

## Mila

Strong hands grabbed me from behind.

Adrenaline surged. *No*. I was no one's victim. I whirled and rammed my elbow back into my attacker. I heard a grunt, but I kept moving, my heart thumping hard.

I lifted my knee, ramming it hard into the guy's stomach, then I shoved him down. I wouldn't be anyone's prey. Not ever again. He hit the mats with a groan.

"Mila, excellent work."

As my instructor nodded and smiled, I straightened, bouncing a little on my feet. Around me, the rest of my self-defense class were grinning and nodding.

My "attacker" lifted his head. "Why did I volunteer for this again?"

Shay, the instructor, held out a hand and helped the young guy up. "Because you're my very good boyfriend, and didn't have a choice." Shay was a fit, thirty-something with a shredded body I envied. Her black, cropped sports top showed off her six-pack. Her blonde hair was in two long braids.

She looked my way again. "Mila, really great. You did everything exactly as I taught you."

I nodded, happy to hear her praise. "I have a great teacher."

Shay's smile widened. "And you're an excellent student."

Because I had no choice. I kept my smile pinned in place. I had to know how to defend

myself. I wouldn't be caught out again.

"All right, everyone." Shay clapped her hands. "We're done. I'll see you at the next lesson."

I nabbed my water bottle and towel. Slinging the towel around my neck, I took a big swig of water.

The sounds of thuds, punches, and grunts echoed around the gym. Hard Burn was one of the most popular gyms in New Orleans. It was located in a large warehouse in the Warehouse District, and most of the space was filled with roped off boxing rings. A glass wall at the end separated the exercise equipment and weights.

I'd heard there was a wait list to get a membership here. Luckily, Hard Burn also ran some self-defense classes, and I'd managed to nab a spot when I moved here. It was perfect because I worked just a few doors down.

The gym was run by one of the notorious Fury brothers. People *loved* to talk about the five men. They weren't brothers by blood, but brothers by choice. I'd heard lots of stories about them, but the most common one was that they'd grown up together in foster care, then banded together to make a good life for themselves.

It probably helped that they were all rich and hot.

One of them also happened to be my boss. He owned the nightclub where I worked, and the bar next door, and two restaurants. In fact, he and his brothers owned the entire block.

Shaking my head, I watched two guys in gloves going at it with each other in one of the boxing rings. I'd gotten a job at the hottest nightclub in New Orleans because I'd heard the Fury brothers were tough. They protected their patch of the city, and stood up to the gangs, cartels, and criminals.

It made it the perfect place to hide under the radar.

“Bye, Shay.” I waved. “I need to get to work.” Glancing at my watch, I saw I had exactly fifteen minutes to shower, dress in my uniform, and hightail it to the club.

“Bye, Mila.”

In the ladies change room, I tapped the code into the locker and pulled out my backpack. The first thing I did was check my laptop was in there. It was a habit now. As I touched the cool metal, the pressure I always seemed to feel eased a little.

I also kept a stash of cash tucked into a pocket I’d sewed in the bottom of the backpack. My emergency fund. It was a little low right now, but I’d build it back up.

It took me two minutes to shower and dress. In the foggy mirror above the row of basins, I caught my reflection. It was still a jolt to see my dark hair. I’d dyed it black after I’d gone on the run, and it was half a step above horrible. I wrinkled my nose. Black didn’t suit me. I missed my caramel-blond hair. I’d loved it, spent hours styling it.

Now, my harsh, black hair was usually up in a careless bun or ponytail.

Now, all I could do was hide and survive.

I fiddled with the shiny gold halter top. All the bartenders and servers at the club wore black trousers and gold tops. Well, the men got black shirts with gold stitching, but I was just grateful my top wasn’t low cut or strapless. The halter top was actually pretty comfortable.

After stuffing everything in my backpack, I headed out. It was a balmy summer evening in New Orleans. Growing up in Louisiana, I was used to warm temperatures and humidity.

I hurried down the street. I liked the Arts/Warehouse district. There were loads of art galleries and lots of places to eat, but it wasn’t quite as crazy as the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. Most of the old warehouses had been converted into galleries or loft apartments, and I really wished I could afford to live in one.

I walked past Smokehouse. The bar was running a brisk trade. I saw several groups sitting out on the front patio, sharing drinks and laughing. One table had a bunch of helium balloons in the center. Celebrating someone's birthday. Another table held a couple clearly on a date, and yet another one held a family with teenagers hunched over their cellphones.

All people going about their lives. Enjoying themselves. Doing things that normal people did. I'd been like that once. Just four months ago, actually, although most days it felt like a lifetime ago.

My eyes burned. All things I couldn't have.

*Dammit.* I sniffed. Feeling sorry for myself was a waste of energy.

I reached Ember, the name glowing in gold neon above a set of beaten-gold double doors. Reggie stood out front. There was only one bouncer on this early, and another would join later as it got busier, in addition to the security inside.

The handsome black man smiled at me. He was built like a linebacker. "Hey, Mila. Ready for a busy night?"

"Always."

He waved me through.

