



Fighting the Lure

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Description: Amelia is the last person Sam should fall for—her brand new client at the gym, a decade younger than her, and her sister's best friend...

Amelia's starting over. After finding her girlfriend getting hot and heavy with her MMA trainer, she moves into the city to lick her wounds in peace. However, when she steps into what she hopes will be her new gym, her trainer is none other than Sam. Her first crush, her lesbian awakening, and someone she hasn't seen in ten years—when Sam just up and vanished.

After Sam came out, her family's rejection broke her. She swore to leave that past behind, but it finds her anyway when her little sister's best friend shows up at the gym where she works. Ames grew up hot as sin, and her scorching glances only mean trouble. However, Sam's a professional. She can keep her desires under control. She has to keep them under control. Because if she lets the past back in, it'll destroy the life she's built for herself here.

Ames isn't just hot—she's pure sunshine that Sam can't help but crave until they're both in a chokehold that neither of them wants to escape. However, moments are all they can claim because when Sam's sister finds out, Ames will need to choose...and the odds are never in Sam's favor.

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Chapter One

Ames

I was going to make Philly my bitch.

Since I couldn't get away with punching Allie in the face, I would do the next best thing and travel onward and upward without her. My pulse thrummed as I stepped outside my brand-new apartment on Spring Garden, the scent of asphalt, tires, and fresh starts weaving my way. With my duffel bag slung over my shoulder, I headed down the sidewalk in the direction of the gym I'd been wanting to check out.

Moving an hour away from my town didn't seem like a total hit of the refresh button, but it was enough space between me and my ex-girlfriend to suffice for now. My bestie, Nina, wasn't thrilled, but when I'd convinced her she could crash at my place anytime she wanted to go barhopping, she came around. I buzzed with energy as I cut a quick path through block after block, drawing in the bustle around me.

This—the hum of cars, the occasional shouts, the brightly colored banners of the storefronts along the street—this was the shift I needed. The only thing better would be finding a gym to train at. Climbing the ranks in the MMA meant frequent fights, and a good trainer and a good gym made all the difference.

Unfortunately, I found my last trainer buried between my girlfriend's legs.

My blood hummed. I needed to unleash on some punching bags stat.

Hence the new gym. Knockout had a great reputation, and it happened to be within walking distance of my new place. Even though I'd made the shift over the past few weeks, not getting to the gym on the daily caused an itch under my skin. No amount of home workouts could compare. My skin prickled as I kept my eyes peeled on my surroundings. This part of Philly wasn't the best area to be walking around by my lonesome, but a lot of new businesses were moving in. Besides, Nina and I had gone to more shows at Union Transfer than I could count, so I at least knew what streets to avoid.

I tugged on the strap of my duffel, my head on a swivel. Up ahead, my destination appeared into view, and relief wound through my veins simply from the sign overhead. I'd always been athletic, even if I hadn't been a sports kid, but I hadn't thought my years of taekwondo would've led me down this path. In part, my jump into MMA had been due to a stupid crush I'd harbored for years.

Samantha Taylor. Nina's older sister.

Way older. Old enough that she'd never given me a second glance, even if she'd been my lesbian awakening at the ripe age of ten.

Sam had been getting into MMA training at the time, and she constantly swung by when I visited Nina. Her tank tops had been criminally low and pasted to her sweaty skin, her glossy, thick hair had been swept into a ponytail, and the cool attitude she emanated had been all sorts of swoon.

Except then she'd vanished.

Nina didn't know why her sister had left, just that she didn't come around anymore, and her parents refused to spill the slightest bit of information. We'd gotten nosy and tried to sleuth, but nothing came up. Except my switch had already flipped, and by high school, I was dating girls and signing up for my first MMA classes. Never heard

what happened to Sam, though, and Nina became as tight lipped on the topic as her folks.

My heart thudded hard as I slowed, my steps almost reverent upon approach. The rainbow flag at the front door calmed me, though friends had already told me that the place was queer-friendly.

My hand settled on the cool metal handle of the door.

New city. New gym. New fucking start.

Maybe if I repeated the mantra enough, it would sink in, rather than feeling like I'd tucked tail and ran. I yanked the door open and stepped inside.

The scent of sweat and cleaner hit me at once, and I breathed it in. The gym was larger than I'd expected, especially for the city, and it teemed with energy. This bright and early, plenty of people were already getting their workout in before starting their day job. Trainers ran their clients through reps in one corner, and a big ring took up the center of the place. Grunts, thwacks, and shuffles echoed to the rafters of this repurposed building. Comfort soaked through me at once.

To the right lay the front desk, a flat black surface that matched the red and black mats throughout the place and the white walls. The guy standing behind the desk had a sweet look about him, not looming over everyone or bursting with muscle like a lot of the folks here. He offered a smile and a nod as I approached.

"Are you on the hunt for a new gym?" he asked.

My lips quirked. "I'm guessing you know your regulars well."

His eyes crinkled at the sides with his soft grin. "Just a bit. The crew around here's

pretty tight knit.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said, trying to ignore the wrench in my chest. My old gym had been like that too. It had been a home away from home, and I’d spent years with those people. But after finding Allie and Chaz midfuck, I couldn’t stomach going there anymore. Chaz had literally been in my corner for so damn long, and that sort of betrayal...

I forced a grin. “So does that mean you’re going to give me the whole spiel?”

“Sure, sure. The name’s Emmit. Do you want the rundown or a physical tour of the place?”

I shook my head. “If you’ve seen one locker room, you’ve seen them all. Just the rundown works for me. I’m Amelia, but most folks call me Ames.”

“We’ve got the locker room and showers deal, weight room, cardio, punching bags, and there’s another room designated for classes. Your membership allows you to attend as many of those as you want.”

“I’m more looking to hook up with a trainer to get fight ready,” I said, leaning against the side of the front desk.

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“Lucky for you we’ve got some of the best,” he said. “One of our trainers should be finishing in a second. I can introduce you to her.”

“I’m happy to wait.” I gazed around the place, my blood thrumming again. It was like every time I entered the ring, the outside noise filtered away, leaving me fully in the moment. And I needed that feeling, the focus as of late. Not like I could find release the other way—hell, ever since I got cheated on, my favorite vibe had been sitting in the box from when I’d moved. Allie and I hadn’t been together for ages, a year, but losing Chaz, the trainer I’d worked with since I started? Fuck. My chest squeezed tight.

“How long have you been doing fights?” Emmit asked. He rifled through a stack of papers, like he needed to constantly set things in order.

“A few years now. Working my way up.” I wasn’t a slouch in that department either. My folks were supportive as fuck, thankfully, and I had Nina as my eternal cheerleader too, which would keep me motivated for the next match. Even though the upcoming fight would feel different without Chaz getting me amped up, setting the tone.

Hopefully, I’d find someone who could KO him from my memory.

“Oh, there she is,” Emmit said, tossing an up-nod to the right.

A woman approached, undoing her black hand wraps.

She was drop-dead gorgeous. Dark brown hair pulled into a ponytail, lush, pouty lips,

and dark, broody eyes. Sweat glistened across her temple and highlighted the dips of her arm muscles plus the abs her sports bra left on full display. Her body was a work of art, all lean, sinuous curves, and she brimmed with intensity. I got suckered in on the first glimpse, but that wasn't what had me full-out stopping.

I hadn't seen her in over a decade, but she'd only gotten hotter with age.

My first crush, my eternal masturbation fodder.

Emmit gestured her over. "I've got someone for you to meet. Ames? This is Sam Taylor."

Chapter Two

Sam

Today had been an early-as-fuck start at Knockout, but I lived for those.

The quietness of the mornings, getting to settle in with a client, sinking into the rhythm of a workout first thing—all of it kick-started my system like nothing else.

Funny, because if my folks could see me now, they would be shocked. I'd been the teenager who needed to get dragged out of bed to make it to school on time. However, the moment they kicked me out, they lost the right to an ounce of my life. Apparently, they'd rather have no daughter than a lesbian one. Besides, they at least had my baby sister, one kid intact in her heterosexuality. My gut pinched, but I pushed the memories of them down. Not here.

I placed the gloves I'd used for whaling on the punching bags into their normal cubby along the back wall of the room. I specialized in training MMA fighters, and nothing got me soaring higher than watching my clients succeed. Getting in the ring, in the

fights, might've been my original dream, but when I started going for my goal seriously, I'd realized I'd rather be behind the scenes than in the spotlight.

Part of the problem might've been my mental state at the time. When I'd been rising up the ranks in the fighting circuit, I'd found myself homeless and without family. Put a damper on my headspace, and I'd fucked up match after match until I needed to focus on survival instead. However, when I'd seen the help wanted ad for a trainer at Knockout, Chuck and the others had not only gotten me on my feet again, but they'd given me a new purpose.

I tugged at my wraps as I stepped out of the training room. Over by the front desk, Emmet was gesturing my way, so I sauntered over. Beside him, a woman leaned against the desk like she owned the joint. A tiny little thing, she couldn't be more than a few inches over five feet, but even from here, I could see the compact muscle of her arms, the dangerous way she carried herself. Her wavy, light-brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun, but charming wisps escaped, and her blue eyes were bright and vivid, like a sunny-day sky.

The tattoos winding down her arms had me wanting to take a closer look, but honestly, her open expression, the pretty-as-fuck curve to her lips, those ample tits on full display from the low neckline of her tank top—all of it had me staring harder. My core throbbed at the idea of stripping those clothes off and tasting every inch of her.

Fucking inappropriate, since this was probably a prospective client.

I finished unwrapping my right hand by the time I stopped in front of her. She looked at me, her brows drawn together.

“Hey,” I said, my voice coming out a bit huskier than intended. Down, girl.

She blinked and seemed to shake herself out of whatever stupor she was in. She

offered her hand, and I took it in mine. I could see the freckles dotting her cheeks, her nose. This girl wasn't just hot as hell—she was cute too, my total kryptonite. Her breath hitched the slightest bit, and her lashes fluttered as she shook my hand, the motion firm.

Electricity sparked up my veins. This close, she looked familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

“So, you signing up here?” I pulled my hand away.

“Only if you're my trainer,” she said, her tone dripping with a sensual note and those blue eyes fixed square on me. Well damn, this one had pluck.

Grinning, I rested my hand on my hip. “Emmit, better hand her over the paperwork. Looks like she found her gym.”

He shook his head, a small grin on his face as he snagged one of the welcome packets we kept on standby. “Read over these documents, and here are the fees. We're pretty simple, so you won't have pages and pages of signing your soul away.”

My new hottie client turned to the front desk and grabbed the pen Emmit provided, skimming and then signing. Emmit gave me me a pointed look. I shrugged. Knockout had no rules against fraternizing with the clients—just the overall clause of “don't bring drama to the workplace.” I had no issues with that. I communicated up front with my hookups that I wasn't a great bet long term, and rarely did any clients lure me beyond some casual flirting.

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Emmit mouthed be good.

I winked.

He rolled his eyes.

My client turned in her paperwork and handed over her card. Emmit rang her up and took the clipboard.

“When can we start?” she asked me while she waited for her card back.

I checked the big overhead clock on the opposite end of the gym. I had a gap between my last client and my next one, so it couldn’t hurt to get a gauge on where she was at skill-wise. “If you’ve got time now, then let’s go.” I tilted my head in the direction of the room with the punching bags where I’d come from. “The sweats and shirt you have on now will be fine. We’ll be going through a few warm-ups and basics so I can see where to begin.”

“I’m looking to be fight ready.” She hiked her duffel bag over her shoulder. “Currently working my way through the rankings in the MMA.” Her blue eyes held an intensity that had me averting my gaze, like she tried to bore clean into my soul.

“Oh, so we’ll have fun,” I responded, my lips quirking. I wasn’t a huge smiler—life liked to kick me in the labia the second I got a little too happy, so I erred on the side of caution. But something about this girl set me at ease. We stopped in front of the room, and I gestured her in. A few clients were doing solo work at the punching bags, but most of the trainers were sparring in other rooms with their clients.

We headed to the far-left corner, one of the spots I usually claimed. “Okay, time for official introductions. I’m Samantha Taylor, and I’ll be your trainer here at Knockout.”

She licked her lips and ducked her head as if she’d suddenly gotten shy. “Amelia Johnson.”

When she looked up and those blue eyes met mine, my heart just about stopped.

Cold rushed through my body in a fierce sweep.

I only knew one Amelia Johnson, but I hadn’t seen her in a decade. Ever since my parents cut off all ties with me when I came out. My skin prickled with chilly sweat, and my hands balled into fists. Part of me was aware I stood there gaping at her, but no amount of MMA skills could break me free from this hold.

The pieces clicked into place—the familiarity about her, the sunshine quality to her features, how comfortable I had felt from the second my gaze landed on her. I hadn’t even recognized her when she’d been over at our place every day growing up to play with Nina.

Fuck, how much had I missed?

My eyes stung the slightest bit, and I sucked in a sharp breath. I was at work and needed to get a hold of myself. Practicing the breathing techniques my therapist had taught me, I focused on counting out my breaths, not caring that the silence stretched longer between us and Amelia stared at me like she witnessed a ghost.

In a way, she did.

That was all I’d ever be to my family, and my parents had ensured that. Even when

I'd tried to reach out to Nina when she was older, when I thought I might stand a chance—bile rose in my throat.

"If you need me to go..." Amelia's voice broke through the silence. She took a step back and jerked a thumb toward the front door.

I sucked in another sharp breath. My nerves still simmered, but my jaw no longer seemed locked. The smart move would be to tell her to go. Find a new gym, a new trainer far away from here.

Except it had been ten years since I'd gotten a scrap of information.

And fuck, part of me wanted to know anything. Even if the news would rip me apart afterward.

"Nah, you're fine," I said, rocking on my heels to expel some of the nervous energy rolling through me. My mouth was dry as hell, but I needed to pull myself together. I hadn't spent the last decade in therapy to freeze up like some fucking coward the moment a hint of my past entered the picture. Shame dripped down my insides like wet paint I couldn't scrub off, no matter how hard I tried. "Been a minute, hasn't it?"

More than a fucking minute. My baby sister, Nina, was eleven years younger, and she and Amelia had always been joined at the hip. But I'd been off doing my own thing, getting into the MMA scene, building a name for myself. And then I'd been out of her life from the tender age of twelve onward. No wonder I hadn't recognized Ames. She had been a preteen then, all elbows and knees, and had barely begun to hit puberty.

"Yeah, just a smidge." She licked her lips again. My body took a zing of interest without my permission. This was someone I'd known as a kid, but the way her hips had filled out like two perfect handles, and her tits strained against her tank top...

Fuck, I felt like one dirty old bitch.

Amelia Johnson was a fucking smokeshow now.

“So,” I said, needing to focus on my damn job here, no matter how much my insides spun. “If you’re not a beginner, is it safe to assume you’ll be here six days a week?”

Amelia straightened up. “I intend to. I’m used to alternating high and low days, though I’ve been slacking the past few weeks, since I spent the time moving.” Her eyes darkened, and the slight defensive squaring of her shoulders had my radar pinging.

The questions lingered on the tip of my tongue, but it wasn’t my place to ask. This wasn’t Nina’s best friend—this was a client. Really, if I were being professional, I should hand her over to another trainer.

Except part of me craved this contact from my past, even though it splashed salt water on those wounds that had never truly closed.

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“Let’s start in with drills, then,” I said. “Pivots.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “Oh, wow, I’ve never heard of those before.”

“Shush. I’m assessing your form.”

She winked at me before taking a step back into the open space. “You can assess my form all you like.”

Good lord. I almost swallowed my tongue at the effortless sensuality dripping from her tone, the confidence she hadn’t had when she’d just been a kid.

“Get into stance,” I said, placing my hands on my hips. Years of working as a trainer kicked in, even though numbness trickled through me in the wake of the intense emotions surfacing. I could run a fighter through drills in my sleep.

Amelia settled into a bend at her knees, her shoulders braced but not tense.

“One, two, pivot,” I called.

She followed the beats with grace, the motions holding all the fluidity I needed to see to back up her claims.

“Two, three, pivot.”

Just like before, she completed the turns as if she’d done these a million times. Amelia executed the movement from the hips, popping out the one-two punch with a

smoothness that didn't need correction. Muscle memory was a helluva thing, and after training fighters as long as I had, I could tell who'd put the time and work in and who hadn't. She must've put in plenty of both to be able to glide with that ease.

"Give me fifty." I crossed my arms and widened my stance.

I didn't miss the flare of heat in her eyes. However, all ideas of sleeping with her had gotten tossed out the window the second I realized who she was. Too bad my body hadn't taken the memo.

She spun from one spot to the next, her muscles flexing with the motions, her ponytail whipping behind her. The determination in her brow was clear, the focused way she threw herself into something as simple as pivots. I kept my distance, though, in pure evaluation mode. Once she hit the fifty, I ran her through a few more basic drills, checking for any weaknesses, any areas for development for future sessions. She dragged with her feet a bit on kicks, so we'd have to be honing on that, and her right shoulder dipped the slightest bit with her throws.

The time positively raced.

Even though I evaluated her movements, my eyes had a mind of their own, roving over her sinuous curves, the sweat dotting her brow and trickling down her chest. The black-and-grayscale tattoos weaving around her biceps were eye-catching, and I kept trying to sneak a full glimpse.

She didn't do anything to discourage me from looking either. Every time we'd pause to switch drills, she'd twirl the end of her ponytail and flutter her lashes, giving perfect "fuck me" eyes. And goddamn, my knees went weak.

My gaze flicked between her and the clock on the wall as she finished the latest drill. We were running low on time. My next client would be coming in soon. Part of me

was desperate for the chance to breathe again, to even start to process what had happened today, but another part of me didn't want this to end.

"All right, that's a wrap," I said as she finished. Her shoulders heaved, and strands of her hair pasted against her temples. "My next client's arriving any minute, but I got plenty of information to work with for our sessions. We'll switch to a high-intensity workout tomorrow. Let me walk you to the front—unless you want to hit the locker rooms?"

"Nah, I like being sweaty," she said, her voice throaty. The urge to spread her out over the nearest flat surface and dive between her legs burst inside me, but I shoved those filthy thoughts aside. Fuck, what was wrong with me? Amelia and Nina might not even be friends anymore, but that didn't mean hooking up with someone from my past was a good idea.

I didn't miss the way her gaze kept sneaking to mine—our eyes met again and again. Doubtless she had questions, but unluckily for her, I refused to answer them. We reached the front door, feet away from where Emmet stood behind the desk. A gravitational pull existed between us, as if neither of us was willing to break it.

I bit back my swear and pushed forward. "I'll see you tomorrow, Amelia."

"Ames," she corrected me as she swept past me, her fingers trailing over the metal knob of the door. She glanced back, those blue eyes fiercely intense. "Hope you can handle me." With that, she opened the door and stepped outside.

Fuck me.

This seemed like the worst idea on the planet. However, if she could keep this relationship professional, I could be her trainer. But that included no sharing of the past. No meeting up outside of work.

And definitely no fucking the client.

Chapter Three

Ames

The emptiness in my apartment was something I still hadn't adjusted to.

Even before I dated Allie, I always had a roommate at the very least, but now...it was just me, myself, and I in this shoebox of a place. A studio had been what I could afford in the city. I liked cute shit, so the place looked like Hello Kitty had vomited all over it, with my Sanrio trinkets and plushies taking up real estate. Since I wasn't sharing the space, I didn't have to worry about what anyone else thought about my loud decorating choices.

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I kicked off my sweaty-as-fuck sneakers right beside my bed, which was tucked into the opposite side of the room from the door. After living in the suburbs my whole existence, getting used to the lack of space would take some time. This was my first stop back at the apartment since I left to sign up at Knockout Gym this morning—too busy running errands, getting my whole life set up for my new corner of the world.

I didn't mind. It had given me time to process what the fuck had happened at Knockout.

Sam goddamn Taylor.

Looking impossibly hotter as well. Her bossy trainer voice had made me weak in the knees, and ever since the brief session we'd had this morning, the ache between my thighs hadn't abated.

I flopped onto my unmade bed, not giving a fuck I imprinted more sweat on the sheets. I'd prefer a different sort of sweaty action right now, but seeing as I was single, that wasn't happening soon.

Unless Sam wanted to come home with me some night.

My entire body heated at the thought. Fuuuuck. She'd been all long, lean limbs and corded muscle, just like I remembered. But the years had hardened her gaze, sharpened her jawline, and her quiet competence was such a vicious turn-on I couldn't stand it. Was I brimming with questions about why she'd vanished? Fuck yes. However, the overwhelming feeling cascading through me was relief—that she was okay, that she seemed to be thriving, that she was still here on this plane of

existence.

Though I could do with a bit more relief.

I slipped my hands past the waistband of my pants, staring up at the popcorn ceiling, all stark shadows and yellowed lighting. I glided my hand beneath my panties and rested my fingertips on top of my clit, which was pretty much pulsing. Ngh, god. I was out of my mind horny.

