,” Linc said, and I realized I was still coughing and spluttering having swallowed water when I went down.

“N-Nico? Is he...is he g-gone?” I asked between gasps to breathe.

“He’s alive. He’s in surgery. Nate’s with him,” he told me as he wrapped the towel tight around me and carried me into the house, the others all right behind us.

“I have t-to go. I need to...to be with him,” I started trying to struggle my way free from Linc’s hold, but he just gripped me harder.

“No, Em. Just stop for a second,” he ordered in a firm voice.

I looked up into his blue eyes, my own filled with tears.

“He’s my brother. I...I can’t lose him,” I squeaked through my tight throat.

“We know, Mia. He’s our brother too,” Jax said, suddenly appearing at my side. “But we have to be careful. Besart could have done this to lay a trap. He could have planned to lure you out so he can grab you.”

“I don’t care!” I yelled as I scrambled so wildly, Linc had no choice but to put me down.

“Em, just take a breath and calm down. It’s going to be okay,” Ty tried to soothe, but nothing would soothe me.

I was terrified and raging all at once. “How the hell is everything going to be okay? My brother has been stabbed! I knew it would happen. I knew it! That’s why I didn’t want to come here,” I almost screamed as I started to pace up and down. “You!” I pointed accusingly to where Jax, Linc, and Parker were off to my right. “You should have been there. You’re his team. He needed you and you weren’t there!”

“Nico wanted you safe. That was all that mattered to him,” Jax cut in.

“This is all my fault. If anyone should be bleeding out on an operating table, it should be me! Valton Marku wanted me. I’m the reason he’s dead! Now I’m going to be the reason my brother is dead too!”

“Baby...” Linc started to move toward me, but I backed off and held my hand out to him, warding him off.

“Don’t!” I snapped. “Just...let’s just pack our bags. We’re going home tonight. I need to be with him. I don’t care about Besart, or his plans or any other bullshit any of you is about to say. We’ve hidden for too long. Whatever is coming next, we’re all going to face it together.”

“Nico wouldn’t want you to do this,” Parker piped up.

“Well Nico doesn’t get a say, since he went and got himself stabbed,” I turned and headed for the stairs, tears running down my cheeks as my strength and bravado turned into terror for Nico.

As soon as I got to my room, I pulled off my wet swimsuit and pulled on jeans and a sweater. My hair was soaking, but I didn’t have time to worry about it, instead just wrapping it up into a messy bun on top of my head to get it out of my way.

As I started to cram my clothes into the carry-on bag I arrived with, I dialed Nate on my cell and hit speaker. He answered

almost immediately, and I didn't even give him a chance to speak.

"Nate? How is he? What happened?" I demanded.

"Emilia? Where are the guys?" Nate asked.

"Just tell me, Nate!" I cried.

"He's been in surgery for an hour. He was stabbed in the back three times, and he lost a shit load of blood."

"Oh God!" I gasped as I once again fought back tears. Three times? Could he even survive that?

"I haven't had an update yet, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I just don't know much right now."

"Is he going to...to make it?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"I don't know. I don't want to lie to you; he was in a bad way, Emilia. I just don't know if he'll come through, but I do know he's the toughest sonofabitch I know. If anyone can survive this, it's him."

"Stay with him until we get there, please? I don't want him to be alone."

"Of course I will, but do you really think it's a good idea to come back here?"

"Nico could die, Nate. I have to be there."

"Fine. I'll arrange some security in the building."

"Just keep Nico safe. We'll be there as soon as we can." With that I hung up the call and collapsed to the bed. I couldn't hold back my sobs any more as Nate's words ran through my mind over and over again. Nico was in a bad way, and he may not make it. I could lose him before I even got to know him properly.

"Mia?" I didn't look up from where my face was buried in my hands, but I knew it was Jax. He was the only one other than Nico who called me that. The bed dipped beside me and then I felt his warm hand rubbing up and down my back.

“N-Nate said he m-might not make it. Three times, Jax...he was stabbed in the back three times!” I cried.

“He’s strong. He’ll fight with everything he’s got to hold on. I know he will. His anger alone, that Besart Marku managed to get the jump on him, will get him through.”

“It was him then?” I asked.

“Yeah. Nate saw him walking out. They were in a bar.”

“What were they doing in a bar when a crazy mobster is after all of us?” I sat up and looked at Jax. He was changed into gray chinos and a t-shirt.

“They needed to take a break, and they were careful. Just not careful enough,” Jax sighed.

“Did you pack?” I asked, not able to think any more about how the hell it all happened. I just needed to focus on getting to Nico. It was all I was able to process for the time being.

“Yeah. Linc’s arranging flights back and Parker and Ty are clearing the kitchen and locking the place up. We’ll be good to go in about thirty minutes.”

“Good. We should load up the car,” I stood up and swiped at the tears on my face, knowing I needed to get myself together.

“Just take a minute to catch your breath, angel. This has been a lot and you almost fucking drowned,” Jax was almost pleading, and I saw the strain on his face.

“We shouldn’t have left him, Jax. I just want to get home now. He needs us.”

“I know, and we will, but you still need to take care of yourself.”

“I will,” I told him, but in all honesty, I didn’t care about myself, or anything except getting to Nico and making damned sure no one could hurt him again.

I had known the day we left I was making a mistake. I never wanted to leave Nico to clean up my mess, and deep down I think I had always known this was how it would end - with

him hurt. If we just stayed, the guys would have had his back, and I knew it was very likely this would never have happened.

We had to go back, and we had to deal with Besart Marku as a family. We were stronger that way and it was time we all realized it. It was time for them all to stop trying to shelter me. It had just gotten my brother stabbed. I wouldn't allow it to happen anymore. From that moment on we were going to face whatever came, together.

CHAPTER 15

EMILIA

“Tiger?” I looked around as Ty walked into the ICU room Nico lay in. I was sitting at his bedside, holding his hand, my head resting on the bed beside him.

It had been three days since we arrived, and Nico was still under sedation. One of his lungs had been damaged in the stabbing and he was intubated to help him breathe while it healed. He also lost a kidney, and it had been touch and go whether he would make it through the night, when we arrived. He did make it though, and he was still with us and hanging in there.

I hadn't left his side for longer than it took to use the bathroom since we arrived, refusing to leave his side. If the worst should happen and he took a turn, I wanted to be there with him. He wasn't leaving me without a fight, and if I did lose him, I didn't want him to be alone. Either way, I was staying there and nothing any of the guys could say managed to convince me otherwise.

“The doctor said if he can remain stable over the next twenty-four hours, they might start trying to wake him up,” I told Ty as he rounded the bed and took the chair opposite me on the other side of the bed, which Jax vacated just ten minutes before.

The guys had been taking turns sitting with Nico and I, only two people allowed in the room at any time. They were watching me way too closely, constantly fussing about what I had eaten and drank and how much I slept. It was infuriating that they just didn't understand – I didn't care about me. I didn't care about anything but my brother waking up and being healthy again. If that didn't happen, I really wasn't sure what I would do or how I would ever live with the fact it was all my fault.

“That sounds positive then, right?” Ty said.

I lifted my head and looked across at him. He, like all the guys, looked tired. They were all worried for Nico, just as I was, and I knew they were camping out in the waiting room down the hall.

“Right,” I agreed.

“So how about you let me, and Park stay with him tonight so the guys can take you home for a shower and some sleep? We can call you if anything changes. You’d only be a short drive away.”

“I’m fine here,” I replied flatly. I had been through this conversation so many times and my answer never changed.

“Em...”

“Don’t, Ty. I’m not leaving him.”

“You’re making yourself ill. You’ve barely eaten anything thing in days, and you can’t keep sleeping in that chair. You’re so pale. If you go on like this, you’re going to end up in a bed yourself.”

“I’m fine. How many times do I have to say I am not leaving him? He needs me and I won’t let him down.”

“If Nico woke up right now, he’d tell you to go home and get some sleep and you know it. Taking care of yourself is not letting him down.”

“Please, Ty...just stop. I’ve heard this from the guys over and over. I need you to be on my side...please,” I was tearful and emotional as I locked my eyes on him, begging him to understand.

He nodded once, then stood and came over to my side. “I am always on your side,” he told me as he dropped to his knees and pulled me into his arms.

I went happily, needing the comfort, and buried my face into his sweater as I sobbed.

He just held me for a few minutes, allowing me to get it all out.

When I was calmer, I sat up again and glanced at Nico. I knew he wouldn't wake up, because he was sedated with drugs, but it didn't stop me from hoping. He had a tube down his throat and there were wires, tubes, and monitors everywhere. It had been terrifying when I first saw him, and I wasn't sure it had become any less terrifying in all the hours I had been with him since.

"The guys are worried sick about you," Ty spoke as he brushed wild strands of my hair behind my ears soothingly. "If you don't want to leave then you need to do something to calm them down. If I go to the cafeteria for food, can you try and eat something? It might get them off your back for a while?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I know, but just try something, okay? For me if nothing else. I'm worried about you too. You need to keep your strength up."

"Okay, fine, but just something small, okay? My stomach is a mess right now."

"You got it," he agreed with a smile. "I'll be right back."

As soon as the door closed behind him, I leaned forward and looked over Nico. It was so strange to see him looking so frail and vulnerable. Since the moment I met him, that night in the street outside Milite, he had been so strong. He made me feel safe in a way no one ever had, always the pillar of strength. Now, laid there, it was like everything that made him my over-protective big brother had been sucked from him. I longed for him to wake up and throw around one of the scowls he had mastered so well, that always sent everyone around him running in fear.

"I'm still here Nico," I said softly, I didn't know if he could hear me, but it hadn't stopped me talking to him every time we were alone for the last three days. "Still waiting for you to wake up and come back to me. I...I miss you."

"I never needed anyone before I met you, you know? I learned to survive on my own and I was okay with that, but you...you ruined that for me. You came along and you showed me it was

alright to need others...to need you. You made me depend on you Nico, so you c-can't leave me now. Do you hear me? Don't you dare leave me. I d-don't know what I would do without you now and I don't ever want to find out."

A while later, the door to the room opened and Jax walked in. He had a bag I recognized from the cafeteria in one hand and a soda in the other.

"Hey sweetie," he whispered as he walked in and came right to my side. He pulled a chair from the side of the room with him and set it right beside mine. "Ty went to the cafeteria. He said you were going to try something?"

"I said I'd try," I replied.

"Well, the food down there pretty much sucks, but Ty said he'd done the best he could," he held the bag out to me, and I took it reluctantly. My stomach, which was tied up in knots, did not want food, but I knew Ty had been right – eating something was the best way to get the guys off my back for a while.

Inside the bag were several pre-packaged sandwiches, some chips, a granola bar, and some fruit. I pulled out the granola bar and an apple and handed the bag back.

"I'll take the soda too, please," I held my hand out, and Jax handed me the soda he held. We sat in silence as I worked my way through the food and drank the soda, the only sound the beeping of the monitors around us. I managed to eat the granola bar and half of the apple before my stomach completely revolted and refused to allow me to eat any more.

"You done, angel?" Jax asked when I'd been holding the half-eaten apple for several minutes.

I nodded and threw the remainder into the trash can behind us. "I'll leave the bag here, okay? Maybe you can try something else later?"

"Maybe," I agreed non-committedly, my eyes locked on Nico, my only thought was the silent pleading with him over and over to just hold on.

“He will wake up, Mia. His body just needs some time to repair itself first. The doctors are hopeful now. He’s stable.”

“I’ve been hopeful before now, and it never got me anywhere good,” I knew I was drowning in despair and allowing the darkness within me to take the reins, but I couldn’t do anything to stop it. That possibility hanging over my head – that Nico could take a turn for the worst and lose his life – was so much more terrifying than anything I ever faced before. I would take a hundred beatings from Juan just to ensure that Nico would get through this. I would have done anything to see him open his eyes and scold me for how tired I looked. I just needed him back, and I was so scared that would never happen. Life to that point, hadn’t exactly taught me to be optimistic.