It always felt like stepping into sin. Everything was done in luxurious black and gold. The floor was polished black, and one wall held a row of gold urns almost as tall as I was. Lights strobed across the dance floor. The long bar glowed with golden light, and off to one side was the roped-off, VIP area.

My favorite thing, though, was the ceiling. I glanced up. It was covered in a sea of gold flowers. It looked as though if a breeze blew in here, they'd all flutter down on us. It was totally the kind of club I would have liked to spend time in.

As I passed the bar, I called out hellos to the bartenders already prepping for the night ahead. I punched the code into the door leading to the staff locker room and wasted no time stashing my bag in my locker.

*Showtime.* It was Saturday night in New Orleans, and soon, the club would be hopping.

When I got back to the bar, Venus, the head bartender, appeared. She was mid-forties, tall, with her curly, black hair cut very short. Her halter top showed off super-toned arms I'd kill for. She could make any cocktail a customer asked for, and managed the customers with an ease that I'd never, ever have.

"Mila, you're behind the bar tonight, but if the servers need help on the floor, then you're up."

"Got it."

"And you're okay to close tonight?"

"Yes. Happy to."

She blew out a breath. "Great, because Bryce has this dance concert tomorrow. First thing in the morning." She was a single mom to two boys. "If I can at least get a decent amount of sleep, I'll be mostly functional for it."

"I'm happy to close any time you need me, Venus."

"It's appreciated." The woman cocked her head. "Been working on any new cocktail recipes?"

I smiled. "Maybe."

Venus nodded. "Good. You have a knack."

I had a knack for mixing up new drinks because I'd also spent loads of nights at home, memorizing cocktail recipes. I'd lied my ass off to get the job here. I said I'd worked in clubs before, all the while praying my fake ID held up.

I wasn't Amelia Clifton, marketing guru anymore. I was Mila Clarke, bartender. Thankfully, I was a quick learner, and I'd picked up working the bar fast.

A large crowd of clubgoers surged inside.

"Time to water the thirsty masses," Venus said.

Soon, I was too busy to think of anything. I was grabbing glasses, scooping ice, pouring shots, and mixing cocktails.

"You can light me up any day, sweet thing."

*Sweet thing? Really.*

Leaning over the bar, I ran the lighter across the three tall glasses, turning the red cocktails from hurricanes into flaming hurricanes.

The customer licked his lips and smiled. He was already heading well toward drunk. I'd need to keep an eye on him and cut him off soon.

"I'll add that to your tab." I flashed him a practiced smile.

"Thanks." He reached for the glasses.

"And don't use that line again." I shook my head. "It's a bad one."

He wrinkled his nose and cocked his head. "I thought it was funny. The drinks are on fire. And you're hot." He gave a sheepish shrug of his shoulders. "I wanted to take a shot."

"Mila?" One of the other bartenders, Staci, leaned in beside me. "I need your help with an order."

"Sure thing." I gave Mr. Sweet Thing a nod, and turned.

"He's *never* gonna make it back to his friends without spilling those." Staci tossed her blonde curls back.

"Nope." I was pretty sure Mr. Sweet Thing would have cocktail all over his shirt soon. Such a

shame. I noted that Staci didn't actually have another order. "Thanks for the save."

She rolled her eyes. "He was talking to your boobs."

I snorted. He totally had been.

"After years of working in clubs and bars, I can pick out that type as soon as they step in here," Staci said. "Easy life, enough cash to make him feel like a hotshot, and he thinks any woman slinging drinks would be grateful to let him get her naked." Staci sniffed. "No, thanks."

Staci was a veteran, so she'd know. Me, I'd only been bartending for four weeks.

Okay, three weeks, five days, and six hours, but who was counting?

Someone called Staci's name, and she whirled away.

There was an uncharacteristic break in the customers at the bar, so I quickly grabbed a cloth and wiped surfaces down. I glanced around. The crowd was starting to build. It wouldn't be long before the club was pumping.

This was light-years away from my busy career in PR and marketing. Emotions hit me like a kick to the gut.

Sucking in a breath, I wrestled them back down. I thought time would help make things easier, but so far it hadn't.

My old life was gone. My challenging, corporate job was gone. My cute apartment was gone. My parents were...

The shot of pain almost made me double over.

I lifted my chin, fighting back the tears. That life was over. Now, I was a bartender. I rubbed the throb growing in the side of my head.

*Just pour the drinks, Mila.*

I threw the cloth back in the sink, scootching out of the way as one of the male bartenders, Eli,

brushed past me. Time to get my focus back on work.

One of the servers, Jules, arrived at the bar. “Mila, need a Jack and Coke, one flaming Hurricane, and one blazing Vieux Carre.”

“On it.” I grabbed some glasses and set to work. I turned to the wall of alcohol and tuned out everything else. Flaming drinks were a specialty at Ember, and the customers loved them—especially the tourists.

I quickly made the drinks, lit them up, and slid them across the bar. Jules smiled and loaded her tray.

A large group of customers entered, all laughing and looking to party. Soon, it was too busy for me to think. My hands didn’t stop. Glasses, ice, booze, slice of lemon, lighter to ignite the flames.

