

One Week

Xander's place was cramped. She had spent a week in the bed, Xander by her side but refusing to touch her. As if she might shatter.

K slept on the red couch and she heard Ryan around in the front office. Everything felt small and claustrophobic.

Every time someone entered the room, their eyes went straight to her, propped up in bed, slowly losing her mind. And they would smile and offer her things, making her irrationally irritable with their kindness.

All three of them were mulling around in the kitchen. K putting coffee on, Xander making her tea, and Ryan restocking the fridge.

She took a deep breath, preparing for the pain in her side, swung her legs off the side of the bed and stood up.

"Hey," K's voice yelled, warning.

"You need something?" Ryan asked.

"Get back into bed," Xander said, shaking his head at her.

"Nope," she said, hobbling over toward the kitchen, her feet smarting every time she stepped forward. But they would heal. Everything would heal. "I'm tired of being treated like an invalid."

"You could puncture a lung with those broken ribs," Xander objected.

"Yeah, maybe," Ellie said, walking up to him and planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Go back to bed," he said, leaning his head down. He wanted her to get better. He needed her to get better. Because sleeping next to her, waking up with her all sprawled all over him, was driving him crazy.

"Why don't you make me," she suggested, her tone dipping low, full of innuendo.

"Sweetheart," Xander said, snaking a hand around her hips and leaning down to nip her lower lip. "When you are well enough to leave that bed, I am going to take you back into it for three days straight."

His lips came down on hers, hard, full of all

the longing he had been feeling for weeks. Full of promises. She sank into him, bringing her hands up to his neck, pressing her body to his.

"Oh, gross," Ryan groaned.

"Yeah, this is a communal kitchen," K added.

Ellie sank back onto her feet, laughing against Xander's chest.

"Don't worry, K," Xander said, his hands running through her hair, "when that day comes, we'll get you some earplugs."

"Christ, I need to get my own place," K said, grinning at them over top of his coffee cup.

K was going to stay in the city. They had had that talk a few nights before about how he always wanted to branch out, that he would leave his business back in Seattle in the hands of his office manager, that any urgent needs from people like Ellie, people who needed help, would simply be directed to his new place.

"Can I spend the nights with you then?" Ryan asked, winking at them. "My poor, virgin eyes!"

"Yeah..." Xander snorted, "like I don't walked out to the office and seen you all wrapped up with a different girl every night."

Ellie reached up, slapping Xander's chest, giving him a stern *'you're supposed to be the grown up'* look.

"What?" Xander asked, grinning. "I gave him condoms."

"Oh, for God's..." Ellie started, but there was a knocking on the front door that had them all turning. Ellie rolled her eyes as Xander pulled away from her to go answer. "Whoever it is, tell them to go away. There isn't enough room for another person here."

There was some kind of exchange in the front, Xander and a female voice, before she heard the door closing and Xander walked back in, holding a box.

Everyone's eyes were on her, excited, anticipating something. "What's going on?" she asked, looking around, giving them a curious smile.

"Get your pretty little ass back in bed and you can get your surprise," Xander said, waiting beside it with a raised brow.

Ellie laughed, tip-toeing back over and scooting into her spot, legs propped up on a pillow. As per instructions. "Okay, gimme," she said, extending her arms out toward the box.

Xander smiled, putting the box on the edge of the bed and reaching in. He took the squiggling, purring little kitten and placed it in her waiting hands, watching as her eyes went wide and disbelieving. She pulled the kitten down onto her chest, stroking its bald head, its stubby little legs.

"I hope you like that hideous little thing," Xander said, watching her play with it, "because it cost a fortune. And Mary wasn't even willing to give me the *'my girlfriend was just kidnapped and tortured'* discount."

Ellie laughed, petting its naked back. "We should call it Kitty K," she suggested looking over at K who had on a horrified expression.

"You're not naming that freaky thing after me. Nuh uh."

Xander climbed onto the bed, curling up next to Ellie, reaching over to touch the kitten's head. "I was thinking Mr. Rochester," he suggested. "You know, like from the quote."

Ellie looked up at him, a huge, happy grin on her face. "That's perfect," she said, leaning over and kissing him. "But you know, we're going to have to get him a Jane Eyre then."

Xander looked at their strange little group, grinning to himself.

More strays.

Six Months

"Ellie..." Xander said, wanting his voice to sound firm, but knowing it was coming off as amused.

She'd healed.

Physically, she was fully mended. There would always be scars, especially on her wrists and her feet, but other than that, she was finally bruise-free. Or, she was on the days when she wasn't going full-force and unpadded while sparring with K. It was a habit she didn't seem to want to break. Maybe it was just a familiar way for her to spend time with her old mentor and friend. Maybe a part of her would always feel vulnerable, like she needed to protect herself.

Not that anyone could ever get within fifty feet of her without drawing the attention of either Xander, K, Gabe, or Ryan. Someone was always around to keep an eye on her, a fact that drove her up a wall but no one was willing to give in on.

She hadn't seen herself when she left that bunker.

She didn't have that image on the insides of her eyelids like they all did.

They'd all be damned if anyone ever so much as waved a hand in her face again.

