



# Finn

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**Description:** Everyone in the Heights knows fairy tales are fake.

There's no happily-ever-after, there's just making the best of what you got. But what if that isn't the case for me? First, my brother returns. Sure, he's come back changed. A ferocious leader, a hardened gangster, but most importantly, an overbearing, overprotective, ass. But hey, he's alive. Something I couldn't be more thrilled about until he ruins my love life, practically repelling men away with his signature glower. His constant warnings don't work on Finn though.

The badass—yet somehow adorably sexy—MMA trainer puts up with my brother's attitude to protect me from being used as a pawn in the Dragon's world. Keeping me safe from this new threat is the only thing they can agree on. But just how far is Finn willing to go? A girl needs answers because I'm ready to be swept away in my own treacherous version of a love story... After all, Cinderella's shoes aren't made for the Heights, but I'd take a combat boot any day.

**Total Pages (Source):** 71

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“You’re crazy, bitch, you know that?”

I drop my head back and laugh at the endearing words from my bestie. I give her a fashion show twirl, swinging my hips like the runway models do, which is really hard to fucking do in these gigantic heels. By the time I’m facing her again, I can’t keep up the pretense any longer. “I don’t know if I can do it, Jaz. My feet already hurt.”

She appraises me from head-to-toe with her discerning, style-expert gaze. When finished, she gives a curt nod as if she’s just figured out how to catch water on fire. “No one will be looking at your feet in that outfit. Trust me. You can change into shorter heels. Maybe a cute boot?”

I tug my lower lip into my mouth and look at my friend expectantly.

She groans. Loudly.

“Pleeeasse? I won’t let anything happen to them.” My eyes are already wide and dreaming about the new boots she bought the other day. She Snapchatted them to me, and I fangirled like I was talking to Jimmy Choo himself. No, they aren’t designer, but they’re great knockoffs.

This is the Heights, not Beverly Hills, after all.

She gestures toward her closet with a dismissing wave and an eyeroll. “Fine.” Before I can even turn fully, her grumbling lifts into a smile. See? She loves me.

Jaz has been my stand-in sibling for more than five years. When she scored this cute apartment above the dress shop, we decided to move in together. Two incomes going toward the rent couldn't hurt. Plus, it gives me some space from Mom and Dad.

She places a matching hoop earring in her right ear. "If Cole's there, you know he's going to give you shit."

"Oh, I'm counting on it," I throw back as I step toward her closet. Hers is filled with more clothing and accessories than mine, and it's always a maze to rifle through. Jaz is a pseudo-fashionista, or at least she would be if we didn't grow up in the Heights.

Through the full-length mirror we picked up at a thrift store, I watch as she shakes her head at my brush off, laughing to herself. I'm pretty sure she's found far too much amusement in the fact that my brother has come back to town. But like, not just as my brother, as afucking badass gang leader. Whatever he is, it still blows my mind that he's here again. I couldn't care less about the title. When he defected from the Crew, I was pretty sure he was dead. Or at the very least, chased away from Rawley Heights for the rest of his life.

Having him back is a blessing...and a curse.

"You two are going to kill each other. Mark my words." Jaz leans back on a sea of pillows that run the gamut of all the colors of the rainbow. She crosses her legs, already dressed for tonight in a skintight pair of skinny jeans and a shimmery crop top. Her chestnut brown hair is growing out from a really bad pixie cut that she regretted from the first snip. It's now dutifully down to her shoulders, a little longer in the front and moving backward at an upward angle. "And like, just sayin', but he can actually make that happen. I'm going to have to give him the upper hand with this one."

I bark out a laugh. Toeing the pair of my roommate's new boots out of the closet, I

step out of the sky-high heels and into the cute peep-toes. For all of my bravado, I worry over my lip while my back is to her. She's absolutely right that Cole has the power to make that happen, which is fucking scary. Obviously, she's joking about the killing me part. He's way too overprotective. Trying to keep me from getting killed from everything right down to the damn Heights street rats.

Basically, my brother left cool and came back an overbearing asshole.

"The only thing he's going to drive me to do is die from boredom," I snarl.

"Dramatic much?" Her red lips pull into a grin. Her favorite thing to do is tease me about my propensity for drama.

I turn, much steadier on my feet now and give my friend a playful boob wiggle, ignoring her dig. I've always had a flair for theatrics. I'm not about to stop now. "Better?"

"Sexy as fuck. I'd do you."

I kiss the air in the vicinity of her face. "You're the best."

"I know." She crosses her arms behind her head, looking the picture of serenity as she basks in my compliment.

I take one of her fringe pillows with purple pom-poms on all four corners and chuck it at her. It hits her in the chest and bounces off.

She drops her mouth in mock shock. "And to think I lent you my new shoes." She shoots off the bed, but I'm already hightailing it out of there. She'll have to pry these boots off my cold dead feet. Which she would do, so I'm not even joking. She's very serious about her shit, and I may or may not be the worst person to lend things to.

The apartment opens up to a joint kitchen and living space. It's not high-end or anything, but we've made it work. The couch in the living space used to be in the dress shop downstairs. We snatched it up when they were getting rid of it. It's a beautiful cranberry velvet settee piece. We decorated the entire room around its charm with furnishings purchased from second-hand shops that we re-stained or repainted to match the aesthetic. Thankfully, the furnishings draw attention away from the cheap cabinetry and pocked Formica of the island that serves as the barrier between the two rooms.

On either side of the couch sit two end tables that used to be a drab brown, but we painted them white, bought fancy new knobs, and placed bargain lamps on each one, and now they look a thousand percent better. The only thing we can't change is the muted brown, stained carpet. To counteract it, we're putting money aside and searching for the perfect area rug to cover up how horrendous it is. All in all, I swear we have one of the nicer apartments in all of the Heights—if not that, then at least it's unique. It's nothing like the modern tower my brother is living in but it's mine and Jaz's so I love it.

Standing in front of the floor-length mirror in the hallway, I re-tie my halter and lean forward, making sure I'm giving enough of a show without giving too much. There's a fine line between sexy and straight up ho. The ruffles that skirt the v-neckline bring attention to my cleavage without overdoing it. The black shirt ends in an asymmetric hem that shows off a sneak peek of my stomach. Rounding out the outfit is a layered jean skirt to match the neckline of my shirt and black tights lead to the cute boots, which really do throw this outfit into H-O-T territory.

Jaz pouts behind me, staring in longing at my wavy, dark auburn hair that stops mid-back. "I hate you."

I smirk at her. "You're rocking that new bob, and you know it."

## Page 2

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She runs her fingers through the balayage colored ends, twisting her face left and right to catch it from all angles. With her chin in the air and a sly grin, she relents. “Yeah, you’re right.”

I shake my head. She’s got the smoky eye look down to a T. I’m shit at makeup. She’s been trying to teach me since we were teenagers, but I’m a hopeless case. If she doesn’t do my makeup for me—like tonight—I just end up with the au natural look. About the only thing I can do is put on mascara, so there’s that. “Is Jared coming?”

She gets a wistful look in her hazel eyes. “Yeah, he’s going to meet us there. Do not drag him into your stuff with Cole. I mean it,” she says, giving me a pointed look in the mirror.

I clasp my hand to my chest. “Me?” In response, she gives me another knowing look, and I crack with a grimace. “I only did it once. I figured Cole would get over it if he knew Jared was there.”

Jaz sighs. “You should just tell him we’re going to the fights, Leenie. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is, he’s going to come swaggering in there and any guy I meet is going to tuck tail and run because of who he is.” I’m not just speculating either. That’s happened with about five guys, and that’s only in the first few weeks of him returning to the Heights. Actually, wait. That’s the first few weeks of me even knowing he was back in the Heights. He failed to tell us he was back until the Crew collapsed.

My body shudders involuntarily. I’m actually glad I wasn’t around for that. Cole

hasn't offered up the deets on what happened, and I'm pretty sure I don't want to know either. I worry about my big brother. His status brings a whole different set of problems which has nothing to do with my sudden, very boring sex life.

"He might show up though, you know?" Jaz offers as she grabs some money and slips it under the neckline of her shirt. She then takes her license out of her purse and places it in the back pocket of her skinny jeans. "If he finds you there, it'll be worse."

I go to my own purse hanging on the repurposed coat rack to the right of the mirror and tuck my license and money into my bra. Someone will have to practically grope me if they want to steal my cash. Not saying they won't, but at least I'll see it coming. "I like the odds though," I tell her over my shoulder, hoping she'll drop it. I don't want to think about Cole right now. "The fights in the new Ring aren't Dragon-sanctioned."

Jaz stops and blows out a breath. "Dragons. Jesus Christ. I don't think I'll ever get over the fact that The Heights Crew doesn't run Rawley Heights anymore. That shit's crazy."

Crazy and fucking much needed. I've always uniformly tried to stay out of Crew shit because of the whole thing with my brother defecting and the Crew possibly looking for retaliation because of it, but things had started to get out-of-hand, and I didn't have to be anywhere near close enough to understand what was happening.

I hold my hand out to her, and she clasps hers in mine. We smile at each other, and I put an end to all the gang talk with, "Let's get this shit started. 'Kay?"

"You are way too happy about this."

I shrug. A night off from my brother's domineering shit sounds like the perfect medicine from a week that was about as mundane as could be. Work. Home. Work.

Home.Jaz, and getting to reconnect with my brother, are the only bright spots. And even then, welcoming Cole back into my life means having to deal with his overprotectiveness, so... Yeah. We're going to the Ring to let off some steam.

After locking up, Jaz places the apartment key in her back pocket along with her license, and we step out into the narrow stairwell that leads out onto the main street. I fumble for the light switch. When I finally find it, the bulb flickers on only to blow a second later. "For Christ's sake."

Jaz chuckles behind me. "Talk about heels being an actual hazard."

We take the stairs slowly, Jaz keeping one hand on my shoulder and the other on the handrail as we descend. Muted light from the window on the exit illuminates the last few steps. Since it's damn near eight at night, the Heights streetlights are already on, giving us just that little spot in the dark.

Thankfully, we make it to the bottom without breaking our necks. Stepping outside, a gust of evening air sweeping through the block picks up my hair and flutters it around me. Almost as soon as I take my first step toward freedom, my phone buzzes. I pull it out of the top of my jean skirt, frowning at the screen.

What are you two doing tonight?

I think about not answering Cole, but if I don't, he'll just show up. Then, when I'm not at the apartment, he'll get his Dragons to find me and bring me to him. He'd happily make me move into the tower with him if that also wasn't a problem. He doesn't want to bring me into gang shit; he wants to keep me safely away. Hanging out, I text back because that's not a lie. I'm just not telling him where we're hanging out.

The thing is, my brother won't stop me from going anywhere, he just wants a guard



to tagalong in the biggest cockblock of all time. Who's going to break through the line of Dragons to hit on the leader's sister? Fucking no one with a brain, and dammit, I prefer my guys with brains. Big dicks, too, but you know, intelligence is also essential if they're going to figure out how to use their dicks wisely.

"I already have a feeling this isn't going to end well," Jaz mutters after reading my text exchange.

Poor girl. She's had to listen to my conflicted emotions about my brother's return for the last few months. One day, he's an asshole. The next, I'm so excited about getting him back I'm bouncing off the walls. I don't know. My head is a complicated place to be, that's all I have to say. "Either way, I'll keep you and Jared out of this so you can get some tonight," I offer, wagging my brows. Jared is Jaz's new fling. And actually, I'm not sure I would call it a fling anymore. She's pretty obsessed with him, and their relationship has been going strong for a few weeks. He seems to be just as into her as she's into him. "You sure he doesn't have a friend?"

"Please. I suppose you want Cole to kill me next?"

I force my hand in the crook of her elbow and hold her to me as we start down the street toward the Ring. "You know Cole wouldn't hurt you."

The resistant tug in my stomach reminds me I'm actually not one hundred percent sure on that. Cole's changed. He was always happy-go-lucky and personable. He was friends with everyone, maybe even to his own detriment. This hard life has made him different. Even so, I still don't think he'd do anything to the best friend I've had all my life. The one he knew before he became a big bad gang leader guy too.

We walk two blocks in silence before I emerge from my thoughts, groaning. "Can we please stop with the brother talk tonight?" I tug her closer as the Ring comes into view. "The whole point of this is to take my mind off my complicated life."

She hip bumps me. “I thought the whole point was to get laid.”