In my teenage years, I'd imagined this—bumping into Sam again, her finally seeing me and pushing me against the nearest wall to tear my clothes off—preferably with her teeth. Then she'd pin me in place, slide her fingers inside my soaked pussy, and fuck me until I came. Her husky voice would rasp in my ear, telling me what a good girl I was while I rode her fingers.

A gush of liquid dripped from my pussy, and my lashes fluttered. I smeared my fingers with the slickness and began to lazily rub at my clit. It was hypertuned, on fucking edge after the run-in today, and that was after masturbating from boredom rather than lust for far too long. Allie hadn't been interested near the end of our relationship, and no wonder.

No. No thoughts of shitty exes.

I stroked up and down my clit, writhing a bit at the sinful sensations fluttering through me. My mind wandered back to Sam's intense eyes, dark as sin and commanding. Of course she ended up a trainer. She was the exact type to boss someone around, and hell, I wanted that in a real way.

I could imagine her here, the salt of her sweat, the hint of hibiscus from her shampoo I'd caught this morning. Her firm, callused hands spreading my thighs open. I increased the pace, closing my eyes as I sank into the feel of the sheets curled around

me, the heat emanating from my body, and my sopping wet pussy at mere thoughts of Sam.

The bruising kisses, the tight grip, the way she'd wreck me. Those fantasies swirled around, heightening my desire. I'd been on edge the entire day, my skin tight, my pussy aching with need. I strummed at my clit harder, faster, imagining it wasn't my hand there. That she rubbed her palm against it as she dipped her fingers inside me. That she murmured words of encouragement in her low, throaty voice.

My breaths came out faster, and sweat bloomed on my temple again. Heat traveled through my body as I basked in how good she'd feel against me. How I wanted to peel her sports bra over her head and taste her nipples, rub my face against the smooth surface of her tits.

I lost myself to the blissful motions, the sparks increasing with each pass as I quickened my pace. My thighs tensed as the sensations grew so strong a whimper slipped from my lips. With my eyes shut, I imagined Sam bringing me to these heights. If anything, that got me closer.

My breaths were coming out short as my orgasm neared, threatening to drag me over the edge. My core grew impossibly tight, to the point my legs trembled—until I tumbled.

I came with my back arching, a low cry escaping me, and my fingers pressed hard against my clit.

My release radiated through me, waves of pleasure that ensnared my senses. My whole body was awash in the bliss traveling from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes. I slumped in the middle of my messy sheets, and my limbs hummed from the intensity of the orgasm—just at the mere thought of Sam taking control of my body. My lashes fluttered as I opened my eyes. If I ever got the chance to sleep with

her, I couldn't even imagine the heights that would send me soaring to.

Which probably wasn't a good line of thought, considering she was my new trainer.

I needed to be fight ready more than I needed to get laid, but goddamn.

Sam Taylor had been my every fantasy from high school onward. Even when she'd disappeared, I hadn't forgotten the impact she had had on me.

Still, it couldn't hurt to try. Not only was I deadly curious as to what had caused her to vanish, but I also wanted to ask her out something fierce. After Allie's betrayal, I might not be ready to crash onto the rocks again, but I'd also regret not making an attempt.

My hand was still down my pants, fingers pressed on my clit, when my phone began buzzing in my purse. I wiped my hand on the side of my pants and hopped over to grab it.

The name on the screen dragged me straight out of the hazy edges of my orgasm.

Nina.

I swallowed hard but swiped to answer.

"Hey." I settled on the side of my bed.

My mind whirled. Should I tell her about Sam? We shared everything— from talking about heartbreaks to what the shape of our shit was that day. I couldn't hide the fact that her goddamn sister was my new trainer.

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“Ameeeeees,” Nina said. Even her voice made me feel homesick. Which was silly because I wasn’t that far away—a forty-minute drive—but I’d uprooted my whole life after the breakup. Not just because of Allie and getting cheated on—though those were two large factors—but because I’d been searching for a change for a while now. All my friends were finishing college or starting to pair off into serious relationships, and my path sometimes felt so different from the picket-fence futures they drifted toward.

“Ninaaaaaa.” I settled fully onto my bed, lying on my stomach, my feet in the air as I kicked them back and forth. “What’s up, girlie?”

“Tell me everything that’s been going on in your new life in Philly. You were checking out the gym today, right? Did you find a trainer who isn’t going to sleep with your future girlfriends?”

I snorted, even though the memory was still a raw rub in my chest. I planned on telling her everything. However, when I opened my mouth, the words froze on my lips. Something about my run-in with Sam felt a little clandestine, a little fragile. And I didn’t want to shatter the bond before it had even formed.

Besides, Nina had also been closemouthed on her sister. Maybe she already knew what was going on with Sam, and this was my chance to find out on my own.

“Yeah, the new trainer is great,” I said, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my chest. I wasn’t lying per se, but the omission was so fucking large you could drive a Mac truck through it. “I think we’ll get on real well.”

“Good, though I’m tempted to drive down and vet them myself. I can’t fucking believe Chaz pulled that on you.”

“I notice you didn’t mention Allie.” I picked at the hem of my shirt.

“Well, she had unfaithful stamped all over her forehead,” Nina said.

I wrinkled my nose. Allie had been a bad decision from the start, but I’d been so damn lonely at home. And she’d been hot and paid attention to me—at least until she got bored. Which had happened far earlier than our inevitable breakup. Hindsight, though. At that time, I’d kept trying to patch a gushing wound with Band-Aids. “Thanks for the heads-up there.”

Nina snorted. “Since when do you listen? I know for a fact if I told you she was bad news, it would’ve turned into a fight with you needing space to cool off.”

She wasn’t wrong. I had a bit of a stubborn streak and learned best by busting my kneecaps. Probably why I did so well with MMA.

If I mentioned her sister, guaranteed she’d have some choice words to say about that too—or worse, more silence. I never understood why Nina got so tight lipped about her, but whenever I had asked, she’d told me to drop it, and I’d respected her wishes.

“True,” I said, needing to brush off the dusting of guilt that had settled over my skin. “Chaz was definitely the bigger loss.”

And my sense of trust, though that wasn’t the first time I’d been cheated on. Just the worst outcome in losing my girl, my trainer, and my gym.

“You should be here,” Nina said with a huff. “The crew’s at McNulty’s Tavern tonight.”

I chewed on my lower lip. Part of me missed the familiarity, but the other part of me hadn't fit in since we graduated. They'd been the people I had hung out with through high school, but our lives had gone in different directions. So many were in internships, some still partying hard in college, especially since a lot of us had recently turned twenty-one. However, I'd been dead-set on MMA fighting from the moment I graduated.

I did part-time data entry work to cover extra expenses, but I pretty much lived and breathed training and fights.

Allie had wanted to go out, to drink and party and be a normal twenty-one-year-old, and she'd said a dozen times over how boring I was. Well, fuck that. Nights spent drinking my face off could cost me a spot in a fight, and I'd worked too hard to slip up.

"Tell everyone I said hi," I said. "You all can hop on the train and come here to drink sometime soon. I'll even have a place for you to crash."

Though it might be the floor, considering my ultimate lack of space.

"Don't tempt me," Nina said. "I can't wait to visit. It's not the same without you here, Ames."

"Thanks, babe." My chest tangled in knots. Omitting that I'd met her sister shouldn't be a big deal. Except that felt like an excuse in my mind because my gut was telling me I should've mentioned it. "I'll let you get to the tavern with everyone. Talk to you soon?"

"You can count on it," Nina said before hanging up.

I clutched the phone, staring at the screen.

Fuck, I didn't deserve a best friend like her.

Not after I'd just masturbated to thoughts of her long-lost sister, who was now my new trainer.

The guilt prickled across my skin, racing like wildfire. There was no way I'd be able to keep this from Nina for long. We were too close for secrets or lies. But I also couldn't ignore the tremulous thump of my heart every time I thought about this morning. How goddamn hot Sam had looked, the calm confidence she emanated that had me internally swooning the whole session.

But even more than that, I couldn't get out of my mind the way she'd frozen when she'd realized it was me.

The shattered expression in her dark brown eyes.

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Whatever secret Sam was keeping, it was a big one. Foreboding swept over me. Somehow I had the feeling it was a stone I didn't want to overturn.

Didn't mean I wouldn't try, though.

Chapter Four

Sam

My first client had canceled, which left me with a morning gap before the next on my list—Ames.

I should've arrived early and pounded out these nerves on the mat, but I'd amped them up with espresso instead. My hands full, I juggled my coffee cups to tug the door to Knockout open. Once I managed it, I stepped over to the front counter. Emmitt glanced up, those sharp eyes as alert as ever.

"Don't tell me you brought coffee?" he said, chewing on his lower lip.

I plunked the latte in front of him. "You know I wouldn't forget you."

"Your new client already got here." He ran his finger across the clean surface of the desk as if he could make it shine more.

"Fuck, I'm not even dressed yet." I wrinkled my nose. I saluted with my cup of coffee and headed straight for the locker rooms. The duffel weighing down my right shoulder carried everything I needed—including multiple changes of clothes. With

how disgusting I got here, I always brought extra for a workday.

My insides short-circuited at the thought of Ames waiting for me. She was probably in with the heavyweight bags, warming up. I'd been wanting to see her again just as much as I hadn't. The conflicting feelings hadn't abated from the second she'd shown up at Knockout the other day, but these weren't ones I could run from.

I sucked down a swig of my scorching hot coffee, relishing the robust flavor as I entered the locker room. Three rows of big black lockers stretched out in front of me, and I could hear the hiss of the showers from the back. I placed my coffee and duffel on the bench of the last row of lockers, the ones normally used by employees. The motions came automatically as I stripped down, tugging off my tee to reveal the sports bra underneath. I opened the zipper of my duffel and grabbed my shorts.

The shower shut off, and footsteps thumped along the tile floor.

Ames appeared into view.

I just about swallowed my tongue.

All she wore was a towel wrapped around her, which barely covered those creamy thighs, and her wavy hair cascaded to her shoulders in wet ringlets. Droplets of water clung to her skin, and I wanted to lick each one off before peeling the towel from her body. Fuck. The dirty thoughts kept marching in, even knowing who Amelia was.

She walked up beside me and cracked open the locker nearest to me. "This one taken?"

I attempted to regain my composure. The sight of her delivered a punch to the solar plexus in a variety of ways. "Have at it," I said. My shorts were still in my hand, and I had to rip my gaze off her so I didn't get caught flat out gawking.

I tugged my sweats down, more than aware of Ames in my peripheral. I'd changed next to pretty much anyone in the lockers with no thought, but between our history and how she'd grown into a fucking stunner—goddamn. My skin prickled with awareness, and I kept my gaze on the floor as I slipped on my shorts as fast as possible.

When I glanced back up, Ames dropped the towel.

If I'd been in shock before, I was KO'd now.

Her body was compact muscle, a fucking work of art. Lightly tanned skin with a few scars, and round, stunning tits with dark pink nipples. Her hips were the perfect handles, and the trimmed curls at her pussy had my mouth watering. Oh lord. A small smirk twisted her lips.

Real fucking professional, Sam.

Gawking at my client was the last thing I should be doing.

Gawking at Nina's best friend was definitely the last thing I should be doing.

"Let's try sparring today," I said, heat rushing through me faster than I could control. I stuffed my bag into the locker, making sure not to look in her direction. "I'll meet you in the ring once you're ready."

I pivoted on my heel and made a quick retreat for the door.

"Sam?"

Her dulcet tone had me stopping midstride. My pulse thumped so hard I could hear it, and those flames were still rushing through me in full force. That sort of lust could

make a woman fucking stupid.

“What’s up?” I turned to her again.

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She'd crossed the space between us, only wearing a pair of black panties and her sports bra—at least semi-covered—and holding out my coffee I'd forgotten about. "You left this."

"Ah," I said, licking my lips, my mouth too damn dry. "Thanks."

Of course I had. I'd been trying to rush out. I accepted the coffee, and our fingers brushed. Electricity zipped up my arm, and Amelia's pulse fluttered at her throat. She quirked her lips again, and those pretty blues locked on me. The Ames I had known was always bright and sunny, and those traits seemed to have stuck around, but I could never in a million years have anticipated her confidence.

She wasn't shy at all with her looks, her body language, and goddamn, that was such a turn-on.

Except she was the one person I shouldn't go after.

I gave a brief nod and pivoted on my heel again before I did something senseless, like slam her up against the lockers and slide my fingers down the waistband of those black panties.

With my coffee in hand, I booked it for the ring in the center.

I would definitely need to let off some steam.

Maybe sparring had been a mistake.

We'd started with some quick warm-ups right outside of the ring, and to say the air was charged between us was an understatement. Ames was dedicated, though. I could tell that about her from the start. And she listened, unlike some clients who you had to put through drill after drill until they wanted to scream and you did too because they refused to process your coaching.

Once we'd gone through the paces of warming up, I planned on getting her in the ring. If she had upcoming fights, we needed to make sure she was prepared. Sometimes I caught her looking at me intensely, like if she stared hard enough, she could dig out my secrets. It had me just as on edge as the other looks lobbed in my direction, so heated I was about to combust.

All this spelled disaster, but I was committed to a little pain.

Sweat dripped down my back, and I took a step away from Amelia.

We'd tried a few introductory spars to get comfortable working together, but now we needed to kick our training up a notch. We had to practice takedowns, which meant I would be hitting the mat hard. Once we got comfortable, I'd start her in sparring rounds with other fighters so I could gauge her form and get her ready.

"All right," I said, swinging my arms side to side as I settled into a solid starting stance. Amelia did the same, her bright eyes focused. The air crackled between us. "Go."

She lunged for me, striking fast as a python.

Jab. Jab. Overhand.

I dodged out of the way with ease, since these were typical introductory moves.

Amelia's left hip twitched.

I pivoted before her round kick snapped out with precision. Her timing was fantastic, but we'd have to work on distraction techniques so she didn't give herself away.

The same style kick flew from the other side.

I brought my arm up, the blow landing with a solid thud. However, she already slid into the next move, her arms wrapping around for a double-collar tie. My arm shot up in defense, pushing out of the hold before she could settle into it. My heart was thumping hard with the quickness of the movements, the thrill of working with a fantastic fighter. This—this was what I lived for as a trainer. Finding a fighter who had the talent to make it big and helping them hone their strengths for their bouts.

Another jab and another one, and I slid out of the way again. I wasn't here to fight her—no, my strategy was defense, defense, defense.

Round kick.

I dodged and pivoted around, anticipating the next overhand she tossed my way.

My chest grew light as I flowed from one movement to the next, taking notes of the form, the speed, and the liquidity of her blows and transitions. The girl had talent in spades, and she would be so damn fun to work with. As long as I could get over the major two hurdles in my way.

The jab hit my temple.

My arms shot up, and while I knew where she was taking this, Ames was already diving in for the takedown. She grabbed my thighs, and even though I twisted, she had the momentum. My back thudded against the mat, and she pressed on top of me.

I shot into a grapple to get her off me, but I was also too aware of the proximity between us. The sweat fragrant in the air, the droplets splashing onto my skin. The heavy breaths between us, the slap of skin to skin as we rolled around on the mats. I managed to drive my leg between hers, then pivoted and extricated myself. I hopped up and onto my feet before she could drag me back down.

My shoulders heaved, and part of my brain was fantasizing about what rolling around with her would be like in a different context. The thought shot a pulse of lust through my core.

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Except I should've never gotten taken down in the first place. My mind was drifting too much with her, and I needed to focus.

"Come on," I said, shifting from one foot to the next, adding a bounce to my movements. "Show me what you got."

She flashed a vibrant smile, pure sunshine and teeth, and my heart clenched hard. Goddamn, she was gorgeous. However, this time, I was ready. She rushed at me with another attack, and I settled back into automatic—analyzing the moves, sliding from one defensive strategy to the next.

I shut out thoughts of how much I wanted to slip between her muscled thighs and the equally distressing thoughts of how much I wanted to know what my family's life was like at home, even if the discovery devastated me.

I was sparring with a client—nothing more, nothing less.

Droplets of sweat flew, breaths came in faster, and our bodies snapped into motion. Back in the ring. The rest of the session raced by as I took one mental note after another, making sure I had points to target for upcoming training.

Ames bounced on her feet, still full of energy, which was good. Girl had stamina.

Everything I saw from her impressed me, and it tracked for the determined-as-fuck girl I remembered. I never figured she would end up heading in the MMA direction, but I could see how she'd flourish and excel here.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s wrap up with some cooldown stretches.”

I ran us through a five-minute routine to settle from that faster pace, the thump, thump, thump of my heart steady. Better to keep my attention there than the thoughts that had run rampant through my mind earlier.

Like if she tasted as delicious as she looked.

Like if my parents were okay with her being queer when they’d never accepted me.

My throat tightened, and I slipped through the rungs of the ring to hop onto the ground.

Ames slid out and stepped up beside me. I walked toward the front of the gym, since I had another client coming in after her. She didn’t hit the lockers, though—no, she stuck to me. When I glanced her way, the look she shot me made it clear she wanted to talk. I stopped close to the door but far enough from the front desk to give us a modicum of privacy.

“What are you doing tonight?” she asked, her hand on her hip like she braced for battle.

My stomach flipped. Was this heading where I thought? “Ames.”

“Let me take you out.” Those blue eyes flared with an intoxicating intensity. “Dinner, a drink, whatever. I...didn’t think I’d ever see you again, and I’d regret if I didn’t shoot my shot.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

Fuck, she was bold. And I hated that I liked it. But I hated even more that I had to

turn her down. My gut twisted with something ugly. Was it from the past or discomfort with the present? This was a girl who'd been all freckles and smiles, sweet as could be. Only a monster would hurt her.

But I'd gotten the niceness shit-kicked out of me years ago.

Ames chewed on her lip. "Unless you're already taken and I'm barking up the wrong tree? Or...straight?"

"No to both," I murmured before I could stop myself. "Very gay and very single."

Ames's lips curled into a smirk. Why the fuck had I said that? This wasn't a good idea with a client I didn't know, let alone one who was part of the past I'd been forced to leave behind.

"I can't," I said plainly, crossing my arms as if that might bolster the shaky-as-fuck ground I stood on.

The smirk dropped from her face, and her blue eyes flashed with a vulnerability that made me want to wrap her in my arms.

Instead, I held strong. "I'm your trainer, Ames, and given the past—it's better we don't get involved."

"Right," she said, a slight tremor in her voice. "Can't blame a girl for trying." With that, she flashed a weak smile.

"Taylor." Cortez hailed me with a wave from across the gym. The guy was a tattooed sweetheart on the quieter side, one of the trainers I'd worked with for a while. Neither of us drank, but we both hit the bars on occasion to find hookups regardless—which I had the feeling I'd need to do soon.

Ames slipped away without another word. Fuck, I was an asshole for rejecting her. Guilt twisted me like a scorpion stretch, along with a hefty amount of disappointment—which was ridiculous, since she'd just crash-landed into my life.

Cortez nudged me in the side as Ames headed to the locker rooms. “Who’s that?”

“Trouble.”

Chapter Five

Ames

Friday nights were meant to be spent out.

Nina had texted me a pic of our crew in their normal spot, and a pang of longing shot through me. I missed them, and I missed my old life. However, an undercurrent of electricity buzzed under my skin at the idea of plunging into any bar in my area on a whim. Even though Sam had turned me down, the rest of our training sessions this week had been just as charged as the first two, which had me convinced there was more to her shutdown than disinterest.

Still, none of that helped my reawakened libido, and with my single-as-fuck status, it was time to step out and be social.

I slid my hands into my pockets, checking for my keys and wallet, and left my apartment. The dim overhead light flickered, casting its amber hues through the stairwell as I thundered down the steps. Nowadays, I spent so much time in workout gear I sometimes forgot how to dress like a regular human being. Nina used to force me into fashionable attire, but I was on my own now, so I'd popped on a bright pink crop top and my ripped jeans along with a pair of comfortable shitkickers.

I wandered toward Knockout on autopilot. I'd been heading there all week, and I had the feeling the trend would continue. It had taken me a while to get comfortable at my

old gym, but I already fit right in at Knockout. Although I didn't know if it was starting as an established fighter rather than brand new or the general vibe of the place. I'd exchanged contact info with a few of the folks who seemed cool, and I couldn't wait to make some new friends.

Tonight, though, I'd be going out by my lonesome.

Probably for the best, since I hoped I wouldn't be returning to my apartment alone.

The brick façade of the nearest building took up most of the block. At the end, the sign for Lucky Penny Tavern was all backlit. This looked like one of the newer establishments that had sprung up in a lot of the places that had been abandoned in this area. People loitered outside near the entrance, and when the door opened, the thrum of chatter escaped.

I grabbed the handle and stepped inside.

Wide arched windows across the front offered a great view of the street, and wooden tables were stationed around massive concrete pillars through the middle. The exposed brick walls and industrial framework gave the bar an artsy vibe, especially with the copper and brass metalwork decorating the walls.