“That’s not true. You were hopeful when you went looking for Nico and that all worked out pretty well, right?” Jax placed a hand on my knee as he spoke. His body heat seeped through my jeans and into my chilled body, giving me some comfort.

“I’m not sure Nico would agree right now,” I scoffed.

“Yes, he would. He would tell you what I have heard him tell you countless times before, that it was the best day of his life when you walked into it. No matter what, he would never want things any other way.”

I could hear Nico’s voice telling me those words. Jax was right, I heard them from Nico several times, usually when he was trying to convince me to do what he thought was best to keep me protected. I replayed all the times he told me he loved me, and the feel of his huge arms wrapped around me and making me feel so completely secure.

“I just miss him s-so much, Jax,” I squeaked as my eyes filled with tears and my throat became constricted with the threat of sobs.

“I know, sweetie. We all do,” Jax soothed. “Come here,” he took my hand and led me from my seat to sit in his lap. I couldn’t resist wrapping my arms around his neck and gripping onto him tight. The very faint smell of his aftershave and the feel of his firm body all around me was the comfort I

needed, and I just started to sob. I pressed my face against his shoulder and soaked his shirt in my tears as I let out the terror, anger, and exhaustion of the last few days.

“It’s okay, Mia. I’ve got you,” Jax soothed as he held me and let me get it all out. Eventually the tears died down, but I wasn’t ready to let Jax go. For days. I tried to be strong and not fall apart, denying the guys when they tried to comfort or hold me, but I couldn’t do it any longer. I was exhausted and so sick of feeling scared. Just for a little while I decided I was going to allow myself what I really needed – the comfort of one of the men I loved.

“Oh no,” I gasp, realizing exactly where I was. I know somewhere deep down it’s a nightmare – one I have had many times before – but that doesn’t make it any less real or terrifying.

I’m back in Juan’s compound, in the bastard’s office. It’s so real, even down to the smell of the cigars he smoked in there. I’m laid on the floor, and I know I need to move, but I just can’t seem to make any part of my body cooperate. It’s like I’m frozen there.

Juan appears, looming over me, laughing as he lifts his booted foot and kicks me hard in the ribs. The pain radiates out all down my right side and I can’t get a breath in, no matter how hard I gasp.

“He can’t help you little girl!” Juan spits, then he bends down and hits me hard twice in the same spot on my ribs that he just kicked. I scream out in agony as I frantically look around the room for Nico. He should be here, he said he’d keep me safe! Then like magic he walks in, his face angry and looking ready to kill.

“Get your hands off of my sister!” He growls as he charges at Juan. Juan doesn’t see it coming and Nico takes him down, landing hard on top of him off to my right. Suddenly I’m no longer frozen, and I’m able to move over to the side and nurse what I’m sure are broken ribs as Nico and Juan roll around fighting. Nico hits Juan twice in the face and I think it’s over,

I'm safe. I don't want to look at my battered body, because I know what I will see when I look up, but it's like a TV show that's playing and can't be changed. I'm forced to look down at myself, but when I look back to Nico, it's not Juan who has him on the ground, a gun to his head, like usual, but Valton.

"You caused all of this, you little whore." Valton hisses as he glances at me, then back to Nico.

"NO!" I scream, knowing what's going to happen.

"I'll kill them all, and it will all be your fault. You should have been a good girl, Emilia," That cold smirk on Valton's face sends terror wracking through my body as I fight to move, to get to Nico before it's too late.

"I'm so sorry, Tesoro," Nico whispers, his eyes locked on mine and filled with acceptance at what is about to happen.

"NO! NICO!" I scream. I know I can't change what is about to happen, but I fight, nonetheless. Valton pulls the trigger and there's an explosion of blood as Nico crumples, lifeless.

"NICO!" I scream as I crawl across the room to his limp body.

"Emmy? Wake up!" Parker's voice roused me from the nightmare, and I sat up, panicked, and gasped for breath. I looked around frantically, trying to work out where I was.

"Parker?" I gasped, relieved to see him there, crouched down beside me.

"I'm here. You're safe. It was just a nightmare," he soothed.

"We're at the hospital."

I looked around and realized I was in Nico's room, laid on the small sofa which sat in the corner.

"Nico!" I cried when my eyes hit him, still laid silent and still in the bed.

"He's fine. He's still out, but they've lightened his sedation. He'll start to wake up soon."

"Oh, thank God," I buried my face in my hands and tried to take a deeper breath, relieved more than I could say that the

nightmare was over and not real, and that Nico was being woken up. That was a good sign that he was going to be okay, that he wouldn't leave me.

"Just breathe, princess. Everything's alright," Parker soothed as he rubbed his hand up and down my back. It was the first time since he came back that he touched me or been so gentle with me, and it felt both wonderful and heartbreaking.

As though I had no control over my actions, I turned to face him and placed my hand on his heavily stubbled cheek.

"I've missed you, Park," I whispered tearfully.

"I've been right here," he placed his hand on top of mine on his cheek and I sighed in relief that he wasn't shoving me away.

"No, you haven't. You've been running from me, and angry," I told him bluntly.

"It's hard, Emmy...so fucking hard," he dropped his hand and lowered his head until I was forced to let go.

"It's hard for me too, but this was your choice," I pointed out.

"Don't you think I fucking know that? I hate myself for making that bullshit decision, but I don't think I can learn to live with the alternative. There's no use in us just going around in circles."

"I know and I understand, but it will never change the fact that I love you, Parker. You hold a piece of my heart just as Lincoln and Jax do. Just know that I'm here if you change your mind."

"I love you too, beautiful," he brushed a hand down my tear-streaked cheek, and the look on his face told me all I needed.

"Just not enough," I added.

"It's not like that," he started, but I stood and started to walk away, unable to hear him tell me the same thing again.

"It's fine, Park," I told him over my shoulder. "You've explained and I get it. Let's just leave it there."

"Emmy..." he began again, following close behind me.

I stopped at the side of Nico's bed and put all my focus into checking over him, making sure he looked comfortable and all the machines around him were working as they should be.

"Just don't, please. I can't hear it all again. Just...just go," I whispered, trying to hold in any more tears from falling over something that was never going to be.

My gaze remained fixed on Nico as I listened to Parker walk across the room and leave, the door crashing closed where he slammed it behind him.

"Nico?" I whimpered as the tears I had been holding back broke free. "Wake up for me now...pl-please wake up. I need you," I leaned over and rested my head on his chest, carefully avoiding all the tubes and wires. I clung onto his shoulders and held him, wishing more than anything that he would wake up and hold me back.

I was sobbing into the sheets when I felt strong arms wrap around me and pull me up. I opened my eyes long enough to know it was Ty who walked into the room. He pulled me into his front, and I wrapped my arms around his waist, holding onto him like the lifeline he was in that moment.

"I'm here, short stuff. Parker told me what happened, so you just let it out if you need to," he soothed.

I cried a little as I clung to him, but I had done so much crying that day; I wasn't sure there were many tears left in me. Besides all of that, I had the news that Nico was being woken up, which was the news I had been waiting days for. He was coming back to me, and I knew I needed to push everything aside and try to focus on that one good thing.

"How are you doing?" Ty asked when I felt strong enough to detach myself from him.

I took a deep breath and looked at Nico again, "Parker said Nico will wake up soon, so I'm relieved, I guess."

"We're all relieved about that, tiger. That's not what I meant though."

"I'm tired," I sighed as I turned to face him again. "I'm so freaking tired of everything being so hard. When do I get an

easy life, Ty? When does all this violence and danger just go away, and I get to just be normal, maybe even happy?”

“Soon, sweetheart,” he stepped closer and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close into his side. “Brighter days are coming, for all of us. We just have to hold on a little longer.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Yes, you can. You’re Xena, my princess warrior. You can do anything,” he joked, pulling a small smile from me. “Come-on, let’s sit down and wait for your hunky brother to open his sexy eyes.”

“Nico will not be happy if the first thing he wakes up to is you flirting with him,” I laughed,

“He’ll think he’s died and gone to heaven,” Ty declared dramatically, making me smile as only he could. He reminded me of the good I had in my life and once again pulled me from the darkness I had been drowning in. Things were bad, that couldn’t be denied, but I wasn’t alone. I had Ty, Nate, and my guys who I loved deeply. Soon Nico would wake up and my world would be one step closer to being whole.

We all knew dark days were ahead, Besart Marku nowhere near done with whatever revenge plan he was enacting, but we had each other. Together, as a family, we were strong. I needed to remember that and hold on to it on the worst days.

Ty and I had been sitting for a few hours by Nico’s bedside. My guys and Nate had been in to check on us but left us when they saw I was snoozing on Ty’s shoulder. Parker hadn’t been in once since I asked him to leave, and though I felt guilty, I was also relieved. I just didn’t have the energy or emotional strength to deal with him at that time. What more was there to say to one another anyway? I laid my cards out for him – told him I loved him. It was all up to him now, and I feared he would stick to his decision to walk away.

“Em? Em, wake up. He’s opening his eyes,” Ty said as he gently shook me.

I leapt awake and looked straight over to Nico. His eyes were twitching and his brow furrowing.

“Nico?” I cried as I jumped to my feet and stood so he would see me when he opened his eyes. “Nico? Look at me. I’m right here.”

“I’ll get a nurse. He’s going to need that tube out,” Ty said, and I nodded to him, tears running down my face.

When I looked back to Nico, his eyes were just opening, and I couldn’t contain the sob of joy that burst from me at the sight of those bright green eyes.

“I’m here, Nico. You’re okay. You’re at the hospital. Ty just went to get the nurse so we can get that tube out,” I babbled, probably making no sense to him.

At that Nico opened his eyes fully, and I watched as they filled with panic, his hands going to the tube which went down his throat and had been helping him breathe for days.

“They’re coming, Nico. Just hold on for a minute, okay?” I reached down and grabbed both of his hands in mine to stop him from doing what I knew he was considering – ripping the damned tube right out.

Thankfully Ty walked back in at that moment, followed by a nurse and the doctor who had been taking care of Nico. I was asked to step back, so I moved over to the side of the room where Ty stood, close enough that Nico could still see me, but out of the way of the hospital staff.

It took around ten minutes for them to remove the intubation and to go through a few tests with Nico to check if he was breathing on his own. I stood aside the whole time, so relieved he was awake and just desperate to wrap my arms around him and tell him I loved him.

“You’re doing very well, Mr. Gallo. We’ll monitor you here for a few more hours, but if all goes well, we’ll move you out of ICU tonight,” the doctor said as he gathered his tablet and papers, then left the room. The nurse bustled about for a moment longer, moving wires and pressing buttons on the monitors.

“He needs to rest,” she told us as she too walked from the room.

I waited until she closed the door before I hurried over to Nico.

“Hey *Tesoro*,” He whispered, and he forced a smile. His voice was quiet and hoarse, but it was still so good to hear it.

“God Nico, I’m so relieved you...you’re awake.” My throat was tight as tears escaped down my face. I grabbed his hand and held it tight.

“I’m okay,” he said. “Stop crying now, I’m going to be fine,” his words were sluggish, and his eyes looked heavy.

“You almost weren’t okay though, Nico. I w-was so scared,” I argued as I tried to stop the tears.

“You had us all worried Nico. It was touch and go for a few days after the surgery,” Ty added as he appeared at my side and wrapped a supportive arm around me.

“Did they catch that fucker?” Nico asked, looking to Ty for the answer.

“No, man. I’m sorry. He was long gone by the time the cops arrived. Nate gave them his details and said it was related to a job you were working, so there’s an APB out for him now. No sign of him so far though.”

“He did this for a reason,” Nico gasped, sounding out of breath. “It was a trap...to g-get Mia. She’s not safe here.”

“She is. The guys are camped out down the hall, and they have additional security throughout the building. They’ve been careful, Nic,” Ty explained.