I laugh again, dipping my head back to let the streetlight shine on my face. The sound reverberates off the brick buildings around us as we move in toward the old warehouse that holds the new Ring. “Yeah, that too.”

The vertical pink and green neon sign spelling out R-I-N-G fades into a wave before blinking brightly, casting the dirty street into a color wheel of bright light. As we get closer, the colors splash all over Jaz and me, making her already glittery shirt sparkle.

## Page 3

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The sign may as well spell out freedom because I'm all over this place. First stop: the bar. Second stop: dick.

Fingers fucking crossed, anyway.

2

The new Ring, as everyone has taken to calling the warehouse that hosts the fights, is so named because the old Ring got blown up in gang-related shit.

I don't know the whole story because again—the sister of a defected ex-Crew member means you keep your head down and stay to yourself. Mom, Dad, and I were smart enough to know it was best to lay low to avoid becoming the means of retaliation against my brother. We didn't even keep in contact with my cousin Jacob—another prominent Crew member—which sucked. We just continued as normal, as if Cole never left, while our house simmered in turmoil.

Thumping bass blasting from the aged brick building filters onto the street. The dark, arched windows don't give anything away as to what's inside. I never went to the original Ring, but I've heard the new location is a carbon copy aside from one aspect: the venue is now housed in a much bigger space to accommodate an increased number of spectators. Judging by the growing crowd gathering on the sidewalk, I'd say that's probably accurate.

Jared meets us out front, leaning down to kiss Jaz on the cheek as we approach. He hands us each a ticket, his honey-blond bangs dangling over his forehead. I take the rectangular piece of paper from his fingers, reading the print to give the couple a

semblance of privacy. Stamped front and center in bold lettering are two names announcing the main fight of the night. Other matchups are listed below the headliners, but I can't say I recognize any of the fighters. The only history I have with MMA is when it's on TV and my dad happens to be flipping through channels. Honestly, I've never paid much attention. Tonight is more of an excuse for me to get out—in something that Cole doesn't have his hands in. Hopefully, no one will recognize me so I can go about my business.

“Ready?” Jaz asks, ribbing me with her elbow.

I turn back, genuine excitement thrumming through me. As we start down the sidewalk again, Jared talks about the different fighters with enthusiasm. I half listen, half watch the crowd. In the Heights, I'm used to seeing the same old faces of people I went to school with. No one new ever moves here for obvious reasons. However, so many bodies crowd toward the Ring's entrance that it's impossible for all of them to be Height's natives. I spot the telltale sign of a Dragon tattoo on several guys, and I dismiss them completely from a possible hookup. I can't get tangled with anyone under Cole's purview, but all the drawn red flames billowing up necks makes me wonder how many gang members my brother brought here with him. From the looks of things, I'd say a shitton.

Despite the volume of off-limits tats, there are other guys who look good enough to get into trouble with. The overwhelming majority of bodies lining up to see the fights are buffed up dudes with muscles straining under their shirts. I've practically hit the holy mecca of hot guys. They must all be MMA fans, drawn here by the now completely above-board fights in the Heights.

I lower my lips to Jaz's ear. “We've been missing out. Where have these guys been my whole life?”

She giggles, using her hand to shield it from Jared as he throws mock punches in the

air, describing something that neither one of us is listening to. Thankfully, he's drawn the attention of a beefcake walking next to us, and they start up a conversation about a fighter on the card tonight.

"Lots of Dragons though," Jaz muses, as another tattooed guy gets in line in front of us. I make myself small so I'm not seen. Cole has been cagey about his family here, trying to keep us out of everything, but everyone our age who grew up here knows. Hopefully, none of them decide to show up and ruin my night.

I study the man in front of me who answers to my brother. He appears younger than me. He's taller, though, putting his tattoo right in my line of sight. Every member of Cole's gang has a matching dragon head on their right chest with roaring flames licking just beyond the collar of their shirts. They don't keep their affiliation hidden. It's there for everyone to see. Which, in this case, helps me know who to steer clear of.

Jared falls in line behind us as we get closer to the employee manning the door. I hand over my ticket, and he scans it without looking up. After getting it back, I walk through the narrow doorway with Jaz only a step behind. She grabs my elbow as the growing mob pushes us further into the Ring.

I blink. It's by far the coolest building I've seen in the Heights. Sure, if you look close enough, it still has its warehouse roots, but they've made the aesthetic work for them by hanging neon signs and grunge decor like old street and building signs. Coupled with the somewhat shabby interior, the result is a clash in design that clearly meshes. I'm sure Jaz would have a cool name for it, like abandoned chic or trendy trash. As for me, I just think it's pretty.

Jared places his arm around Jaz as we take a right, falling into the natural flow of the crowd. The building is set up like a stadium with open walkways that circle the perimeter. Vendors to our right sell fighter merch on folding tables. To our left are

chairs ringed around an octagon-shaped cage that stands proudly in the middle.

“We’re up one flight,” I hear Jared shout to Jaz above the loud, thumping music that sounds like rage itself. Quite appropriate music for cage fighting, I assume.

Jaz’s boy toy points out a set of metal stairs in the corner that lead upward. They switchback until they hit the second floor, and we climb them to an almost entirely different atmosphere. If downstairs was all business with the actual cage and the vendors, this is the party floor.

Rows of wood bar tops line the walkway, boasting multiple metal stools shoved underneath. Along all four exterior walls are several different alcoholic concession stands, which are currently keeping the attention of most of the clientele. I follow Jared and Jaz down an aisle toward the center of the room until we hit a huge square cut-out in the middle, ringed with black, iron spindles. Folding chairs skirt the first row, and when we’re close enough, a quick peek down tells me we can see the cage clearly from here. Our bird’s eye view paints a clear picture of what is currently an empty ring surrounded by men in cheap, official suits. The baby blue flooring of the cage is marred in some areas with reddish-brown stains, a direct juxtaposition to what appears to be a well-oiled machine surrounding it.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach the whole time I take in the scene. When Jaz nudges me to sit down in the seat behind me, I turn wide eyes to Jared. “Are these our seats? They’re awesome.”

“Nothing but the best for my girl,” he grins, kissing Jaz’s temple. “And her friend,” he adds, giving me a half smile. He takes the aisle seat, Jaz sits next to him, and I seat myself next to her, quickly taking in the room. It takes Jared all of two seconds to stand back up and ask if we want drinks.

I give him money from my stash and ask for an amaretto sour. While he’s gone, the

place fills, brimming with bodies and electricity. The overhead music is a natural hype, pulsing a frenzied buzz through the crowd. If this is what it's like pre-fight, the bouts themselves must raise the hairs on every single person in this room.

Jared returns minutes later, handing me my mixed drink. "I hope it's right. Apparently, that's called an Uppercut Princess here. They don't even recognize the real name."

I narrow my gaze at the plastic cup with the same green liquid I've always ordered. I take a sip and the same delicious sour kick I love coats the back of my throat. Shrugging, I continue to drink the Uppercut Princess, whatever that means.

The lights dim after my fifth deep swallow, and I instinctively lean forward in my seat. It's so loud in here with the chattering voices and heavy rock that it's becoming increasingly difficult to hear anything else. Then again, Jaz is leaning toward Jared, so it's not as if I'd have anyone to talk to anyway. The third wheel is awkward as fuck, but someone has to do it. I mentally toast to myself that by the end of the night—if everything goes smoothly—I won't be in this position any longer. Though, if Cole has anything to say about it, he'd probably argue on the side of being a nun for the rest of my life.

The music suddenly cuts off, and a booming voice fills the air. Much more commotion begins near the octagonal cage as a man announces tonight's fight card along with the drink specials.

I tap my cute, borrowed boots against the cement at my feet, glancing around the place as the commentary continues regarding the first matchup, including the athlete's weights and reach. Things I'm definitely not interested in. My gaze moves all the way up to the steel beam tresses across the top of the room. Above this seating area stretches another level with the same square hole in the floor except those spectators are in bleacher seating that moves up and back. Even the furthest row is

filled with people who can practically touch the industrial ceiling.

The chime of a bell brings my attention back to the cage. Two lanky fighters face off in the middle, a referee shuffling around the outside. I grip the top of the black iron bar in front of me, leaning forward as I watch the fighters trade blows. The matches on TV I caught glimpses of were nothing like this. The crackling energy increases the intensity tenfold, making this live, firsthand experience so much more exciting. The crowd feels every smashing blow and errant miss. Applause and catcalls percolate from even the highest chairs. As if invigorated by the audience, the fighters leave nothing on the table, swinging with everything they have until the very last second.

When the match finishes, I lean closer as Jared talks to Jaz. He thinks the guy in the white trunks won, and if I had to guess, he would be my choice too. After a few minutes of judge deliberation, the guy in the white trunk's hand is raised, and the music starts up again with a drum solo crescendo.



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I'm watching the outskirts of the ring when Jared hands me another amaretto sour. Excuse me, Uppercut Princess. Since I'm here, I may as well talk the talk. I drink it down while two more fighters approach the cage. These two enter to music, jogging down a ramp until they wait in front of the octagon's entrance where a referee-looking official rubs a gel-like substance over their nose and cheekbones. When I ask Jared what it is, he tells me it's Vaseline to help the fighters' blows glance off instead of splitting skin. My eyebrows end up in my hairline as I take in the information.

Bulkier than the first, the two new fighters sport full muscles and defined abs. One of them has a messed-up ear, and I overhear Jared tell Jaz it's because he does Jiu-Jitsu, which apparently makes your ear look like a swollen troll. The guy opposite him bounces up and down, smacking his gloves together. Over his right shoulder stands a man in a tight t-shirt, hanging over the top of the cage and talking rapidly. I sit up straighter, lips parting. This guy is to-die-for gorgeous. Longer hair feathers over the tips of his ears, falling forward toward fierce eyes that are highlighted by sharp cheekbones. The taper from his muscled torso to strong hips is partially hidden by the black chain-link but is nonetheless droolworthy. Suddenly, the rushed words bursting from his mouth end on a crescendo while he slams the top of the cage three times before jumping to the ground, leaving his fighter in the ring baring his teeth.

If I thought the first fight was brutal, this one is next level. The extra meat on the competitors' bones lends to more damaging punches heaved with almost the same amount of dizzying speed as the first match. Despite the raw brutality in the ring, I'm drawn to the dirty-blond haired coach outside the cage who's putting as much energy into the bout as the two fighters. In between rounds, he enters the octagon, giving the guy in dark blue trunks a water bottle and a towel to clean up with. All the while, he talks into the brawler's ear animatedly, making short punching motions with a closed

fist. Dark joggers hug his waist when he crouches, getting eye level for his last few words of advice.

I'm mesmerized. I don't know if it's the guy or the atmosphere or what, but I feel as if I'm watching the most intriguing scene I've ever witnessed. I'm completely caught up in the moment that when the fight resumes and the fighter in the blue trunks knocks his opponent out, I jump to my feet, clapping louder than any other person in our section.

Jaz yanks me down, her face full of confused amusement. "What are you doing?"

I half turn toward her while still keeping my eyes on the action. "I love everything about this."

She laughs. "Let's see, blood, brutality, and drama? Of course you do." Leaning closer, she teases, "You're so much like your brother."

I shove her away playfully for that remark but I'm still distracted by what's happening in the cage. The opponent who got knocked out is being tended to while the other fighter's team—including my hottie—rushes the cage. The dirty-blond haired trainer picks his man up around the waist, hoisting him in the air while the winner thrusts his hands toward the ceiling with a gladiator-like yell.

The celebration dies gradually, and the two sides shake hands after the official announcement. I can't keep my eyes off the gorgeous specimen of a man, his grin infectious as he greets the other fighter's team, bowing his head to them in a show of respect before he wraps his arms around the victor's shoulders for a picture.

I lean left, getting all up in Jaz's space to ask Jared who he is, trying to point him out without using words like sexy, handsome, and muscled god. Eventually, he understands. "Oh, that's Finn. He and his brother own a boxing-turned-MMA gym on

the outskirts of town.”

Finn. Even his name is fucking hot.

They leave the ring, and I watch him as he talks in his fighter’s ear, exiting down the ramp they entered from. They retreat inside another door on the far end, and I lose sight.

The best thing about Finn is the lack of a Dragon tattoo.