At the far left, patrons perched on black barstools at the bar, its long, thick wooden surface gleaming. Some upbeat punk music pumped through the speakers, which fit the vibe of this place, and the dangling Edison bulbs cast dim lights throughout.

No way would I sit at a table by myself tonight. I walked toward the nearest empty barstool but came to a halt. A woman to the right hunched forward, ball cap obscuring her features. She was wearing a Flyers shirt, and her jeans clung to her muscular ass. However, her guarded stance, dark hair pulled into a ponytail, and the smooth, even shade of her exposed skin had my mind whirring.

I rerouted and headed to the unclaimed seat beside her.

When I plunked onto the barstool, a whiff of clove drifted toward me, and my core sparked to life. Bingo. A cursory scan told me I'd been right.

Looked like Sam and I were going to have a drink together after all.

She kept her face down at her phone as she scrolled through it. The bartender, a big, broad guy, gave me an up-nod.

“Whatever dark beer you’ve got on tap,” I ordered.

“Coming right up,” he said, grabbing a pint glass.

The feel of Sam’s eyes on me was like a drug, and I reveled in the prickle of awareness across my skin.

I lifted my hands. “Before you go jumping to conclusions, this was just a happy coincidence. I live up the street from here and was looking for somewhere to grab a drink.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That’s not a great neighborhood.”

I settled onto the barstool. She hadn’t immediately gotten up and stormed out, so I’d take whatever win I could get. “Beggars can’t be choosers. I needed affordable and fast. Besides, it’s close to the gym.”

“Why fast?” she asked and took a sip from her drink.

“Rum and Coke?” I pointed to the dark liquid.

“Just a Coke,” she said, lifting her glass in salute. “Not much of a drinker.”

“Or a talker, it seems.” Who knew when I’d get this chance outside of work again. Sam seemed determined to keep our relationship as professional as possible. If she didn’t want to fuck me, fine. I could sulk about that on my own time, but the need to learn what had happened, why she’d disappeared, burned stronger within me every day.

“I planned on sitting here and nursing my Coke in silence.” Sam lifted a brow.

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I chewed on my lip. What was I even doing bothering her? She'd made it clear she didn't want to talk and we'd remain above board. I'd swung out to the bars to hook up, not chase the hottest girl on earth who'd turned me down. The bartender placed a dark beer that looked like a porter on the bartop. I gladly accepted and passed over some cash.

I took a sip, my foot thump, thump, thumping on the leg of the barstool. Maybe I should finish this and get out of here.

"Hey," Sam said softly.

The seriousness in her dark eyes snared me on the spot. I didn't know why Sam had always drawn me in. She was ten years older, and it wasn't like she and I had ever spent a lot of time together—I'd been a kid and her kid sister's best friend. However, Sam's presence calmed me like a lazy summer day.

Back then, being around her was this intoxicating combination of peace, fascination, and attraction I'd never quite been able to find with anyone else.

"Just because I'm not chatty doesn't mean you can't talk," she said. "My hobbies consist of working out and watching documentaries about old men looking for lost treasure. I'm not the best for engaging conversations."

Not true in the slightest.

She held so many secrets I desperately wanted to know, but I understood what she'd placed on the table. We could talk as long as I didn't dig too deep.

My phone dinged, and I glanced at the screen. Nina, with another pic of our friends at the tavern together. My stomach twisted into knots. I should've told her I'd run into Sam—this wasn't the sort of information I should withhold.

"Is that..." she started, her voice ragged. "Fuck, never mind. Not my business."

"Nina?" I showed her the pic. "Yeah, and the rest of our crew."

Had it been ten years since she'd seen her sister too? Her folks? None of them would talk about Sam, so I had no idea, but the idea settled in my stomach like stale diner coffee.

"She's so grown up," Sam said. The strangled tone and how she balled her hands into fists until the knuckles turned white gave her away. Whatever had happened had affected her in a big way. "I mean, so are you."

"Yeah, that tends to happen in a decade."

Quiet settled between us again, but this wasn't the sort I could punch through. Sam stared back at her Coke, her shoulders bunched like she prepared to bolt. I didn't want her to leave, though. As much as I longed to know why she'd disappeared, I wanted to be around her even more.

"I'm not going to push, okay?" I stated bluntly. She swung her gaze my way, surprise painting her features. I shrugged. "Look, yes, I'm curious, but we also haven't seen each other in ages. I'd like to just hang out for now."

"This you trying to get me for that drink still? Damn, you're persistent." A half grin lifted her lips, and relief settled over me that she'd seemed to relax.

"It's one of my best qualities," I said, wagging my brows. "And you're here drinking

with me, aren't you? I'd say goal accomplished."

"So why the city?" she asked. The question took me by surprise, since she hadn't been doing a lot of pushing conversation thus far.

Hell, it was clear with how shattered-glass guarded she was that if I wanted to make any headway with her, I'd have to bleed a little bit.

"Needed to get the hell out." I ran my fingers through my hair. "You know, the usual—found my trainer with his dick buried in my girlfriend." As much as I tried for nonchalance, I hadn't been able to shake the bitterness from my tone. Not yet. Hopefully that would shift in the future, but as it stood, a whole lot of me still felt stripped raw with not enough varnish to protect myself.

"Well, fuck," Sam cursed low, her brows drawing together and her gaze dark. "How long did you and your trainer work together?"

My heart thumped a little harder. I didn't know how she pieced together I was more wrecked over losing my trainer, but somehow she had. "From the start. Chaz should've been my ride or die. Instead, the fucker screwed me over. Well—screwed Allie."

"How long were you and Allie together?" Sam asked.

"Question for a question," I challenged before clarifying. "About relationships."

She wrinkled her nose and took a sip from her Coke. "Fine. Fire away."

"A year, but it was a miserable year. Don't know why I clung on as long as I did, because she sure as hell hadn't been worth the wasted time." My palm was cool around my beer, and the cushion of the barstool comfortable.

My chest throbbed at talking about everything I'd run away from, even though I'd rehashed the story with friends and family a million times. Sam's quietness let the truth sink in a little deeper, though. That I was still sliced up from it all, no matter how much I cracked jokes or acted tough.

"Because you're dedicated," she said.

I swallowed hard. Damn, how easily she saw through me. That was rare. I'd met enough people who didn't bother looking past the surface to understand as much. "I think I deserve at least a solid question for that."

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“Maybe,” Sam said, her tone throaty and a minx-like tilt to her smile that I liked a little too much.

“Okay, longest relationship?” I asked, greedy for any information about what Sam had been up to all these years.

“Three years.” She tapped her finger against her glass. “Mia Stone, a total hottie go-getter who was so out of my league it was ridiculous.”

Envy flared in my chest. Probably her age and successful as hell, a lawyer or a doctor or some shit. Someone with way more to offer than me, who’d skipped out on college to head into fights. Someone with tons of experience instead of being twenty-one and only a few relationships deep.

“I find that hard to believe,” I said instead.

Sam shook her head, her ponytail swinging behind her. This close, I couldn’t help but notice the low neckline of the Flyers shirt, exposing a hint of cleavage and strong collarbones I wanted to lick. “Ex-fighter who couldn’t even last her first season turned trainer? I’m not anyone’s idea of a catch. Mia was top of her class in med school, so when she got a residency across the country, she didn’t hesitate to call us quits.”

I pointed a finger at her. “By that analysis, you’re saying I’m no catch either.”

Sam frowned. “Well, that’s a lot of horseshit.”

I shrugged. “You can’t be sure, though, can you?”

Sam fixed me with a pointed stare, one with enough intent that a shiver rolled through me. “It’s only been a few days of getting to know the adult you, and I can tell you’re the same level of determined you were as a kid. That you’ve got more raw talent in your pinky than most fighters out there. And genuine confidence like yours, the bounce-back attitude is rarer than you’d believe.”

Holy fuck. This woman was going to make me cry.

After Allie dismissing me and Chaz fucking me over, I had doubted myself in a big way, but that endorsement not just from my first crush but from my new trainer? Goddamn. Warmth spread through me, and I clutched to the ephemeral feeling like the sun peeking out after a week of rain.

“If I’m going to believe that, you need to agree you’re more than an ex-fighter turned trainer,” I challenged her. “You’ve got the calm demeanor and keen eye to teach. Not everyone possesses those skills.”

She licked her lips, making them glisten. The woman probably tasted like sin.

“Are you trying to coerce me into believing in myself, Amelia Johnson?” Sam arched an eyebrow. Shit, she looked far too pretty tonight. I tried not to swoon, but it was hard when she stared at me with her serious gaze.

I cracked a grin, all teeth. “You betcha.”

Slowly her lips curled into a genuine smile, the first I’d seen from her in over a decade. Her brown eyes lit up, and her features transformed into something breathtaking, something I wanted to slip into my pocket just for me.

“You haven’t changed in the slightest,” she said, shaking her head.

“Well, I’ve changed a bit.” I thrust my chest forward, batting my lashes.

“You’re not wrong there.” The sensual way she purred that out had me soaring.

Because the woman I thought I’d forever lost my chance with was actually seeing me, and there was no way I could pass her up.

Even if it meant lying to my best friend.

Chapter Six

Sam

After the way Ames had crash-landed into my life and seemed to be planted there, I needed to talk to someone.

My therapist had told me these were moments I should share with people I trusted, close friends I’d built, which had taken years to do. Nothing like having your parents kick you out for being a lesbian to slaughter your ability to get close to people.

And when I’d tried to contact Nina, she’d told me she knew my secret and that she didn’t want to have anything to do with me either. Yeah, that had pretty much disintegrated my foundation.

I walked to Bump and Grind, my favorite coffee shop, only a few blocks from my apartment. One thing had plagued me since Ames and I had spent the entire night at the Lucky Penny a few days ago. She and Nina seemed as close as they always had been, but she was an out lesbian.

Which didn't stack up with the way Nina had pushed me out.

Anytime my brain circled around to it, I got more tangled up, but that paled in comparison to the brew of lust and confusion regarding Ames. My client. My baby sister's best friend. Yet I hadn't gotten up and left at the bar. No, instead, I'd flirted with her, and we'd talked about everything from mistakes in past relationships to the movies we loathed. She was allowed to be wrong with her terrible opinion that Avengers was bad.

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All of the should, should, shoulds crowded in my brain, but none of them had mattered when we'd been sitting there exchanging glances and words with an electric currency I wasn't blind to.

What was worse had been how she'd made me feel. For the first time in years, I'd experienced a glow of self-worth within me, like what I had to say mattered. Like someone wanted me to stick around.

My chest spasmed at the thought, which came too close to colliding with the past.

Bump and Grind's wide glass windows showed off all the pine flooring and white walls of the coffee shop, and when I opened the door, the scent of coffee and the sound of smooth jazz slammed into me.

Discomfort rippled through me at the idea of confiding in someone. Honestly, I'd rather punch a weighted bag, but my therapist had said I needed to confide in others more. Even if the prospect made me want to vomit. This was a situation where I needed an opinion, and I only trusted one woman well enough to give it.

Maeve had already claimed a corner table with a cappuccino. She waved and made a shooping gesture toward the counter. I stepped into the line, three deep, and worked out my order in about two seconds flat. I usually switched between black coffee or mocha with extra whip, two wildly different moods.

Today was a mocha day.

I placed my order and stepped over to the handoff pane. How could I even broach this

topic with Maeve? She was my bar buddy, even though she lived in the suburbs. We'd met through the gym when she'd signed up for self-defense classes—mostly because she had the hots for one of the instructors. While I kept the majority of folks at a distance, she'd fast bullied her way into my life, and with how hot the feisty redhead was, I'd been tempted to try for a hookup.

But I'd needed a friend far more, and now we bickered like sisters most of the time.

My stomach squeezed tight. Since my real sister wanted nothing to do with me, I'd found a replacement. I was reeling from the way the past dragged its tendrils around my limbs, which was the exact reason I met up with Maeve today.

The barista passed over the mocha, the rich scent of chocolate making my mouth water.

I clutched the warm ceramic with the creamy whip in an artful swirl over the surface and joined Maeve.

“Okay, Samantha, I’m going to need the full rundown.” Maeve might be barely over five foot, but she was intimidating as fuck—because of all the direct eye contact and explosive personality. Complete opposite of mine.

“Maybe once I’ve gotten some caffeine into my system,” I said, sliding into the seat across from her. The pale wooden chairs were comfortable, yet another reason why I liked this place. My beat-up body needed a break every now and again.

“Nuh-uh,” she said, arm braced on the top of the chair behind her. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”

“Ew.” I blew on the top of my beverage and took a sip. Sweetness exploded on my tongue, and I savored it, as if the drink might bolster me for the conversation ahead. It

would help if I shared about my past more in general, but I'd chosen Maeve because she was one of the few who knew everything that had gone down with my family and me. Only because of a bad night involving too much tequila and vomiting in Maeve's passenger's seat, but she knew, nonetheless.

When I looked up, Maeve's blue eyes were burning holes into me.

"So, my sister's best friend is my newest client." I pushed out the words, swinging my gaze back down to my mocha. "And she grew up stupidly hot."

Maeve let out a low whistle. "Have you already started sleeping with her, and you need to be absolved from guilt or something? Because I'm never going to shame about going after some ass."

I shook my head. "Haven't slept with her, but she's direct as hell. Asked me out on a date, and she's flirty as fuck."

"What's the problem here?" Maeve asked. Her eyes twinkled with a knowing, as if she'd worked out my issue on her own. Having people who got me fucking sucked—even if I was grateful as hell to her.

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way my chest burned at the words I was about to admit. The ones I'd cycled over a thousand times. "She's connected to my family. To that time. And she's still close with my sister."

Maeve hmm'ed at me.

Even seeing the photo of my sister on the screen had been a gut punch I hadn't known how to handle. Getting cut out in a sharp slice like that, years apart where we weren't in contact—my sister looked like a stranger to me now. Yet I couldn't help but remember the kid I'd driven to get ice cream at Paolo's in the summer because it

was our favorite spot, or the one who'd come to me crying when the girls in her class had picked on her for the birthmark on her elbow.

If I did go on a date with Amelia, what could ever come from it?

It wasn't like we'd ever have a future, not when her best friend was an active source of pain for me. I might be an idiot at times, but not enough of one to keep placing my hand on the burner over and over.

"I'm going to sound like a dick, but do you need to date her?" Maeve asked. "It's obvious you're attracted to her, or you wouldn't have called me out here, but if you both need to fuck it out, then fuck it out."

"Going there feels like a betrayal." And that was the truth. My gut twisted at the thought of sleeping with the person my little sister was still best friends with while she hated my guts.

"Nope," Maeve said point-blank. "Your sister cut you out for being queer. That's a betrayal. At this point, you don't owe her an ounce of loyalty. This best friend of hers is a big girl who can make her own choices."

I wrinkled my nose.

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Maeve arched a brow. “How old?”

“Twenty-one,” I mumbled. Fuck, even saying it aloud made me feel like I was robbing the cradle. Still college age, but unlike someone who’d gone to college, Ames had already been out in the world for a spell. And hell, for being in her early twenties, she possessed unparalleled confidence. I wasn’t sure if it was genuine or just her sunshine attitude breaking through, but hopefully, she never lost her glimmer. That the world didn’t pummel it out of her the way it had me.

Maeve waved her hand in front of me. “Pah, twenty-one is fine. Old enough to know who you want to sleep with, even if you may not have figured out the rest.”

“And when do we figure out the rest?” I took another sip from my mocha.

Maeve snorted. “Fuck if I know. Tell me if you find out.”

Even though my skin prickled from the vulnerability of talking this over with her, some of the fuzziness in my mind had subsided. I’d been cycling through all-or-nothing mode, but Maeve wasn’t wrong in her assessment. Maybe as tactful as a wrecking ball, but I appreciated her unfailing ability to fairly assess situations.

“Enough about me,” I said, needing to escape the hot seat. Confiding in someone was bad enough, but no need to prolong my agony. “Tell me who you’re fucking.”

Because with Maeve, there was always someone.

“Nice pivot, but I expect a full report when you get over your misplaced loyalties and

bang the hell out of your hottie.”

The idea of fucking Ames sent a wave of heat through me, like a blast of wildfire that sparked through my veins. Having her splayed on my bed, her wavy hair spread across my pillow. Seeing those long lashes fluttering while she moaned. I would spend hours mapping out her body with my mouth, watching every response, every sinful shudder.

I clutched the mug a little tighter, and Maeve snorted.

“And I’m looking for a new flavor of the month right now,” Maeve said. “Keeping busy with the Sun and Moon Collective. Did you know they’re letting me offer goat yoga? You should try something like that at Knockout.”

“Yeah, bringing a bunch of goats to a fight gym. That sounds like a good idea.”

“Hey, don’t knock it until you try it,” Maeve said, her eyes twinkling. “Pun intended.”

I groaned, but relief filtered through my veins. One single conversation with her had cleared my mind. Sure, being around Ames brought an edge of pain, but she was fucking gorgeous, and if we didn’t have our past connection muddling the waters, I would’ve said to hell with it and slipped between the sheets with her ages ago.

I took another sip of my mocha, letting the sweetness flood me as if it could somehow bolster my decision. I’d spent the past six months in a bit of a sex drought, mostly because I hadn’t been chasing like I used to. Maybe I was getting tired and old, but the thrill of landing a pretty girl and tumbling into bed with her wasn’t as shiny as it used to be. However, Ames had been pursuing me—something that sparked new energy through my veins.

The fact that she even looked my way was flattering—the woman was sex on legs—but I'd also have to be blind to ignore the chemistry that flared between us. My heart thudded a bit harder as resolve settled inside me.

The past kept taking and taking from me, whether memories knocked me down at the knees or the hurts still sliced me open.

It was beyond time I stole something back.

Chapter Seven

Ames

I wanted to toss my phone into traffic.

The picture of Allie and Chaz together made me gag. All posturing and swooning, out to the local bars because that was the exciting sort of shit Allie had wanted to do when we were together. Apparently, karma wasn't striking down on cheaters, because they were basking in new couple happiness while I'd needed to relocate and start over again. My skin prickled with anger that had burned deep within me for a while now.

Luckily, I was heading to the gym, so I could pound it out there.

My soles slapped against the pavement a little harder as I made my way to Knockout. Last weekend, when I'd spent the night in the bar with Sam, I'd been floating the day after. I'd hoped we'd turned a corner, that maybe whatever flared between us might deepen, but then training had resumed. She'd slipped into her normal distance, despite the way she stripped me down with her eyes.

God, I was going out of my mind.

The hit to my already fragile ego had landed, and I couldn't afford to take another blow. I'd made it clear I was interested in her, but I refused to push.

I shouldn't be pushing in the first place. Not with Nina's sister.

However, Sam had infiltrated her way through my bloodstream. She'd always been a vivid part of my fantasies, and now, seeing her more mature and even hotter amplified all of those a thousandfold. Scars marked up her arms, and my fingers itched to trace the one on her cheek. And I was in for another sweaty session with her—training—where I'd leave just as sexually frustrated as before.

The sign stood out farther down the block, and I quickened my pace. I'd arrived early today, wanting to take my time in the shower and get some better stretches in before we started.

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When I opened the door, the scent of sweat and cleaner settled some of the bitterness that had been percolating through my veins. If only it was as pure as anger, though. No, seeing Allie and Chaz so happy burned through me like acid. Maybe I'd been the problem—too much and not enough, all in the same breath.

“Hey, Ames,” Emmit said.

“Figured I'd get ahead today,” I said, tugging on my duffel and making a beeline for the locker room. Normally, I'd stay and chat a bit more, but all this prickly energy coursing through me would sabotage any attempts at small talk. I just needed to feel—anything but this.

I tossed my duffel in a locker near the back.

The door to the locker room creaked, but tucked back here, I couldn't see who entered. Hopefully, they wouldn't want to strike up a conversation.

Footsteps came closer, and I sucked in a breath, restraining a groan.

Sam stepped into view.

Her hair was pulled into the usual ponytail, her tits on display in that tight sports bra she loved to wear, and her black shorts showed off plenty of creamy muscular thigh. Fuck, it was so unfair of her to appear looking hot as ever while I was horny and angry and needed release so damn badly.

“What's wrong?” she asked, her brow crinkling.

I swallowed hard. Of course she'd noticed something was off. Sam's observation skills were unparalleled—it was what made her an exceptional trainer, but it was also something that had attracted me early on.

“Just stupid shit,” I muttered, rifling my fingers through my hair. “Seeing my ex and ex-trainer happy together on socials.”

Tip of the fucking iceberg, though.

Sam didn't say anything, just stared at me with a piercing gaze, the one that flayed me open.

“Look, I'll get over my hurt feelings. I wasn't enough to keep her on the hook. And who would want this anyway?”

Sam took a step closer. Then another. And another until mere inches separated us. She placed a hand beside my head, palm splaying against the locker behind me, crowding into my space.