“We’re all being careful, Nico. Stop worrying. You need to focus on getting better,” I told him.

“You should have stayed in Hawaii. It’s not safe here right now.”

“You were stabbed! There was no way in hell I was kicking back on the beach while you lay here fighting for your life,” I all but growled. “I’m not hiding anymore. That psycho is

coming for all of us because of me. From now on, I will help you guys stop him.”

“Mia....” Nico began, but I cut him off.

“My mind is made up, Nico. I’m here and I am not leaving. Whatever comes next, we handle together.”

“It’s likely the police will stop him before we do now anyway. There were multiple witnesses to the stabbing, so he’s going down for attempted homicide,” Ty reasoned, and I really hoped he was right. I didn’t want anyone else I cared about facing off with Besart Marku.

“I don’t like it,” Nico declared. “I want you as far away from all of this as possible.”

“Well, that’s not happening,” I replied flatly.

“She’s safe Nico. The guys have made sure of it. You just focus on getting strong yourself,” Ty added.

“I n-need to...to speak to the others,” Nico’s words were slow and drawn out as his eyes fluttered closed, and then slammed open again.

“You need to rest,” I told him as I gave his hand a squeeze.

“Fucking pain meds,” he grumbled as he looked to me, studying my face.

I smiled so relieved to have him awake, but I knew my smile was weak. I was just so drained and exhausted. It had been a very long few days.

“You need to rest too,” Nico said. “You l-look too pale.”

“She wouldn’t leave your bedside. She’s been here over ninety-six hours,” Ty told him, the traitor.

“You shouldn’t have done that. You’re still...still recovering.”

“I’m fine. There was no way I was leaving you,” I returned stubbornly.

“Promise me you’ll go home and get some sleep now. I’m awake and I-I’m going to be fine,” he whispered; his eyes half closed.

“But I don’t want to leave you.”

“One of us will stay with him, tiger. He won’t be alone. Nico’s right, you need to go home and sleep. You’re exhausted.”

I glared up at Ty, but I couldn’t deny his words. I was exhausted. It had been the longest days of my life since Nate called to say Nico was in the hospital. Now that Nico was out of danger, maybe a hot shower and some sleep would be good.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Good. S-send the guys...in here,” Nico’s words were barely audible, then he was out, fast asleep.

“The pain meds knocked him out. He’ll probably sleep for a while now,” Ty explained.

“He’s going to be okay,” I told myself more than Ty. I could hardly take in that he had been awake and talking to me after so many days of fearing I would never get to speak to him again. The silent tears that followed were pure relief.

“He’s going to be fine,” Ty agreed as he placed a hand on my shoulder, “Everything is going to be fine.”

CHAPTER 16

“You want coffee, firecracker?” Linc asked as I walked into the kitchen at mine and Nico’s apartment. It had been a week since Nico opened his eyes and he was getting better and better. His doctor told him he may even be discharged in the next few days.

The guys and I had been staying at my place at night together, and I spent days at the hospital with Nico, trying to keep him company and stop him from losing his shit. It was driving him crazy being in there, unable to do anything to help the guys and the cops track down Besart Marku. Eventually, we had given in and taken him, his laptop and the files the guys built on Marku’s operations so he could work on something at least. It calmed him some, but he was still climbing the walls and worrying way too much about me and my safety. The guys reassured him countless times that I had round the clock security, but none of it could soothe Nico’s concerns.

Ty had been to the hospital with me most days, keeping both Nico and I entertained with his antics and flirting with the doctors and my guys and Nate would appear periodically, checking in on everything between their search for Besart.

Parker was a different story though. I had seen him a couple of times, both in the Milite building and at the hospital, but he hadn’t spoken directly to me once, and he did everything he could to avoid even making eye contact with me. I had no idea if he was pissed, because I refused to talk to him that day, or if he was pissed because he was denying himself what I was pretty sure, deep down, he wanted, but either way I was getting the sharp end of his ire and I was so over it. I tried to tell him how I felt, and he made his feelings clear too. What more was there to be done? I opted to just start ignoring him too. It was hard when I felt as strongly as I did for him, but those feelings were getting me nothing but hurt, and I refused to keep wallowing over them.

I had two amazing guys who loved me, and who I was deeply in love with, and Nico was out of danger. I needed to be

grateful for those things and keep my focus on the threat hanging over us.

So far things had been very quiet, the threat seemingly gone, but we all knew better. Besart Marku blamed us for the death of his brother, and the stabbing of Nico would not be enough revenge for him. He was out there somewhere, waiting for his next opportunity and we knew it. He had likely been slowed down by the fact that not only were CPD looking for him, but also his old buddies in the Albanian mob. He pissed them off in some way and now they were out for his blood. I just hoped they got to him before he came for us again. I just wanted it to be over and for everyone I cared for to be safe.

“Em? Coffee?” Linc prompted again, holding the full carafe up for illustration.

“Sorry, I was miles away. Yes please,” I’d had a rough night’s sleep, completely plagued with nightmares of Juan and Valton and I was exhausted. It had been the same all week, the stress of everything going on seeming to make my anxiety that much worse.

“Sit down, baby. I’ll make you some breakfast,” Linc directed as he placed a cup down on the counter in front of one of the stools. Too tired to argue I sat down before it and watched as Linc filled it with hot coffee.

“Thanks,” I told him as I wrapped my chilled hands around the hot cup.

“Rough night again last night?” He asked. He slept in the spare room, leaving me with Jax that night. Occasionally we all slept together, but it was a squeeze in my bed, so more often just one of them stayed with me.

“Yeah. I have an online appointment with April tomorrow, to try and work out why the nightmares are so bad right now. Hopefully she can help,” I sighed.

“It’s been a very stressful few weeks,” Linc pointed out.

“It definitely has,” I agreed. “But Nico is doing great, and things have gone quiet with Marku. I just thought the nightmares might ease off too.”

“Maybe you could talk to April about some meds? Maybe some sleeping tablets or something?” He suggested as he started cracking eggs into a bowl.

“I don’t like taking drugs, Linc. We’re not there yet,” I hated to take anything that altered my alertness – a side effect of spending my entire childhood on alert for danger – and that wasn’t going to change any time soon.

“Not where?” Jax asked as he walked in from the bedroom, dressed for work in navy tailored trousers and a white shirt. He stopped at the seat beside me and laid his jacket over the back of it, then leaned in and kissed my temple gently.

“I was suggesting Em talk to her therapist about some meds to help her sleep,” Linc explained.

“It was a bad night last night, sweet. Did you get any rest?” Jax asked. He walked into the kitchen and poured himself coffee as he spoke.

“Some, but it was a bad night, I’m not ready to consider drugs though. April said there were plenty of techniques we could try before it would come to that.”

“Whatever you want, Em. I wasn’t trying to push you. I’m just worried about how tired you are,” Linc said.

“We both are,” Jax agreed.

“I’ll talk to April tomorrow, and we can go from there, but you guys don’t need to worry. I am tired, but I’m doing okay.”

“We know, angel. You’re doing amazing considering everything that’s going on,” Jax walked back over to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders comfortingly.

“Is Ty going to the hospital with you this morning?” Linc asked. He was standing at the stove now, cooking eggs.

I couldn’t help but take a moment to appreciate how good he looked doing it, dressed in his snug fitting ‘Milite’ t-shirt, which showed just enough of the sculpted lines of his body to have me drooling. That of course made me glance to Jax, who had taken the seat next to me, and appreciate how amazingly sexy he looked in that crisp white shirt, his hair just touching

the collar in the wild messy way he made work so well for him. They were perfect, and they were all mine.

“Earth to Em.” Linc startled me from my happy musing and when I looked up, he and Jax were watching me, knowing smiles on their faces.

“What exactly were you thinking about with that sexy little smile on your face?” Jax asked playfully.

“Nothing to concern you,” I told him, but I couldn’t hide my smile. “What did you say Linc?”

“I asked if Ty’s going with you today?”

“No. He has a meeting with an editor about his blog. He said if he finished in time he’d come by later.”

“Then I’ll drive you in on my way to my meeting,” Jax offered.

“Thanks, Jax,” I was relieved I wouldn’t have to catch a ride with the security guys who escorted me to the hospital. I had done it a couple of times when Ty and the guys were busy, but it made me very uncomfortable and nervous. I just didn’t know the guys who worked for Milite very well, and even though Nico and the guys told me over and over that they were trustworthy, I still didn’t feel safe alone with them,

“I’ll be picking you up too. You and I are going on a date tonight,” Jax added.

“A date? Really? Is that okay...with Besart out there? Is it safe?” I asked. I was excited to have Jax all to myself, but I was also very conscious of the threat that now hung over all our heads.

“You really think we’d ever let you be in danger?” Linc asked.

“Well, no.”

“I have it all arranged, angel. We’ll have security and we’re going somewhere secure. Just trust me,” Jax threw me a wink and I was a goner.

“I do,” I agreed. “And I can’t wait for our date,” It wouldn’t be perfect with security in the background and that constant

nagging worry in our heads that Besart Marku was still out there, but after everything that happened in the last month, having Jax all to myself on a romantic date sounded heavenly. I was determined to make the most of every second of it.

“Hey,” Jax greeted as he walked into Nico’s private room at the hospital later that day. I had been there with Nico all day and he was driving me crazy. He was just so sick of being stuck in that bed, unable to help the guys run Milite or with the search for Marku. He was unsettled and fidgety, just needing to get out of there, and trying to keep him busy and distracted was becoming impossible.

“Jax, please tell my sister I am fit enough to discharge myself from this hell hole now,” Nico growled. This had been the argument we had been locked in for most of the day. Nico was sick of waiting for the doctors to discharge him and wanted to just do it himself.

I argued that he should just wait. He almost died, after all. A day or two longer of rest and monitoring was worth knowing for sure he was on the mend.

“What do the docs say?” Jax asked as he walked over to where I sat beside Nico’s bed. He kissed me just briefly, then took the chair beside me.

“Some bullshit about oxygen levels,” Nico grumbled.

“They said they would like to monitor him for a further day or two because his oxygen levels are still on the low side,” I explained.

“That sounds fair, bro. You were stabbed in the lung. Give it time to heal,” Jax agreed.

“I can’t just lie here anymore. I’ve had enough. I need to get back to Milite and help with the hunt for that fucker.”

“Why don’t you talk to Xander? See what he thinks is best?” Jax suggested.

“He’s on leave. They’re on vacation in Europe.”

“Then I think you just have to stick it out, Nic. It won’t be for much longer. In the meantime, I have some research for you to do,” Jax held up a slip of paper and I sighed in relief. At least if Nico had something to focus on, he might calm down some.

“A lead?” Nico asked.

“Maybe. Nate found a money trail from Besart’s offshore accounts to a shipping company. It’s a new arrangement and we’re thinking maybe it’s part of his exit strategy,” Jax explained.

“I’ll look into it,” Nico said as he took the paper from Jax and picked his laptop up from the table beside him. He looked so much better now, with color back in his face and most of the tubes, wires, and monitors gone. He was healing well, but the doctors had to keep on telling him he needed to give his lung time to recover. I was determined to do what I could to make sure he did that, but it was no easy feat.

“Great. Are you ready to go, angel?” Jax asked me.

“You have security for both of you on this date, right?” Nico asked, glancing up from the laptop.

“We’re covered, Nic. Chill out. I have it all arranged,” Jax assured him.

“Just be careful. We have no idea where that motherfucker is, or what he has planned next.”

“We’ll be fine, Nico,” I told him as I stood and grabbed my purse. I leaned in and kissed Nico on the cheek. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I’ll be coming home tomorrow so don’t bother,” Nico grouched.

“We’ll see.”

“Just try not to terrorize the staff too much. It’s not their fault you’re a grumpy, impatient bastard,” Jax laughed.

Nico just gave him the finger as we left the room, closing the door behind us.