I can’t stop thinking about him as the night wears on. Scanning the crowd between matches always leaves me disappointed. So, after the last fight ends, I perk up again, but instead of finding him, I watch in awe as the Ring transforms into a club. A canvas net is thrown over the octagon, the chairs are stripped down, and the fighters fill the lower level, walking around proudly with cuts and bruises. One contender’s eye is so swollen it’s grotesque but he smiles through it all. Spectators from the upper floors file down, talking with the competitors, getting autographs, or just dancing in the available space now that club music has turned on.

I survey the crowd until I spot Finn standing with a group of fighters. His build matches theirs, and even though he didn’t fight tonight, I wonder if he has before.

“You have a glint in your eye,” Jaz pokes.

I give her a wicked grin. “I have my eye on someone. Do you think Jared wants to go down and meet any of the fighters?”

She knows I’m up to something and like the good girlfriend she is, she helps me out. Leaning into her date, my bestie brings up the idea. He seems thrilled, and what a coincidence, me-fucking-too. As for Jaz, she’s just content to see what the hell I’m going to do next.

We head toward the stairwell as I figure out how the hell I'm going to get in this guy's pants. Preferably tonight. Preferably within the next hour.

It's been some dry spell, let me tell you.

3

I've never been much for beating around the bush.

As soon as we enter onto the first floor, I take the lead, forcing Jared and Jaz to follow. When we get ten feet away from Finn and the group he's talking to, my stomach clenches. He's taller than me, by almost a whole head. He'd be intimidating if he didn't have an alarmingly adorable smile, striking features, and a boisterous laugh that seems to come as easy as breathing.

Basically, I'm a goner for the guy before I've even officially met him.

Though I'm at least a foot shorter than all the guys in his circle, I butt right in, wiggling between him and the guy on his right. He peers down at me, lip twitching at the corners as if he finds me amusing.

"Finn, right?" I ask, an absurdly wide smile on my face.

He isn't taken aback by how forward I am. In fact, his own smile grows, and he tilts his head to the side conspiratorially. "That's me. But I know we haven't met because I would remember those eyes." His gaze narrows, and for a brief second, it's like he's staring straight into my soul.

Despite myself, I blush. I'm so struck by his flirtatious comment that I forget I'm on a mission until Jaz nudges me, and Jared, thank God, saves the day. "Dude, amazing fight." He turns to the guy on my right who I definitely stepped in front of to meet

Finn and congratulates him on winning. I hadn't even recognized him as the fighter with the blue trunks when I approached Finn. I was on a mission.

Finn doesn't steer his eyes away from mine except to shake hands with Jared. When Jared moves on to the fighter, the trainer's entrancing blue eyes focus on me once more. "So, does the beautiful girl have a name?"

I blink, all thought leaving me. Not going to lie, I'm used to being the assertive one. The fact that he's coming right back is throwing me off.

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Jaz nudges me again, putting a little more strength into it so I lose my balance. “This is Leenie.” She turns a bewildered smile to me, rounding her eyes as if to tell me to get with the program because I’m definitely fucking this up.

“Leenie, huh?” Finn turns my way fully, giving me all of his attention. The tension in the air I felt during the fights settles between my shoulder blades.

I mentally smack myself, quickly chanting an internal pep talk. “Nickname.” I shrug, the back of my neck heating in embarrassment. “My parents had to go and give me one of those classic names. You know, kind of like Beverly or Mary. They’re just unsexy.”

He chuckles to himself. “Now you have me curious.” He leans in, and I can smell the mixture of cologne and the sweet tang of sweat clinging to his skin. “Leenie is short for...” He crosses his arms over his chest, his right hand moving to his chin to stroke his clean-shaven jaw.

“Colleen.” I smile with an I told you so look.

He drags his gaze down me, and my skin responds, heating everywhere his eyes catch. His slow perusal lands on my borrowed boots and then moves back up again. “It suits you.”

“A lot of things suit me...” I rake my gaze down his body, making myself abundantly clear, but also taking the time to appreciate his form up close. Studying him from the second floor did not do him justice. His tight black shirt clings to his muscled torso and highlights the size of his biceps peeking out of his sleeve. His angular,

symmetrical face is downright striking, but the longer hair softens his features just enough to not be too cutting.

He laughs, catching me off guard in a pleasant way. “You’re fun Leenie,” he remarks, using my nickname which already adds points in my book. It’s nice to skip all the formal bullshit. Sometimes, even after I tell people I prefer Leenie, they’ll use Colleen instead.

Before I can tell him he has no idea how fun I can be, someone else enters the circle, congratulating Finn’s fighter on his win. He’s much more serious, but Finn’s so easy with him that they must have a past. He doesn’t stay long, just enough time to tell Finn he has work to do before stalking off again.

My sexy crush watches him go with a slight frown, but it’s gone again by the time he looks back at me. “My brother,” he informs me, answering a question I didn’t ask.

I turn to see if I can find him in the crowd but he’s already gone. They looked alike, I guess. He was shorter than Finn and stockier with more of a body builder physique, but not the kind who look like they’re on steroids. “Does he also have a sexy name?”

“Depends.” He gives me a teasing smile. “What do you think about Jax?”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Man, your parents must have really loved you guys. They set you up to get laid for life.”

The freeing sound of his laugh cuts away at the giant armor I’ve been wearing since Cole returned. I find myself stepping closer to him as if some of his personality might rub off on me. So much of my life has been filled with tension lately that his easygoing nature is like smelling an aromatic flower, and I can’t get enough.

He takes note of how close I’m getting. “Is this your first time at the Ring?”

I nod, a rush of excitement tingling up my spine just like when I was watching the fights. “Yeah. Honestly, I wasn’t so sure I would like it, but I was brimming with energy the whole time. Your fight—” I stop to correct myself. “Hisfight was explosive.”

Finn glances over my head. “Yeah, Dalton’s worked super hard. He’s a monster in the ring.”

“So, you’re like his trainer?”

“One of them.” The lights dim around us, and he moves his gaze up, face pulling taut for a moment. The space has fully transitioned from fight space to club, complete with lights dancing off the walls and music blaring. Finn leans in so I can hear him over the noise. “Can I get you a drink?”

His closeness sends a warmth over me. “I’d love that.”

“And a more comfortable space to talk?” The flirty wink that follows does funny things to my stomach.

I’m still processing the butterflies when he drops his hand to the small of my back as we walk wordlessly toward the stairs. The light touch shoots pleasure through me. Enough that I need to find an A/C vent stat before I combust. The climb up the metal steps gives me time to talk myself down, so that when we finally hit the second floor, I don’t look like I’ve just short-circuited. Our group stops at an empty wooden bar top, and we all congregate around it. Jared looks right at home talking to the other fighters while Jaz raises her eyebrows at me from under the crook of his elbow.

“That’s better,” Finn says, pulling out one of the metal stools for me. He takes my hand as I settle on top. “What are you drinking, Leenie?”



“An Uppercut Princess.”

His eyes round for a second, and then a sly smile pulls at his lips. “Excellent choice.”

After he turns toward the closest bar, Jaz extracts herself from Jared’s arm and comes right for me. “Holy shit. I thought for sure you’d screwed that up. I’ve never seen you so tongue-tied before.”

I barely hear her. I’m looking over my shoulder at his retreating figure. “Is he not the hottest thing ever?”

Jaz laughs, the sound tinkling above the music. She pushes my shoulder, forcing me to face her. “I mean, I probably shouldn’t say because...” She gestures toward Jared. “But shit yes. Boy is fine.” Her gaze flicks above me, and she slams her mouth shut. “Coming back,” she singsongs and then gracefully moves back to Jared.

“Girl talk?” a husky voice asks in my ear.

A thrill shoots up my spine. I have a thing for men whispering in my ear. Nothing turns me on more, a fact he couldn’t know after just meeting me but holy shit. I turn to him with a grin to match his teasing voice. “Of course.”

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“Did I get her approval?”

I take the drink from his hand and sip it, holding out on my answer just to watch him for a moment longer. “So far, so good.”

He sits next to me, moving the stool until our knees touch. A deliberate action if I’ve ever seen one.

I notice he’s empty-handed and frown. “You’re not drinking?”

A hint of blush colors his cheeks. “It’s not that I don’t ever drink, but not here.”

“Oh, so are you still on duty or...?”

“Something like that.” He brushes his adorable hair off his forehead but it falls right back into place. His lower lip has the cutest indentation in it that my gaze keeps wandering toward.

“So, is this what you do for fun?” I ask.

“Hit on hot girls?”

I preen under his hot girl assessment. At least there’s a mutual physical attraction going on. And so far, he’s getting an A in the intelligence factor, too. “Well, I was talking about this whole scene. The training, the fighting, owning a gym.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You know I own a gym?”

Well, Jesus. Why don't I just wear a sign that says stalker? I turn in my seat and gesture toward Jared. "That's my girl's boyfriend. I may have hit him up for some information about you."

"How unfair. I know nothing about you."

"Not true. You know my real first name. Not many can say that."

He takes a moment to formulate a response. I swear he never stops smiling, and I like it. Like, I really like it. "So, Leenie, who drinks Uppercut Princesses, and doesn't normally come to fights, what are you into?"

Is getting my pussy licked an appropriate response here? Because I've practically planned out the rest of our night and that's certainly included.

The sexual tension between us feels like an actual physical pulse. I press my lips together and take another drink if only to stall. "I work at the bank. Jaz works there, too." It seems wrong to stop there. In fact, he should know more about me now that my brother is the most well-known person in the Heights, but that's the same reason why I don't want to keep going. Hell, for all I know, this might not go anywhere. I sure hope it does. It's not often you meet a guy who not only has a steady job but who actually owns his own business in the Heights. That's attractive as fuck. "I'm fairly boring, actually," I tell him with a chuckle. "I like to let my hair down a little on the weekends when I can."

He grips the end of one of my long, auburn waves, passing his thumb over it before dropping it back to my shoulder.

When he doesn't respond, I blush. "See? Told you. Boring."

"Not in the slightest," he states. "Just kind of blown away by the fact that bank

employees look as sexy as you. Maybe I should start going in more often instead of doing all of my transactions online.”

His words have an instant reaction to my lips, like a puppeteer pulling on marionette strings. “You’re a flirt.”

“So I’ve been told.”

I bite the top of my straw and smile. “Shameless.”

“Always.”

I take a deep breath, loving that he has an answer for everything. I think it’s about time to see if we can take this to the next level. “Does the shameless flirt dance?”

He sits up straight on the stool. “How do you think I got my amazing figure?”

I lean in too close for two people who’ve just met. “I don’t know why I thought fighting had something to do with that.”

Finn runs his fingers up my forearms as he whispers in my ear. “Who else is a shameless flirt? We better be careful.”

“Before?”

“Before we end up talking our clothes right off each other.”

## Page 7

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Heat envelops me like a rushing inferno. He stands, running his hand back down my arm to tangle his fingers in mine. A short tug helps me to my feet, and he leads me back down the metal stairs. Before I lose sight of her, I turn to catch Jaz beaming and wiggling her fingers at me. All I can muster is an excited smirk.

Once again, Finn places a sure hand on my back as he leads me into the area surrounding the cage. A couple of guys nod his way. I recognize a few of them from fighting earlier. He greets them with fist bumps, but he never once takes his attention off me. Grasping my hand more solidly, he raises it above my head and makes me twirl before pulling me close, sliding a muscular thigh between my legs. It doesn't matter that he's still wearing joggers like he just ended a workout, he's undeniably fine and the thin material makes for less of a barrier. Win-win.

I loop my hands around his neck, then drop one to his chest. My fingers skirt over the block lettering on his shirt: Elite Boxing. I lean forward to talk into his ear so he can hear me over the music. "Is this your gym?" I ask, pressing against his chest.

"Mm-hmm," he hums, reaching down to grip my hip.

I can feel his pectoral muscles under his shirt. Even through his joggers, his corded muscles are prominent as he sways our hips together to the beat of the sultry music.

I'm so caught up in him I don't immediately recognize the sudden influx of Dragon tattoos moving in around us, dancing in the empty pockets, some with girls, some grabbing girls to dance with. Finn stiffens, and that's when I come out of my lust haze to take in my surroundings. "Maybe we should go back upstairs?" I hedge, feeling like we're surrounded. I don't recognize any of them yet, but that doesn't

mean they won't recognize me.

I internally curse. The minute this guy gets wind of who I am, he's going to run far, far away.

I pull away before he can, taking his hand, and leading him back toward the metal staircase in the corner. He quickly adjusts, placing his hand at the small of my back, but I can't even enjoy it this time when I recognize someone walking in.

Motherfuck.