My throat bobbed, and all I noticed was the perfect shape of her lips, the dark, spicy scent of clove lingering around her.

“She was an idiot,” Sam said, her voice husky. Her hot breath puffed against my mouth, and my knees grew weak. My heart accelerated as my body responded like it'd been ignited. Heat rushed through me in one fierce sweep.

“Look, I don't see any takers lining up.” I couldn't meet Sam's gaze, mostly because I couldn't hide how badly I wanted her. I'd never been good at locking away my feelings, and from the moment we'd crash-landed into each other's lives again, all the yearning I'd felt as a kid had rushed back in full force.

“Consider me first in line, then,” Sam said.

Holy. Fuck.

I looked up, expecting mockery in her eyes, but no—deadly earnest.

My whole body immolated. Even my cells ignited.

Sam crooked her brow as if giving me the chance to back away, to turn her down.

Hell no.

The space between us stretched out to infinity for a single moment—and then I leaned in and closed it.

My lips brushed against hers, and the electricity sparked through from that single point of contact. Sam pressed in so my back thumped against the locker. She claimed my mouth with surety, turning the kiss from hesitant to incendiary. My knees turned to rubber, and my insides exploded with butterflies, the buoyant lightness the exact opposite of how I’d been feeling. With the way she pinned me to the lockers with her arm at my side, her body in front of mine, I was growing delirious with want, my pussy soaked.

As she slipped her hot tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss with ease, I drank in her taste, fresh like mint. This was everything I’d imagined and more—the effortless way she took control, how her calm competence bled into her movements. Sam might not be flashy, but she’d always given off the vibe she’d be an intense fuck—and her kiss proved she knew how to use her tongue. Pleasure rolled through me in a ferocious sweep, my heart all but bouncing out of my chest as I rested a hand on her hip. Her skin was hot where my fingers splayed across it, and the back of my head thumped against the locker again and again as I lunged in for more.

More of her drugging kisses, more of her sweet taste, more of the euphoria sparking through my system.

My preteen self would've died if she knew that one day Sam Taylor would devour me like this.

I nipped at her lower lip, trying to draw her lush mouth to mine. Her softness, her other hand gripping my hip, pinning me against the hard metal behind my back—fuck, I was so lost in the thrill sweeping me away that I never wanted to find my way back. Her low moan vibrated against my mouth and then traveled straight to my core. My clit fucking throbbed from the kiss alone, from having Sam up in my space.

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Sam took control, exactly how I'd hoped she would, and I surrendered to her kiss, to how she crowded my body, to the overwhelming need surging through me. I whimpered against her mouth as she devoured, twining her tongue with mine. My heart raced a million miles a minute, and my mind was reeling. This had been a fantasy for so long I could barely believe it was happening. Moisture pooled between my legs, which were trembling.

Sam raked her fingers through my hair, giving a light tug that sent a frisson of pleasure through my system. She slowly pulled away, and I bit back a noise of protest. Her dark eyes were luminous, filled with banked heat, and her lips were even plumper and redder from our kiss. The intensity in her gaze was enough to drown in, and I wasn't sure how I was supposed to go work out now with how damn turned on I was.

"We've got a little time before your session starts," she said, her voice throaty and seductive.

Was she suggesting...I licked my lips.

Her eyebrow lifted, the look in her eyes wicked. "Don't know about you, but I could do with a shower."

My heart rate accelerated like a Tesla, ramping up faster than I believed possible. "Depends."

"On what?"

I leaned in so my lips brushed against her ear. “How many times you can make me come.”

“Challenge accepted.” Sam took her sports bra off and tossed it to the bench, placing her gorgeous breasts on display. My nipples tightened just from looking at the dark areolas, the hefty globes I wanted to squeeze. Before I could process that, she’d drawn down those short shorts and panties to reveal a muscular ass I wanted to sink my teeth into and her gorgeous pussy with a thatch of dark, trimmed curls. My mouth watered. Fuck, there was too much I longed to taste.

“Plan on showering in that?” Sam asked, a cockiness in her voice that made me goddamn swoon.

I sucked in a breath and focused on getting my pants down. I dragged off my gray sweats and panties in one go, my hands trembling. Any moment, someone could come walking in and disrupt us. If anything, that spurred me on to move faster. I ditched my shirt and then my sports bra in record time, adding them to the pile on the bench beside us. Goose bumps traveled across my body, but not from the cold. Sam’s gaze lit me on fire from the inside out, and my pussy was dripping.

Sam extended her hand. “Follow me.”

I slipped mine in hers, and she led us to the line of showers along the back. My pulse thumped hard, my skin buzzing. Sam had kissed me. I kept tripping over that simple fact because it had been something I’d dreamed of for far too long.

She pushed back the curtain, the sound echoing through the locker room—because everything echoed in here. That awareness soaked through me, pumping more adrenaline through my veins as I stepped in after her, drawing the flimsy fabric shut behind me. I drank in the sight of her as if I looked with fresh eyes each time.

Those shapely hips should be illegal, as should her breasts, so round and the perfect handfuls. Her hair was still pulled back in the ponytail, but I loved it like that. It fit her completely. Fuck, the woman even had abs, ones I needed to trace with my tongue. I wanted to lower to my knees and lap at her pussy until she came.

However, when Sam stared at me with a wild spark in her eyes, I held back. This was her rodeo.

“Fuck, you look delicious.” Her low, throaty voice was my undoing. “C’mere.” She beckoned me with one finger, and I took a step toward her. She reached behind me and turned on the shower, the cool water sending a shock through my system until it warmed up. Not like a cold shower could douse the inferno burning inside me. The water cascaded between us, barely covering either of us—but I didn’t mind seeing her all wet and slicked up in the slightest.

“Can I touch you?” she asked, her directness a total turn-on.

“Anywhere you want,” I murmured like a breathless slut.

The corner of her mouth quirked into a deadly smirk. Fucking sinful. She stepped into my space again, and I stood there, waiting—needing—for her to make the next move. Sam leaned in and nipped at my earlobe, sending a jolt right through to my core, and then slid her palm up my side until she circled my breast. The water pelted down on my skin, warm and blissful against my muscles, but they were already melting from that kiss, from having Sam close.

My nipples were so taut, waiting to be touched, and Sam didn’t let me down.

She brushed her thumb against my nipple, and the sensation traveled straight between my legs.

“Nggh.” Coherent words were overrated.

“God, these tits.” Sam grabbed one of my breasts and lifted it toward her mouth. The firm grip around my breast, the way her tongue lapped out at the tip of my nipple, all of it had my legs quaking and my clit throbbing. But she didn’t stop there. No, she wrapped her lips around my nipple and sucked hard.

“Oh fuck,” I cried out. My clit ached, and I needed her between my legs something fierce. Except she wasn’t stopping. Instead, Sam backed me against the stall, grabbed my other breast, and gave that nipple the same treatment. My eyes rolled back in my head, and my core throbbed as she alternated back and forth, nipping, sucking my nipples until I was writhing, delirious with need.

A sob escaped my mouth and echoed through the place. However, she was relentless, tugging and teasing at my nipples until I whimpered. The handfuls she had of my tits, how claimed and possessed I felt with her firm grip had me floating even higher, as if this wasn’t already the hottest moment of my life.

Her mouth was scorching, her tongue, teeth, and the suction at the perfect rhythm to make me lose control. My legs were shaking, and I’d never felt the need between my thighs grow this sharp or incessant before. But the sight of her, fingers buried in my tits, her lush lips wrapped around my nipple was intoxicating. The woman launched a direct frontal assault I happily surrendered to.

She finally pulled back, her wet hair plastered to her skin in the hottest way possible. Rivulets traveled down her shoulders, through the valley between her breasts, down her vee to her pussy. God, I wanted to slip my fingers between her thighs.

Before I could move forward or process anything, Sam had let go of my breasts and lowered to her knees.

My nostrils flared. Oh fuck.

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Her position on her knees placed her right in front of my pussy, and a moan flew from my lips. When she looked up at me, the determination in her gaze lanced right through my core.

“Foot up on my shoulder, gorgeous.”

“You expect me to do gymnastics?” My words barely came out steady, which was the same wobbly state of my legs.

Again with the eyebrow arch. Holy hell, this woman would ruin me for anyone else. “I do if you want me to eat out this pretty pussy.”

I bit my lower lip and braced against the wall hard to support myself as I lifted my leg and rested my foot on her shoulder. The motion bared me to her. The shower hissed, only half of the spray reaching us. Still, I wasn’t chilled in the slightest with this inferno roaring through me. Water slid down my stomach, rolling to the vee of my hipbones and dripping down my pussy. Not like it could wash away the sheer volume of slickness gushing from me.

I’d never been this embarrassingly wet or turned on in my entire existence.

All thanks to my preteen fantasy coming to life.

Sam leaned in, and the moment her tongue brushed against my clit, I shattered.

She began to lick with the sort of dedication and persistence that had me unraveling fast. My thighs were quaking, so I pressed harder against the wall behind me, my

palms planting against the surface. Another moan slipped from my lips at the intense bursts of pleasure rolling through me with every swipe of her tongue. Sam hit the target every time.

The door creaked loudly, and we both froze. I glanced down at her, and she blinked away for a moment before pulling back to mouth “quiet.”

Oh god.

I balled my hand into a fist and bit down on it.

Sam descended on me again, with more fervor than before. Footsteps echoed through the locker room. Shit, someone was wandering around. All while Sam was blowing my mind and sending me to higher heights than I believed possible. Her hands steadied around my hips, moving me the way she wanted as she ate me out with unwavering focus. The ache in my clit grew sharper and more intense, to the point I was ready to scream. My teeth sank into my fist even harder.

Still, she didn't relent. No, her tongue drove against my clit like she was determined to send me vaulting over the edge.

My breath began coming in faster bursts through my nose as the pressure in my clit became unbearable. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I tipped my head back, the hot water splashing against my skin, Sam's fingers pressing so hard into my hips I hoped they'd bruise. My hand remained firmly over my mouth as I choked down moan after moan. The shuffling sounds and creaks from farther in the room signaled someone was still out there. We couldn't risk getting busted fucking in the showers. However, the thrill of danger vaulted me higher, brought me closer to the edge.

Sam's mouth descended on my clit, nipping and sucking at it between laps, and the pleasure rolling through me was torturous. My body felt like it would detonate from the inside out, every nerve at attention, every inch of me bursting with awareness. Sam's hair looked black and shiny from the water pouring over it, and the droplets down her face, her back, the crack of her ass—holy hell, I'd never seen anything hotter.

She sucked hard at my clit, and that did me in.

My orgasm exploded through me, and I bit down even harder as I sobbed into my fist. Wave after wave of sheer bliss blasted through me, chasing away any rational thought. My whole body quaked from the force of it as my vision whited out. My clit throbbed, more intense than I'd ever experienced. And Sam didn't relent, sucking at my clit while I came and came and came.

Fuuuuck.

I closed my eyes, panting in the wake of my release as the aftershocks still rippled through me. Sam pulled away from my pussy and lowered my leg on her shoulder back to the ground. Before I could open my eyes, she drew my fist from my mouth and replaced it with a soft kiss to my lips. Her mouth was hot and tasted tangy, like my release. I licked into her mouth, letting out a soft moan.

She stepped back, and my eyes fluttered open.

"Let me take care of you," I said, reaching between us.

"Hell yeah." She spread her legs a little wider, and I slid my fingers through her soaked folds. Fuck, she was wet as hell and not from the water gliding over our bodies. I bit down on my lip as I circled her clit.

“I like penetration,” she murmured against my mouth.

I loved the way she stated what she wanted, how she was still in control, even when I was fucking her. The door creaked again. The person who’d been in the locker room must have left. I ran my fingers along her folds and nudged my fingertips against her entrance.

“Give it to me hard and fast.”

Nngh. Yeah, I could do that. I pushed my fingers inside her, my already weak legs quaking at the sinful feel of her hot pussy. Goddamn, the woman squeezed my fingers tight, the smooth glide so damn hot I couldn’t stand it.

Sam tipped her head back and rocked against my hand, my two fingers buried inside her as I pumped furiously. Her lashes were wet and dark, and the way her normally serious face softened was something I wanted to memorize. Who knew if this would happen again? My chest twisted at the thought, but I pushed it away. I kissed her neck, enjoying her taste, as I thrust my fingers inside her over and over. She bit her lush lower lip to muffle her cries.

I drank in her water-slicked skin, her pussy clenching around my fingers, her nipples brushing against mine. The intimacy of how she wrapped her arms around my shoulders, leaning into me as I fucked her hard, made me reel. I was floating high on endorphins—not just from coming my brains out but from having this woman in my arms, pressed up against a literal dream.

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Strands of her ponytail plastered to my shoulder, and I adored the way her body began to shake. She was close.

I nipped at her neck, the slender column fucking delicious. Her fevered skin against mine, her quickened breaths through her nose, her hot channel gripping tight around my fingers—all of it was heady and perfect, details I wanted to remember forever.

“I’m going to come.” Her voice was raspy and rough.

I curled my fingers in to find her G-spot, and her entire body tensed.

Bingo.

She writhed in my arms in the throes of her orgasm. Sam’s lashes fluttered, her head tipped back, and the bliss relaxing her expression entranced me. The water streamed over us as her pussy pulsed against my fingers a few more times before she all but sagged against me.

For a few moments, we just leaned against each other, my fingers still buried in her cunt while we sucked in desperate breaths, the hiss of the water overhead almost drowning out the sound.

Fuck, I was wrung out, and we hadn’t even started training yet. But the orgasm had taken the edge off in the perfect way.

“I don’t want to move,” Sam said as I pulled my fingers out of her pussy. “But I’m going to be on the clock soon, and we’ve got a workout in the books.”

“Don’t remind me.”

The glow to her features, a softness in her normally hard brown eyes, had my heart fluttering, and I thanked everything holy I’d gotten a chance with her, even if this was a one and done.

“Look.” She brushed her lips over my ear. “I promised multiple orgasms. If you do well today, we’ll see about making that happen.”

My heart thundered, and hope bubbled inside me in such a fierce wave I could barely stand it. She might not be offering anything more than another hookup, but after the lows I’d come from, this high was exactly what I needed.

Chapter Eight

Sam

Amelia should’ve been a one and done.

Maeve’s suggestion had been to hook up, yet I hadn’t been able to help myself in offering another round. However, after our session in the shower and then in the ring, I had clients to attend to, so she’d delivered a wink, blew me a kiss, and sauntered away.

At the end of my shift, I leaned against the locker and tugged my phone out of my duffel.

A text was waiting for me from the exact woman I’d been obsessing over.

Don’t suppose you’d want to grab dinner? Jared’s Pizza’s right between my place and the gym.

Dinner meant sitting down and talking, not fucking, which was probably bad news. My stomach rumbled out loud. Clearly, my body liked the idea, though. I'd been to Jared's a ton of times, and the pizza was solid, but I'd be lying if I wasn't more interested in the company. The images of Amelia in my arms, her unraveling above me when I ate her out, played on a loop in my brain for the rest of my shift. I would never in a million years have expected the kid I'd known to grow into a stone-cold fox, but here we were.

My fingers betrayed me before I could help myself.

Meet you there in ten.

"You heading out?" Cortez asked as he stepped beside me, tugging off his sweat-soaked shirt.

"Got a date, apparently." My cheeks burned.

He crooked a brow, a knowing glint in his eyes. "With trouble?"

I flipped him off, slid my duffel over my shoulder, and walked out of the locker room. I didn't smell like a peach, but Ames had seen me plenty worse since I was her trainer.

When I stepped out into the gym, Brooks headed my way. Their presence was always welcome, as we'd gelled together easily when I first started working here. Maybe because we were both the quieter sort, but they were one of the few I went to if I needed to vent or talk.

"Finished up?" I asked.

"Just wrapped. You want to grab something to eat?" they asked.

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“Can’t.” A grin threatened to tug my lips. Ugh, that sort of reaction was dangerous. Ames and I could never be more than a fling—not with her connection to her past, and not with her connection to my sister. My smile wavered. “Grabbing a bite with a hookup.”

Brooks squeezed my shoulder. “Be careful.” Their eyes were soft with understanding that made my stomach flip. Brooks and Maeve were the two folks who managed to push past light and easy with me, and sometimes I resented how much they could see through me.

I shrugged. “We’re not anything more.” Except even as I stated those words, they tasted like a lie.

Brooks nodded, gave my shoulder another squeeze, and headed for the lockers. I pulled on my ponytail, trying to ignore the frisson of vulnerability traveling through me. Because the truth was, the kiss with Ames had been life changing. I’d never experienced the way my heart lunged out of my chest—not with how guarded I was. When she looked up at me with that soft expression, her blue eyes as alluring as a summer sky, I couldn’t deny her anything.

The idea of shutting her down made my stomach wrench, which couldn’t spell good news for me.

I waved to Emmit at the front desk and slipped through the front door. The familiar scent of asphalt, rubber, and metal greeted my nose, pure Philly. I might’ve grown up in the suburbs, but the city was where I’d found my stride, where I’d emerged from my ashes a different person. Maybe not whole, maybe always a little broken, but I’d

found a family of my own here—one that wouldn't toss me out for who I loved.

I cut across the sidewalk faster than needed, but it gave me far less time to contemplate what I walked into. This wasn't what I'd discussed with Maeve. She would've kept things to a single fuck in the shower and some occasional acknowledgments of a sexy-as-hell hookup. And with a lot of the women I'd taken to bed, that would've been doable.

Something about Ames made that impossible—whether it was the fact I'd known her from childhood or how her brightness always threatened to infect me.

The sign for Jared's Pizza stood out at the end of the block. This time of year, it was still light in the evening, and most of the restaurants had tables out cluttering the sidewalk. Jared's was one of them, the cheap white tabletops and black wrought-iron chairs a familiar sight.

Ames was sitting at one of the tables, and my heart sped up.

Fuck, trouble indeed.

She'd changed out of her gym clothes from this morning and wore a cute red tunic and black shorts. Her chestnut waves were glossy and pinned back. She looked up, and those blue eyes landed on me. The gut punch of—fuck, everything—lust, longing, curiosity swelled inside me with such force I stumbled.

Fucking her to get her out of my system had officially backfired.

If anything, my mind was consumed, my heart trying to stake claims I had no right to.

I plucked at my sweaty tee. Shit, I should've changed. While yes, she'd seen me in this attire plenty, the care she'd put into her appearance made me want to step up.

Because despite my paltry attempt at declaring this a hookup, my heart was saying date. Ames's smile brightened her whole face, and the thump in my chest drowned out the sounds of the late afternoon traffic.

Ames gripped the arms of her chair like she might rise, and the temptation to lean over and claim her lips washed over me, drawing my feet closer than intended. She licked her lips, practically begging me to kiss her.

I swallowed hard and took a seat instead. Disappointment flashed in her gaze, but she pasted on her bright smile again just as fast. Fuck, I was an asshole. However, no matter how badly my body wanted to leap in headfirst, I couldn't forget Amelia was my sister's best friend.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry enough to eat a whole pizza by myself." Amelia dove into the conversation with a smooth fluidity I envied. She'd always been friendly and engaging, and adulthood had amplified those skills a thousandfold. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find it sexy as hell.

"As your trainer who knows you've got a fight next week, I should be steering you to better food choices," I said, tapping the menu as I scanned it over. "However, after the workout you had today and the one in the showers this morning—eat whatever you feel like."

Heat bloomed in those gorgeous eyes. "I know exactly what I want."

Well, damn.

Focusing on sexy was a good thing. Much better than leaning in for a whiff of her perfume or reaching across the table to twine my fingers with hers.

A server approached, a young guy who had to be early twenties—fuck, Amelia's

age—and he flashed a grin at us. “What can I get for you?”

“An extra-large pizza and fries,” I said, lifting my chin at Ames. “You want any toppings?”

“Awfully bold assuming I’ll split that with you,” she said, her flirtatious tone making my engines rev. Her eyes twinkled. “Plain’s fine for me. Most folks don’t want anchovies on their pizza.”

I arched an eyebrow. “That’d be correct. But if you desperately need them on half, I’ll tolerate it.”

She smirked. “I’ll survive. But add cheese on those fries and you’re going to have trouble getting rid of me.”

I glanced at the server. “Okay, cheese fries.”

He offered a salute and walked off to place our order. My heart twisted at just how easy it was to sit here and have dinner with Ames. Like a slice of home. No matter how many walls I’d put up over the years, I’d been yearning for the simpler life before I’d come out. When I’d still been a fool who hoped my family would love me, no matter what.

I sucked in a sharp breath. I needed to reroute. “So, what got you into MMA in the first place?”

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The first day she came into the gym, I'd been shocked as shit to realize it was Amelia Johnson and as a fighter, no less. She'd been outgoing and athletic but sunny, more the girl you'd expect on the cheer squad than in the ring.

Her cheeks pinked, and she took a big slurp of her water.