I spent the next hour slinging drinks. Some shifts I worked out on the floor—and let me tell you, carrying a tray loaded with drinks is nerve-wracking. I liked it much better behind the bar.

Suddenly, I felt a ripple go through the crowd, and my belly tightened. Without looking up, I knew what caused it.

Or rather, who.

Finally, I couldn’t stop myself from raising my head.

And there he was, sauntering through the crowd like he owned the place. Which he did.

Dante Fury. Owner of Ember.

My hand curled around a bottle of Jack Daniels.

He wore tailored, black pants, and a black shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The shirt showed off the corded muscles of his forearms and his olive-brown skin, and the fabric strained against his biceps. He had black ink on one arm. He moved in a powerful, supple way, his stride sure

and measured. It made me think of a warrior...no, a king in his domain. His hair was black, thick, and tousled. Like he often ran a hand through it. A dark, sexy beard covered a strong jaw.

He cut through the crowd like some sort of midnight predator. My throat got tight every time I saw him. He had an aura about him that made it impossible to look away.

He had this lock of dark hair that always fell over his forehead, and my hand desperately wanted to push it away.

*Dammit.*

I made myself look away, and set the bottle back on the shelf.

It didn't matter how sexy and attractive Dante Fury was. I was in hiding. I couldn't get close to anyone, or I could end up dead. Plus he was my boss.

My pulse skittered, and I couldn't help but look back at him. He was talking with one of the servers, Jessica. Checking in. He did that every few hours, chatting with the VIPs, talking with the staff, looking for problems.

Dante drew closer to the bar. I saw the way men eyed him, standing a little straighter and sucking in their guts. There was no gut on Dante. His was as flat as a board, and was the perfect complement to his broad shoulders.

Women watched him too—hungry and dazed.

“God, that man is prime fantasy material.” Beside me, Staci let out a gusty sigh. “I’ve contemplated naming my vibrator after him, but I decided it was skeevy to call it Dante.” She eyed him. “Still, the man is *so* fine in that dark, dangerous, just know he’d pin a woman down and fuck her hard kind of way.”

*“Staci.”*

She rolled her eyes at me and grinned. “Come on, Mila. You’re quiet, but I’ve seen you eye-

fuck the man when no one is looking.”

I choked, grateful that it was dim enough that she couldn't see the heat in my cheeks.

Staci slapped me on the back. “No judgment here. He's worth an eye fuck.” She sighed. “It's a damn shame he never messes around where he works. Never flirts with the customers, never takes them back to his office, and that goes double for staff.”

In my few weeks here, I'd never seen a single hint of him flirting, or anything.

Staci leaned in. “I heard he was seen with some fancy assistant district attorney a couple of times. Figures he'd go for smart and classy.”

My stomach did a weird flip. And then I noticed Dante was heading our way.

I straightened. “How about we make some drinks?”

Staci leaned closer. “Are you blushing?”

“No.”

She grinned. “You *so* are blushing.”

“No, but I'm thinking about giving you a black eye.”

Staci laughed. I looked up and locked eyes with Dante.

He moved toward the bar, and I couldn't look away. Every single part of me shivered, filled with energy.

He had dark eyes. They looked like chips of obsidian. Deep, dark, unfathomable pools.

“Mila. How's it going this evening?”

*Gah.* It was all kinds of unfair that on top of his looks, he had a deep, panty-melting drawl with a touch of grit.

“Great.” I managed a nod. “All good.”

He cocked his head. “You sure?”

I felt a cold tickle down my spine. I always got the sense he knew I was hiding something. Like he wanted to know all my secrets.

I straightened. No one got my secrets. They were too horrible and too dangerous.

I knew Dante and his brothers stood up to the darker underbelly of New Orleans—the gangs, the mobsters, the criminals. But that didn't mean I'd bare my soul. Not when it could end with me with a bullet in my brain.

“Very sure.” I pasted on a smile.

He watched me for a long second with those endless, dark eyes. “Are you closing tonight?”

My heart did a little jump. “Yes. Venus needs to get home. One of her kids has a dance thing tomorrow.”

“Good. I've got some whiskey samples from a local distillery. I know you like your whiskey, so maybe you can try them with me? I need to decide if I want to stock them or not.”

I nodded, my belly twisting. *Oh, hell.* A late-night close with Dante. “Happy to help. Oh, and I have a new cocktail creation I think the customers would like.”

His teeth flashed white against his skin. “You and your cocktails.”

“Hey, the Fiery Phoenix has been super popular.” I'd made up the cocktail a week ago and the clientele loved it.

“I know.” He held up a hand. “You try my whiskey, I'll try your new cocktail.”

I almost said ‘it's a date’ but managed to stifle the words. It wasn't a date. It would never be a date. “I'd better get these drinks made. Thirsty customers.”

I whirled away, but I felt his gaze digging into my back.

When I glanced his way again, he was gone. I blew out a breath and my shoulders sagged. I needed to definitely *not* get too close to Dante Fury.

The rest of my shift was a blur—tipsy customers, lots of drinks, sore feet.

And somehow, from time to time, I still felt Dante's gaze on me.

Shaking my head, I reached for a cocktail glass. *You're imagining things, Mila.*