Turning to face Finn again, I stop us right there in the middle of the dance floor, trying to come up with another way to hide other than just giving the newcomer my back. I briefly think about just wrapping my arms and legs around Finn, hiding in a kiss. I mean, I'm forward, but I'm not that forward.

Instead, I have a front row seat for when Finn's attention drifts away. He glares over my shoulder, jaw twitching. Leaning down, he whispers, "Why don't you head upstairs? I have to take care of something."

My body thrums. Why do I think we're both pointedly upset about the same thing? Of course he's heard of the Dragons, and by extension, my brother.

Best case scenario? Cole isn't here. I can hide upstairs and wait for his guard to leave, and then we'll be fine. Maybe he has the day off and came here to let off some steam like I did? Hell, maybe Finn and I can leave completely and hole up in my apartment for the rest of the night.

Before I can suggest anything, a familiar, hard voice sounds behind me. "Colleen."

I close my eyes, the life draining out of me. I briefly look up at Finn in apology

before turning around to meet the eyes of my brother: leader of the Dragons.

But maybe most importantly, major cockblocker.

4

Since Cole's been gone, he's perfected the stare down. I'm pretty sure if he looked at any of his lackeys with his cold, hard glare, they'd be shaking in their boots right now, but...I'm his sister, and that makes me immune.

For a moment, I think back to the Cole who left the Heights. My fun big brother. The one who was so boisterous and happy. The man in front of me is hard around the edges. When I peer into his eyes, I hardly recognize the brother I knew for the first part of my life. Not even just physically, but that unknown internal presence, too.

Outwardly, there's the Dragon tattoo that tells the world who he is. His close-cropped hair shows off the different earrings in his ears, some studs, some hoops. He screams danger. If he was walking toward me on the sidewalk, I'd probably cross the street.

Finn must think so too because he steps in front of me. I frown at his back, but he's so tall, he's completely hidden my brother from view. I can only imagine the complete stare down Cole's having with the man who dares hide his sister from him. "Cole," Finn's clipped words rumble from his chest.

I don't know where my fun, happy guy went, but he's certainly not here anymore. His bunched shoulders are poised to strike. I guess it was just wishful thinking that I'd be able to find someone who didn't know my brother.

Guilt slices through me at that thought. I've cried myself to sleep countless times worried sick over what happened to Cole, and sometimes, I fear for how truly self-centered I really am when I get mad he's back.

“Come out, Colleen,” Cole orders, not even bothering to return Finn’s greeting.

I step out, letting my displeasure show all over my face. I know it’s better to keep it to myself for now though. Cole can’t look like anything but the badass gangster he is in public. “Hey,” I mutter in a voice that he probably can’t hear over the music.

If possible, his eyes get even angrier as if he can’t believe the only thing I can muster is ahey.

I peer up at the second floor, hoping Jaz is witnessing this and might come down to act as a buffer. I shuffle my feet, more guilt clawing at me because Jesus, I’d already promised her I wouldn’t get her and Jared into the middle of this, and here I am looking for a scapegoat again.

“Cole, this is Finn,” I say instead.

“I know who Finn is,” my brother states simply, eyeing the man beside me.

Finn’s gaze settles on the side of my face. I swallow. I have to give him credit. One of these other guys probably would’ve backed away slowly by now, leaving me with my brother’s ire.



## Page 8

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I slowly turn toward his handsome face, or at least it feels like time has started to crawl. I don't know him very well, but from just the last hour, we totally clicked, and I know the next words out of my mouth are going to change that. "Finn, this is—"

Cole cuts me off. "Her brother."

The guards around him stiffen. Not because this is new information but because of the dark way Cole decided to give Finn this information. They're so attuned to him. It's freaky.

"He's my brother," I say anyway, with a bit of edge and a glare toward the brother in question. My voice brings Finn's gaze to me. He's certainly not smiling anymore, but he's not running either. He frowns, and I don't know which reaction is worse. The running away, I expected. This is something more. The indentation in the center of his lips deepens.

He roams his gaze over me for a few moments before turning back to Cole. "Wow, I didn't know you had a sister."

"Obviously," Cole says, acting bored now. It's this thing he does, so he can elevate himself around everyone around him, and with most people, it works. "Did I see you guys dancing?"

I reach out instinctively, grabbing Finn's hand. He doesn't immediately pull away, so that's more points in his favor. "Yeah, we were."

Now it's Cole's turn to frown at me. He lowers his gaze and finds us holding hands,

which only worsens his reaction. He steps up close, his entire being bringing with him a wave of tension. “I’m going to give you the opportunity to run away now, Finn.”

Here it is, I grumble inside my head. I try to extricate my fingers from Finn before he can do it himself, but instead, he increases the pressure, keeping his hand in mine. I stare at him in awe. I didn’t take him as someone who had a death wish.

Cole’s lips pull tight. “Looks like we’re going to need to take this conversation someplace else.”

“I have the perfect place,” Finn smiles.

Turning, he leads us around the octagon and toward the back room I saw him and his fighter exit earlier. He’s dropped my hand now, and I really want to bitch my brother out for that, but that’s just simply a no-no in front of all these people. It’ll have to wait.

I watch Finn as he takes us through dimly lit hallways until stopping at a non-descript door. He turns the handle, and it moves freely in his hand, opening up into a locker room. Clothes, gloves, and mouth pieces are strewn everywhere, including benches and the floor, and a hint of sweat and exertion permeate the air.

Cole tells his guard to stand outside, so it’s just the three of us in the room. Luckily for me, I can talk to him like my brother instead of the gang leader now. “Cole, that was rude.”

“Leenie...”

When he says my name like that, I’m transported back in time. My heart aches for the relationship that I used to have with him. I’m well aware of the responsibility on his

shoulders now, but I shouldn't have to suffer because of that.

He shakes himself out of the old Cole, and instead, shadows creep back over his features. "I'm going to deal with you in a minute, but I need to have a talk with Finn."

"You don't need to deal with Finn," I argue. "We just met."

"Ouch," Finn bemoans.

I peer over at him. He's leaning against a row of lockers with his arms crossed. "Trust me, I'm helping you."

He gives me a smile. "I never needed help before, sweetheart."

Cole gazes between the two of us. I'm not ashamed to admit that the cute name for me coupled with the fact that it sounds as if he's about to tell my brother to go suck it, endears me to him even more. How is this guy even real?

"Colleen, leave the room." Cole stalks forward, but I step in his way, grabbing his inked-up forearms.

"Can you please just be my brother again for a minute?"

"Even if I was just being your brother, I'd be telling you off for ignoring my texts and lying to me. And—"

"I didn't—"

Cole laughs. "Leenie, come on. Hanging out makes me think you were staying in. You know when you go out you need a guard now. That's all I ask."

“Yeah, and the Dragon tattoos are a major cockblock.”

Cole shudders, his lips turning up in disgust. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

Finn chuckles behind us and doesn’t stop even when Cole narrows his gaze at him. “Sorry, it was funny.”

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“There will be no cock between you two,” Cole states like his word is everything.

I step back from my brother, studying him to find the guy who left more than five years ago. Sometimes, it’s as if he’s right at the surface. Other times, it’s as if he’ll never come back.

“It’s for your safety,” Cole pleads, staring at me. Some of the tension leaves his shoulders as he implores me with his eyes.

“Unless Finn’s cock is going to kill me, I don’t think we’ll have a problem.”

Finn smirks. “I mean...”

Cole pushes past me. I try to grab his hand, but he yanks out of my grip, meeting Finn nose-to-nose. Cole is slightly shorter, but what he lacks in height, he makes up with the dark aura that follows him around everywhere. It seems to swallow Finn up as they stare each other down.

“Do you find my sister’s safety funny?”

“It was just a joke,” Finn and I say at the same time, my voice with a lot more edge to it than his.

I reach out and grab Cole’s hand, tugging him back. At this point, I’d rather just leave. I’m obviously not going to take things further with Finn like I wanted. Once again, my gang leader brother saves my reputation.

Finn sighs at my brother's hostility. "I didn't know she was your sister, but that doesn't change anything. I don't treat girls like shit, so there shouldn't be an issue."

Cole runs his hand over his head. The move is so forceful it comes across as barely restrained anger. "I can't deal with this right now," he snaps. "Colleen, say goodbye to Finn. I'll have one of my guards take you home. I assume Jaz is somewhere out there?"

Finn uncrosses his arms. "I can take her."

Cole stops what he's doing, lifting a hand. "Finn, as of this moment, you're just an annoying gnat. Don't test me tonight."

His threat is clear. I start to shake my head at my new friend. He's taking this farther than I imagined. A lesser man would've shit his pants when the three of us stepped in here alone. I'm sure my brother has at least three weapons at his disposal at any given moment, and he has a reputation. The man who helped take the Heights Crew down is someone to be feared, that's for sure.

"Don't take your anger out on him," I tell Cole, sighing. "I'm sorry I wasn't completely upfront with you."

Cole presses a kiss to the top of my head. "We'll talk about it later, okay?"

I nod, knowing he'll give me the biggest guilt trip when we do talk about it, and all we'll end up doing is going round and round in circles with me explaining to him that I need space while he counteracts that with every reason why he can't give it to me.

Finn kicks off the lockers, and the two of us face him. "Can I see you again?" he asks, looking right at me. Just like when we were back in the club, the rest of the world fades away for him. He doesn't care that my brother's in the room.

Cole obviously does. “Unless you want to lose this business, forget you even met her.”

My mouth drops. “This...business? Wait. You own the Ring?” I ask Finn.

Cole answers for him. “Yes, and he’s allowed to operate it out of the goodness of my heart, but that can be rescinded just as easily as it was given.”

Finn’s furious gaze turns on my brother. “Are you joking?”

“I don’t find anything about my sister a laughing matter.”

Finn darts his gaze between the two of us. He runs a steady hand through his dirty blond hair until it falls right back into place, teasing the tips of his ears. His expression is one of complete desolation. The conflict running through him now is as clear as day.

My stomach churns. For once, someone was sticking up for me. Not even Mom and Dad do that anymore. For a few blissful minutes, I had someone else in my corner. “Fuck it.” I march toward the door and throw it open. I eye up the guard waiting for us. “Looks like you’re taking me home.”

As dutiful as always, the guard looks over the top of my head to the real leader in the family. Whatever he sees there, he nods, and we both start toward the maze of hallways.

“Leenie,” Finn calls out.

I ignore him. I know it’s not his fault. My brother does have pull, but dammit, it was just so fucking nice to not be Cole’s sister for a few hours. Even more, to have someone who teamed up with me instead of him.

“Don’t fucking call her that,” Cole growls.

While we walk, I take out my phone. I find a slew of texts from Jaz who obviously thinks Finn and I made it somewhere private to take out all of our sexual tension. There’s a whole line of eggplant emojis lined up with doughnuts.



## Page 10

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My heart clenches for what could have been. And damn, it. Could. Have. Been. Amazing.

I shoot off a quick text, explaining to her that my brother showed up and fucked up my night instead. Then, I tell her to have a good time with Jared, and that I'll obviously be under the watchful eye of the guard until further notice, so she might as well stay at Jared's tonight unless she wants some rando listening to her fuck.

She sends me back a crying face. I'll have plenty of time to bitch to her later, so I reinforce that she should stay and have a good time. I'm the only one who needs to have her night ruined by the big, bad Dragons.

5

The bed jostles underneath me.

"Leenie!" Jaz calls out in her sweet, drunk voice on as she jumps on the bed.

I open one eye and stare at her. Her eyes are glassy, and she has a lovesick smile pulling at her lips.

Like a loser, I got home before midnight, watched a Netflix docuseries about the afterlife and then dragged my ass to bed.

I grunt at her in response which just makes her laugh.

"I have hot boy news."

Well, now. That's interesting. "You have my attention," I say just before a yawn takes over all other bodily functions. I wave my arm at her. "Continue." She takes a big breath and opens her mouth, gearing up for a spill session. "Wait," I cut her off. "Is our friend still outside?"

She shakes her head. "No, but there's a black car out front."

I roll my eyes. My brother's guard was standing just outside the door last night. I thought about having a very loud session with my vibrator, and when word got back to Cole about what I was doing, I could tell him he should stay the fuck out of my life if he doesn't want to hear about my self-love time. Instead, I decided to be the bigger person and sent my brother a message to tell him I was home. Then, I reminded him that since I was, in fact, safe and sound inside my apartment, the Dragon didn't need to stay.

He never answered, and I'd stupidly believed that maybe it was because he'd listened to me.