“Poor Nico,” I sighed as we walked down the corridor. “He really needs to get out of here.”

“He needs to learn to be patient. He was fighting for his life a week ago. He can’t hurry his recovery.”

“I don’t think he agrees.”

Jax led me out to his car and helped me inside. I dressed up, knowing we were going on a date. I was wearing a green strappy sun dress and heeled gold sandals. I had taken extra time to curl my hair that morning and applied a little makeup. I still wasn’t great at being glamorous, never having practiced with makeup, hair, and pretty clothes, but I thought I looked okay that day. I looked better than I usually did in jeans and a sweater, my hair pulled back into a ponytail, that was for sure.

As if he heard my thoughts Jax turned to me as we stopped at a red light and smiled.

“You look beautiful today, Mia. Not that you’re not beautiful every day, you are.”

“Thanks,” I blushed. “Where exactly are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Jax teased.

We continued through the city, two Milite security staff in the SUV right behind us.

I tried not to think about them, and about the reason they were there, choosing instead to focus on Jax and whatever he planned for the both of us.

When he pulled into the parking lot of a marina, I was confused and excited. I looked to Jax who turned off the engine.

“Do you have a boat?” I asked.

“I do. It belonged to my parents. I hardly ever come down here, but I thought it would be perfect for tonight,” he replied.

“I’ve never been on a boat,” I told him, my excitement clear to see.

“Well, lets’ hope you don’t get seasick,” Jax laughed. He stepped out of the car and hurried around to my side.

I took his hand as I exited the car and we walked past the rows of shiny white boats and yachts to the one at the very end of the row.

“Oh my God!” I gasped as I looked up at the huge yacht before us. It was bright white and looked like the fanciest one there. I knew nothing about boats, but this one was clearly pure luxury and freaking huge!

I was completely speechless once we were aboard. Inside it was like the fanciest hotel you could ever imagine, with thick cream carpets below my feet, wood paneled walls and the most opulent furniture I had ever seen. The two cream sofas looked like clouds. We were in a lounge area with a kitchenette off to the right and a small bar, stocked with every liquor you could imagine off to the left. The wall before me was floor to ceiling glass looking out to the ocean, and beyond that was a huge deck with leather bench seating and several sun loungers. Right outside the glass doors closest to us a table was laid with candles and place settings for dinner.

“Is this okay? I thought we’d set sail for a few hours, put some distance between us and the rest of the world,” Jax explained. He was still holding my hand, but there wasn’t enough contact.

I wanted to be closer to him, so I swung around and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“This is amazing, Jax. I love it,” I told him happily. I knew the Milite security guys were on the boat with us, as well as what seemed to be the staff who would sail, but all I cared about was the amazing man before me. I reached up and Jax stooped to meet me halfway, so we could share a deep, meaningful kiss that said everything I couldn’t put into words – I loved him, and I wanted him.

Jax opened a bottle of champagne and poured us each a glass as we set sail. We were sitting on the deck, on one of the bench seats just taking in the amazing view and enjoying the thrill of the huge yacht slicing through the water. It was a wonderful experience, settled as I was between Jax’s legs, my back to his front and his arm around me as the breeze blew past us cooling

the late evening heat – it was so perfect, and I could hardly believe it was real. Even with all the chaos going on in the background, it was unbelievable how very much my life changed in the last year. I had gone from being that terrified, lonely girl, to a woman surrounded by family, love, and hope. It was so hard not to worry that it could all come crashing down around me if I weren't careful.

“I could happily stay here forever,” I sighed contentedly.

“Me too,” Jax agreed. “I never thought I'd have this, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when we were discharged, we were all pretty fucked up. For a while I was facing the rest of my life in a wheelchair. I just...I never thought I could have this...what we have. I never thought I could be whole and stable enough for anyone else to want to be with me, let alone love me.”

“That's crazy, Jax. You're one of the greatest men I know. Women must have been lining up around the block for you.”

“I'm not going to lie, I was a bit of a hound before you came along, sweets. I slept with plenty of women, but that's all they ever wanted from me and to be honest, I wasn't too interested in anything else with them either. I never felt the need to even pursue anything more. I didn't have it in me to be what they would need. Then you came along, and I just knew you were it for me. I will always do everything in my power to be what you need, Mia. I don't know why you're so different, but with you I see a whole new future. I see myself being whole and happy. I see our family, you, me, and Linc, maybe even a few kids down the line. You've changed my whole outlook on life for the better and it's amazing.”

“You guys have changed things for me too, Jax. When I arrived here all I wanted was some peace and to feel safe for once. I never even dared to imagine anything past that. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life alone, because that's the only way I thought I could ever be safe, but meeting Nico changed all of that.

“Now I have this amazing family who I trust. I feel safe and loved and...happy. I never thought I could be happy,” I sighed. “You and Linc, you guys make me happier than I have ever been. I see a future too, where before there was nothing. I see us all happy and content, surrounded by family and I want that. I want it all and so much more. You guys have made me want so much more than just the safe existence I came to Chicago for.”

“You deserve everything good, angel, and Linc and I will always do everything we can to see you get it,” Jax placed a kiss on the top of my head, and I couldn’t help but sigh in blissful satisfaction. There was a long way to go before things settled down. We had to deal with Besart, Nico was still healing, and Parker was still a huge question mark, but I had faith that we would get there, together.

“You fit so perfectly in my arms, Mia. You were made for me,” Jax said softly. We were in the lounge, soft music playing in the background as I wrapped myself in Jax and we swayed to the lulling rhythm.

We’d had the most romantic candle lit meal on the deck, in the moonlight, just the two of us with not a single security guard or staff member in sight to ruin the perfection.

When it turned cooler Jax suggested we head inside and I happily agreed, feeling chilled. As soon as we got inside, he put on the music and held his hand out to me, offering me a dance.

I warned him that I had no idea how to dance, but he just wrapped his arms around me and started to sway.

Now I never wanted to leave his arms. His strength wrapped around me as we moved was wonderful. He made me feel safe, loved, and so very content. The only thing that could have made it better was if Linc was there at my back, my guys surrounding me from both sides. Parker popped into my head at that thought too, but I pushed it back. He wasn’t mine to think about in that way anymore.

“We were made for each other,” I agreed. “You, me, and Linc. I never believed in soul mates or true love until I met the two of you. Now I know it was always meant to be,” The champagne had me loose lipped, but it didn’t make my words any less true.

He moved his hands from my hips and gently cupped my face, his thumbs softly brushing my cheeks.

“I love you Jax. You make me happier than I ever imagined I could be.”

“You make me feel the same way, Mia. You make me feel complete. Before you, there was always something missing and I think that something was you,” he whispered, his lips drawing closer to mine.

His lips met mine and we were instantly tangled in the most intense kiss we ever shared. While one of his hands roamed to tangle in my hair, pulling my lips harder to his, the other hand cupped my butt and lifted me until we were eye level and able to deepen the kiss further. I wrapped myself around him and my arms around his shoulders, clinging to him as my body was set alight with need for him.

Jax backed us up to the wall, until my back was against the cool wood panels. He moved his kisses from my mouth and down to my neck, nipping with his teeth and then soothing with kisses. I pushed a hand into his hair and pulled at the soft waves frantically, loving what he was doing, but needing more.

“This fancy boat has a bed, right Jax?” I gasped.

“It does.”

“Then show me,” I was being very forward for me, but I didn’t even think about it. I was so wrapped up in Jax and my need for him, that I didn’t care. I knew what I wanted and needed, and I was going for it.

He started to walk from the lounge down a corridor, and then down some steps as he continued to reign kisses down my neck. I had no idea how he was moving so precisely without

looking where he was going, but I was grateful he hadn't stopped his attention.

At the bottom of the stairs, he kicked open a door and walked in. He hit a light switch and the room before us was lit up just enough by a small wall light. I barely took a second to take in the huge king bed before us, before I pulled Jax's head up and met his lips with my own, kissing him wildly.

"Are you sure you want this, Mia? We don't have to do it now if you're not ready," he asked as he pulled back and studied my face.

"Which part of me right now seems not ready to you?" I laughed as I indicated my body, wrapped around him, and pressed hard against his front.

"I just want you to be sure."

"I am surer than I have ever been about anything. I want this Jax. I'm ready," I told him with complete confidence. I needed him to understand how very sure I was and how much I wanted this with him.

Without another word he lowered me down and laid me in the center of the bed. He started, very slowly, to peel off his clothes, first his suit jacket, followed by his shirt. I laid back and enjoyed the show, enjoying every inch of his firm, sexy body that was revealed to me, and getting hotter and hotter by the second. As he removed his trousers, his eyes stayed locked on mine, not once looking away as he undressed painfully slowly.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more teasing he started to crawl up the bed, and over me in only his boxers. His lips met mine in a gentle touch, then his tongue swiped across the seam of my mouth, demanding entry.

I opened for him and this time the kiss was deep and seductive, suggestive of everything I hoped was coming.

"You are the most gorgeous woman I have ever laid eyes on," he whispered as he pulled back and brushed the wild strands of hair from my face. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of you, starting right now, right here," he

kissed behind my right ear and then moved slowly down my neck, each kiss increasing the raging need building within me.

“Jax! Please...” I cried, not even sure what I was crying out for. I just needed his hands on me. My whole body was writhing with desperation.

“It’s okay. I’m here,” he whispered as he pulled the straps of my dress down my shoulders, then slid the whole thing right down my body and off. He dropped it to the floor, then just paused and studied me as I lay in just my bra and panties before him.

“Perfection,” he whispered as he bent and was over me again, kissing his way down my chest, between my breasts and down to my stomach. His hands roamed up and released the front clasp of my bra, freeing my aching breasts. He massaged both with his hands as he continued to place gentle kisses on my stomach.

I moaned in delight and then squeaked in shock as he clamped my right nipple in his hot mouth.

He kneaded the other with his hand as he sucked and nibbled at the right, sending shocks of pleasure through my body that I had never experienced before. After a while he swapped out, giving my left breast the attention of his skilled mouth.

I continued to moan and keen at the wonderful sensations he was giving.

“Jax, please...I...I need more,” I whimpered between moans of pleasure. I needed him inside me, needed him to claim me as his. I had never been more ready.

He moved up to kiss my lips gently and I saw him studying my face, checking to see if I was still with him, still good with what was happening.

“You’re sure?” He asked.

“Yes, please Jax,” I gasped breathlessly.

He nodded and pulled back enough to remove my panties, so I lay completely naked before him, writhing with need.

“If you need me to stop, you just tell me, okay?” He asked as his eyes met mine.

“I will,” I replied.

He pulled off his boxers revealing what I already knew from brief glimpses and nights cuddled up together – he was large, really large. Nerves showed for a moment as I considered if he would even fit, but I thought the same with Linc and that had been amazing.

He crawled up the bed once again, stalking over my body with a look of pure hunger in his eyes. He kissed and nipped at my neck as he reached over to the nightstand to pull a condom from the drawer.

He placed the foil packet on the bed beside me and then continued his assault of kisses down my torso, while at the same time his hand wandered down until his fingers found my pulsing core. His fingers worked me deftly, touching everywhere I needed and so much more. I was completely lost to pleasure as he skillfully brought me to the brink.

“Jax, I want you...please. I want all of you,” I panted. I was breathless and dizzy with pleasure.

“Fuck Mia. You’re killing me with this sexy body,” he growled as he rose on his haunches and tore open the condom.

I watched both intrigued and excited as he rolled it on, then his eyes locked with mine as he lined up with my core.

“I’ll go slow, angel,” he told me, then he slid into me.

He moved slowly and cautiously, pushing forward little by little, his eyes never once leaving mine.

I tried to keep my eyes on his, feeling the connection between us, but it felt so amazing it was hard to focus on anything but the sensations running through me.

I focused on his face as he slowly began to move in and out and saw all the emotion there. With every movement he was claiming me, and I was claiming him right back.