That being said, Ellie wasn't exactly the shrinking violet she had seemed when she first came to him, beaten, bruised, terrified, and so so tired.

Ever since the day a mysterious package showed up on his front stoop, a simple white box with red string and Ellie's name on it, everything had changed. She'd opened it and reached inside, her mouth falling open. Her sapphire eyes looked both horrified and relieved.

Xander reached for what was in her hand, a giant malachite ring sized too big to be for a woman. He reached into the box, pulling out the small business card inside. It was one for Lam and it had Vin's signature on it.

"Sweetheart..." Xander started, drawing her attention as understanding dawned on him.

"I know I should have told you," she said, shaking her head.

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want you to think differently of me if you knew what I did."

"Ellie," he said, shaking his head, dropping both the ring and the card back into the box. "I could

have and would have beaten him to death with my bare hands if Gabe hadn't stopped me." And he had spent every night after Ellie passed out on his computer, trying to track down the son of a bitch so he could finish the job. Little did he know, sweet, soft, delicate Ellie had already handled the situation. "You did what you had to do to be safe again. I would never think of you any differently because of that. Ever."

Ellie smiled then, slow, tentative, as she stepped toward him and rested her face against his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart," he said, squeezing her tight as he watched one of the cats: Jane or Rocky, he couldn't tell them apart half the time, the ugly fucks, knock a pile of his paperwork on the floor.

It was then he decided they were done taking in strays.

Five Years

There had been endless strays in and out of their lives over the years. Ellie's heart was too big. Her soul went out to every lost cause that crossed their paths.

Ryan aged up and moved on, getting his own apartment, taking some classes and joining Gabe's team.

K had opened a martial arts studio in the city like he said he would, using it to teach self-defense, but also to help continue his mission to disappear women who needed to, helping them the way he had helped Ellie for years.

And Xander, well, he was apparently expanding his business.

Don't ask him why, he wasn't sure himself.

All he knew was Ellie had found him a new

office. It was in the same shitty area of town his old one was in, but it was five times the size. She'd spent weeks screwing around with it, painting it, decorating it, getting it just right.

"Ellie, I don't need to do any more interviews. Two new guys is plenty. I don't need to take on that much more new business," he reasoned as she stood in the new office, shuffling paperwork on his desk. She was still a bit of a neat freak. When she got anxious or angry, you could expect bloody nails from her scrubbing things. But, as the years went on, it was less and less frequent. But if she was shuffling stuff, she was nervous about something.

"We do need more business. And you need more men."

"Why?"

"Because you need people to have your back when you're on dangerous cases."

"Sweetheart, I've never needed anyone before."

"Yes, well. You do now," she said, turning away from him.

"Ellie..."

She took a deep breath, turning slowly.

"What?"

"Spill."

"I'm pregnant," she said, waving a hand out.

He felt like all the air got knocked out of him. "Pregnant?"

She gave him a small, wobbly smile. "Ten weeks."

"Ten weeks?" he asked, his voice getting a little sharp. "How long have you known?"

"About nine and a half weeks," she admitted.

"And you didn't tell me before because..."

"Because there was a lot of work to do."

So that was it. That was why he needed to expand his business, why he needed to take on new men, why she'd made them move out of their old, awful apartment behind his old office and into a two bedroom apartment.

"Sweetheart," he said, opening his arms and she flew at him, hitting him bodily, her arms going around him tight. "You're worried about me."

"You're going to be a father. You can't go barreling into alleys to save stockbroker's sons from street gangs by yourself anymore."

His arms went around her, holding her tight. He'd never given too much thought to fatherhood, but knowing Ellie was carrying, it made him realize suddenly how much he wanted that. He wanted a baby that was theirs, that was proof of the love they had, what they had created. He wanted that more than he could have ever known.

And Ellie was right, to be a father meant he needed to be more careful.

He needed to train a team to be able to have his back. Or even take the lead.

Behind them, the door swung open.

"Honey, you're stubborn as fuck," a deep, smooth male voice said, sounding amused.

"Don't *honey* me, honey. I can open my own doors."

"Christ," Xander said, shaking his head against the side of Ellie's hair. "What now?"

"Those are your last two candidates," Ellie said, pulling out of his arms and turning. "For the last open position. This is Espen," she said, waving a hand toward the compact, thin, black-haired, brown-eyed woman standing next to, and dwarfed by, the six-foot-something, solid mass of masculine muscle with caramel-colored skin, light green eyes, and exquisitely chiseled face of a man she didn't recognize. "And I don't know who that is," Ellie admitted, giving the man an apologetic smile.

"My name is Enzo," he offered.

"What kind of name is Enzo?" Espen asked, raising a brow at him.

"What the fuck kind of name is Espen?" he countered.

"You're not getting this position," she declared, cutting through the bullshit.

"Honey, you want to bet?"

"What?" Xander asked, watching Ellie's slow, warm smile.

She went up on her tiptoes, saying quietly, close to his ear, "I think we have room for two extra

strays, don't you?"

"Don't tell them that," Xander said, watching the two launch into a full-on argument over who was more qualified for the position, Epsen getting heated, Enzo staying cool and collected, seeming almost a little amused.

"Why not?"

"Because it might be fun watching them battle it out."

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