Jaz lifts a brow. "Are you done bitching out your brother inside your head?"

"No," I grumble.

She throws herself down next to me, hogging most of my pillow. She's still dressed in the same shimmery shirt and skinny jeans she went to the fights in. I turn toward her like we used to when we were just kids having a sleepover, and she does the same.

"You didn't go home with Jared?"

"Oh, I did," she said, smiling. "But I felt bad about leaving you here all by your lonesome so he brought me back afterward."

“Aww, you’re such a good friend,” I tell her, pushing her elbow away playfully.

“I know,” she agrees. “Now, are you going to let me give you the scoop or not?”

I yank the pillow down and get comfortable. “Is it about Finn?”

She nods slowly, her glassy eyes twinkling in the bit of light coming in through the window. “Yeah. Soooooooo,” she draws out, prepping for her news. She never gets quite so dramatic until she’s been drinking. Me? I’m a little dramatic all the time. “I’m not saying I know what happened but I saw Finn later in the night and he had a black eye.”

“Wait. What?” I screech.

She grimaces. “Girl. Shh, I’m right here.”

I lift up onto my elbow. “Do you think Cole punched him?”

“I didn’t see Cole at all. I wouldn’t have known he was there if I didn’t get your text. But I definitely saw Finn when he came up to say goodbye to the fighters we were hanging out with, and he definitely had the beginnings of a black eye.”

“Did he say anything about me?”

She frowns. “No, but he looked a mix between pissed and sad. You know?” She picks at the sheet between us with her fingers.

“Did anyone ask him about the black eye?”

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She slams her hand down on the mattress between us. “No! And I was going to say something but then when no one else did, I figured it wasn’t my place, you know? You were all up in his business, did he have one before?”

I shake my head. “No, definitely not.”

“So, spill,” Jaz says, waving her hand in the air. “Your turn. What the fuck happened?”

I let out a breath and tell her everything, from Cole spotting us dancing to his threat about the Ring. “Holy shit, Finn owns the Ring?” Her eyes bug out of her head.

“I know,” I grind out. “Can you believe Cole is making someone like him off limits. Like, dude, there’s not going to be a better guy in the Heights. He’s not a thug, and he owns his own business. He owns two freaking businesses.”

Jaz shakes her head. “He just really wants you to die alone, doesn’t he?”

I blink at her. She’s so serious that it makes me laugh. “He keeps telling me it’s about my safety.”

“Which is a concern,” Jaz relents. “Bad things happen to people caught up in gang stuff.”

“But I’m not in the gang.”

She pouts. “We don’t need to talk about Maria, do we?”

I throw myself back on the bed, closing my eyes. I rub my temples, thinking back to high school when my brother's friend and his sister got gunned down on the sidewalk. She was just caught in the middle of gang shit.

Jaz moves closer and places her head on my shoulder. "I know it's hard, Leenie. Cole coming back turned your whole life upside down. It's almost as if it's not even yours anymore, but I don't want you to end up like Maria. You can't. I don't know what I would do." She chokes on her last words, and I know it's not all alcohol propelling this talk. Jaz and I have discussed this before. We even talked seriously about one of us moving out.

The whole brother being the leader of a huge gang thing is just so new, neither one of us knows what to do. Cole is simultaneously trying to keep me safe while also attempting to have a relationship with me.

I reach down to clasp our hands together. "I'll apologize to Cole in the morning about going out without telling him."

She hums under her breath, and her breathing deepens. She's about to fall asleep, but she asks me one last question, anyway. "What are you going to do about Finn? If he stood up to your brother for you..."

She barely gets the words out, and I know she's sleeping already. I don't bother answering her, but I'm wondering the same thing. Most of the men in the Heights would've run away so fast, I would've thought they were a figment of my imagination.

While Jaz drunk snores on my shoulder, I know two things for sure. One, I have to have an honest and raw conversation with my brother, and two, I can't let that be the last time I see Finn.

\* \* \*

It wasn't hard to find out where Elite Boxing was. Just a few clicks once I Googled the gym name plus Rawley Heights afterward. I step off the bus stop and check my phone, but Cole hasn't responded to either of my texts. I apologized, and then I told him we should meet to discuss things. I think both of us have been avoiding this conversation. Me, because I'm worried he's going to try to send me out of the Heights, and the Heights is all I know. It's where Jaz is, and Mom and Dad. Maybe he wants Mom and Dad out of here, too. Hell, I don't even know what his plan is. The Heights is new territory for the Dragons, acquired when they killed the Heights Crew's leader. He might not even know what he wants.

Staring at the phone screen doesn't make the response come any quicker, so I tuck it back into my pants and continue down the street toward the strip mall where the gym is located. It's in a better part of town than the warehouse district, but really, nowhere in Rawley Heights is actually all that great. But it's home, and I have a comfortable life here.

The closer I get, I spy the sign above the gym that just reads Boxing. My stomach clenches. A bunch of cars are parked out front, and I suddenly don't know why I thought that no one goes to the gym on Saturday. I was hoping I'd be able to talk to Finn alone, but that might not be the case.

I straighten my shoulders as I approach the door. Heaving it open, I blink when the short chime of a bell rings overhead. Not that anyone who wasn't standing right under it would be able to hear it because inside Finn's gym is absolute chaos. A boxing ring stands in the center where two guys are inside punching the crap out of each other. Around the outskirts of that are various pieces of equipment with shirtless guys involved in some aspect of training. A few are hitting speed bags. Some are jumping rope. In the left corner, blue mats section off a space in which a few guys wrestle.

I am legitimately the only person with a vagina in here. Testosterone is everywhere.

I almost lose my nerve, but that's not my style. I pull up my big girl panties and move in further. The closest sweaty dude is stretching, so I approach him and ask for Finn. He looks around the wide-open space and points to the side of the boxing ring.

I spot him immediately, and I don't know how I missed him before. With his hands wrapped around his mouth, he shouts things to the two fighters in the ring. He's one of the only guys in here wearing a shirt, and like before, it hugs his torso like a glorious second skin.

A catcall whips through the gym, and I immediately stiffen. The piercing noise attracted a bunch of attention, so quite a few guys stare as I stride across the floor. The sad part is that I can't bitch any of them out for taking back feminism a few decades with just one whistle because Finn is currently marching toward me.

I take a deep breath and stop in my tracks. He's glowering, no longer wearing the easy smile I was so fond of from yesterday. But I came here to thank him, so I'm going to do it. There's no backing out now.

When he gets close, my gaze drifts to the adorable indentation in his lip. After taking in my fill, I move upwards, studying the sharp cheekbones that give way to blue eyes. His hair falls forward, just grazing his ears.

"Leenie."

I swallow, meeting his stare finally. He's not giving anything away. Nerves stay my tongue but then I notice the bit of bruising around his eye and remember why I'm here. Yeah, he most definitely did not have that yesterday. Sure, it was dark, but I practically committed Finn to memory, and I would've seen the bluish-purple shadowing. "Hey."

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He looks around, and I do the same. Most everyone has gone back to training, so at least we haven't drawn more of an audience. "What are you doing here?"

I had this whole spiel I was going to say but it just seems too rehearsed now that I'm standing here. Finn already knows the secret I never wanted him to find out, so I might as well just go with it. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about my brother yesterday."

The adorable trainer looks around again, then gently touches my elbow to lead me back toward the door. I think he's about to throw me out when he stops just to the side of it and lowers his voice. "I'm guessing you're here without his knowledge."

"Apparently, it's the thing I do around him," I admit, chuckling apprehensively. I step toward him, still feeling the same pull from yesterday even without the darkness and anonymity of the club and the two cups of alcohol in my system. Without any sort of heel on, he soars over me even more so I have to tilt my head back to talk to him. "I just wanted to let you know that I didn't know Cole was going to be there and that I didn't deliberately keep the information from you."

He smirks, and my heart clenches in response. A little of the Finn from yesterday starts to peek through. "You mean you didn't divulge every last bit of who you are within the short time frame that we spoke? How dare you."

I smile and place a few strands of hair around my ear. "Yeah, I know that's not exactly weird but seeing as how Cole is who he is and he's also my brother, people think I should walk around with that information on my shirt or something. I have no idea."



Finn frowns. “I get it. Probably not all of it, but I get what you mean.”

“I had absolutely no idea that he’d threaten you like that or—” I drift my gaze toward his swollen eye deliberately.

Finn reaches up to run his fingers lightly around the dark bruising. “You guessed that, huh?”

“Actually, Jaz told me she saw you with it before she left the Ring yesterday.” I step even closer under the guise of looking at his eye up close, but really, it’s because I’m drawn to him and I can’t seem to help myself. “Did he really do that to you?”

He leans closer and whispers, “I told everyone I got it training because it’s part of the job description that I can’t let people get away with hitting me.”

I let out a breath and run my hands through my hair, exasperated.

“I was half-joking,” he offers with his signature smile.

I shake my head. “It’s just typical.” Now I’m pissed that I even apologized to Cole in my text. What I really want to do is give him a piece of my mind about hitting guys who I just barely met. “We only had one dance!”

“Well...” Finn hedges. “That wasn’t all of it.” He looks unashamedly giddy now. “I kind of told him I was going to see you again.”

I recoil. A dozen or so comebacks spring to mind, but instead, I stand there, mouth agape. When I collect myself, the only thing I can think to ask is, “You did what now?”

If it's possible, Finn smiles even wider.

He almost makes me forget about everything else. For as long as I can remember, Cole held a lot of weight. Not just because he was my big brother, it was more than that. In high school, everyone knew he planned to join up with the Heights Crew. Because of that, he was one of the badasses around town that the other kids looked up to. When he left, he lost respect, but now that he's back—and as a gang leader himself—I'm not sure Finn realizes what he's just done.

I gulp, tamping down the excitement of having someone stick up for me, and instead, replace it with real worry. “You shouldn't have done that.”

The smile falls off his face, and I'm immediately sorry I'm the one who caused that. He runs his hands through his hair. “I guess I read the situation wrong then.”

I step up to him, fisting my hand in his shirt. “No, you didn't read anything wrong.”

My hands brush his chiseled abs through the thin material, and I actually feel his intake of breath. He grasps my hand, holding it firmly against him. We're locked in not only a stare off but a semi-embrace, neither one of us willing to back away.

I take a deep breath. Maybe coming here was a bad idea. I'd chalked up being drawn to him to a myriad of reasons, but the only one that's still true right now is the fact that he's drop-dead gorgeous, and I honestly don't think that's all of it. “My brother—”

“Is a bully,” Finn states plainly.

“Yes, he's that,” I confirm. I've often thought of him that way since he returned, and I have no doubt he can be more than that when the situation arises. I lower my voice. “He's the leader of the Dragons.”

“I know exactly who he is,” Finn answers.

“Then you know how dangerous he can be.”

“I’m of no threat to you, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

My gaze drops to the adorable indent in his pouty lip.

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He squeezes my hand tighter. “You want to kiss me, don’t you?”

I nod, not taking my eyes off the plump, pink curve of his mouth. If I look into his eyes, I’ll just be drawn forward even more like flowers to light.

That’s exactly what he is. A big, hunky sun.

“I want to kiss you too,” he breathes.

I close my eyes, wiggling my toes inside my shoes. My free hand flexes at my side. “I just came here to thank you for sticking up for me in front of him, and to see if you were okay.”

“You didn’t come here to makeout with me then? I’m definitely reading it wrong.”

The teasing tone in his voice makes me open my eyes. He’s stooped lower, and I’m drawn right back into ocean blue irises with starbursts of gold flecked throughout. “Right here in front of all of your clients?”

Finn reaches his free hand to the small of my back, pressing me closer. He dips his head toward my ear. “I have an office.”

Molten lava gathers in my core. I squeeze his shirt tighter and step back for breathing space. Once there’s a decent distance between us, I let him go and place my hands on my hips to stare at the ground. “I’m sorry he hit you.”

He clears his throat. When he talks, the airy quality of his voice is gone, and he’s

more business. “Don’t apologize. I don’t stand for people telling women what to do. I don’t care who they are.”

I blink up at him, curling my fingers into my hips to the point of pain. “Cole and I have a complicated relationship.”

“I’d love to hear all about it.”

“Right into the heavy stuff, huh?”

He shrugs. “I’m not one for beating around the bush. If you wanted that, you should’ve hit on my brother.”

For the first time since walking in, I focus back on everything else happening around us. The two guys Finn was coaching are now leaning against the ropes, pretending they’re not watching us but failing.