My curiosity piqued at her quiet. So far, she hadn't hesitated to jump headfirst into difficult topics—whether it was asking me out on a whim or this morning when she'd talked about her insecurities over her old relationship.

I didn't break the silence, wanting to give her time to speak at her own pace rather than potentially spooking her, so I sipped at the water the server had dropped off for me.

She scrubbed her face with her palms. "Ugh, this is embarrassing."

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms. "Well, now I'm intrigued."

"I might've sort of had a crush on you way back when." The words tumbled out. "You'd show up after MMA, looking super fucking hot, and even though you were long gone by the time I started high school, I decided to try out a class."

My heart thumped a little harder. The shy way Ames acted hinted the crush had gone deep, which landed with mixed feelings. "So, how disappointed were you when you saw where I was now?" I asked, steering away from the hope, the adrenaline burst at having the admiration of someone like her. That was past me she'd been into, not the present version—ten years older and broken.

Ames slapped her palm on the table. “Enough of that bullshit. If anything, I was intimidated because you’ve only gotten hotter and more competent.”

My cheeks heated at her praise, at the way she stared at me like I was worth more. That type of passion, that type of support, was addictive, and I wasn’t immune to the lure. “You tried out a class and then what?” I was unable to address the other shit—not when it made me feel more stripped down than I’d been in the shower with her this morning.

She shrugged. “I’ve always had a lot of energy, and MMA was a great outlet for it. I’d never expected to be any good, but the rush when I won my first fight? Yeah, I’m riding this out for as long as I can.”

“You’re talented. And I’m not just saying that because you’re my client.”

She shot me a scorching look, but beneath it, layers of history between us simmered, sediment stacked under pressure until over time it turned into something beautiful. The years we’d shared, the connection from before I’d left, the love for MMA, and the direction we’d each taken that led us to here. All of it swelled beneath my skin like something momentous, something bigger than me.

Far bigger than a single night.

I tugged on my ponytail, ignoring the jittery sensation that swept through me—the mix of nerves and anticipation pure trouble. Especially when I was trying to protect my foolish fucking heart.

We’d taken hours with dinner, sharing conversation and pizza. I passed the cheese fries to Ames, mostly because I didn’t want to get stabbed. We had built up appetites and demolished the pie in a sitting, and there was barely a crumb left. Far shittier than I normally ate with my steady lean protein and veggies diet, but today was all about

indulgence from start to finish.

“You didn’t need to pay,” Ames said, pouting.

“No, but I wanted to.” I popped down a few bills and rose from my seat. My ass ached from sitting for so long, but honestly, the time had flown by. Night had coated the city in shadows, and the streetlights stretched out in either direction, casting their hazy beacons throughout Philly. With the honks of the traffic, the casual passersby, and the skyscrapers lit up, the city barely felt different than it did during the day.

“What direction is your place?” I asked.

She pointed to the right. “That way.”

“I’m walking you home,” I said, leaving no room for argument.

Ames fixed me a look. “I’m a big girl, Taylor. I can handle the eight-minute trek back.”

I crossed my arms, not budging. “And I’ve got ten years of living in the city on you.”

“Pulling out the age card, are we?” Ames said as she grabbed her bag and slipped the strap onto her shoulder. It was bubblegum pink with a unicorn, bursting with rainbows across the background.

“What’s that, a Lisa Frank purse?” I teased.

She wrinkled her nose. “Who the hell is that?”

I clutched my chest, feigning drama. “Ouch. Lord, I know I’m old, but damn.” As much as I joked, Ames was a decade younger than me, and it fucked with my head

how goddamn hot my baby sister's best friend had turned out. Still, she'd lived enough to make her own decisions, so I wouldn't waste time second-guessing her. "Come on." I tipped my head toward the road. I started in the direction of her apartment before she could argue with me.

As we walked down the sidewalk, a comfortable quiet settled between us. Cars zipped by, the flare of their high beams casting patterns on the pavement, and a metal and stone scent lingered, fitting with the slight chill the evening brought.

Ames shivered a bit as she tugged on her "not Lisa Frank" purse. Clearly, the lack of sleeves on her tunic and her shorts weren't cutting it in the warmth department. I was tempted to plaster my body to hers, but I unzipped my duffel instead.

"Here," I said, snagging my spare hoodie and passing it over.

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Her lashes fluttered, and the softness in her gaze when she looked my way had my heart tripping all over itself. She tugged it on in a fluid motion, and my knees grew a little weak at the sight of her in my Knockout hoodie.

“Looks good on you.” My voice came out hoarser than planned.

“Thanks.” The lip bite and the way she peered up at me from beneath those long lashes was the sexiest thing I’d seen. The hoodie didn’t hide her curves in the slightest, and those muscular legs were still on clear display, showing off thighs I wanted wrapped around me. Or hell, I’d love to ride against her thigh until I came.

At every alley we passed, I peered in the darkness—in an area like this, vigilance was key—but my gaze gravitated back to Ames every time.

“I know we’re not talking about the past.” Ames raised her hand. “But one question.”

My shoulders tensed, even though the more we hung out, the more I was tempted to slice myself open. The desire to know what was going on with my family was near-unbearable, but finding out would only hurt me.

Her eyes twinkled. “Do you still collect X-Men comics?”

Relief almost punched the breath from my chest, along with respect that Ames hadn’t pushed me. That alone made me want to trust her because she had every reason to demand answers.

“You got me.” The grin rising to my lips hurt a little, the muscles rusty. “I’m current

with the comics, and my collection is out of control, though I'm impressed you remembered."

She gave a helpless little shrug. "I remembered everything."

The gravity of her tone combined with the casual vulnerability had me stumbling, but I righted myself. The idea she'd had a crush on me for this long was equal parts mind-blowing and humbling. Not like I felt I deserved the attention, but hell—I was only human.

Amelia Johnson was such a bad idea on so many fronts—a client, a decade younger, and my sister's best friend—yet I couldn't keep myself from pursuing her.

"That's my place," she said, pointing to one of the rowhomes that got divided into apartments. She hesitated, so different from her confident approach from earlier.

Fuck it.

"Want to show me around?" I asked, my voice escaping in a low rasp.

Her eyes flared, and she licked her pretty pink lips until they were glossy. We came to a stop outside of her stoop.

Ames crooked her finger at me and delivered a perfect "fuck me" look. "Come on inside."

Chapter Nine

Ames

I was flat out obsessed.

A week had passed since Sam had fucked me in the shower at Knockout, and then we'd had sex in my apartment, barely reaching my bed. Half hanging off, we'd stripped down and ground against each other's thighs until we came, which then required another shower after the mess we'd made. I had a fight this weekend, so training was getting more intense, but we'd still found corners at the gym to make out in and the occasional night when she landed in my bed again.

Preteen me would've died and gone to heaven if she knew that someday I'd be hooking up with Sam. But whatever this was between us didn't feel fast and dirty. No, she texted me every day, checked in on me, and didn't hesitate to sleep over either. Waking up beside her was next-level bliss.

I tugged on my sneakers, getting ready for my jog. Despite what Sam said, evening was fine for a run with how bustling this part of the city was. And I planned on hitting up the Rail Park to get my cardio on. I'd take any extra edge back in the ring because I was facing off against one of my former trainer's fighters. Which meant Chaz would be there, showing his ugly mug. And more than anything, I wanted to win this fight to claim a little karma for myself.

Keys and wallet in the pocket of my running pants, Mace in the other, and I was ready to go. The second I stepped outside, cool shadows slipped over my skin with a velvet quality I always associated with night. I hopped down the steps, my body humming with readiness to expel that energy. I could think of at least a dozen ways I'd prefer to burn it—all of them involving Sam—but I hadn't checked when she finished work today.

Didn't want to appear needy as hell, even though I was. As much as I tried to stay cool and detached and remind myself we never promised anything, internally, I was throwing a fucking glow stick rave.

No point in waiting around. I did a few quick stretches on my stoop and launched into

a run toward the Rail Park. The wind whistled in my ear as I passed alleys and streets, my senses on high alert as always. The streetlights overhead cast their sallow beams onto the pavement, and a steady stream of cars rolled through. This area was a hotspot with plenty of bars, concerts at Union Transfer, and nightclubs. If I were the exciting type, like Allie had wanted, I'd be exploring all those options instead of going for a run to get my cardio quota in.

However, the fights exhilarated me like nothing else, and most fighters had a limited shot at glory. I was willing to put in the work for a win, to climb the ranks, and that didn't seem worth tossing aside for a few drinks at a too-loud dance club.

My body sank into the rhythm of the run, one of my favorite forms of cardio. I wasn't a long-distance runner, but I loved the burst of energy and the way I all but soared across the asphalt, needing to dodge the occasional pedestrian.

Time melted away as I raced along the sidewalk, the tall buildings on either side of me blurring. Like this, I could shut off the stream of worries percolating through my system and bask in the bliss of motion. I drew in deep breaths of the city, all metal, stone, and exhaust fumes, which imprinted in my mind as hope.

A month into starting over and I was not only in great shape for my next fight, but I was also hooking up with the girl of my dreams.

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In the near distance, the elevated Rail Park loomed. The old rail line had been converted to an overhead jogging path, and I loved how close I lived to there. Hell, I loved this spot in the city in general. It had so much character I'd barely gotten to crack into. I jogged up the wooden ramp to the entrance, my heart thumping hard. Up here, the city stretched out around me, the sharp lines of the skyscrapers lit up for the night. Despite the overwhelming darkness that coated Philly, the number of streetlights and illuminated buildings made it look like a reflection of the starry sky.

I'd just hit the main stretch of the Rail Park when my phone began to buzz in my pocket. I slowed down, ready for a brief break anyway. A sheen of sweat had burst on my forehead, and I wiped it away with my forearm before answering my phone. "Hey?"

"She lives," Nina said. Instant guilt surged through me. I'd been in my bubble since I moved here and even more so the past week, ever since Sam and I hooked up. Had I been avoiding Nina on purpose? Maybe a little.

"Sorry I've been so shit at communication," I said, my heart thumping harder. Best friends didn't sleep with estranged sisters. Except I'd gotten the opportunity with Sam and had dived in headfirst, without a thought to how much this would hurt Nina. Fuck, I was the worst sort of friend. I made a beeline to the hanging benches lining the path, only one at the end taken by a couple who seemed to be in deep conversation.

"I'd be mad if I didn't already expect it," she said in her light, cheery tone. She wouldn't be feeling the same if she knew the big secret I kept. "Not only are you in a new place, but with the fight this weekend, I assumed you were in hardcore training

mode.”

My heart twisted hard. Of course she’d remember my big fight. Because Nina was a good best friend, unlike me, who hid so much from her I wanted to burst. All my fantasies about Sam deciding she wanted to be my girlfriend felt naïve and stupid now. What was I supposed to do when my two worlds eventually collided? Considering Nina had flinched and told me to drop it the last few times I’d asked her about Sam, this would be the ultimate betrayal.

“Yeah, it’s been crazy.” I clutched my phone a little tighter as I leaned back onto the bench. “But you need to come visit.”

What I’d do about Sam at that point was a goddamn mystery. I should be telling Nina about her sister, yet I hadn’t spilled a word.

“Once you’re through your fight and finals are done for me, we’ll have a week of debauchery in the city,” Nina said, as enthusiastic as ever. I swallowed hard—simultaneously missing her like crazy but also overwhelmed with guilt that consumed me.

“That’s a deal,” I said, my voice coming out a little hoarse. “You just let me know when.”

And I’d figure out what damage control I would need to do. My skin prickled, but not from the cold. More from the realization that if Nina found out about me seeing Sam, I might be starting over in the best friend department.

“Most definitely,” she said. “You won’t be able to hermit away forever, Ames. I’ve got to finish this paper, but soon, okay? We’ll take the city by storm.”

“See you then,” I said as I hung up. A figure approached from farther down along the

path, and my shoulders tensed. Except then she stepped under a nearby streetlamp, and my mouth dried. I knew those curves intimately.

Sam caught my gaze and began to approach, as if she'd been summoned by me talking to her sister. The guilt oozed like a fresh wound, and I was tempted to run in the opposite direction to escape it all. Too many questions clouded my mind. First and foremost why she'd left in the first place.

But I'd told her I wouldn't push, and I'd meant it. If she trusted me enough, she'd eventually tell me.

"This seat taken?" She pointed to the spot next to me on the bench.

I shook my head, and she crooked her brow.

"On an important call?" she asked.

The glare of my cell screen by my cheek alerted me. Shit, I still gripped my cell like I was midconversation. "Nah, just finishing up one."

She opened her mouth as if she was about to ask something, but she plunked down onto the bench beside me with an audible thump. I drank in her scent, all cloves and sweat that made my pussy throb.

"Nina was worried." The words slipped out. Regret thudded through me a second later. Why the hell had I led with that? Sam had made it clear she didn't want to broach the past. An awkward silence settled between us, so different from the ease of any other time. The question rested on my tongue, but I wouldn't voice it.

Sam gripped the side of the bench and stared down at her thighs as we drifted back and forth, back and forth on the swing. "I just don't—" she said but stopped. A low

breath hissed out from her, followed by a bitter laugh.

I didn't dare say a word. I'd already stepped onto a landmine, and I didn't want the shrapnel to eviscerate us.

When Sam looked up at me, my heart stopped.

Her dark eyes glistened with unshed tears, and the hard jerk in my chest at the sight had me reeling.

"Why?" she asked. The helplessness in her tone had my fingers digging into my thighs. "Why you and not me?"

Her voice broke, and the first tears slipped down her cheeks. A thick lump formed in my throat.

The past couldn't be evaded any longer.

Chapter Ten

Sam

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:33 pm

I'd just been on a run.

The Rail Park was one of my favorite spots, but apparently, Ames had started to frequent there too.

When I'd spotted her, my heart had sped up, but when she mentioned Nina, it stopped.

Tears pricked at my eyes, a burning sensation I couldn't ignore. This wasn't the way I'd wanted to tell Ames about the past—if I did at all. However, the truth seemed to spill from my lips, beyond my control. My insides stretched like tallow, to the point they might snap. And my body had started to hum, like it always did before I careened over the edge into a breakdown.

I needed to reroute off this road, but when I met Ames's quiet, steady gaze, I ended up pushing the gas instead.

Hot tears slid down my cheeks. "Nina has no problem with you being a lesbian?" I managed to push the words out, even though my chest throbbed. Fuck. This was one Band-Aid I hated to tear off because the wound had never fully healed.

Ames shook her head. "No, she was one of the first people I came out to."

I clawed at my chest, unable to handle how my heart throbbed—fucking unbearable. The tears blurred my vision, but there was no way back, only forward. "When I came out, I lost my entire family."

The day remained vivid in my memories, and I still couldn't taste wintergreen gum without wanting to vomit.

How my hands had trembled when I'd approached Mom and Dad in the kitchen.

How Mom's glass had slid from her hand and shattered onto the tile.

How Dad's face had purpled with rage, his finger pointed toward the door.

The hollow sunlight not penetrating the icy numbness that had overtaken me when I'd driven my car to the closest park and bawled for hours. I'd stolen back in the middle of the night to pack whatever I could from my room—officially homeless.

“What do you mean?” Ames said slowly, her face pale. Her hands balled into fists, the knuckles white.

“Mom and Dad couldn't have a lesbian for a daughter,” I spat out. The bitterness was as vibrant as if the betrayal had just happened, an acid burn inside me. “When I called Nina, she told me not to bother.”

Ames's jaw dropped.

I swiped at my cheeks. Goddammit, those hateful tears needed to stop spilling. I'd cried so much over my family, and they didn't deserve my tears any longer. My whole body tensed, waiting for Ames's defense of her best friend, for her to tell me I had to be wrong, that Nina could never do that—even though she had.

Instead, Amelia wrapped her arms around me, squeezing me tight, like she tried to single-handedly keep my broken pieces together. The warmth of her embrace and how she buried her face in the crook of my neck—all of it overwhelmed me, and my tears slowed. I didn't move, but with each second that passed, my muscles

unclenched a little more.

“I hate that you went through that,” she murmured into my neck, wetness coming from her eyes. My heart thundered so loud it drowned out any noise, but I leaned into her embrace.

“After a few rough months in the suburbs, I ended up working at Knockout,” I said, the words sounding barren and hushed in the wake of the bomb I’d dropped. “Chuck helped me land on my feet and get situated in the city, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Ames gripped me a little tighter, her nails biting into my sides. The sting felt right, felt needed in the moment. I’d told this story before, but not to someone who knew me back then. My extended family had lost my number real fast, and Mom and Dad had cut me off. Same with Nina. Ugliness stirred in my gut at the unfairness, at how differently my own sister had treated Ames. At how fast Nina had abandoned me.

“I’d been wondering for so long,” Ames murmured into my neck. “One day, you vanished, and no one would fucking talk about it. I was just a kid, so it wasn’t like I could chase you down either.”

I clutched her even tighter. The knowledge that someone had cared, that someone had been looking for me, traveled deep to my core. That maybe I wasn’t so easy to discard.

“There were years,” I said, my voice trembling, “when I didn’t think anyone would even know if I died. No one at the funeral, nothing. After that, it took me a long time to trust again, to start letting people in.” My heart wrenched at the memory of the agony. I’d been a husk floating through the motions at work, having lost everything—my family, my future in MMA, my home.

Too many days, I’d considered oblivion.

Just walking into traffic to end the misery.

“Fuck.” Ames drew away from me. Her hands still circled me, but she moved back enough to lock her gaze with mine. “How could they do that to you?”

I shrugged. My cheeks were sticky with the tears that had thankfully stopped, and the breeze chilled my skin. However, Ames’s body was warm against mine, her fierce grip keeping me grounded, even as my numbed soul threatened to ice over. “That’s the question I’ve been asking for years.”

She trailed her fingertips along my cheeks, staring at me like I mattered, and my heart fucking tumbled headfirst.

I was unable to pull away from this magnetic force between us. Not sure if I even wanted to at this point. A need unfurled inside me, fresh, new, and stronger than anything I’d ever experienced. In the wake of those tears, of the confession, I found myself lighter. The heaviness that had weighed me down for so long dissipated, leaving this burning desire to just feel tonight.

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“Want to come to my place?” I asked, the words a little husky, a little raw.

Ames blinked and ran her fingertips across my lower lip. A shiver shot through me. “Only if I can kiss you first.”

I didn’t bother answering but leaned in and claimed her lips. Desperation welled inside me as I tasted the sweetness of her lip gloss, some candy flavor. My mind vaulted back years ago to my first kiss, with Debbie Simons in my sophomore year—in my bedroom with the door locked. However, I’d spent years hiding my affections for girls before being able to do it loud and proud, and kissing Amelia meshed the past and present together in a way that had me a little heartsick, a little nostalgic.

Her lips were soft against mine, and I let out a low noise from deep in my throat as I wrapped my hand around her nape, crushing our mouths together. I hungrily consumed her, the way she melted sending a thrill up my spine. Sitting here on the bench, pressed against each other, the Philly skyline in the distance and elevated over the city, I knew I’d remember this moment for the rest of my life.

There was a sense of the inevitable in this kiss, as if we’d always been meant to find each other again.

I lost myself in the glide of our tongues, the sparks flaring with every nip she delivered to my lower lip, the full-body shivers that stole over me when I devoured her anew. My fingers wound around her ponytail, and I gave it a firm tug. Her moan vibrated against my mouth. Even though my body still felt a little weaker after all the outpouring of emotions, my strength returned with every kiss, every touch, every

sigh. The flame that ignited inside me burned steadier and intenser with each minute, to the point I was about to combust.

“Mm,” I said, pulling back. “If we keep this up, I’m liable to spread you on this bench and eat you out.”

Her eyes widened, and the flare of lust there had me burning from the inside out. My clit throbbed, and the need to bury my fingers inside her grew unbearable. An idea flared in my mind, and I licked my swollen lips.

“Want to try something?” I reached down and placing my hand in hers. I rose from my seat with a creak and drew her along with me.

“Anything.” Ames’s voice was breathy and her gaze wild in the best way.

“God, you’re dangerous,” I said as I led us toward the steps. Her hand was firm in mine, and I wasn’t letting go for a heartbeat. My nipples tightened against my shirt at the idea of sliding my fingers down the waistband of her running shorts. Fuck, I could still remember how good she tasted—tart and delicious.

We rushed down the steps, the shadows falling over us as we reached the base. I only lived a few minutes away from Knockout and the Rail Park, though in the opposite direction of Ames. However, my place wasn’t the destination—yet.

Our harsh breaths mixed with the regular city noises, but I grew hyperaware of Amelia’s presence, of the way our hands intertwined. That connection was a north star right now, guiding me forward despite the complications between us, despite our history.

We passed one block after another until I spotted the familiar red overhang from the café I had looked for. I slowed until we came to a stop in front of a narrow alley

between the buildings. No one would be back there—I could see the area from behind my place, and fuck, I was too impatient to wait. My blood burned with desire, and my core throbbed.