His slow movements were building intense feelings within me. Needing more, I wrapped my legs tight around his waist,

locking my feet, drawing him deeper inside me. He leaned down to kiss my neck and I pushed my hands through his wild hair, pulling and grabbing as the most intense, wonderful feeling built inside me.

“More Jax...please!” I cried, desperate for just that little more to push me over the edge I was now teetering on.

He moved his kisses down my collarbone and to my right nipple. When he bit down gently on the aching bud it was just what I needed, and I screamed out his name as pleasure surged through me.

I was lost to all rational thought. All I could do was feel, as I fought to keep my eyes locked with Jax. He sped up, pushing into me harder, drawing out the pleasure until I was sure I couldn't take anymore, but at the same time I never wanted it to end.

“It's okay. Let it happen, Mia,” Jax gasped as my pleasure reached its crescendo and I tumbled right over that edge into oblivion.

A second later Jax cried out and lowered himself until his weight was on me.

I remained wrapped around his body, him still inside me, our sweaty bodies tangled together as we panted breathlessly. Slowly the world came back into focus once again.

“You doing okay?” He asked when my eyes met his.

“More than okay, Jax. That was amazing,” I whispered with a contented smile.

“Amazing doesn't do it justice, angel,” he sighed as he leaned in and kissed me before pulling out of me and standing.

“Won't be a minute,” he said as he headed for a door off to the right, which I assumed was a bathroom.

I stretched out, basking in the contented hum of my body now it had been sated. When Jax returned a minute later, he laid on his back and pulled me into his side. I curled into him, my head on his chest feeling perfectly content.

“I love you so fucking much, Mia. I can’t imagine my life without you in it now. It would be completely empty,” he whispered as he ran his hand through my wild hair.

“Well, it’s a good thing I don’t plan on going anywhere then, I guess,” I sighed.

He pulled me tighter against him and we just held each other in a blissful silence. Completely content and blissfully happy I settled instantly and within minutes I was drifting into sleep.

CHAPTER 17

LINCOLN

“Em, hurry up, baby!” I called down the hall. “Nico will go crazy if we’re late picking him up.”

Nico was being discharged from hospital that morning and he already called me twice and sent two texts to tell me I had to be there to pick him up and drive him home at ten sharp. To say he was eager to get out of the hospital was a huge understatement.

“I’m coming. Just grabbing shoes,” Em called back. She arrived home late the night before, after her date with Jax and she still seemed tired that morning. I tried to tell her she should stay in bed, and I’d bring Nico home, but she was determined to come, likely to confirm he was actually being discharged and not just checking himself out.

“She’s coming now,” Jax told me as he too appeared from the bedroom where he’d spent the night with our girl. “She tried to snooze her alarm and turned it off by mistake,” he was smiling, and I knew why. It had been obvious when the two of them walked in last night looking ruffled and satisfied with what they had been up to. I didn’t feel any jealousy about it. I was just happy that Emilia felt she was ready to take that step with Jax too. It meant she was healing and dealing with all she had been through. It meant that she trusted the two of us and that was everything.

“I made you both coffee and toasted bagels to go,” I nodded to the counter where there were two travel cups and bagels in to-go bags.

“Thanks man. I’m starving,” he replied as he went right for the bagel.

“Last night go okay?” I asked, lowering my voice a little.

“It was fucking perfect, Linc. She loved the yacht.”

“So, you’re not going to sell it then?” I asked. Jax had hated that thing since he inherited it and had talked of nothing but his plans to sell it when he had the time.

“No. Last night Mia made me see it in a whole new light. I think I’ll hang on to it for now.”

I just shook my head and laughed. He was keeping a fucking yacht because Emilia liked it. That’s how crazy we were for this girl. There was nothing we wouldn’t do to see her smile. No lengths we wouldn’t go to in order to know she was safe and happy.

“I’m here!” she declared as she appeared in the living room, looking beautiful in tight fit jeans and a white floaty looking shirt. Her hair was pulled back, just highlighting her beautiful wide eyes and the spectacular smile she was sporting that morning. “Should we go?” she asked.

“Yes, Nico has already blown up my cell this morning. We better not be late,” I laughed. I grabbed the coffee and bagel from the counter and held them out to her.

“You made me breakfast?” she asked.

“I did,” I nodded. “You need to eat.”

“You’re too good to me,” she bypassed my offerings and reached up to kiss my jaw, which was as high as she could reach, then took the coffee and bagel.

“Morning,” Parker’s rough greeting had Em pulling away from me and looking uncomfortable. It pissed me off the way he made her feel like she was doing something wrong in showing affection to us when he was near. He was the fucking douche who had chosen to walk away from the woman he loved. Why should Em have to take the brunt of his anger for his fucked-up decision? He was an idiot.

“Hey Park, are you coming with us to pick up Nico?” Jax asked, and I saw the way Em flinched a little, clearly not liking the idea of being stuck in a car with the jerk for any length of time at all.

“He being discharged?” Parker asked.

“Yeah. We’re going to pick him up now,” Jax replied.

“Sure. I’ll come.”

I moved over to Emilia and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, offering her my silent support.

“Shall we go, firecracker?” I asked, and she nodded as she curled into me a little.

We left the apartment and headed down to the parking lot. Two of our employees followed us - the security detail we arranged to be with Em at all times, even when we were with her. We decided with the threat we faced we couldn't be too careful, and it wasn't like we didn't have the resources.

“I can't wait to get Nico home,” Em said as we headed for my escalade.

“He'll probably drive us all crazy when he gets back here,” Jax laughed. “There's no way he's going to take things easy.”

“He will. I'll make sure of it,” Emilia said firmly.

“Good luck with that, baby. Nico is a law unto himself,” I reminded her.

“Especially with everything going on. There's no way he's going to be wasting any time resting,” Parker added.

The first shot came out of nowhere. One minute we were all joking, the next all hell had broken loose. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the security details, Liam, drop to the floor.

“DOWN!” Jax yelled as he and Parker ducked behind the car closest and pulled out their weapons. I grabbed Emilia, and dove behind the car too, taking the impact as we landed on the ground, then rolling to cover her body with mine.

Jax, Parker, and the other security detail, Spencer, were all returning fire, but it was very quickly clear we were heavily outgunned.

“How many?” Park yelled.

“Ten at least,” Jax replied.

“Linc? What's going on?” Emilia asked as she tried to push herself up beneath me.

“Stay down!” I yelled as I looked at Jax with worry. We were in trouble, trapped down there with at least ten trained men.

“We need to get in one of the cars. Driving out of here is our only shot,” Parker suggested.

“We need to get to my Escalade,” I added. It was only about ten feet from us, and the only vehicle I had the keys to.

“You and Em go first. We’ll cover you,” Parker said.

I nodded and sat up enough to see Emilia beneath me. She was shaking and clearly terrified, but I was proud of how well she was keeping it together.

“We need to run to my car, okay baby? I need you to stay low and move as fast as you can. Once we get in the car you have to stay down.”

“What about Jax and Parker?” she asked, looking past me to them.

“They’re going to be right behind us,” I assured her.

“Is this Besart?”

“We can’t worry about that now, Em. We just have to make it to my car, okay?”

“O-okay,” she agreed with a nod. She took one last glance at Jax and Parker, then took my hand, determination in her eyes.

At the sound of Park and Jax returning fire I set off running with Em tucked tight against my side. Bullets, from what sounded like automatic weapons were flying past us as we ran the ten or so feet to my Escalade. I hit the button to unlock it, threw open the back passenger side door and hauled Em inside. As soon as she was in, she pulled my hand until I was in too.

“Get down!” I yelled as I scrambled into the front of the car and started the engine. I could see Park, Jax, and Spencer, carrying a wounded Liam, running for the car now and I threw open the passenger door to speed things up. Jax leapt in that door, as Park opened the back door and he and Spencer threw Liam in, then jumped in with Emilia.

“Go! Go! Go!” Parker yelled as all the doors were slammed closed.

I sped off, the wheels squealing as we lurched forward. Emilia screamed as flying bullets hit the windows, sending glass flying all over her where she hid in the footwell of the back seat.

I plowed through the parking lot, seeing several men dressed all in black, with semi-automatic weapons. We were for sure outmanned and outgunned.

“Fuck!” I yelled when I got to the exit of the parking lot and came to a huge black SUV blockading it. “We can’t get out.”

“Ram it!” Jax barked as he leaned out of the side window and started shooting. I was unsure how effective ramming a car that big would be, but it really was our only chance of getting out of there. I backed the car up and glanced in the rearview to try and see Em, but she was hidden behind my seat in the footwell.

“Hold on, baby. This is going to be rough!” I called, then I floored it and headed right for the SUV blocking our exit. I hit the front end, hoping to swing the thing out of our way just enough that we could get past it, but the impact was much harder than we could have predicted. Emilia screamed as we hit, and the airbags deployed, immobilizing Jax and I in the front.

“FUCK!” Parker growled as we all rattled from the hit. “It must be armored,” he added, which is exactly what I was thinking as I fought with the airbag.

“Lincoln?” Em cried.

“It’s okay. I’m getting us out of here,” I tried to reassure her, hating how terrified she sounded.

I put my car in reverse, ready to try once again to ram my way through, but in a second, we were surrounded by armed men, all pointing their weapons into the smashed windows at us.

“Switch off the engine,” a voice demanded with a Russian accent. I glanced over to Jax, hoping, and praying he had some

plan I couldn't see, but he was looking in the back to where Emilia sat and he looked worried.

"Do it, Linc," Parker said. "There's too many of them."

"Fuck," I growled as I shut off the car and looked to the two men pointing guns at me through the window.

The back door was thrown open and Emilia started screaming. I turned just in time to see her being torn from the car by her hair. Jax and I threw open our doors and ran for her at the same time, thinking of nothing but protecting her. I saw Park in my peripheral right on our heels, but none of us made it over to where she was crying for us.

Parker was knocked out first, smashed over the back of his head with the butt of a gun. Sensing someone behind me aiming to do the same I spun and kicked out, knocking the fucker to the ground, but as I turned back to go to Emilia, another caught me with an elbow to the ribs. As I bent in agony I was caught on the head with the butt of a gun, and as I went down, I saw Jax fighting off two of them, before he too was knocked clean out and went down hard.

"Em," I whispered, still hearing her scream as everything around me went gray and then completely black.

EMILIA

"Get your hands off of me!" I screamed, panicked as I was dragged from the back of the van I had been thrown into, out into some kind of warehouse for goods. One of the thugs who was manhandling me had me by the top of my arm and he dragged me through the wide, open, box-filled space and into an office in the back. I was thrown down into an office chair, my hands bound with thick tape. The thug pulled the tape out again and this time he bound both of my ankles to the legs of the office chair.

"Where are the guys I was with?" I demanded, terrified they had been killed in all the chaos. I couldn't even stop to comprehend how much that would destroy me.

For the time being at least I needed to believe they were all still alive, and hopefully chasing right behind me.

“Shut up!” The thug spat, then he left the room slamming the door of the office closed behind him.

I sat in silence, the only sound, that of my pants for breath, and tried to contemplate my options. I was bound to the chair and my hands were bound together in front of me. If I could get free there was a chance I could slip out of the building, depending on how many of the men from the parking lot were there. I had to try and get free. Chances were the guys had woken up after being knocked out and they were looking for me.

I started to bite at the layers of tape around my hands, in an attempt to free myself. If I could get my hands free, I could free my legs too.

I'd made my way through the top layer of the tape when the door was thrown open so violently, I couldn't stop the squeal that escaped from me. I hurriedly placed my hands in my lap, hiding the ripped tape as I looked up to the door. Another guy walked in, this one taller and fatter than the last, but also dressed head to toe in black. He had a revolver in his hand and a nasty snarl on his face.

“Move!” He barked, as he indicated the door with his gun.