Finn follows my gaze. “Shit. I have to—” He looks back at me, conflict acute in his gaze.

“I barged in on you,” I tell him. “Do whatever you have to do.”

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move. Okay?” He turns toward the ring but at the last second, he stops himself and swoops down to press a kiss to my cheek. He lets his lips linger, and when he talks, they brush across my skin. “I mean it, don’t go anywhere.”

Surprise hits me. All I can do is watch after him as he jogs across the gym floor. Jesus fuck. Of course the one guy I’ve been legitimately notjustattracted to but so curious about—in years—is off-limits according to my brother.

The two shirtless guys smile knowingly as he approaches the ring. Finn flips them off. “Come on. Get back to work, you assholes.”

The imprint of his lips is still on my cheek. To distract myself, I pull out my phone to see if Cole’s written me back. He hasn’t. He hates it when I just show up at the tower, a.k.a. Dragon headquarters, but if he doesn’t write me back soon, that’s what I’m going to do. He can’t order me around and then ignore me for a day.

The door opens behind me, and I step out of the way. I glance up and then back down only to do a double take. Finn’s brother stands in front of me, eyes wide. I smile but that quickly gets wiped off my face when he scowls. I swear he even growls at me as he stares me down. “You...”

“Aw shit,” Finn says from behind us.

Jax marches away, leaving me standing there a little shell shocked. He points at his brother who’s half out of the ring now, ducking in between two ropes, then points toward a closed door in the corner.

Finn catches my gaze. “Wait,” he mouths. Then, he shouts orders to the two guys he was working with and starts making his way to the back room. Tension curdles in my stomach as he walks away. This is obviously about me. I can’t just stand here and let Finn get in trouble because I showed up here. Before I even make the conscious thought to follow, my feet start moving. I pick up the pace and by the time Finn pushes the door open, I’m right behind him.

The door opens to an office. Two desks face each other, one riddled with paperwork, the other tidy with only one piece of paper lying over a keyboard.

“Finn,” Jax starts, voice raised. Then, his gaze darts behind his brother’s shoulders to me, and miraculously, his face turns even more murderous.

Finn turns to see who his brother is trying to eviscerate on the spot. He hadn't realized I'd followed him until his brother gave me away. Despite everything going on around us, he smiles. "I'll be right back out." He leans toward me and lowers his voice. "Jax is just a big grump but everything's fine."

He shifts back around so fast he misses my widened eyes. His brother seems like more than just a big grump. He could give Cole a run for his money. Fortunately, I doubt he has the reach my brother does.

"I showed up here," I speak up. Finn took my side when we were in front of my brother. It's my turn to repay him. "Don't be mad at Finn. I just wanted to tell him I was sorry."

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“Sorry for almost making us lose everything we’ve worked so hard for?” Jax bites out.

His barely restrained temper shoots a defiant, if not somewhat guilty, shockwave through me that hardens my spine and makes me stand straighter.

“It’s not her fault,” Finn says, sticking up for me once again.

“Damn right. It’s yours!” Jax roars.

He may be shorter than his brother, but he’s broader, and evidently, scarier. I’ve seen Cole act like this, but I know him. He has boundaries he won’t cross when it comes to me, but I’m not familiar with Jax. He’s not directing his ire at me right now, but the tension that settles over the room is damn near suffocating.

Jax takes several deep breaths, his slick, jet-black hair wet. “As soon as she came here, you should have sent her on her way.”

“That’s the problem,” Finn explains. “I don’t want to.”

The crimson rage that stains Jax’s cheeks deepens. He moves his gaze to me then back to his brother before starting to pace. Sighing, he runs tattooed hands through his hair and then clasps his fingers behind his neck. “It’s not worth it, and you know it.”

“Come on, man,” Finn says. “You know—”



Jax doesn't even let his brother finish. "No, you know that if Cole wants to shut our shit down, he can. That's all you need to know. The only reason we were allowed to do this was because of—" He cuts himself short this time with a frown. The big man suddenly showing a bit of emotion.

"Princess, I know. And her guys," Finn adds.

"Who's princess?" I butt in. Why do I keep hearing that name?

"I'll tell you later," Finn says over his shoulder.

"The fuck you will," Jax explodes. "Finn, for once in your goddamn life, quit acting like life is just for fun. It's so much more than that."

Finn spins my way, an angry red blush greeting me. He tries to smile but it's forced now and it looks so wrong on his face. "Can you please give us a minute?"

"Give him your entire life," Jax snaps. "Don't come back."

I stiffen at his words, and Finn glares at his brother over his shoulder.

"What?" Jax asks. He's like a dog with a bone. Coming out from behind the desk, he makes Finn step back, so he's addressing both of us. "Your brother threatened us last night. He can easily take away our business. Not just the gym, but more importantly, the Ring. It's our livelihood. We've sunk everything into that place." He heaves a big breath, his broad shoulders bunching. He's no longer yelling, and I can read the real fear in his eyes when he addresses me. "I am begging you. Please stay away. I know it's not fair, but what my brother doesn't realize is that life is rarely ever fair. You can't change who you are, or more importantly, who your brother is. He has the power to ruin us."

I bite the inside of my cheek as he talks. The real emotion pouring out of him stings my eyes. I always believed Cole was a threat to other bad people. Other gang members. I've never seen it from this perspective before. With real people living in the Heights. Why would he want to hurt them? Is this really over one fucking dance?

"You really think he'd take this away?" My lip wobbles, so I bite down on it harder.

Jax steps up to me, and his proximity makes me stand at attention. "He only let us do what we wanted as a favor to a friend."

"I can call her," Finn suggests.

"No," Jax snaps. But then he looks toward his brother with real affection. "That's unfair. They don't need any more of this shit in their life."

The small, cramped room, coupled with the tension, is making my shirt stick to my back. I need some air, stat. "I get it," I say, even though the anger is bubbling up inside me so fast that I just want to scream.

The emotions around my brother are always so conflicting that they can lead me into a spiral.

I smile at Jax, and his shoulders release some of the stress. Then, I turn to Finn. He drops his head to the side as he regards me. I reach out, tugging on the cuff of his sleeve. "Looks like I'm going to apologize again. I'm sorry about my brother for more than one reason now. Don't worry about me screwing anything up for you guys." I swallow as Finn's face hardens at my words. "It's no big deal," I lie. "It probably would've fizzled out sooner rather than later."

Even as the words leave my mouth, they ring untrue. More so when they hang in the air between us rather than just inside my head.

“You two take care of yourselves. I’ll tell Cole he can back off.”

I spin on my heel and shove the door open. “Leenie!” Finn calls out. Sounds of a scuffle sound behind me, but the door closes, and the noises of the gym swallow up whatever is going on inside the office.

I hurry the hell out of here before a few tears stray down my cheeks. Brushing them away, I immediately send my brother a text. I’m coming over. You better be there.

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His reply is immediate. Leenie I'm busy.

Me: IDGAF

7

The bus drops me a couple of blocks from the headquarters of the Dragons. The Heights Crew also ran out of the tower but ever since Cole took over, it's his now.

The high-rise building is absolutely the nicest in all of the Heights—inside and outside. The exterior is modern, a definitive contrast from the shambled buildings only blocks from it. The Crew started to rejuvenate the city, but as time went on, all that kind of went on the backburner, and the only buildings that got facelifts were the ones the Crew started running businesses out of. A lot of people had real hope that an organized crime group would help Rawley Heights grow. That's the reason Cole got into this life in the first place. He felt like he was doing something good, fighting against the terrible crimes in the city. And the Crew did regulate things in the beginning.

It just didn't last long.

I walk past my work which just so happens to be in one of the nicer blocks that the Crew renovated and keep going without looking in. I don't want to get stopped by one of my coworkers or a regular customer for a chat. I'm too worked up for that.

I grab hold of the glass door and yank it open. A desk sits off to the side along with a fern plant sprouting up behind it. The surroundings are so corporate lobby-like that

you'd expect a pretty secretary to be manning the phones. Instead, it's a guy with a Dragon tattoo licking up his neck, his head buried in his phone. It looks like fresh ink, too, so I can only imagine he's a former Crew member who knew no other life. So, when the Dragons confiscated the territory, he went along with it.

The tattoo only serves as a reminder of what's at stake. The rumors about my brother's gang are wide and far-reaching. If only a blip of them are true, I understand why Jax is so worried.

"Hey," I call out in greeting. "I'm here to see Cole."

The kid at the desk doesn't even look up. He snorts, his face still in his phone. "Good luck."

I smile, gaze drifting toward the landline that's sitting just in front of him. "Yeah, I'm going to need you to call him to let him know I'm here."

His fingers fly furiously over his screen, and when I step up on my tiptoes and lean over, I see he's playing a stupid game. "No can do."

I grip the side of the desk, my knuckles turning white. "Listen here, you little fuck." Yeah, Cole's not the only one in our family who has a temper. "I'm Cole's sister, so I need you to get on that phone right next to you and tell him I'm here to see him."

The peon drags his gaze up to me, and I see him weighing his options. He doesn't want to interrupt Cole if I'm full of shit, but I can tell there's a teensy bit of fear there, too. Like, what if I am telling the truth and he disrespects me?

Thankfully—or maybe regretfully—the elevator opens, saving the douche from answering. Cole's guard steps out. He walks over to the desk and nudges the handset

back into place. “Petey, this is Cole’s sister, Colleen.” He smacks him in the shoulder. “Stand up straight, you ingrate.”

Petey not only straightens his back, he jumps out of the chair, forcing Cole’s guard to take a step back and roll his eyes. “I’m so sorry, ma’am.” He shakes his head. “Miss? Mrs?”

The scared shitless look is enough to placate me, and I hold back a smile and follow Cole’s guard toward the elevator. It feels good to be shown some respect around the Heights, I’m not going to lie. Women here are treated like the suffrage movement never happened. It’s fucking laughable, and I suspect I’m about to get more of the same bullshit treatment as soon as I see my brother since he thinks he knows best about everything.

Cole’s normal guard steps into the square box behind me and hits the P button. The elevator starts moving up, the pert dings sounding out each time we pass a floor. I flick my gaze toward my silent companion. “I should probably learn your name since you guarded me all night.”

“It’s Dempsey,” he states, not looking away from the pristine, stainless-steel reflection in front of him. He’s staring above our heads like he’s willfully avoiding looking at me. He looks as if he’s a tad hard worn. He’s buff, and I suspect his muscles are hiding his real age.

I clear my throat stubbornly. “Thank you,” I tell him, even though I feel like I shouldn’t. However, it’s not Dempsey I’m mad at, it’s Cole.

“You’re welcome.”

The final ding sounds, and I step off. I’ve been here before, so I already know where Cole’s suite is. Passing two more guards, I head down the hall and open the first door

on the right without knocking. It opens up into a grand room with modern, metal finishes that don't represent my brother at all. Silver and grays are everywhere, highlighted by white touches. The atmosphere is so futuristic looking that it instantly makes me uncomfortable.

I approach the center of the room and spy movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I find Cole in the kitchenette. I've been told an even bigger kitchen is through one of the many doors that leads out of this main room, but this one was for when the old leader of the Crew—Big Daddy K—didn't want his help around.

Cole peers over his shoulder. He's always dressed in the same white shirt and jeans. On occasion, I've seen him wear black shirts, but even if the color changes, they're always plain. He meets my eyes, and it's as if I'm seeing my brother again in his soft brown irises. He frowns. "Demps, can you give us a moment?"

His expression almost makes me forget that I'm supposed to be furious with him for ruining my life. I don't watch Dempsey leave, but I feel his overbearing form leave and then hear the soft click of a door.

It's so surreal to think of Cole and I here, in this very spot. It's a far cry from where we grew up in a one-story, ramshackle old house. Our father worked at one of the factories downtown before all the businesses left the area and the Heights started to really go downhill into crime, violence, and drugs.

"It's okay," Cole says.

I narrow my eyes. "What's okay?"

"You apologized to me in a text this morning?" He lifts a brow and then comes around the island with a bowl of cereal in his hand. "You want some?"

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I spot Cap'n Crunch, and I almost laugh, but then I remember that there's so much more I want to say to Cole, and it's not about reminiscing over childhood cereal tastes.

He walks past me to one of the couches and plops down. His white socks poke out of his jeans as he digs into his cereal. Seeing him like this, it's hard to believe who he is. I've been burning to ask him questions about how he got to be the leader of the Dragons but held back due to the fear of what I might find out. Ignorance might be better in this case.