“I want you right now,” I said, and her bright eyes widened.

“Here?” she asked, shooting a furtive glance to the alley.

My lips twisted in a smirk, my heart thumping hard. “Yep.”

She bobbed her head, and I tugged her hand, drawing her down the alleyway. Shadows threatened to swallow us whole, the scent of must and brick crisp to the nose. My hand squeezed hers a little harder as I brought her around to the back, another cross-section alley, and right behind the building. The second we stepped out of clear view, I slammed her against the wall.

The breath rushed out of her, and that control, taking the initiative flooded me with adrenaline, filling all the emptied spaces. Darkness blanketed us, but I could still glimpse enough of her in the velvet night. I nuzzled beneath her ear, loving the hitched breath, the tremble of her body. Ames was so damn responsive, and I loved to tease her, to memorize the way she writhed beneath my hands.

“I want to feel you so badly.” She gasped, her pulse at her neck fluttering. I licked along the column, tasting the salt of her sweat, savoring the scent of her, all musk and lilies.

“Likewise.” I sank my teeth into her traps. She let out a low, filthy moan that reverberated through the empty space back here. I slipped my hand underneath her shirt, past the band of her sports bra, and cupped her plump breast. The soft-as-fuck skin had my core throbbing harder, and I brushed my thumb over her nipple. She was such a slut for nipple play, and I fucking adored it.

Ames bit down on her lip, her hips bucking forward as if she sought my hand. I wanted to suck on her tits until she came on my hand, but I'd rather do that with her splayed on my bed. I pinched her nipple hard, and her hips bucked forward again.

"Please, please, please," she begged, her voice breathy and oh-so-fucking sexy.

"Can't deny a pretty girl," I said, sliding my hand out from beneath her sports bra. Not like I waited. Need drove me, delirious, blinding need, and I was too aware of the cool alley, the breeze blowing across my skin. My heart thudded so hard it deafened the distant honks of traffic and squeals of tires. I brushed my lips to hers again, wanting to taste the honeyed sweetness of her mouth, to linger in the heat that sparked my nerves to awareness.

I tugged her waistband open and shoved my hand inside. She shifted her hips forward, all but offering her pussy to me.

"Eager are we." I nipped her traps again, sinking my teeth into her muscles as my fingertips pressed against her soaked folds. The whole-body shudder I was rewarded with just made it hotter. Being with Ames felt beyond right, and a sense of the inevitable settled over me. I couldn't process that yet, so for now, I'd enjoy the ride.

"God, I need you inside me," she begged as I rubbed her slick up and down her folds. Her pussy was fucking dripping, the wetness mirroring my state. Slowly I pushed two fingers inside her, loving the way her grip on my shoulders tightened, how she let out a long, low moan.

"Mmm, fuck, can I touch you?" she asked. I gave a few pumps of my fingers inside her, allowing her time to get comfortable. The sight of her pressed against the brick wall, her head tilted back in surrender, was one I wanted to memorize.

"Hell yes," I said, hiking down my shorts with my free hand.

Ames didn't hesitate. She slipped her hand over my cunt and pressed her palm against my clit. The woman seemed to have a magnetism to it, given the speed with which she found the right spots in me. I wasn't complaining in the slightest. Fuck, she'd brought me to highs I'd never anticipated. However, she didn't stop there—no, she thrust her fingers inside me.

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My eyes rolled back in my head as bliss rushed through me in waves. The ache between my thighs had been growing unbearable, and in a few quick strokes, she hit my G-spot with every pass. I widened my legs a little, pressing kisses along her neck, her shoulders, and began to fuck her in earnest. She dripped around my fingers, the sensation sending a bolt of lust through me, and I thrust my fingers inside her firm and fast.

Her desperate breaths fueled my desire, and I lapped at the salt of her sweat as she fucked me hard enough that my clit throbbed. The pain grew exquisite with the need to come, for her to touch it, and I was getting close to begging. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I sank my teeth into her shoulder again, not giving a fuck I marked her. Sparks flared with every pass of her fingers, and the low squelching sounds between us were so hot I had trouble forming a coherent thought.

The cool air whispered across my bare ass, a reminder we were outside, in the middle of an alley. An illicit thrill slithered up my spine. God, she was so scorching I couldn't stand it. Pleasure flushed through me as Ames continued her relentless pace, and my thighs began to quake. I braced myself against the wall with my free hand, the uneven texture of the brick biting against my palm.

"I'm so damn close," I said, fucking into her over and over, loving the silken feel of her.

"I've got you." She thrust her fingers in hard and rubbed the base of her palm against my clit.

The rough, firm pressure did me in.

My clit pulsed with an oncoming orgasm, and my whole body froze up. Flames of pleasure raced through me in a fierce torrent, and the lingering heat stole me away with wave after wave as if my orgasm would never end. A moan ripped from my throat. I sank my teeth into Ames's shoulder and pressed down on her clit. Sparks flared through me with a soul-stealing intensity.

"Oh fuck." She seized against me. Her walls clenched around my fingers, her clit thrummed, and she let out whimper after whimper as she came. A gush of liquid dripped down my fingers. The quakes were still robbing me of my senses, and we clutched to each other in the throes of our ecstasy, our fingers buried in each other's cunts.

Our breaths cut through the quiet of the alley like razor blades, but neither of us moved. I rested my sweaty forehead against her shoulder, and she leaned her head against mine. The aftershocks of the orgasm still radiated through me, and I wanted to live in this moment for as long as possible. With Ames connected to me, our bodies intertwined, buried inside each other. The scent of sex mingled with the metal and stone surrounding us, and I sucked in a heady breath, my mind whirling.

Slowly I retracted my fingers from Ames's pussy, and she did the same. Even though I was tempted to go in for another few rounds to squeeze out as many orgasms as possible, we could do that in my home, a better place than in the middle of an alley.

I licked my lips and stared at the bite mark on her shoulder.

She glanced down. "Fuck, that's hot."

"Stupid, though, with your fight coming up." I wiped my fingers on my shorts.

She lifted hers to her mouth instead, sucking each one. Heat flared through me, urging me to shove her against the wall and take her all over again.

“Not stupid,” she said. “Sexy. What sort of fighter wouldn’t want to show off marks like those?”

I tugged up my shorts and pressed a slow, sure kiss to her lips. This one simmered through my veins. In the wake of all the outpouring earlier, then the desperation that followed, this kiss held the steadiness I’d been searching for—maybe my whole damn life. Something inside me clicked at being here with Ames, and I couldn’t ignore this connection if I tried.

I slipped my hand into Ames’s. “My apartment’s over there. Come on.”

“Lead the way.”

No matter what our future held, no matter how many hurdles we needed to overcome, for the first time since Ames crash-landed back into my life, I could admit I wanted this. Not just as a fling.

No, I wanted to keep her.

Chapter Eleven

Ames

Fucking Allie showed up to my damn fight.

Not for me, obviously. No, to support her new boyfriend. She’d never wanted to come to any of my fights when we were dating because they were “too violent.”

Fuck her.

Sweat poured down my face, the salt stinging my eyes. The lights glowed brighter

than ever, and my adrenaline was pumping so hard I could barely feel the aches, even though I knew tomorrow would be hell. My heart thumped fast as I settled on the opposite side of the ring for my minute break.

The buzz of the crowd beyond the ring was intense, but like every time I sank into a fight, they all faded into the background. Dana Levante huddled next to Chaz on the other side of the ring. Bitch had made me work last round, and right now, we were even.

“Hey,” Sam said, her gruff voice dragging my attention. She shoved a bottle of water at me and clapped her hands on my shoulder. “You’ve got this. She relies on her right side too much—telegraphs her swings.”

“Mm,” I grunted out, my shoulders heaving. I guzzled the water, not giving a fuck it splashed over my skin. My regulation shorts and sports bra would be next-level disgusting after my fight anyway.

My blood pumped hot, and the sight of Allie in the crowd, her prim blonde hair in a ponytail and a cute little pink dress on, had me feeling reckless. Not the right headspace if I wanted to win this. Plus, Chaz kept shooting me these shitty smug grins from the other side of the ring, and I was tempted to charge over and knock them the fuck off his face.

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“Ames,” Sam said, her voice steady, grounding. “You’re going to head back out there and dominate, okay?” She leaned in, close enough for her lips to brush my ear. “If you win, I’ll reward the fuck out of you tonight.”

Oh hell yes.

Heat rushed through me. The ref gave the signal, and I sucked in a sharp breath. Dana was my height, with a similar build but with broader shoulders and thicker thighs. She packed a fucking punch.

However, I was scrappier.

And tonight? Tonight I fucking wanted it more.

I stepped up to face her, the ref at our side. Tension simmered through the air—not just our anticipation but the whole arena’s.

He slashed through the air. “Fight.”

Dana lunged in fast, but I’d been expecting that. Chaz trained to slam in hard and quick, but Sam’s style was different. Patience, smarts instead.

She swung her leg overhead, and I ducked right. Wouldn’t let the opportunity pass. I dove in and knocked her to the mat. Screams sounded in the background as we grappled. I tried to slam her down again into a pin, but she rolled out of my grip. My pulse thudded hard in my ears as I moved into a crouch, right as she straightened up.

We circled each other, and she lunged first. Righthand side, just like Sam had said.

I ducked around, throwing a punch in return. Sweat flew between us as we prowled and tossed punches, none of them fully landing. Back and forth, back and forth, each of us searching for an opening.

I darted out with a kick to her left, but she slid out of the way just in time. Her fist came flying in my direction a second later, and I twisted to the side and dodged. Adrenaline raced through me, the lights blaring down as my focus zeroed in on this moment, this second, and I experienced a peace I had never managed to find anywhere else.

Dana lunged at me, and the world tilted sideways. I slammed to the mat, but my body was moving automatically. My thighs clamped around her, and I pivoted and slammed her to the side. She tried to rock me back, but I used the impetus to roll to my knees. My breaths came out in quick pants as I got to my feet again.

Her fist flew at me, and I brought my fists up to block. She followed with a kick. The momentum was amping up, the intensity of the fight growing with every passing second. She tossed another punch as we circled, circled, circled.

This needed to end, and I would be the one to do it.

Dana lobbed another swing—right side again.

I dove in from the left—full-body takedown.

The thump was audible as she hit the mat hard, my body thudding down on top of hers. I pinned her in place, even though she winged her thighs around me to escape. I tossed my full weight into the move, and she continued to use her thighs for leverage. I leaned in harder. Dana started swinging punches, a few grazing my cheek. I pivoted

to the side, tasting the copper along with the plastic of my mouthguard.

Had to hold this.

Fucking hold it.

She lobbed punches like shrapnel against my back, but I gritted my teeth and remained steady. Sweat dripped from my brows, poured down my body, and the pain was already pulsing from the blows. Her hip jerked beneath me, but I kept her pinned in place as the seconds stretched out like eons.

The bright lights glaring in my eyes.

The dull roar of the crowd beyond the ring.

The hummingbird thump, thump, thump of my heart.

Finally—finally she tapped out, and the ref ended it.

Breath burst from my lungs. The punches stopped, and Dana sank to the mat with a groan. I rolled off her, my body on fire—from adrenaline, from the hits lobbed my way, from how even my cells vibrated right now. I hopped to my feet and lifted my fists in the air, punching a few times, fucking euphoric. Bubbles rose inside me as the crowd roared.

Tonight's win hadn't just been about rising the ranks in the MMA.

No, I'd wanted payback.

Chaz's frown as he met up with Dana, the bored look on Allie's face in the audience. Yeah, maybe a little petty, but I'd needed an inch of karma—even if I was the one

delivering it. I headed over to my side of the ring, and Sam's arms were around my shoulders. I almost sagged into the grip, relief coursing through me so strong it was intoxicating.

Sam's eyes glowed with pride, and my pulse thudded harder. A little of the bitterness I'd been feeling dripped away—not from my win but because of her. Because she stared at me with a wonder that was more than just what a trainer and fighter shared—a mixture of heat and pride and affection. I swallowed hard, my heart singing.

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I wanted to kiss her so badly.

Bend her over and claim her lips in front of the whole arena.

But we hadn't even discussed what we were. I hadn't even told her sister.

"Go hit the showers, champ," she said, leaning in close so only I could hear. "Then we'll meet back at your place."

Mmph. Yes, ma'am.

Before we left, I'd given Sam my key so she could go to my place early, but still, butterflies exploded in my chest when she greeted me at the door. Like coming home to her was a thing I could have on the regular.

"Come on," she said, striding toward the couches.

A savory scent caught my attention, and I zeroed in on two plates of food, glasses of water, and napkins set on the surface of the coffee table.

I'd showered in the locker room, got checked out and cleared by the on-site doc, and then headed home, but that was an impressively short time for her to have whipped up a whole dinner.

"Reheated everything," she said as we both settled onto my couch, the full plates in front of us. "You need some calories and water first and foremost."

My heart tightened. This level of care was nothing I'd experienced from former partners, and we weren't even together. This went beyond a trainer wanting her client to succeed. Chaz would never have pulled this. No, Sam might not be chatty like me, but she showed through action, and hell, hope burned in me anew.

The chicken in a light herbed sauce, with wild rice, mushrooms, and asparagus looked delicious, and my mouth watered. My appetite was always insane after a fight, and she'd known this and prepared.

"Thank you," I said.

"You were brilliant out there."

I chewed my lower lip, my heart reeling at her praise. God, I soaked up every ounce, the yearning growing out of control. I wanted Sam in my bed every night, in my life as long as she'd keep me.

I knew it was a risk. I knew I should've told Nina.

Yet I couldn't help but fall headfirst for Sam.

"I had extra motivation," I said, spearing a piece of asparagus with my fork and biting it. The burst of lemon and salt on my tongue was glorious, and I started digging in full force, not giving a fuck how I came across.

"Your ex-girlfriend and ex-trainer were in the crowd, right?" Sam asked. "Best sort of payback."

I shook my head. "Nah, maybe it was that way at first, but honestly? You were all the motivation I needed." My cheeks burned at the admission, and I ducked my head. Way to go, jumping right into the deep end. This was how I scared off all the chicks

interested in me. “Sorry,” I blurted out in an attempt to scrape some of my dignity off the floor. “That was super cheesy.”

Sam’s hand settled over mine, and I glanced up. Her dark brown eyes were as soft as her grin, and my heart stilled for a second.

“Not cheesy if I liked it,” she said. Fuck, she was so genuine it made me swoon, the seriousness melting into a vulnerability that had me latching on like a suction cup to tile.

I chewed a bite of the chicken, which was juicy and cooked to perfection. A moan slipped from my lips. The way her nostrils flared was sexy as fuck. I hadn’t forgotten our plans for tonight, even though my body had started to crash from the adrenaline and energy spent on the fight. However, fucking in bed until we came and then passing out sounded like the perfect way to end this night.

“Be right back.” Sam rose from her seat. Her short shorts almost exposed a slice of her cheeks at the bottom. Fuck, I wanted to strip her down. My clit throbbed hard, and it took everything in me to remain in place and not follow her. So maybe I got a little hornier after a fight. Sue me.

Sam opened my freezer and returned with ice packs. God, I could kiss this woman.

Fuck it.

When she sat on the couch, I leaned forward and brushed my lips against hers. She lapped into my mouth with strong strokes, reminding me of how talented she was with her tongue. My core throbbed, and my panties grew damp. I nipped at her lip, then dove back in, enjoying her taste. Sam had been my dream woman since I was old enough to start noticing them, and every moment I spent with her was more than I could ever have fantasized.

Because this Sam was real. She had the control and competence that had always made me swoon, but I'd also seen her break, and those fears and hurts drew me deeper under her spell. And this caring side of her? I could never have dreamed up how attentive she was.

Slowly she pulled back but not before pressing one more brief kiss to my lips.

“Where did the biggest hits land?” she asked as she nudged the ice packs toward me.

“We’ve got to take care of them.”

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I sipped at my water. Fuck, I was thirsty—in all the ways tonight.

“I’ll be honest. I’m a lot more concerned about taking care of something else right now.” I went for blatant, spreading my legs.

Sam arched a brow. “We both know we’re going to end up in your bed tonight, but I’m going to make sure you’re not an aching wreck in the morning.”

“Mmm, has anyone told you how hot you are when you’re bossy?” I fluttered my lashes.

“From time to time.” She smirked, a wicked glint in her eyes. I had trouble paying attention to anything but the needy throb between my legs. I wanted her between them now.

“Eat the rest of your food, drink your water, and ice your sore spots.” She gave me the ice pack.

I let out a huff in protest, but it was halfhearted at best. Honestly, I soared at how Sam took care of me. It touched a tender part of my heart I thought had gotten battered too hard for recovery after Allie cheated on me.

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll make you come until you pass out,” Sam said, the surety in her voice one hell of a drug.

Flames raced through me at those simple words, and I was determined to show her what a good listener I could be.

Chapter Twelve

Sam

Watching Ames during her fight today had me in a state of arousal ever since.

Seeing her train was hot, but pro fights were different. The energy in the ring, like the air itself had teeth, made me spark with awareness. Having all of that trained on the woman I was growing far too attached to had me buzzing as well. Hell, if I were being honest, attached was a flimsy word compared to the way my heart had lurched the moment she arrived at her apartment.

She set the empty glass of water on the coffee table with a low thump. “There. Done.”

Like I’d asked, she polished off her plate of food, drank her water, and applied the icepack to the reddened areas. Tomorrow she’d be covered in bruises, and her muscles would hurt something fierce, but it would be no hardship to massage the soreness away. Fuck, I wanted to worship the velvet skin and those defined muscles most of the time anyway.

I arched a brow and met her gaze. “Good girl.”

Her cheeks flushed, and her pupils flared. Clearly, those two words turned her on. Noted.

“Come on,” I said, pushing myself to a stand before offering my hand. “I want to go strip you down in your bed.”

Her throat bobbed with a hard swallow. “Yes, please.”

She slipped her hand into mine, and I tugged her up and led her to her bedroom. I'd only been here a few times, but this place already felt comfortable, familiar. Mostly because she was.

It was wild to think mere weeks had passed since she first showed up at Knockout, looking like a fantasy come to life.

And she was so much more than I could ever have bargained for.

The air vibrated between us as we stepped into her bedroom. I flipped the light on, illuminating her messy bedroom—clothes tossed on the floor, her bed a rumple of sheets. Somehow the little bit of chaos fit this wild sunshine girl so well.

“On the bed.” I let go of her hand and pointed.

She licked her lips before following suit, tossing herself onto the mattress, the sheets fluffing around her. Her light brown waves spread out against the cream fabric, and her tee rode up, exposing her abs. My mouth watered.

I crawled onto the bed after her, wanting to unwrap her like a present. Ames had consumed my thoughts and my daydreams, and after witnessing her in the ring today, I needed to savor that this girl was here, granting me her attention and affection for as long as I had it.

Slowly I ran my palms up her bare legs, loving the firm tone, the thickness of her thighs. Fuck, I knew how sweet she tasted between those thighs, and I was dying to lap at her until she came against my mouth again and again. I hooked my fingers into the waistband of her shorts and panties, taking my time dragging them down. The brown curls at her pussy were glistening, and her legs trembled the slightest bit as I drew the fabric lower and lower. Once I got her panties and shorts off, I threw them over the edge of the bed. Her lower half was bared to me, her arms splayed up by her

sides, and her chest heaving.

God, I loved how she melted for me. This woman could be so fierce in the ring, such a clever, tough fighter, yet in my hands, she turned into a puddle.

“You’re so damn pretty.” I drew circles along her legs with my fingertips, skating closer to her pussy, then drawing them away again. Amelia bit down on her lip and let out a little moan. “Let’s get you stripped down.”

I crawled over her, my knee between her thighs, mere inches from her pussy, and I rolled her T-shirt up her torso, enjoying each inch of skin exposed. I dipped my head and nipped and sucked at her stomach, loving the way she writhed beneath me. She helped me get her sports bra up and over along with her tee, which showed off those gorgeous, ample breasts and her perky nipples.

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The Celtic knotwork along her upper arm in a half sleeve was a work of art, and I licked along the pattern. She shivered under me. Out of all her tattoos—a sun and moon at her ankle, a bouquet of flowers along her forearm—this one seemed to be the most prominent.

“What does it mean?” I asked, continuing to trace lazy circles with my tongue.

“Mmm?” Ames asked, her lashes fluttering at a rapid pace.

“The tattoo, sweet thing.”

“It’s Epona. Symbol of energy and power. I got it after I started in the fight circuit. Even if I burn out fast or this just ends up being a few years before I head in a different direction, I wanted to honor my time in the ring.”

“Fitting.” Every new detail I learned about her charmed me more. This woman had infiltrated my bloodstream and dominated my thoughts, and I loved it. I traced around the tattoo, her body near vibrating. Guaranteed if I reached down to feel between her thighs, she’d be dripping.

“This is torture.” She gasped, reaching up and tugging at my tee.