“I can't. I...I'm taped t-to the chair,” my voice trembled with every word, and I couldn't seem to make it stop. It all just felt too much like when Valton had taken me before and I was struggling to stay calm enough to breathe, let alone talk. I couldn't go through that again, I just couldn't.

He studied the chair, then cursed up a storm as he crouched down to slash the tape holding me to the chair.

“Move, now!” He barked again, but he didn't wait for me to stand. Instead, he grabbed the top of my arm and dragged me from the chair. I cried out as he dragged me from the office roughly and shoved me out into the middle of the warehouse. I tried to keep my feet in front of me as I was propelled forward, but it proved impossible with my hands tied, and I wound up in a heap on the floor.

“Em?” The sound of Linc’s voice had me looking up instantly, and I couldn’t help but gasp when I saw him – saw all of them.

Parker, Jax, and Lincoln were all bound to chairs before me, all in a line. Parker and Jax were unconscious and Linc was barely awake, his eyes rolling around in his head as he tried to focus on me. They were all covered in blood in varying degrees, obviously from the hits to the head they each took.

“Lincoln!” I cried as I scrambled to my feet and tried to run to him, but I was stopped by one of several armed men who surrounded us. He shoved me backwards and once again I found myself in a heap on the floor.

“Keep y-your hands of...off her.” Linc slurred. He was obviously concussed or maybe worse, but I didn’t have time to think about it. We needed to get out of there before...

“Good morning, Miss Gallo,” as if I had conjured him with the thought, Besart appeared from the shadows. He strode in with all the arrogant confidence of his brother, dressed in a fancy designer suit and black shoes polished to the point I was sure I’d be able to see my reflection in them if I got close enough.

At just the sight of his cold eyes, so much like Valton’s, I began to shake even more violently, and my heart pounded so hard I was sure he would hear it. Refusing to give him any advantage, I scrambled to my feet and tried to make my quaking body stand tall before him.

“You are not an easy woman to get a hold of,” he sneered, stopping just a few feet before me.

“What do you want with us?” I asked, fighting to keep each word steady, not wanting him to see the full extent of the fear he caused in me.

“Revenge,” he answered. “Pure and simple. One of you killed my brother in cold blood. I will find out who that was, and I will get justice for Valton.”

“Your brother kidnapped me. He...he tortured me. He d-deserved what he got,” I spat, angrily.

“Shut your mouth!” Besart raged. I didn’t see the hit coming, he moved so fast. He punched the right side of my face so hard

I saw stars as I fell to the ground. I could taste blood in my mouth as my whole face began to throb angrily.

“Hey dickhead!” Parker yelled.

I looked up from where I lay on the ground and saw he was awake and looking less dazed and groggy than Linc. “I shot your perverted motherfucker of a brother. It was me! Leave her the fuck alone!”

“Parker!” I cried, knowing whatever was coming next was going to be bad. Would Besart just shoot him? I could barely breathe as I watched on in horror.

Besart stormed past me and right up to Parker, who was bound with tape to the chair he sat on. His glare remained on Parker as he removed his suit jacket, handing it off to one of the men closest to him, then rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt, slowly and methodically.

I cried out and looked away as Besart’s first hit landed square in Parker’s face. I heard the impact of flesh on flesh and tried not to let it spiral me into a flashback of that exact noise when Juan’s fists used to meet my flesh. A couple more hits followed, and I dare not look up, knowing exactly what I would see.

“Please stop!” I cried out between sobs. Finally, the awful sounds stopped, and I glanced up to Parker. His face was covered with blood and already swelling badly.

“Parker,” I whimpered.

“It’s okay, Emmy. Just look away, princess,” Parker told me as he swiped the right side of his face on his shoulder.

Jax was starting to come around beside Parker, but Linc’s head was hanging down and I was worried sick about why he would have passed out again. Did he have a brain bleed or something serious? Was he going to die? We needed to get out of there, but how could we possibly do that when we were all bound and there were armed men all around us?

“Untie him,” Besart ordered as he wiped the blood from his fists onto a towel.

“No! Leave him alone!” I yelled as two of the armed men holstered their guns and stepped forward to free Parker from the chair.

“Mia?” Jax looked at me groggily.

“Jax! They’re going to kill him!” I cried.

At that Jax seemed to shake off the fuzz. He looked up and assessed the room the way I had seen him do the night of the holiday party, the way all the guys had that night – with the training of the military.

“You thought you could kill my brother and get away with it, huh?” Besart taunted as Parker was held at either side by two hulking thugs.

“Someone’s gotta take the trash out,” Parker shrugged, his words slurred a little. Blood was running down his face from multiple cuts, and as he smiled a little at his comment, his teeth were covered in blood too.

Besart, clearly pissed off with Park’s comment, lashed out with two more punches to the face, and one to Parker’s stomach. When Parker tried to double over as he grunted in pain I couldn’t hold in my cry. Parker was going to get himself killed and all any of us could do was watch it happen.

“Hey! You got the wrong man, you dumb fuck!” Jax called. “I’m the one who killed Valton, fired a full clip into the sick sonofabitch.”

“Shut the fuck up, Jax!” Parker yelled, spitting blood out right afterwards.

Besart turned his attention to Jax, stalking toward him with nothing but stone-cold violence on his face.

“No...i-it was me,” Linc slurred as his eyes half opened.

“Enough!” Besart barked. “I want to know who killed my brother right now, or the little bitch dies,” he turned to me and pulled his gun from somewhere at his hip. He pointed it right at me and I couldn’t help the whimper of fear that escaped me.

All hell broke out then, Parker springing to life and attacking the two guys who had been holding onto him simultaneously,

punches and kicks flying all over as he took them down in a matter of seconds. Just as they went down three more guards ran at Parker, on Besart's yelled orders.

I took the opportunity while his back was turned to run to Jax, who was fighting like crazy to free himself from the bindings. I grabbed a box cutter from on top of one of the boxes in the warehouse and hurried over to help him, the whole time keeping low as the guards grappled with a deadly looking Parker.

"Mia, you have to run. Get the fuck out of here!" Jax yelled as I slashed at the tape holding him to the chair.

"Just help Parker!" I cried as I got, first his hands, and then his feet free. He leapt up and ran into the fight with Parker, and I moved over to free Linc.

"Linc? Can you hear me?" I asked as I sawed at the thick tape around his wrists.

"Em?"

"I'm here. We have to get out of here," I managed to get his hands free, so set to work on his ankles which were taped to the chair legs. Once he was completely liberated, he lurched forward, almost falling completely from the chair if I hadn't had quickly caught his shoulder and pulled him upright.

"We have to go. Can you walk?" I asked.

"The guys..." He slurred.

"You can't help them like this, Linc," I told him. "We can go and get help."

"You go...get help...get out of here."

"No! I'm not leaving you here. Just get up! You're walking out of here with me," I said firmly, grabbing his arm and pulling with everything I had. My hands were still bound together but we didn't have the time to stop. The guys were holding their own against the guards, many of whom were now bleeding and, on the ground, but my guys were also looking tired, especially Parker who was still bleeding badly.

Linc stood on shaky legs and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I needed to get him medical attention as soon as possible. The hit to his head had obviously done some damage and I was aware every minute could count.

He was leaning on me heavily as we tried to walk toward a door I could just make out at the back of the warehouse, and he was really heavy, almost knocking me off my own feet every time he swayed.

“We’re almost there...j-just keep going,” I told him as I grit my teeth and fought to remain upright. We were just a few feet from the door when I felt the cold metal of a gun at the side of my head.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Besart asked.

I looked up to the side at him and weighed up my options, trying to decide if there was any way I could get the gun from him before he shot me.

Before I had even made my mind up, he grabbed me and shoved Linc aside. As Besart pulled me in front of him, my back to his front and the gun to my head, Linc fell to the floor.

“Linc?” I gasped.

“Stop!” Besart yelled as he turned to face where Parker and Jax now had all the guards disarmed and held at gunpoint.

“Drop the guns or I shoot her,” Besart warned. Parker and Jax looked to me, then to each other.

“Don’t!” I cried, knowing they were going to put the guns down. “He’ll just kill us all anyway. Don’t do it!” I likely wouldn’t get out of there, but the men I loved would. Nico would still have his brothers to get him through. Besart would be dead, because I knew there was no way the guys would let him get away if he shot me. It would be over and the people I loved would be safe.

The guys looked to each other, sharing a silent conversation in the way only they could, but before they could enact whatever they were cooking up, the door I had been running to, which was now behind me, crashed open and gunfire erupted around us. Besart grunted as a spray of wet splashed over me, then he

was on the floor behind me. I turned to look, not comprehending what was going on in the chaos and saw a bullet hole clean through his head, a pool of blood growing rapidly around him.

“Mia! Get down!” Nico’s gruff voice was unmistakable.

I looked up and saw him running toward me, a gun in his hand and a bullet proof vest over his t-shirt. Flooding in behind him were dozens of men, some I recognized from Milite, some I had never seen before and then I saw Kyle, Linc’s brother and Kade. They were all armed and returning fire at the few of Besart’s men who managed to get back a weapon and were shooting wildly in a panic.

As a bullet whizzed past me, way too close, Nico’s words sunk in and I threw myself to the ground, covering my head with my arms.

The deafening shooting went on all around me, and I dare not move an inch. When it finally went quiet it felt like it had been going on for hours, but it could only have been a couple of minutes.

“Clear!” Nico called.

“Mia?” Jax yelled.

I slowly moved my arms away from my head and looked around from where I lay. There were several bodies around me, including Besart’s.

“Mia? Sweetheart, are you hurt?” Nico fell to his knees beside me.

“I...no...I don’t think so,” my voice was hoarse and shaky, and as I tried to sit up, I realized my whole body was trembling. “The guys? Linc...he’s badly injured.”

“Kyle’s with him now. Jax and Parker are pretty banged up, but they’re still standing,” Nico explained as he ran a hand over my throbbing cheek. “We need to get you checked out by the EMT’s.”

“I’m okay. I just w-want to see the guys.”

“We’re here, angel. We’re good,” Jax said.

I looked up and found him and Parker standing behind Nico. Parker's face was covered with blood and badly swollen and Jax wasn't in much better shape.

"Oh my God!" I cried. "You are not good! Look at the two of you."

"They'll be okay, *Tesoro*. Ambulances and police are on the way," Nico said, just as the sound of distant sirens could be heard.

"That's our cue to leave. I trust you have everything in hand, Mr. Gallo?" An older man asked as he strode toward us. He was in a navy suit which looked very expensive, and he just had an air of power about him.

Nico nodded, and said, "Thank you for your assistance," The older man nodded in return, then strode out with a dozen or so men on his heels, all casually stepping over bodies as they went with no regard whatsoever.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Admir Morin, number two for the Albanians. He helped me to track you down," Nico explained.

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he wanted Besart Marku taken out just as much as we did."

"Come on, angel. Let's get you out of here. Explanations can wait until later," Jax said as he took my hand and pulled me to my feet and into his side. We headed over to where Linc laid on the floor, Kyle knelt at his side.

"How is he?" Jax asked.

"I think he's got a bad concussion. He's going to need a CT scan," Kyle replied.

"I'm good," Linc grumbled, but he still sounded a little slurred. "Em? Are you..."

"I'm fine, Linc. Let's just get you sorted out, okay?"

EMT's arrived a couple of minutes later and they set to work on Linc, hooking him up to an IV for fluids and loading him

onto a chair, then out to the ambulance. I wanted to go with him, but Nico insisted I get checked out, so Kyle went with him instead.

Now Nico was across the room with Kade talking to CPD, creating some explanation for the mess before them. All the Milite employees cleared out at Jax's command. Crime scene people were milling around, covering bodies, and gathering evidence.

"I thought we were all dead," I admitted. I was sitting against the wall inside the warehouse between Parker and Jax. When I had begun to feel shaky and needed to sit, they led me over there, away from everything that was going on.

"So did I, for a minute there," Jax agreed.