"About that," I say, moving to the couch opposite him and sitting. "I rescind my apology."

His gaze flicks up. "You can't do that," he says around a mouthful of cereal.

"I absolutely can."

He shakes his head. "No way. You already apologized. Taking it back is wrong."

"Well..." I hedge. "Then I'm mad at you again."

He rolls his eyes. "What now?"

It's so hard to see the gang leader in him at this moment. It makes me revert back to when we were so close as kids. It hurt like hell when he left—or more like escaped. We had no idea what had happened to him for fucking years. Years. I was heartbroken.



I bite the inside of my lip again and wince because I've already given myself a sore there from my conversation with Jax and Finn.

Cole continues to eat his cereal, staring at me over his spoon as he shovels the sugary goodness into his mouth.

"What happened to you?" It's the first question that comes to mind, the most pressing concern I have. The root of where every other complaint I have about him stems from.

His eyes widen, and he hurries to finish his cereal, drinks the milk, and sets the bowl down on the coffee table in front of him. Sitting back, he quickly wipes his mouth with his fingers. "Why don't you tell me what the problem is so I can fix it?"

"That's the thing, Cole. You can't fix it." I refrain from throwing my hands up in the air in exasperation. "Is that why you go around making demands? Because you're trying to fix everything?"

He leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees, and steeples his fingers in front of him. The overhead lights catch on his earrings, making them glimmer.

I can tell just by the set of his mouth that he's about to spill some bullshit on me, so I cut him off. "Cole. I'm your sister." I stand, step right onto the coffee table between us, and then jump off it to the left of him. "I need answers. I need information. I don't want you to skirt around the truth like you've been doing. I need to know stuff. It's time, okay?"

He looks away. "The less you know, the better."

I take a seat on the cushion next to him. "You can't keep making decisions for me without telling me the reasons behind them."

He peeks at me. “Is this about that trainer douche? Fuck, Leenie. Do you need to get laid that badly? I’m sure you can find someone else.”

“Who?” I shout. “You won’t let me do anything, and I’m beginning to think you wouldn’t approve of anyone.” I shove my hand in the direction of the door. “How about Dempsey. Can I fuck him?”

Cole makes a choked sound in the back of his throat, lips parting in disgust.

“See? Why? You trust him with your life but you won’t let him fuck me?”

“Let’s just be clear,” he glowers. “You’re just using him as an example, right? Or do I need to cut his fucking balls off?”

“An example, Cole, God.” I push off the cushion and start to pace beside the two couches.

He watches me for a while until he asks, “Is this all just about having sex?”

I shake my head. Guys are dense. “I’m talking about living my life. Ever since you came back, I haven’t been able to do that.”

Cole doesn’t respond immediately, and when I glance up, pain distorts his face. He nods slowly. “You wish I didn’t come back.”

“No. No...” I go to him, sitting beside him on the leather couch. “I love you, Cole. You’re my big brother. I get that you have...responsibilities now. Major ones.” I’m skirting everything I’m scared to talk about, but I keep going anyway. “But I don’t understand the reason why you do things, and maybe if I just did, I wouldn’t feel like I want to throat punch you so much.”

He cocks a brow. “Throat punch me?”

“So. Bad,” I growl.

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He runs his hands through his almost non-existent hair. If he ever wore it longer, I'd bet it'd have some of the auburn in it that mine does. Our cousin Jacob was the only full red head in the family, but we all had a little. His leg jumps up and down, so he leans his elbows on his knees to calm it. "I'm doing what I know to do. I'm trying to keep you safe. I'm trying to keep Mom and Dad safe. I never thought I'd be coming back here, but...things fell into place that way. I never wanted to bring my shit back here."

I watch him come undone, and it's the first time since he's returned that he's opening up a little. "You know I wanted you back, right? We were devastated when you left." I reach out and place a hand on his leg, lightly tapping him. "I would never wish you away again, no matter how mad I get."

He clamps his hands around the back of his neck and stares ahead for a few minutes. The silence between us stretches out so long, but I know better than to push him. Even when he was younger, he needed time to process his emotions, and when he takes the time, the next thing out of his mouth is going to be genuine.

Turning, he props one of his knees up on the leather cushion next to him. "Things moved really quickly for me. I'm juggling a lot of things right now, and they're all dangerous. You know who I am so you can guess."

"I know what your job is," I tell him. "It's not who you are."

He sighs like that's a different argument he doesn't want to get into.

"I was worried about this exact scenario before I came back. I tried to talk myself into

the fact that none of you would want anything to do with me. Or even if you did, that who I am now would drive you away. Hell, I don't even want you in this building right now because someone could be watching and wondering who you are to me, Leenie. There are always threats. That's why I get on you about the guard. That's why I'm conflicted about what to do next. If I let you back in again, you're just going to get madder. Your life will change. But to push you away fucking kills me. Okay? That's what I'm thinking."

I snap my jaw shut, swallowing the big ball of emotions lurking in my throat like a stalker. He just put my thoughts into words. We've been doing this push and pull since he got back. Hanging out, ignoring each other. Hanging out. Stepping back. "You're my brother," I tell him because it's the only lame ass thing I can think of to say, but in those three words are so much truth.

"And I'm much more than that too," he says. A mix of truth, fear, and conflict sears in his gaze, almost like it's boiling to the surface like a brand. Maybe he's right. Maybe he can't be just my brother anymore. His responsibilities are too damn much.

Jax's earlier words are echoed back to me. Life is unfair.

"We have to figure out something," I tell him, lifting my chin. "I didn't mourn you for years just to get you back only to let you live in the same damn town as me and never see you."

"About that..." Cole sighs. The gang leader persona comes back into his expression again. His lips thin. He stands up straighter. He looks the part of ruthless, doesn't-give-a-fuck Dragon. "I have to go away again."

My stomach plummets. Just when I think we're getting somewhere, reality slaps me in the face. So, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Yeah? Well, I'm telling Mom."

He doesn't say anything for a full five seconds. But in that span, he drops his gangster persona. "Shut the fuck up, Leenie Bear."

What can I say? Humor is my lifeline.

I pull my phone from my pocket. "I will," I threaten as if we were still kids playing in our shitty yard.

Cole tears the phone out of my hand and throws it on the opposite couch.

I watch it land with my mouth hanging open. "You're such a jerk." I narrow my gaze at him, and despite the fact that we're play fighting, we're still kind of fighting. The air around us is still thick with tension. "Are youleavingleaving?" I ask, laying bare one of my biggest fears when it comes to my brother. I'm mad about the cockblocking but that doesn't mean I want him leaving again.

"I have something to do, and I don't know how long it will take."

I deflate. "So, you're really leaving?" My disappointment hangs in the air between us like dirty sheets.

"There's a girl who needs my help," Cole says, a smile trying to play over his lips but dropping off again. He reclines back against the couch. "I have to..."

"Who is she?"

"Someone you don't know."

"A girlfriend?"

“Fuck no,” he snaps.

I roll my eyes. “You can’t get mad at me when I ask you things because you’re too damn secretive for your own good.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans his head back against the cushions. “Sorry,” he retorts, but it’s far from sincere. I let him take his time coming up with an answer again, and he voices it sooner this time. “I’m doing something for a really good friend of mine.” The muscles in his forearms tense. “He’s no longer with us and can’t do it for himself, so I’m doing it for him. I won’t be gone forever.” He turns his gaze back to me. “I just feel compelled to do this for him because he never got the chance.”

“For a gang friend?”

“A gang brother,” he softly corrects.

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I nod. I can imagine what it's like going through dangerous shit together. People get attached when they go through traumatic experiences with others. Kind of like the military. Gang members think of themselves as a brotherhood, and Cole has always had a big heart. "Okay. I hope whatever it is, that it works out."

He gives me a smile, and I know he's thankful I'm not prying him for more information, but that's only because he doesn't realize I'm about to unleash a myriad of questions about something else.

"About Finn—"

"Jesus Christ." Cole jumps to his feet. "What the fuck is it with people I love losing their head over fighters, regardless of goddamn gender?"

"So he does fight?" I ask in wonder, a smile peeling my lips apart.

Cole shakes his head, mumbling something about hormones and scientific reactions to badassery. I don't know. It sounds like a bunch of weird words strung together, but he has a full-on conversation about it. "Let's go back to the fact that you apologized to me for going out without a guard. I need to be able to trust that you'll be smart when I'm gone, Leenie. I won't be able to protect you, and I wouldn't even do it, if this other thing wasn't just as important to me as you are."

I press my lips together. "I apologized already. But you have to see things from my point of view."

"I do," he confesses, stopping his own trail over the tile by glancing at me. "But when



I'm gone, if you want to stay here, if you want me to stay here, you're going to need guards. You're going to need to be observant and careful. I have to vet everyone, Leenie. Everyone."

Just from the dark spark in his eyes, and the fact that he so quickly went back to pacing the floor alerts me that something else might be going on. "Did something happen? Something I should be worried about?"

He lifts his shoulders.

"Cole..."

"We got a vague threat," he rasps. "It's probably bullshit, but since I'm going to be out of town, I'm taking it seriously. Everyone wants to take the leader of a gang down, Leen. I've had a bullseye on my back since I fought for the leader position. Everyone close to me has targets, too. I wish I could send you someplace safe, but the selfish part of me wants my family back since it's one of the reasons why I stepped up."

"I can handle it."

"The consequences—"

I stand, my hands turning to fists. "Cole, I can handle it. I told you already I didn't mourn your ass for years just to give up."

For a moment, his defenses slip. Every single piece of armor he's built up over himself since leaving the Heights—actually, scratch that. Since joining the Crew—starts to fall away. I step closer, winding my arms around him for the second time since he got back. The first time was in shock, an expression of excitement. This time, I'm hugging my brother because I care about him no matter who he is.

He returns the favor, squeezing me. Kissing my temple right through my hair, he says, “You’ve gotten taller.”

I push away. “Fuck off.”

He chuckles. “Whatever, shortie.” Placing his hands on his hips, he takes a deep breath. “Dempsey’s my second, so he’s going to stay with you while I’m gone. I’m taking quite a few people with me, but there are a shitton of Dragons in the area also.”

“Your second? I thought he was your guard.”

“He’s both.”

“Sooo, can I fuck him?” A laugh bubbles to the surface, disrupting my attempt at a straight face. Dempsey’s cool and all, but not where my kitten compass is pointing.

“You’re a brat.” But my joke has the desired effect on Cole. He starts to smile. “He’ll take care of things when I’m gone. I’ll be keeping in touch with him.”

“What’s he taking care of?” I ask, using air quotes around the words because I’m actually just wondering if “taking care of” means leaving someone’s dead body in an alleyway or something.

“Gaining control over the Crew and its territory. Takeovers don’t just happen overnight. There are tons of shit to wade through, and we have to vet everyone who wants to switch from Crew to Dragons. It’s a big clusterfuck, actually. Some guys started getting tattoos before we even offered them a spot.”

An image of the tool I met downstairs pops into view, and I wonder if he’s one of the ones who was way too overzealous to put his life on the line. “So eager.”

He hums in annoyance.

Studying my brother now, he looks so much better than when I first walked in. This is the longest conversation we've had since he returned. Things are going well, so it's too bad I'm about to shake shit up again. "Oh leader of the Dragons, I do have a bone to pick with you."

He raises an eyebrow in my direction.

"You can't go threatening people I'm interested in."

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He drops his head back in exasperation. “What is with your lady hard-on for this guy? Didn’t you just fucking meet him?”

I shrug because I’ve been wondering the same damn thing myself. “Do you want the truth as I would give it to Jaz? Or a shortened version?”

He sneers. “Spare me.”

“He’s just nice, okay? And he owns his own business. Two of them.”

“Out of the goodness of my heart,” he interjects.

His gang leader persona is back, but at his core, my brother has a big heart so I’m going to keep at him. “My point is, who else has that?”

“Me.”

I roll my eyes. “You have to admit there are plenty of other worse options for me, and you’re making me pine for this guy like Romeo and Juliet when I haven’t even had a date with him to know if I should be this worked up. Regardless, you shouldn’t be punching him.”

My brother smirks as if he’s congratulating himself internally. Then it falls off his face as easily as it came. “How do you know about that?”

Shit. Well, I’m already in it, and I don’t want to lie to him again. I lift my chin in the air. “I may have gone to his gym today.”