I arched a brow. “Want something?”

“Fuck, I want to eat you out so badly.” She gave me a heated look.

“I can work with that.” I slid off her. A second later, my shorts and tee were hitting

the floor. I hadn't bothered with a bra because I'd known where tonight would end. Ames lay spread out on the sheets like a fucking goddess, and the hunger to touch her, to taste her skin, her sweat, her pussy rose with such a fierceness that my legs grew a little weak. I climbed back onto the bed, aware of the hungry way she stared at me right now.

"God, you're so hot," Ames said, her voice breathy as hell. My cheeks burned in response. I wasn't used to the admiration in Ames's tone, how she looked at me—like I was worthwhile.

It had been a long, long time since anyone had made me feel that way.

The intense emotion was one I recognized, but it was the sort that usually took months to foster, time to nurture. However, Amelia had rushed back into my life like a summer storm, and I couldn't help but get swept away.

As I crawled over to her, the mattress creaked. The second I brushed against her, the skin-to-skin connection of my thighs to hers short-circuited my brain. This woman was so damn hot it was unreal. Our breasts crushed together, and a gush of liquid oozed from my pussy just from the sensation. I leaned in and brushed a kiss to her lips, teasing her lower lip in my mouth and licking in hungrily. The exhaustion from the fight was kicking in. She turned to putty beneath me, which I fucking loved.

We kissed for minutes, hours, I had no idea. I savored the taste of her mouth over and over, and my thigh slipped between her legs. She thrust up against it, leaving a trail of her slick on the skin. My clit was throbbing, so damn needy for any sort of touch. Ames tried to reach down for it, but I grabbed her hand and pinned it overhead, making my intent clear.

She moaned into my mouth, and I felt the tremor that rocked through her body.

God, I needed pressure, needed to grind against her, but I wanted to coax a few more moans out of her first. Besides, each time she rubbed against my thigh, my breasts shifted against hers, sending sparks straight to my core. I sank into those heady sensations, loving the plushness of her tits across my nipples and how it made my pussy throb.

The intensity there was growing slowly, and sweat pricked along the inside of my thighs and on my forehead. I wove my fingers through Ames's glossy strands and gave them a solid tug.

"Nngh." She gasped. "I could come just from that."

"Not yet," I said, peeling myself off her. The heat there, the silken feel was hard to draw away from, but I wanted to taste her as badly as I wanted her to taste me. I crawled up to her head and rested my knees on either side. My pussy was drenched, and even the puff of her hot breath against it had my thighs quaking. "Be good and wait."

I pushed up to my hands and knees until I settled right over her pussy, those glistening folds causing my mouth to water. Her breaths were coming out a little shallower, and even the slight sensation against my pussy was enough to send sparks through my veins.

"Can I please taste you?" Ames asked, a slight tremble in her voice.

Fuck, the vulnerability she offered me, the sweetness inherent in her, undid me every time.

"Yes, sweet thing," I said.

Her hands gripped my hips, and her tongue brushed against my folds. My nails dug

into the sheets from the intensity of the pleasure rolling through me. She lapped up again, her tongue finding my clit, and my back arched. My breath came in faster as I lowered myself to her pretty little cunt.

The first taste had her bucking up against my mouth. She was sweet and tart, and I dipped my tongue in again, needing more of her. Amelia's moan was loud enough to reverberate around the room, even muffled by my pussy. The vibrations felt sinful as she lapped at my clit. Bliss radiated through me, each swipe of her mouth pure magic.

I buried my face in her cunt, not giving a fuck about any technique. I hungrily devoured her, sucking and nipping at her clit and burying my tongue deeper into her hole. Her hips were tilting toward my face on reflex, just as mine were with her. She kept me steady with her grip on my hips, the sting from her nails into my skin getting me hotter.

Our bodies were crushed together in perfect symmetry, and we moved in tandem, as natural as muscle memory even though we'd just begun hooking up. The familiarity between us soothed me despite all the new, and I recognized the connection was rare.

Pleasure rolled through me in stronger waves by the second, and I lost myself in the firm hold she had on me, in the way her thighs quaked beneath me. She tasted so damn good, a mixture of her juices and my saliva dripping from her as I alternated between strong strokes along her clit to driving my tongue inside her pussy.

Ames was launching a full-frontal attack on my clit, the continuous firm pressure making my eyes roll back in my head. My nipples kept grazing against her skin, which sent a zap of electricity through me every time. The pressure in my clit grew more and more intense, to the point of pain, and for a second, I came up for breath. Ames didn't pause, lapping at my pussy like it was her reason for living, and fuck. I'd never had anyone as good as her. Anyone who made my pulse race like this, who consumed me heart and soul this way.

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I dove back in, nipping at her clit again, loving how she ground her hips toward my mouth. Her eagerness was unparalleled, and I wanted to take care of her, to lavish her with time, attention, anything she wanted.

“Oh fuck, I’m close.” Ames moaned, the sound muffled as her lips brushed against my folds. I’d learned she was a hair trigger to come, whereas I often took a bit longer. Truth be told, I loved it that way. Meant I had the time to give her as many orgasms as I liked.

I honed my focus and licked hard against her clit.

Ames’s groan vibrated against my pussy as she came on my tongue. The slight gush of her nectar was delicious, and I lapped at her through her orgasm. Her thighs quaked, and I savored the way she unraveled for me. I could feel the pulse of her clit as she rode out the waves of pleasure, grinding against my face. Her hands were still on my hips, but she’d abandoned my pussy, lost in her bliss.

“Fuuuuck,” she let out against my pussy again, those vibrations traveling through me. I was so damn sensitized there it wouldn’t take much longer.

Amusement quirked my lips. “Want to come again?”

“Overachiever,” she muttered.

“One really good orgasm is all I need. And I know you’ll deliver.”

As if those words were the opening bell to a fight, she brought her mouth to my pussy

again and devoured. My lashes fluttered, and my hips involuntarily moved, thrusting against the pressure she provided. Fuck, it felt so damn good.

I summoned enough brain cells to loop an arm around her thigh and bring two fingers to her soaked hole. The relentless attack against my clit had my whole body humming, the intensity amping up like it'd never stopped. But I slipped my fingers into her hole, loving the slick feel, how she just sucked them in. I began to pump, and she cursed against my pussy, one that traveled right through me.

I rode her mouth, unleashing as I thrust my fingers inside her over and over. The rhythm overtook me, same as training, same as a fight, muscles moving on reflex, in perfect unison. The way Ames felt against me, how she read me just right, was rare, and my heart thumped a little harder at the realization. The tightness in my clit had reached a searing point, the need to unravel pushing me to desperation.

Sweat burst on my forehead, and my thighs were just as sweaty, the coiling intensity driving me hard. I bit my lower lip, my chin dripping with her juices, as I tried to hold back, wanting to wait until she was ready to come again. Ames trembled, her whole body shaking as I curled my fingers with each pass.

Her nails were going to leave indents on my hips with her tight grip, and I fucking loved it. My core was dripping, and every time Ames licked at my clit, the flicker of pleasure grew stronger and stronger until it became almost unbearable. As I thrust my fingers into her pussy again, it started to clench around me.

That small motion was enough to set me off.

Her tongue drove against my clit, and all of a sudden, I was coming and coming and coming. Pleasure locked my limbs, and I ground my pussy against her face as the bliss radiated outward.

Her pussy spasmed around my fingers at the same time, and fireworks burst behind my eyelids as the orgasm slid through my veins like liquid honey. I floated there, my eyes rolling back from the potency of the way she'd dragged me over the edge. In that moment, we were transcendent, we were one, and our connection clicked into place like it had always existed.

Like it was inevitable.

My heart soared as the pleasure rolled through my whole body until I was completely spent. My fingers were still buried in her cunt as I sagged forward, not giving a damn that I crushed her beneath me. Not like she needed the help. She kept my hips pinned upright with her strength. For a moment, the room was quiet apart from our heavy breaths. My body settled down from my intense orgasm, and I slowly pulled my fingers out of her.

In the stillness, the scent of sex permeating the air, our sweat-slicked skin, and the steady thrum of my heart was all I could focus on. Like practicing a move over and over until it snapped into muscle memory, I realized I was falling for Ames.

I swallowed hard and moved off her with a groan to thump onto my back against the mattress.

"I think my teeth are numb," Ames said, amusement in her voice. "You'll be lucky if I'm up for another five minutes."

I pushed off the bed, even though my body protested the movement. Ames had already beaten her body up in the ring today and then made me come so hard I still saw stars, so she could stay the fuck put. I headed for her bathroom, running a washcloth and wiping myself up before wetting another one. When I returned to the bedroom, I stopped still.

Ames was spread out on the bed, her brown waves splayed over the sheets, her glistening pussy bared. She looked like a damn goddess, and fuck, I was smitten.

My heart ached with the desire to keep her, for this to be the budding of something new, something amazing.

However, she was my sister's best friend.

And in the choice between my sister and me, I knew I'd get left behind.

A creak woke me out of a dead sleep.

Ames was curled around me, her face buried in my tits, and my arms were still wrapped around her waist.

A definitive slam of a door followed.

I pushed up, adrenaline kick-starting me into awareness. Ames let out a mmph and stirred. My muscles tensed as I prepared to launch from the bed to investigate.

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“Don’t tell me you’re sleeping in, Ames.”

That voice.

My blood chilled.

Before I could fully process, a figure stepped in the open bedroom door. Taller, older than she’d been, definitely grown up now.

However, I’d recognize my sister anywhere.

Chapter Thirteen

Ames

My wake-up was abrupt.

One moment, I basked in warmth and bliss, and the next, the warmth and bliss had shifted away from me. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes. Some noises rustled in the background, but I wasn’t registering them. Fuck, I wanted to stay curled up with Sam all day, and my muscles ached like I’d been hit by a pickup truck. Nope, just a fight against Dana.

Sam was sitting upright, frozen.

A voice sounded again, and it finally clicked in my brain it wasn’t Sam’s.

I pushed up from my comfortable spot on the pillow, my muscles screaming with the effort. My jaw clenched, but I fought through the discomfort as I tried to suss out the source of the problem.

A figure stood in the middle of my open door.

The rush of nerves woke me up better than a cup of coffee.

Nina. In my apartment.

And I was naked in bed with her sister.

“Oh fuck, Ames, I’m sorry,” she said, throwing her hands up to cover her eyes. “Didn’t realize I was walking in on a hookup.”

Maybe I could hide Sam. Just tug the covers over her and then usher Nina out the door before she realized anything.

“Wait—” she started, then stopped. Her gaze zeroed in on who sat in the bed next to me, barely covered by the sheet. Nina’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped. I was so fucked.

My fingers curled into the sheets on either side of me. It took a minute to realize my tits were hanging out, but decency was the least of my concerns.

“Sam,” Nina’s voice came out in a whisper. She glanced between us, a crease forming between her brows. “Sam?”

“Long time no see, little sis,” Sam said, the words coming out in a dry rasp. Her body began to tremble beside me, the slight movement visible, and my heart lurched. I still hadn’t uncovered what had happened between them all those years ago, but Sam had

been cut out from her entire family. I couldn't reconcile the Nina who'd given me a huge hug and accepted me as queer with the one who'd coldly iced out her sister, but we hadn't talked about it. There had to be something else going on.

"What the fuck?" Her head whipped back and forth as if she tried to piece together the sight before her.

"Nin, please wait in the kitchen so I can get dressed," I said as calmly as I could muster, even though my insides were rioting. This was it—the end of our friendship. I'd crossed an uncrossable line, and there was no way she could forgive me. Sam would leave too, not wanting to deal with the mess, and I'd be worse than where I started.

Utterly alone.

To my surprise, Nina stepped out of the room and shut the door behind her.

My grip on the sheets relaxed, and I forced myself up and out of bed. I needed to talk to Nina before she bolted out of my apartment. Sam still sat frozen in the bed.

"Babe, are you okay?" I tugged on my ponytail. Fuck, she was probably reliving her horrible, horrible past, and it was my fault for not remembering I'd given my best friend the key to my apartment. "Fuck, I'm so sorry."

Her gaze snapped to mine, her eyes sharp. Without a word, Sam got up from the bed and threw her clothes on, moving at a whirlwind pace. My mind reeled, torn in so many different directions that I couldn't parse left from right, and my body ached to the point of distraction. I'd barely gotten my panties and a pair of shorts on when Sam was already fully dressed.

"I need to go," was all she said before she opened the door and slipped through. Not a

glance back, not another word, leaving me to face the music with her sister—alone.

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My throat tightened, and I ignored the sting of tears in my eyes. Since I'd moved here, I'd felt like I'd come so far, yet here I was, vaulting back rock bottom again. I yanked a T-shirt over my head, my heart thump, thump, thumping so hard it deafened. I didn't know what was worse—walking out there to find both Sam and Nina gone or walking out to find them still there.

I didn't want to lose either, yet I had the feeling the moment I stepped through this door, I'd be down either my best friend, whom I'd known most of my life, or the woman I was falling for.

I sucked in a breath, slightly dizzy, aching like a motherfucker, and definitely discombobulated as I walked out of my room.

Sam was gone.

Nina sat on the couch, her gaze full of every ounce of accusation I'd expected. My stomach did a barrel roll. This morning wasn't going the slightest way I'd thought it would—not with Sam bolting out the door and leaving me to deal with her sister. Tears glistened in Nina's eyes, and I sagged onto the couch beside her.

Fuck, I was such a dick.

My eyes stung, but I refused to break down. Nina deserved this conversation, one I should've had with her before I started sleeping with her sister.

“How could you?” she said before I could say a word. “You know what Sam did to our family, how she left us. It's bad enough that you never mentioned her once, but

this?”

Irritation prickled through me, mixing into the soup of other emotions that was fast approaching full boil.

So many years of unanswered questions.

Sam might not be here now, but at least I knew why. That had been the unvarnished truth that night at the Rail Park.

“Yes, I absolutely should’ve mentioned her,” I said, my hands forming fists on my thighs. The slight sting in my palms kept me grounded as I stared at them. Looking up at Nina would break me, and I needed to get through this. “I’m sorry for that. I’m not sorry for associating with her, though. The only one who told me what happened back then was Sam—not your parents, and not you.”

A bitter laugh came from Nina. “And what bullshit did she feed you? A sob story about how terrible my parents were to her?”

My stomach twisted, and the first tendrils of doubt tried to take hold. I sucked in a sharp breath, remembering the way Sam had broken down, the tears glistening in her dark eyes. “Okay, I’m here now, Nina, and I’m listening. Tell me what happened.”

“She fell in with a bad crowd, started using drugs. And then she told Mom and Dad she didn’t want to see us anymore. Not either of them and not me. So fuck her. If she wants to throw away her family, fuck her.” There was a bite to Nina’s words of long-suffered wounds, but between both stories, only one was believable.

My mind reeled. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t placed the pieces together a lot earlier, but everything started to make sense. All I needed was a single answer to confirm my suspicions.

“Hey, Nina. Why don’t we ever go over to your folks’ place anymore?”

Her brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“When we were younger, we were there all the time, and you used to invite me over to family parties and stuff. I know you don’t even go to a lot of them now, but junior year was when I noticed the shift,” I murmured, keeping my voice soft.

She glanced away. “I don’t see what this has to do with anything.”

“It’s the whole point.” My heart was thudding a thousand miles a minute. I needed her to see, to understand.

“My folks...aren’t the most tolerant people,” she said, refusing to look my way. “They’re still amazing parents, but I didn’t want them saying something rude around you about...well, you know.”

I swallowed hard. Yeah, I knew.

Unfortunately, Nina didn’t.

I reached over and clasped Nina’s hands in mind. “Nins. I get you’re hurt, and you have every right to be. I know you’re furious with me. However, I need you to think, really think about the situation between you, Sam, and your parents. Someone was lying to you, but not who you believed it was.”

Her mouth dropped open, but I pushed up from my seat on the couch. As much as I wanted to sit here and continue the conversation with Nina, a few things had become clear to me.

Most of all?

As much as I felt like I was about to hit rock bottom again, I still had a home to go back to.

Sam had lost the option.

“I never wanted to hurt you. You’re my best friend in the whole universe. The fierce to my cheer, the only person I’d let drive my car, mostly because you’re a better driver.” My chest squeezed tight, and I ignored the thickness in my throat. “When it comes to Sam, I’ve always been a little crazy. She was my first crush—my lesbian awakening, and a large part of why I started looking into MMA. And when I ran into her? Hell, I just lost my mind. I want to continue this conversation but with all three of us. If you need to leave, if you need time, I understand. But if you want to stay, I promise we’ll talk this through.”

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Nina stared at me, her dark eyes a little unreadable, like Sam when she was processing. I didn't know if I'd come home to an empty apartment or my best friend, but I understood if I left Sam in the dust right now, I'd regret it.

However, only time would tell if tonight ended with the girl of my dreams or a broken heart.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam

I stood in front of Knockout, wondering how the hell I'd ended up here.

My eyes burned, my body hummed, and I was holding on by a thread. I should've headed home. I wasn't working today, and I wouldn't last a round with a heavyweight bag. My phone dangled in my hand, but I wouldn't text Maeve for the third time. Typing was hard enough with the words blurring in front of my eyes.

Nina.

She'd looked so much older.

Fuck, how many years had we lost? A decade. A fucking decade.

The hatred in her eyes—hell, my fingers trembled all over again.

The door creaked open, and Emmet stood there, holding it. "Coming in?" he asked.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied on automatic, my words sounding wooden. I could feel his gaze burning, but I sucked in a deep breath of the gym—of the sweat, rubber, and cleaner fragrant in the air. “Just needed to get something.”

My legs carried me forward, even though stepping into the gym made no sense. I should be heading home and getting the fuck out of here. My heart thudded so hard it deafened, and I couldn’t focus on anyone I passed. The breakroom might offer a little privacy, but it was too damn close to the office and front desk.

No, I knew one area where no one would come looking for me.

I bolted to the back of the gym, past the ring where a practice match was happening. My eyes were glossing over at this point, and the reality that I’d run to escape kept hovering overhead, waiting to crash down. Everything fuzzed around me: the bright lights, the bustle of all the trainers and our clients walking by. My focus honed in on the metal door to the far left, leading to the storage area. It was either that or force myself out of the gym and have a full-on breakdown on the streets of Philly.

Storage was the better bet.

I grabbed the door, but it took me several tries to pull it open with how badly my hands were shaking. The trek down the hall to the storage area was quick.

The door clicked shut behind me, and cool darkness swept over me. I only made it several paces in, and then my knees gave out. My drop wasn’t graceful, and I bumped my elbow against one of the stacks of mats. A sharp shard of pain shot through me. I welcomed it, preferring it to the agony ripping apart my insides.

I’d just left Ames.

But she’d apologized to me, horrible heartbreak in her eyes, and I’d known what was

coming.

Because no one ever chose me.

Not my family, not my girlfriends, and at the end of the day, Amelia wouldn't either.

Wetness trickled down my cheeks, and my shoulders shook. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'd been so goddamn stupid to believe she might be mine. That someone from my past could accept me. My heart wrenched hard. I clapped a hand over my mouth before the sob tore out of me, muffling it.

And Ames and Nina were back at her apartment where I'd left them, probably mending their fences. Ames telling her she wouldn't ever see me again, that she'd cut ties—just like my family had.

Another sob ripped out of me, my shoulders pitching forward, and I struggled to breathe.

I was so, so tired of being alone.

For one brief moment, I thought I'd found her. The one who'd seen all of me—the shattered pieces, the insecurities, the grief—and had accepted it anyway. In the whirlwind where we'd collided and I'd started to fall, I'd somehow let my guard down.

Pain squeezed my chest so damn tight, and I couldn't bear the agony.

Hands settled on my shoulders, and I whipped back, my adrenaline spiking.

"Sorry for startling you," Brooks said, settling into place behind me. Their voice was quiet, soothing, and the steadiness of their wide palms on my shoulders was the only

thing I could focus on. “I saw you bolt back here, and I was worried.”

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I blinked, trying to stop the tears from sliding down my cheeks, from blurring my eyes, but they wouldn't abate. Just like the pain in my chest, this agony refused to abate, slicing at me over and over again.

"Sam, do you need to talk it out or cry?" they asked in the same calm tone. "Either way, it's okay. I've got you."

Oh fuck.

My chest convulsed. They hadn't realized how badly I needed to hear that—that I wasn't completely fucking alone in this world. I looked back at Brooks, who stared at me, the understanding clear in their green eyes.

Maybe they did know.

I sucked in an inhale, the breath unsteady as tears leaked down my face. Brooks wrapped their arms a little tighter around me, and I leaned against them like I'd lost all the bones in my body. Words weren't rising to my lips yet, no matter how much I wanted to tell someone what had happened, to feel like I hadn't lost everything—all over again.

I stared at the cement floor, the mottled surface speckled with my tears. Brooks's warmth filtered through me, their arms in a steady lock around me, like a hold in a fight, but I didn't want to escape. I just wanted something to go right, for once.