"You shouldn't have said it was you, Parker. What if he just shot you?"

"You need Linc and Jax more than you need me," he shrugged.

"I need you too, you idiot!" I snapped, pissed that he could just be so cavalier with his life. "How many times do I have to tell you that I love you? That's not going to change, whether you want me or not. I can't lose any of you," The last sentence turned into a sob, but I was still pissed at him too. How could he not understand how much he meant to me?

"Come on guys. The second ambulance just showed up. You can all get checked out," Nico called, saving me from having to say anything else I didn't want, to Parker. I was so sick of trying with him. It was like repeatedly banging my head against a wall. It never got me anywhere with him and I knew I needed to stop trying.

For now, we were all whole and Besart Marku was dead. I had to take that win and hold on to it tight. For the moment all I wanted to do was get everyone I loved back home and safe. The rest of my troubles would still be waiting for me when I was ready to pick them back up.

CHAPTER 18

EMILIA

“Linc?” I whispered as his eyes fluttered open. He’d had a head CT and no bleeding had been found. The doctors told us that he was badly concussed and that he would need to stay in the hospital for a couple of days for observation.

“Hey, baby. Are you okay?” He asked, his voice gruff and hoarse sounding.

“I’m fine. Just a bruised and swollen cheek,” I pointed to the now purple side of my face.

“The others?”

“Jax just had cuts and bruises. Parker’s nose had to be reset and he has two fractured ribs, but they’re both doing just fine. They went home to shower and change.”

“What happened? I remember you getting me off that chair, then it’s fuzzy.”

“Nico called Morin when he found out we’d been taken. Morin was already looking for Besart because his dealings in drugs and people trafficking had brought the FBI down on the family. They tracked us to that warehouse and took out Besart and all his guys,” Just the mention of Besart had me reliving the moment his blood sprayed all over me when he was shot. I showered for almost an hour to get rid of it all, in order to feel clean again, but I could swear I still felt it on me.

“So, it’s over?”

“It better be,” I replied. It had to be. Valton, his brother, and anyone loyal to them was dead. Juan was dead, and Nico had been assured by Morin that we were in the clear with the Albanian mob.

“Come here. I need to hold you,” Linc moved over in the bed and patted the thin strip of space beside him.

“I shouldn’t. You have a concussion.”

“I’m fine, firecracker. Just come here and let me have you in my arms. I almost fucking lost you again today.”

“I think it was me who almost lost you this time,” I sighed as I lay down at his side and wrapped my arm over him.

“It was way too fucking close either way,” he pulled me against him even tighter and kissed the top of my head. “What do you say to a nice quiet life from here on out?”

“Yes please,” I agreed. “That would be really nice.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“As long as I have you and Jax, then I can handle whatever kind of life comes at us,” I added.

“We’re not going anywhere, baby. I can promise you that. You’re stuck with the both of us until we’re all old and senile, with no teeth. Jax will still be running his hands through the few strands of hair he has left as we all sit in rocking chairs remembering the amazing life we have shared together.”

I giggled at the mental image and squeezed him tighter as I looked up into his bright blue eyes. “That sounds perfect,” I agreed. My lips just found his when the door of the room was thrown open.

“You know how to worry a guy to death, short stuff. I think I’ve aged fifty years since I met you,” Ty cried with his usual flair for the dramatic.

I looked up to him and smiled.

“I’m fine. It’s the guys who all needed medical attention,” I told him as I sat up on the edge of the bed.

Ty came closer and took my hand, squeezing it as though he needed to be sure I was really there. “Just please try to stay out of these crazy situations from now on. My heart can’t take it.”

“I’ll do my best,” I agreed playfully. “Where are the others?”

“Behind me. They stopped to talk to Kyle and Kade in the hall.”

“Everything go okay with CPD?” Linc asked as he pushed himself up, sitting against the back of the bed with a wince.

I adjusted his pillows behind him in an attempt to make him more comfortable, which earned me a sexy smile.

“I think so. Kade smoothed a lot of it over. Nic said the FBI were at the scene when he left.”

The door to the room opened at that moment and Nico, Jax, Nate, Kyle, and Kade walked in, making the room seem completely tiny, the entire space taken up by all their hulking frames.

“Finally.” Kyle declared. “Sleeping beauty awakes. How are you feeling, little bro?”

“Like someone caved my head in with the butt of a gun,” Linc replied dryly.

“Well, I hope you’re feeling better before Livy gets here because she is pissed with you for getting hurt and I think she’s going to yell,” Kade laughed.

“She’s totally going to yell,” Kyle agreed with a grin on his face.

“I didn’t get attacked on purpose,” Linc groaned.

“Tell her that. She’s worried sick and on her way here now.”

Linc groaned and looked at Jax and Nico who stood at the foot of the bed.

“Liam and Spencer? Are they both alright?”

“Liam took one in the shoulder, but it went straight through. I gave him three weeks leave. Spencer’s fine. He’s back at the office,” Jax explained.

I was relieved to hear that. In all the terror and chaos, I hadn’t even thought about the two guys who had been our security detail.

“Everyone’s whole, except for that fucker Marku and his guys,” Nate added.

“And the Albanians?” Linc questioned.

“Morin said our business with them is done. He and all his guys are back in New York. It should be the last we hear from

them. They got what they wanted - their out-of-control guy dead and the FBI off their back for now.”

“Let’s fucking hope so,” Linc agreed, as he looked over to me and took my hand.

“Where’s Park?” I asked, unable to contain the question any longer. I knew he’d gone home with Nico and Jax to shower and change, and I’d expected him to come back with them too. I wanted to see him and check that he was doing okay. No matter what was going on between us, I thought I was going to lose him that day and that left me with a desperate need to hug him tight.

“He needed coffee. Said he’d come up afterwards,” Jax said, giving me a roll of his eyes as he said it.

I was guessing he was trying to tell me Parker was once again avoiding me, and I was just so sick of all that bullshit. If that day had shown us all one thing, it was that life was too short to be dancing around issues and avoiding each other. Whether Park wanted to be just friends or more, I didn’t care anymore. I just wanted all this avoidance and awkwardness over with.

“I’m gonna go and find him,” I told Linc, then glanced up at Jax. They both smiled and nodded, clearly agreeing it was time this was all sorted one way or another.

“I’ll come with you,” Nico offered.

“You don’t need to, Nico. They’re all dead. I’m actually safe,” I assured him with a smile, “Plus, I need to speak to Parker alone.”

“Okay, *Tesoro*. Just...don’t leave the building, okay? I almost lost you again today. I’m feeling a little protective,” he admitted.

I walked over and wrapped my arms around his waist hugging him tight.

“I love you,” I whispered, so grateful to have this amazing brother in my life, always looking out for me.

“Love you too, Mia,” Nico returned.

I pulled out of Nico's arms and glanced at my guys, "I won't be long," I told them.

"We'll be waiting right here for you, angel," Jax said with a wink.

"Go get him, tiger," Ty called after me as I turned and left the room.

I walked through the hospital towards the coffee stand out front, knowing it would be Parker's preferred place as he hated the crappy coffee they'd sell at the cafeteria. I was determined that Parker was going to talk everything through with me without getting grumpy and without storming off. Either way, he and I were going to work out what our relationship would be moving forward, either friendship, or more, and we were going to resolve to make it work and stop dancing around each other.

The threat of my past was gone. The trauma of it would linger, and I knew that, but I had a chance to find a future for myself, with Jax and Linc, and with the family I had around me. I had a chance to just be normal and forge ahead with my life without monsters haunting me. I wanted Parker to be a part of that life, in whatever way he felt able to handle. More than anything I wanted him to just give in and be with me. I loved him and those feelings were not going away. I loved him just as much as I loved Jax and Linc. They all held an equal portion of my tattered heart, and they always would, but if Parker was still resolved that he couldn't be a part of what we had, then I would accept that and do all I could to turn the piece of my heart he held from love and need, to friendship. I just needed him to be a part of my life, in whatever way he felt able.

I found him out in the front of the hospital, sitting on a wall with a coffee in his hand. His entire face was a palette of shades of purple and black and his nose had a dressing over the bridge. The way he was sitting on the wall made him look very stiff and uncomfortable, and I knew it was because of his fractured ribs – an injury I was well acquainted with.

“Hey,” I greeted as I walked right over and jumped up to sit on the wall beside him.

“Hey,” he greeted, not even looking at me, his gaze instead focused on his coffee cup.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’ve had worse,” he shrugged.

“Linc’s awake. He seems pretty good, all things considered.”

“That’s good. I’ll come up and see him. I just needed caffeine,” he lifted the cup to indicate his coffee, but still didn’t look at me. We both sat in silence for several minutes as I tried to build up the courage to just say what needed to be said.

I was just so worried he’d storm off as he always had before. I wasn’t sure I could deal with that after everything we all faced in the last twenty-four hours.

“What’s going on with us, Park?” I finally dared to ask.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve done nothing but avoid me since we spoke that day on the beach. You’re clearly pissed off, and I don’t know if it’s with me or the situation.”

“It’s not with you,” finally, he looked up at me.

“Then what’s going on? We can’t go on like this. I want you in my life, and I don’t want you to hate me or avoid me. I understand if you can’t be a part of what I have with Jax and Linc, but can’t we at least be friends? Can’t we at least talk to each other?”

“I don’t want to be friends,” he said so quietly I barely heard it, but I did, and it hit me like a slap to the face.

“Oh...okay,” I whispered as I turned from him, trying to hide the tears that were filling my eyes.

“Emmy. I didn’t mean it like that,” he must have put his coffee down because a moment later he wrapped both of my hands in his and pulled until I faced him. “I...I thought I was going to die in that warehouse, and I was okay with it if it meant you

and my brothers would be safe. I knew the guys would look out for Smudge. I was ready to die if everyone I cared about would be good.”

“Don’t Parker...please,” I squeaked through my tears. I couldn’t even stand to think about the possibility of losing him.

“The thing is, there was one thing I wasn’t good with, and that was all the time I have wasted denying myself to you. I’ve spent so much time being pissed that I didn’t want a poly relationship with you and the guys, when I could have just let it all go, and had you in my arms. If I’d have died in that warehouse, I’d have spent all eternity regretting what an idiot I’ve been about all of this.”

“So...what? What does that mean?” I asked emotionally, too scared to let my brain jump to the happy place it was straining to get to.

“I don’t know exactly. I’m still not sure how I can learn to handle sharing you with Jax and Linc. It’s not something that will come naturally to me.”

“But...you want to try?” I dared to hope.

“I do. I love you so fucking much, Emilia. I think you’re it for me and if I walk away, I know I’ll be making the biggest mistake of my life. I’m not saying it’s going to be smooth sailing. I have no idea how to share and I’m going to be a grumpy bastard while I get used to how it all works, but I want to be with you, princess and I can’t deny that anymore.”

“We can handle it and get through it together. I don’t care if you’re a grumpy bastard, as long as you’re my grumpy bastard,” I smiled through my tears at him.

“So, you’re willing to give me a chance, even though I’ve been a complete dick to you?”

“You were hurting, Parker. I understood because I was hurting too, but it doesn’t matter now. I’m just so happy you’re willing to try this. I love you too, so much,” he pulled on my hands until I moved into his lap with my arms around his neck.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he whispered.

“It’s about time,” I smiled.

Our lips touched and electricity sparked between us. The kiss started slow and gentle and quickly built to something filled with passion and promises.

I knew the road ahead of us wouldn’t be easy. What relationship with three guys and one girl ever could be? But if I had the three of them, I felt strong enough to face just about anything and that was a good place to start. My past was finally in the past and before me lay a future I had yet to make. I had no idea where it would lead, but it started with the three guys I was madly in love with and the family that surrounded us.

I had come a long way from the terrified girl who stepped off the bus in Chicago so many months ago. I still had a long way to go and a lot of healing to do, but I had made it. I survived, but I wanted more than that. I wanted to know what my life could become if I did more than just survive.

“Let’s go and find the others,” Parker said as he placed me on my feet and stood beside me, taking my hand.

We made our way to Linc’s hospital room in a comfortable silence, just happy to be at ease with each other after so many tense weeks.

“Fuck man, they did a number on your pretty boy face,” Jax gasped when we walked into the room. Linc and Jax were the only ones in there, Jax sat beside Linc’s bed with his laptop out.

“Fuck you. I’ll heal. You’ll always be stuck with your ugly face,” Parker retorted. We walked over and sat in the two empty chairs at the other side of the bed.

“So does this mean you finally pulled your head out of your ass?” Linc asked as he nodded down to our joined hands.

“Guess so,” Parker shrugged.

“Thank fuck for that,” Jax sighed. “Any more of your grumpy asshole bullshit and I was gonna have to kick your ass.”

“You wish,” Parker scoffed.

“Seriously though guys, we’re going to be okay, aren’t we?” I asked with worry. “Can we really make this work?”

“Of course, we can, firecracker. It won’t be easy, but we love you and you love us, right?” Linc asked.

“Right,” I agreed.

“Then everything else will follow.”

“We will all do whatever we have to do to make it work,” Jax agreed.

“After everything we’ve faced this year, handling a relationship should be a walk in the park,” Parker added.

I wasn’t so sure it would be that easy, but as I looked between the three of them, I couldn’t help but smile. They were amazing guys, and I was so damned lucky to call them mine. They made me stronger and braver and with them at my side I was ready to head off into an uncertain future, hopeful, for once, that it would be bright.

EPILOGUE

EMILIA

Two years later...“I’m so happy for you, Ty!” I cried as I wrapped my arms around him and embraced him tight.

“I couldn’t wait for your brother forever,” he joked.

“You still crying about Nico over there?” Finn, Ty’s fiancée called, making me giggle as I released Ty. Finn walked over to Ty and wrapped an arm around him. They were the cutest couple, Finn the light to Ty’s dark, with short, sandy blonde hair and a pale complexion. He was a little taller than Ty and well built. He was wearing the hell out of the pale gray suit he had on, which paired perfectly with Ty’s charcoal suit.

They met at the hospital the day after all the drama with Besart Marku in the warehouse. Finn was there visiting his mom, after a hip operation, and he and Ty got to chatting in the cafeteria. A few dates later and they had become inseparable. Now, two years later they were engaged, and the guys and I were throwing them a party.

“Don’t be jealous, babe. You know I love you more,” Ty teased.

“That’s good, since I’m the only one who could put up with you,” Finn returned, but the love they shared as they looked at each other was plain to see. It was beautiful and I was just so happy for them both.

It had taken Ty months to feel ready enough to tell all the guys about Fabio, and what happened in Italy, but meeting Finn made him stronger, and in time he finally did it. The guys were fully supportive, as I knew they would be, although Parker was upset Ty hadn’t told him sooner. It seemed to be the final hurdle to Tyler being able to move forward. He and Finn moved in together just a couple of months later and now they were planning to get married.

“The party is amazing, Emilia. Thanks so much for doing this for us.”

“The guys did most of the work. I was just the planner.”

“As it should be,” Ty said. “Where is your harem anyway?”

“I told you to stop calling them that!” I hissed, looking around to see who else was nearby. It wasn’t that I was embarrassed about our relationship. I wasn’t, but the word harem made them sound like my slaves or something.

“Well, that’s what they are.”

“No. They’re my husband’s now. Remember the whole wedding thing you attended last month?” I asked dryly, waving my hand before his face to display the diamond solitaire and wedding band that adorned my finger.

The guys proposed to me six months ago. We all knew it could never be a legally binding marriage between the four of us, but we wanted to do it for us, to show our commitment to each other. The ceremony had been small and private, in the backyard of our new home, with just Nate and Lola, Livy, and her guys, Raffy, and Ty and Finn. Nico had given me away and it had been very intimate and special, the guys each making separate vows to me and me blubbering my way through my vows to them.

“Is he stirring up trouble over here?” Parker asked as he appeared at my side and wrapped an arm around me, looking at his brother with a raised eyebrow.

“Always,” I replied. “But I’m used to it.”

“You love it, short stuff. Don’t try and deny it,” Ty added.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be mingling with all of these guests?” Parker asked, indicating the restaurant filled with people Ty and Finn invited. It was a mix of people from Finn’s legal firm, Ty’s office, and family.

I glanced over to the corner where Livy sat with her four guys, and Keira and Grant. The kids were running around and two of them were swinging off Nico, one on each arm as he lifted them into the air. I smiled as I looked around further. Lola and Nate, who were getting married at Christmas, were sitting with a few Milite employees, laughing, and joking. The whole place was just filled with happiness, and it was wonderful.

“He’s right, Ty. We have mingling duties to attend to,” Finn agreed, pulling Ty away.

“You doing okay?” Parker asked as he turned to face me and cupped my face between his hands, looking deep into my eyes.

“Better than ever. It’s all turned out pretty perfect,” I told him, so relieved everything had gone to plan. I wanted the night to be special for Ty and Finn and so far, it all seemed to be working out. They looked really happy and in love and their guests all seemed to be having fun.

“It’s great. You did an amazing job, and you look so fucking sexy in that dress,” he told me, as he leaned down enough to kiss me. “I can’t wait to get you out of it later,” he added as he released me.

“Promises, promises, Mr. Davies,” I flirted. It had taken me some time, after what I went through at Valton’s house, to find any kind of sexual confidence, but, slowly, the guys had gotten me there. They had been patient and gentle with me to start with, but over time I overcame a lot of my triggers from the rape and imprisonment, and I found my voice and learned to tell them exactly what I wanted.

I wasn’t fully healed. I still had triggers, and panic attacks happened now and again, but overall, I was stronger and better able to handle the trauma when it did hit. Nightmares were the harder aspect to handle, and I still suffered with them a lot, but the guys still slept with me each night, and that helped.

We moved into our new home just before we got married. It was a sizable five bedroom, with three stories in a gated community. In it we all had our own rooms, but the guys remodeled the top floor and made it into a huge master suite with a custom-made bed that fit all four of us. It was for the really bad days or nights, when only having all of them around me could calm me. It was just what I needed, and I cried buckets when they revealed it to me, overwhelmed by just how well they always knew exactly what I needed. I shouldn’t have been surprised really, because for two years they had always been what I needed, always there to catch me no matter how

far I fell. They were amazing and I dread to think what I would be without them.

“Oh, it’s definitely a promise, beautiful. Now, let’s go find the others before I throw you over my shoulder and carry you upstairs right now,” Park said as he took my hand and headed over to our table, where Linc and Jax were sitting chatting, each with a beer in their hand. Like Parker, they were both dressed in suits and together the three of them looked so handsome and sexy.

“Here she is!” Linc declared as I took the seat Parker pulled out for me. “We’ve barely seen you all night.”

“Sorry. I just wanted to make sure everything was going as planned.”

“Well, it is, so you can relax now,” he said as he leaned over and kissed just behind my ear, making me shudder in the best way. “You look beautiful, baby,” he whispered, and I couldn’t help but blush a little. I’d never get used to the compliments my guys showered me with.

“You want me to get you a drink, Mia?” Jax asked.

“Maybe in a minute, but just stay here for now. I’ve missed you guys the last few days while I was arranging everything. It’s nice to be together in this romantic setting,” I explained, realizing I likely sounded stupidly mushy.

“We’ve missed you too,” Parker reached over and took my hand as he spoke, lifting it to his lips and placing a kiss on the back of it.

He changed so much from the grumpy, arrogant asshole I first met. It had been rough at first, Parker really struggling to find how he fit into the dynamic Jax, Linc, and I had already found. He had days where he just got pissed and stormed off, but over time we all found our rhythm. Parker got over his issues with sharing when he saw that I had plenty of love to split between them all. We still came to humps in the road, but mostly we were all happy and content. It was rare we argued and when we did it was usually all the guys against me, about some safety issue they were raising, which I didn’t agree with. The

threats I faced were all gone, even Steve Mills, my stalker. He had gone to prison for his attack on me at the beach house, then while serving his sentence he had gotten into a fight and killed someone. Now he was facing life in prison, and I didn't ever need to worry about him again.

Juan was gone and none of his employees had been anywhere near me since, and the Marku's were dead. I was safe from all my monsters, but that didn't stop the guys from worrying or being way over the top protective. Sometimes it would drive me crazy, but in those moments, I remembered the days when I was trapped with my mom in that compound, scared and alone, wishing just one person on the earth would protect me. Now, I had not only my guys, but also my amazing brother, Nico, who I knew beyond all measure would always have my back, and Nate, who was also like a brother to me, and my very best friend, Tyler. Livy and her guys also became a huge part of my life. We all spent holidays and special days together and Livy had become the one woman I could confide in when my guys were driving me up the wall. We were a family, albeit an odd, rather ramshackle one, but a strong one.

No matter what we were, we were always there for one another, and I knew we were all very lucky to have that.

"We need to make the most of our time together. We won't be seeing much of you when you start classes next week," Jax said.

"It won't be that bad. I'll be home by four every evening so we can all eat together," I assured him.

"Are you excited?" Linc asked.

"I think so, but I'm really nervous too, "I admitted. It had taken me two years to gather up the courage, but I was finally going back to school the following week. I was taking psychology and counseling classes in the hope that I could one day work for the police in victim support. I wanted to be the one to be there for people who had been through experiences like I had. I wanted to help people see there was still a light at the end of all the darkness these awful crimes plunged people into.

“You’ll be just fine. You’ve got nothing to worry about,” Parker reassured me. It was what they had been saying for the last two months since I applied. I wasn’t so sure. It was a long time since I interacted with a class full of people, and even then, school years hadn’t exactly been conventional for me, but I was determined to give it my best shot. I wanted a career and I felt that was the time to go for it.

“Park’s right. You’re going to do great,” Jax agreed.

“I’m scared, I’m not going to lie, but no matter how tough the classes are, knowing I get to come home to you guys will get me through,” I told them.

“You’ve got this, baby,” Linc threw me a wink, which never failed to set my heart aflutter.

“And we’ve got you,” Parker added.

To say life was good, was an understatement. Everyone we cared about was happy and in a good place and our future just seemed to look brighter and brighter. The darkness that lived within me was slowly being ground out by the happiness my guys gave me and I was finding the new me; the stronger, tougher version, and I found I liked her.

There was more in our future too. The guys were in talks to open another branch of Milite in New York, possibly going into partnership with Kade and Kyle’s security company. We also talked extensively about children and knew it was what we all wanted, but not yet. We were happy as we were at that time, just making the most of being together and finding our careers. In time, when it was right, we would think about filling our home with children.

For now, we were content. We had a beautiful home, a comfortable lifestyle, work we enjoyed and an amazing family. Most of all though, we had each other and enough love and strength between us to face whatever life brought next.

THE END

Thank you so much to everyone who has read the 'Milite' series. I hope you have enjoyed the story of Emilia and her men as much as I have enjoyed writing it. Thank you also for all the kind reviews, messages, and comments I have received. It makes all the hard work worth it and I am so grateful for the support I have been given.

This is the end for Emilia and the guys' story, but we will catch up with them again in the next book in the 'Milite' series which will be coming later in the year and will tell Nico's story.

Books by Kerry Taylor:

Shepard Security series

Something Other Than Fear (Lucy's story)

Something Other Than Pain (Matt's story)

Something Other Than Darkness (Amy's story)

Pieces of Us – A Reverse Harem Series

Book 1- **Handfuls of Shattered Pieces**

Book 2 – **Shadows of Shattered Souls**

Book 3 – **Healing Shattered Hearts**

Book 4 - **Shattering The Darkness** (Novella)

Milite – A reverse Harem Series:

Book 1 – **Everybody Breaks**

Book 2 – **Broken Love**