Slowly the tears began to dry on my cheeks, sticky like paste. My breaths came in a little easier, albeit shaky.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Brooks,” I murmured, my voice raw.

“None of the apologizing bullshit.” They loosened their grasp slightly.

I pulled the rest of the way out of their grip and sat on the floor facing them. The cement was cool on my ass, grounding me in a way I needed. I tugged my knees to my chest, sucking back the shuddery breaths that exploded out from me in the wake of my breakdown. Shame washed over me, but Brooks wasn’t looking at me with disgust—just a steady kindness I didn’t deserve.

“Just saw my sister,” I whispered, staring down at my scuffed sneakers with their ratty laces.

“Shit, Taylor,” Brooks said. A moment later, their shoe nudged against mine, and a bubble of warmth burst inside me at the simple gesture. There was a reason I’d come here rather than heading to my apartment. Because these people, this place? This was home.

“Yeah, the hookup I got involved with? My sister’s best friend.” I tugged at the end of my ponytail, realizing now that my tank top was on inside out. I’d been in such a rush to get out of Ames’s apartment I hadn’t been aware of what the fuck I put on my body or how. “We were in her apartment, and Nina showed up, and...”

“That sucks” was all Brooks said, but honestly, it was all I needed.

My relationship with Ames had been destined to end in heartbreak. I’d known that from the start, yet I’d been so enthralled by our connection, so smitten with her, how she looked at and listened to me that I couldn’t help but fall.

“I don’t even know where we stand,” I admitted out loud, the realization sending a shudder through me. “I just ran out of there in a blind fucking panic.”

“When was the last time you saw your sister?” Brooks asked, sitting across from me, all casual, like I hadn’t been crying my eyes out a second ago.

“Ten years ago. I’d tried to call her after my parents cut me out, but she’d severed ties too.”

“I’m not saying anything about your sister, because she clearly made her own bed, but when you’re feeling calmer, would it help to talk to your not-quite-hookup?”

I huffed out a breath and hugged my knees tighter to my chest. They were speaking reason, which wasn’t what swilled through my veins. Another shuddery breath escaped me. “I’m not sure I have the strength to.”

Brooks snorted and delivered a pointed look at me. “Samantha Taylor, you’re one of the strongest women I’ve met. I’ve watched you pull yourself up from nothing, and if this relationship with her crumbles, you’ll still have everything you built. You’ll still have all of us.”

My eyes watered again, and I resisted the urge to break down sobbing for the second time today.

“My one client canceled, so I’ve got a quick break,” Brooks said. “Want to go grab a coffee?”

“Ugh.” I wiped at my puffy eyes. “Everyone’s going to know I was bawling my eyes out.”

“I could punch you a little—black eyes instead?” Brooks said dryly.

“Thanks, asshole,” I said, lifting my middle finger. Still, the slightest bit of lightness tugged at my shoulders. Maybe getting some coffee would clear my head. Not

enough to go back to Ames's apartment but enough to stop losing my shit in the storage room of Knockout.

“Anytime.” Brooks rose to their feet. They reached out and offered a hand. I took it, the warm clasp grounding. I pushed myself up, my legs shaky and the cement chill clinging to my body. My eyes felt swollen as fuck. If only I had brought a pair of shades or some shit—anything to hide my puffy eyes when I walked through the gym.

“Wait, can we go through the back exit they use for loading?” I asked.

Brooks lifted a brow. “You really don’t want everyone to see you, do you?”

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I crossed my arms. “Look, I know you all care, but my ego as a trainer can’t handle the whole gym being aware I had a breakdown.”

“Fair. I’m a fan of backdoors anyway.”

I let out a groan and rolled my eyes. They were leaning into the humor hard for my sake, and I appreciated it. Way better than them acting like I was some fragile thing that needed to be fawned over.

Footsteps pounded down the hall outside of the storage room, which stopped me in my tracks. A second later, the door creaked open.

“She just showed up here, and I had the feeling you’d want to talk,” Emmitt said, a little breathless. They must’ve jogged over from the front desk. He stepped aside, and an all too familiar woman appeared.

The sight of Ames struck me speechless, and any sanity I’d collected off the floor fled.

Brooks shot me a knowing grin. “I’ll leave you two to work things out.”

Right. My throat went dry.

Emmitt and Brooks exited, and the door clicked shut.

Ames crossed her arms. “You left.”

“I did.” My heart thudded so loud it was all I could hear.

“We’re going to talk about us, right here, right now,” Ames demanded. With the fire flashing in those gorgeous blue eyes, there was no way on earth I could deny her.

This conversation was coming, whether I liked it or not—I only prayed I didn’t end up even more broken in the aftermath.

Chapter Fifteen

Ames

Once I saw Sam, I knew I’d made the right call.

Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed, tear tracks evident down her cheeks. She looked wrecked in the worst way, and my heart leaped out of my chest. All the fears, the worries circulating through my brain from the second Nina appeared at my place this morning faded away.

This was proof positive that Sam cared.

If she’d been consumed by anger, ready to ditch me, she would’ve been lobbing punches against a heavy bag or shutting down. Instead, she was tucked in a back room, distressed over what had happened.

“Do we have to have the talk here?” Sam waved her hand in a wide circle.

I shook my head. “Where do you want to go?”

“I know where. Follow me.”

My heart thudded hard as she led us past stacked boxes, mats, and heavy bags toward an industrial door. Sam pushed it open, and the bright sunlight flooded in. It wasn't even nine a.m. on a Sunday—too early for all this shit to be descending.

Silence stretched between us as we looped around to the front of Knockout, and Sam headed to the right. The longer we remained quiet, the more the tension between us grew. Had I misread the situation? Maybe her tears had been for Nina, not me.

Yet last night had been transcendent. I'd never had a partner show their care like she had after I had a fight. Normally, my exes left me to fend for myself, realizing I wouldn't be great company. Sam had not only fed me and made sure I was hydrated but had also given me some of the best orgasms of my life before we passed out together. She was everything I wanted in a woman.

At the end of the block, we took a turn to the right, and a moment later, I realized where she led us to.

“Are we going to Rail Park?” I asked.

Sam gave a small nod. Did this mean something? Was she taking me here for a reason beyond convenience? I barely dared to hope.

We clattered up the steps leading to the Rail Park. The motion soothed some of my nerves, despite the ache of my muscles, the way my body was beat to shit from the fight last night.

The city spanned out before us in breathtaking glory. The buildings rose in the distance, those skyscrapers making their mark on the horizon. The view during the day was so different from night—teeming with chaos and movement from every direction. And somehow I got swept away in the beauty of it, how the harshness and brilliance of humanity all coalesced in this place.

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Sam was already farther down the trail, making a beeline for the swings. My chest squeezed tight. That was where she'd confessed her past that night, not so long ago. Where she'd shared a part of herself she didn't offer others.

I only hoped that would continue today.

I switched to a light jog, even though my muscles screamed out at the sudden movement. Not the best idea the day after a fight, but the need to talk to Sam, to tell her everything, burned inside me with an intensity I could no longer deny.

Sam stopped by the closest swing and waited for me. The sun gleamed on her dark brown hair and intensified the brightness of her tan skin. Even with her puffy eyes, the inside-out tank top, and the sweats she'd tossed on, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Butterflies exploded in my chest.

I skidded to a halt in front of her. We were inches apart, and I was dying to close the space between us and claim her lips. However, words had to come first.

"Sit." She gestured. "You should be resting, not running around."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, the hope almost suffocating. "Only if you do too."

She shook her head and plunked into the seat, and I followed suit. I wanted to drape myself all over her, but I kept some space between us. I needed every ounce of courage I could summon right now. My nails curled into my thighs, and I stared down at them. If I was looking at Sam and her pretty fucking face, I wasn't sure I could get the words out.

“I want you,” I blurted out. “Fuck, I think I’ve wanted you forever, but these past few weeks—they’re everything I’d ever dreamed of and more.” My heart thundered so loud it drowned out even the distant traffic.

“What does that mean?” Sam whispered.

I looked up now. Her dark eyes were wide and bleeding vulnerability. Her lower lip trembled, and fuck, she might be older and more experienced than me, but in that moment, I wanted to wrap her up in a blanket and tell her everything would be okay. She’d been wrecked, betrayed by those she’d trusted most—of course she’d believed the worst.

“It means I want you as my girlfriend, my partner, whatever I can get,” I said, the words surprisingly firm. “It means I’m falling in love with you, Samantha Taylor.”

My shoulders tightened, and I ducked my head, bracing for the blow.

Quiet settled between us, and I didn’t dare look up and see the rejection in her eyes.

“You’ve got to be crazy,” Sam said.

“I mean, a little.” I peeked through my eyelashes.

The most beautiful grin lit her eyes, transforming her features. She was radiant, and the breath snagged in my throat.

“Fuck, I’m falling for you too, Ames.” Her voice was thick with emotion, and my chest seized.

Her words were ones I’d imagined a thousand times over but had never expected to hear.

“Dammit, c’mere.” She closed the space between us.

Her lips coasted across mine, and the electricity sparking between us was enough to make my legs tremble. Relief poured over me in a ferocious wave. Thank god I was sitting. I leaned into the kiss, a soft moan escaping as she fisted my hair. Her tight, possessive grip sent a thrill through me, hitting right between my legs. Even more than lust, though, my heart was as buoyant as the fluffy clouds in the perfect blue sky.

The early morning sun shone across my back, bright and warm, the joy rising inside me higher. The breeze brought the sharp scent of the city tumbling by and mingled with Sam’s sweetness. For a moment, the only thing that existed was me and my girl—goddamn mine.

She kissed me with the same passion I felt stirring inside me. Relief that we were here together after everything that had happened coursed through me.

I didn’t know how the chips would fall with Nina, and hell, I couldn’t predict the future for Sam and me. However, the connection between us was rare enough to protect. Rare enough to cherish.

Sam finally pulled back, releasing my hair. “I never expected you to come for me.”

I lifted my brow. “Then you must not know me well.”

She rested her hands over mine, and I savored the power of a simple touch between us. “Nina’s your best friend. I’m terrified one day you’ll wake up and resent me for ruining things with her.”

I shook my head. “I apologized for not telling her about you, but I’m not sorry I fell for you. If she genuinely has an issue with that, she isn’t the person I thought she was.”

Sam chewed on her lower lip. “What did she say?”

“I think the two of you need to talk,” I said. Sam huffed out a breath, but I lifted my hands. “If she’s still at my apartment, she’s willing to listen. Look, I’ve seen how much losing your family sliced you up—if there’s the chance for at least some closure with Nina, why not take it?”

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“Why give her the opportunity to hurt me more?” Sam spat out. “You saw her reaction back there—like I was the worst sort of scum.”

“Yeah, but unlike you, I spoke to her,” I said, giving her a pointed look. “I’m not going to make you do anything because I’m not in your position. I haven’t lived your life, and I can’t imagine how horrible it feels to lose your family because of who you are. I’m just telling you the chance might be there to get one member back.”

Sam sucked in a deep breath. “I’ll try. I don’t want you to lose your best friend too, just because I can’t face my demons.”

I threaded my fingers through hers, squeezing her hand in mine. As much as we needed to head to my apartment, I didn’t want to leave the perfection of this moment. Of the bright sunlit sky overhead, the city that had welcomed me carved across the horizon, and the woman I loved sitting beside me. I breathed in the clove, exhaust, and metal, loving how they made my senses spark to life.

Loving the way Sam Taylor made me feel.

“All right, let’s go,” I said finally, breaking the gentle quiet between us.

When we arrived at my apartment, we’d find out if I still had a best friend.

Chapter Sixteen

Sam

I couldn't believe I was willingly going back to Amelia's apartment after I'd bolted.

However, three little words made a world of difference.

Learning that Ames loved me? Hell, I'd confront my parents for this woman. And a small part of me needed to know what had happened all those years. Why Nina was okay with Ames being gay but not me.

Ames held my hand tight the whole way, but as we stopped in front of her apartment door, both of us were buzzing. Because there was always the chance Nina hadn't stayed. That she'd cut Ames out as well as me. If that were the case, I didn't know how I'd process. Ames might not hold the outcome against me, but the guilt would fucking bury me.

"I'm opening my door," she warned me, her keys jangling in her free hand.

When she cracked it wide, my gaze landed on Ames's sofa—and the person still sitting there.

Nina hadn't left.

My chest squeezed tight, and the familiar panic fluttered through my veins, but this time I wasn't running. Ames's hand in mine kept me grounded as we approached, a united front. She loved me. She'd chosen me. I could barely believe it, but I knew from the moment she crash-landed back into my life what a treasure this woman was. I sure as hell wasn't going to give her up.

"I only have one question," Nina said, her eyes sharp. "Why did you leave?"

I sucked in a shaky breath. Looked like we were going to dive in. I let go of Amelia's hand, even though I wanted to keep holding it. Nina and I needed to have this

conversation, though, and I couldn't rely on Ames here. I settled onto the couch beside my sister, and Ames found a spot on her loveseat.

"I didn't have a choice," I said. "Mom and Dad said that as long as I was a queer, I didn't have a place in the family."

Nina flinched as if I'd slapped her.

Silence descended between us, but she wasn't speaking. She also wasn't leaving, so I wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

I stared at my thighs. Amelia's presence next to me was pure sunlight I grasped onto, if only to fight the darkness threatening to tug me under. Finally, a small exhale came from Nina.

When I looked up, Nina's eyes were glossed over with tears.

"I should've known," she said, her voice cracking. The first tears slipped down her cheeks. "They told me you'd gotten into drugs, that you didn't want to be around us anymore."

Anger flared through me fast and fierce, but the sight of my sister's tears quenched it just as fast, leaving a bitter ache in its wake.

Our parents had lied to her.

The missing piece clicked into place, but what remained was this hollow grief of the years we'd lost. All because of those lies. Nina had only been a kid. Of course she'd believed them.

"You couldn't have known." I needed to reassure her. The sight of her there, tears

streaming down her face vaulted me back ten years. This was my baby sister, the one I'd taken care of as an infant. I'd changed her diapers, sung her to sleep. I'd read her stories and played tea parties with her, even though I'd been way older. We'd never been close like siblings who'd grown up side by side, but I'd been her protector.

Not being able to check in to see how she was doing all these years had gutted me.

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“But you tried, Sam.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks. “You tried to explain, and I just told you to fuck off.”

My heart cracked in two. I wanted to protect her even now from the heartache she must be feeling, the betrayal of having our folks lie like that. Bitterness still stirred in my gut, from old wounds, from years of being on my own, from being abandoned by the people I trusted most. Yet in that moment, the bitterness didn’t win. I opened my arms like I had when she was six and crying because she hurt her knee.

Nina collapsed into them, and I clung to her tight, holding on for dear life. To see her look at me with kindness once more was a gift I’d never expected, and I wouldn’t take it for granted. And I knew who was to thank for that. Nina’s hot tears stained my shirt, and I clutched her with all my might.

Nina believed me.

She believed me, and she still cared. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay,” I soothed, rocking back and forth. “It’s going to be okay.”

For the first time in a long, long while, I genuinely believed it. My gaze locked with Ames’s, and the gratitude roaring within me was unbelievable.

Thank you, I mouthed to her, and her stunning blue eyes crinkled at the edges with her warm smile.

This woman had stormed into my life like a hurricane, uprooting everything I

knew—only to plant my roots in better soil.

I held Nina tight and basked in Amelia's steady, loving presence as she watched over the both of us.

Nina had stayed with me and Ames through most of the day. We'd taken a break to go grab lunch at Jared's Pizza, which meant we had leftovers for tonight because neither Amelia nor I were in shape to go anywhere.

When Nina had left, about an hour ago, we'd exchanged numbers and promised to fill in the gaps of what we'd missed out on over the years.

Ames had stripped down to a loose black tank, no bra, and her lacy panties. The sight had my core twitching to life, but we were both too bone-weary to fuck tonight. The volume of tears that had escaped me today bordered on ridiculous, and all her bruises from the fight had developed into a patchwork pattern across her skin. We had decided on a night of cuddling on her couch.

It was perfection.

She lay against me, her back to my front, and I kept my arms wrapped tight around her, like she might vanish. I still could barely believe she was mine. When I'd woken up today, I'd been sure I'd lost everything, yet tonight I had more than I could've imagined.

I still had my family at Knockout.

I had a new chance with my baby sister.

And I had the woman I loved in my arms.

“Fuck, I love you.” I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. A shiver rocked through her body, and I held her a little tighter.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing that,” she murmured.

“Then I’ll tell you as much as you want.” I nuzzled into her hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her, all lilies and sunshine.

“You know, making me watch Avengers again won’t change my mind over it,” Ames said. I lifted my hand and ran my fingers through her hair, and she sighed softly.

“It’s not for you. I fully expect you to pass out minutes in.”

“Rude but accurate,” she said, even though her smile was radiant. The comfort and ease between us was something I’d longed for and had never realized I’d been missing from past relationships. Ames understood me without a single explanation, and I loved her all the more for it.

I pressed another idle kiss to the top of her head. The opening scene for Avengers played on the screen, and a few slices of pizza still lay in the open box on the coffee table. Ames was curled into my arms, her lashes fluttering as I stroked my fingers through her soft waves. The heat from her, the sweetness of having those curves pressed up against me, was pure heaven. A long, elusive peace fluttered through me, settling deep in my chest.

If I got lucky, truly lucky, I would get the chance to show this woman what a treasure she was for the rest of my life.

Epilogue

Ames

Three Months Later

Today was one of those stunning fall days, all blue skies and crisp breezes.

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Sweat stuck my shirt to my chest, a tee with the Knockout logo on it. Since my girlfriend happened to be one of the employees, I'd gotten an invite to the staff picnic. They had it every year at Penn Treaty Park, right at the Delaware River. The coolness coming off the water was welcome. Get a bunch of workout buffs together, and already we were trying to one-up each other with challenges.

Cortez and Corbett were currently in a push-up contest, and a few of the guys were crowded around them, egging them on.

Sam stood by the picnic tables with Brooks and Jace, both trainers at Knockout. I'd been walking to the waters with Emmit and August, folks I'd started to get to know well. Considering how much time I spent at the gym, these people had become a second family. It didn't hurt that they did regular breakfasts together at the gym, which I'd gotten the invite to.

The trainers I'd grown closest to were Brooks and Cortez, and we'd gone out to the bars with them outside of work. Apart from them, I'd also met Sam's elusive friend Maeve, who lived in the suburbs. My footfalls softened as I switched from pavement to grass, making my way over to my girl.

As far as my friends went, Nina was the most important one—and she'd forgiven me completely. If anything, we'd been spending more time together since she was mending her relationship with Sam while simultaneously hanging out with me. My heart warmed whenever I caught them laughing at an old joke or bringing up a memory they'd shared—like watching them heal in real time.

The historical markers and statue of William Penn stood out nearby, and the lap of

the water to the shore was soothing. I was stuffed from all the amazing picnic food that had been brought out—a huge hoagie spread, chips and dips, potato salad, and insanely good chocolate peanut butter cupcakes from one of the local bakers. I was cheating today on my strict regimen, especially with a fight coming up. However, with Sam’s care and training, I’d never been better in the ring. We were a fucking power team, and I couldn’t wait to keep rising the ranks in the MMA scene.

I neared the picnic table, and Sam’s gaze slipped to mine. The bloom of affection in her dark eyes sent my heart fluttering every time.

“Got tired of watching the water?” Sam asked.

“Clearly, the food beckoned.” I sat next to her. Sam slipped her arm around my waist and pressed a light kiss to my lips. I melted at her touch, at the electricity that danced up my spine every time I was in her arms. I could be a fierce-as-fuck fighter in the ring, but in bed, Sam took the reins. I loved it.

“You two are cavity-inducing,” Brooks said, a smug smile on their lips.

“Thanks, I aim to please,” I said with a grin.

“I’m glad you locked this one down, Sam.” Jace, the gruff older guy, was just as sweet as the rest of the employees around here.

“See, they all love me,” I preened, and Sam brought my back flush against her front.

“How could anyone not?” she murmured in my ear, her lips brushing it.

I swallowed hard, a deep sense of satisfaction taking root inside me. When I’d arrived in Philly, I’d lost my girlfriend and my trainer, and I’d been looking for somewhere new to settle down. I could never have imagined it’d be in the arms of Sam Taylor, my first crush.

I leaned back into her, the ever-present warmth filtering through me. The love she sparked inside me was so much more powerful than a wildfire. It had the steadiness of a hearth. She was the first person I wanted to see in the morning and the one I wanted to fall asleep next to every night.

I stared out at the Delaware, the sunlight sparkling across the river, filled with potential and dreams. Those were the same I witnessed every time I looked in Sam's eyes. I hadn't realized it when I was younger, but the connection I felt was the strongest force on earth. This woman wasn't just my partner, my love—she was my future.