He scrapes a hand over his cheek. “Really? After apologizing to me in a text, you went and did the exact opposite of what I’ve been asking you to do?”

“I had to apologize for you.”

He barks out a laugh. “Fuck that, I meant to punch his ass. Asshole pissed me off.” He bends down to grab his cereal bowl and stomps off to the kitchen.

“Because he didn’t listen to you?”

“Yes,” he calls back sharply. “That’s exactly why.”

“Well, he’s not a Dragon. Duh.”

“Clearly,” he yells back as he rinses his bowl out.

I follow him, standing on the other side of the gray and silver marble-topped island. “Cole, you can’t throw your weight around in my life like that. I’ll die an old, unmarried, cranky-ass woman.”

His shoulders sag. Spinning to face me, he leans against the sink. “His defiance pissed me off.”

“So you threaten their livelihood?”

“The livelihood I allow them to have? Yes.”

I drop my head to the side, letting him know just what I think about his pompous attitude.

He groans through a clenched jaw. “I don’t like him.”

“Because he didn’t listen to you.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much all I need to know.”

I glare at him. “Just don’t touch their businesses, Cole. That’s not fair.”

“Will you stay away?”

“Not likely.”

He shrugs as if to tell me I’m digging my own grave, but I get in his way when he comes around the island. “You need to be my brother right now, and not the leader of the Dragons.”

“It’s hard to be both,” he grinds out. “I see this city differently than you. You’re calling me a cockblocker, and you’re right. No one is good enough for you here. I don’t care if they’re not in a gang. The Heights breeds bad shit. If I wasn’t so selfish, I’d have moved you all away by now.”

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My heart tugs at the conflict and emotion in his voice. “I understand that you think you’re helping, but we were both born here. It’s our home. This city is a living, breathing thing all its own. I’m not a little girl anymore.” I grew up when he left. His departure was a physical blow. From a young age I understood that respect means everything here, and it was only reinforced as I watched Cole pledge the Crew, then leave entirely, and then return with a whole different level of deference.

“What’s the arrangement you have with them anyway?” I question. Cole’s answering smile is such an odd response that I’m instantly intrigued and maybe a little nervous. “What?”

His smile only grows. “I know where Jacob is.”

My mouth drops. “You’re kidding me.” When the Crew collapsed, I’d wondered what happened to our cousin, but there was no way for me to find out. And now I’m chomping at the bit to find out what Jacob has to do with Finn and Jax.

“You’re not going to believe it.” He shakes his head in giddy disbelief. “Jacob’s in a harem-like relationship with three other guys—including Johnny Rocket—and a girl who they all desperately love.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor this time. “Johnny fucking Rocket? As in the Johnny fucking Rocket?”

Cole grins. “I know. I about lost my shit when I found out too.”

“Holy fuck.”

“Appropriate response,” he remarks.

The girly part of me takes over then. “Awww,” I sigh, my heart giving into a pitter-patter. “They must love her so much. Who else is in their relationship?”

“One of them you probably know. Manning’s little bro? Mack.”

My heart squeezes. Yeah, I do know him. Mack was Maria’s brother, too. He was there when Manning and Maria were gunned down. I can’t even hardly think of that without getting choked up.

Cole snakes his arm around my shoulder. “I know.” His voice drops several octaves, and I’m sure he’s thinking about Manning. They were good friends.

I stifle the grief. It’s only reinforcing the reason why Cole is being overprotective. “Who’s the other? You said three.”

“Oscar? I don’t know if you’d know him.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t think so. But damn. So Jacob got out? They all got out? With Johnny fucking Rocket?”

“Yeah, they all got out.”

Joy clings to me, and then a thought springs to mind. I suck in a breath and slap my hand over my mouth. “Holy shit. You helped them do that, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t have to confirm my suspicions. I throw my arms around him, tears stinging the backs of my eyes for the second time today. Jacob was so important to us growing up, that being apart from him was like another loss. To know that he’s out of the Heights, away from the Crew, and in love? I couldn’t be happier.



“Can I talk to him?”

Cole squeezes me tightly. “They’re laying low right now, but as soon as they get in contact again, I’ll give him your number. I’m sure he’d love to talk to you again, Leenie.”

I wipe at my eyes before shuffling away. “Wow. Jacob. That must be one strong woman to put up with—wait. Is she ‘Princess’?”

Cole cocks his head. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Finn called some girl princess and said she was the reason why you let them run their businesses separate from the Dragons.”

“Yeah, Kyla’s princess. Uppercut Princess, actually. It was her fight name. But I wouldn’t call her that.”

“Waaaiiit,” I draw out. “Uppercut Princess? Like the drink I got at the Ring yesterday?”

Cole shrugs. “I guess? I don’t know.”

That must have been the reason behind the look Finn gave me when I ordered that drink. Damn. Everything is just clicking into place. “Cole,” I say firmly as he leans against the island. “Finn must be a good person if Jacob was willing to vouch for him. Come on. You have to see that.”

“I never said he wasn’t a good person. A mouthy one, maybe.”

The perfect thought strikes me, and I gasp. I keep doing that in this conversation, but holy shit. “I have the best idea,” I exclaim.

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“Oh God,” he mutters, already folding his arms over his chest.

“I mean it,” I tell him, practically jumping up and down on my toes. “The best.”

“I already know I’m going to ha—”

“Love it,” I finish for him. I widen my eyes in true excitement. “Let Finn be my bodyguard while you’re gone.”

“What? No.”

He starts to walk away, completely dismissing the conversation, but I follow after him and yank back on his hand. “It’s perfect. Then you can see what kind of guy he is.”

“Leenie, no. Dempsey is watching you. He’s trained. I trust him.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to fuck Dempsey.”

My brother stops and turns toward me. A cruel smile curves across his lips. “Actually, maybe I should hire Finn.”

“See, we’re on the same...” My excitement fizzles out like a bucket of water was thrown on a match. If Cole’s giving in this easy, there must be a reason. “What?”

He chuckles to himself. “My guards don’t fuck the people I have them guard. It’s forbidden.”

“Cole,” I warn.

He turns, his laugh echoing around the room while I stay rooted in the spot, dread deflating my body.

“And you’re right, Finn’s trained, too. Plus, he owes me for letting him run his businesses in my territory without compensation. You’re pretty smart, Leen. Thank you.”

Well, fuck. I walked right into that one.

9

Cole and I spend the rest of the day together at the tower.

I watch him jump between different personas. When it’s him and me, he’s back to being my brother, and we pick on each other relentlessly. When anyone else is in the room, especially if it’s one of the Dragons, he hardens up like a tortoise retreating into its shell. Even his voice lowers to a pitch slightly above dangerous, and I’m sure he’d go darker, too. To get where he is now, there’s no doubt in my mind he’s done it before.

He’s secretive about “the project” he’s working on, but whatever it is, it means a lot to him. The guys he’s taking are the ones closest to him, so he’s not trusting just anyone.

When he kicks everyone out after a short, whispered meeting, he tells me he ordered Chinese from the place we used to get it when we were kids. He bounces on his toes, rubbing his palms together in excitement.

Jaz has been keeping me company while Cole takes care of business, and she just

informed me Jared's going to take her cell away from her since they're on a dinner date. I guess it works out because now I don't have to eat alone in the apartment. I read her last text, which is a picture of her second glass of wine. If Jared knows her well enough, he already realizes he's going to get lucky tonight.

"Who's that?" Cole asks, keeping his voice neutral, but when I tilt the screen so he can't see it, he frowns.

I laugh. "It's just Jaz. She's on a date with her boyfriend."

He snaps his fingers. "Which reminds me. I still have to vet him."

"Jared? Please." I laugh, the sound coming straight from my belly. "He's harmless. Besides, I promised Jaz I wouldn't bring him into your shit."

"Myshit?" he asks, raising a dark brow.

"You know, you and the big bad Dragons," I whisper conspiratorially. "She told me not to drag them into it if you found me at the Ring yesterday."

"Oh, so Jaz and this dude were at the Ring with you?"

"Of course they were. I wouldn't go alone. I'm not dumb, Cole. I understand taking precautions. You do realize I've been taking care of myself since you left, right?"

His lips thin. He picks his foot up and rests it on the coffee table in front of us.

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Guilt hits me. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad, I’m just trying to prove to you that I know what I’m doing. I have mace. I travel in groups. I watch my surroundings. That kind of thing.”

“I’m not worried about normal Heights thugs, Leen. I’m worried about the exact opposite of that.”

A sliver of fear roots in my stomach. “Dempsey can follow me. I’ll exchange numbers with him tonight, so when you go, we’ll be good. Promise.”

“Oh, Dempsey, huh? Suddenly we’re okay with him?”

“Yeah,” I hedge, hoping he’ll forget about Finn, but I’m not nearly that lucky, I suppose.

“Huh.”

I’m about to ask him what the hell that response means when the door to the suite opens. It’s the guard in question. “They’re here.”

I jump off the couch. “Ooh, Chinese.” I head toward the kitchen to grab some plates. Reaching for the shiny cupboard, my hand still on the pull, I pause when I hear cursing out in the hallway through the open door.

My ears perk up. That’s certainly an interesting delivery driver, but I am in the tower so I guess anything goes.

The swearing increases before turning into grumbling. Recognition flows through me, but it really hits home when my brother chuckles. “Cole,” I snap, absolutely fucking appalled.

He’s already making his way to the door, a hard mask on his face.

“You didn’t,” I say, running out from around the island to catch up with him.

He ignores me and keeps walking until a voice grunts, “This the place?”

I stop in my tracks when Jax stalks into my brother’s suite. He rivals Cole in intensity. The same shadowed-look with matching dark hair and angular faces that scream business. The only reason I would give preference to Cole over Jax in a fight scenario is knowing who he is. Dempsey would take the trainer out if he even made a move toward my brother. But Jax definitely looks like he can hold his own. Well-used, trained muscles pop out of his clothes.

Finn strides in next, and I suck in a breath. He’s wearing actual jeans and though his shirt still looks MMA related, a graffiti-splattered brand name etched across his chest points toward a dressier vibe. He’s also somewhat smiling, the exact opposite of his brother.

I stride toward the trio hesitantly. I can’t believe my brother actually brought them here, and judging by Jax’s reaction, it wasn’t an invitation. It was a demand.

Finn’s stare moves toward me, and his eyes widen. I try to convey telepathically that I had no idea this was happening, but then Dempsey comes walking back in with several bags of Chinese food. Enough to feed a whole block of people.

“Welcome,” Cole says as his second skirts past him to place everything at the table in the far corner. “Leenie, will you get four plates, please?”

“What the hell is this about?” Jax asks.

Cole stiffens. “I invited you to dinner with my sister and me. If the food gets cold, I’m going to be pissed.”

“With all due respect,” Jax starts, sounding like he has none for my brother whatsoever. And who could blame him?

Finn hits his brother in the chest. “We’d love Chinese,” he finishes, though I doubt that was anywhere near what Jax was going to say.

My face heats, and I’m rocking a full-on blush. Even my neck feels like it’s on fire.

I return to the kitchen, but before I grab the plates down from the cabinet, I send Jaz a text, telling her Cole invited Finn and Jax to fucking dinner and added about a thousand exclamation points, so she’d get the gist that this is a huge fucking deal. Like, holy fuck. And not in a good way. So, to drive home my point, I add a few knife emojis because how is anyone supposed to convey what they really mean without a well-placed emoji?

Taking a deep breath, I grab the plates and turn. The scene before me makes me stop. I bite down on my lower lip as Cole moves around the table, opening up the Chinese. If I take away the nice surroundings, I could place him right back in our old house, doing this exact same thing. And fuck, I missed it. I know some dumbass shit is about to come out of his mouth, but he’s here. He’s right in front of me.

When I start forward again, my gaze tracks toward Finn. He’s standing on the opposite side of the table, staring right back at me with his head cocked. I’m not sure he noticed my stumble or would even get the reason behind it, but his expression says he’s trying to figure me out. I’m too worried about why the hell Cole set all this up to break down the nuances of his look, so I glance away.

If Cole is taking my Finn idea and instituting his own rule, I'm going to throat punch him. When Dempsey's not around, of course.

I set out four plates, and once the food is out of the bags, Cole retreats into the kitchen to grab silverware and glasses. "Leenie, can you help me?"

Swallowing, I follow him. "What are you doing?" I hiss once we're far enough away.

"Being a big brother," he whispers right back. Then louder, he says, "There's a pitcher of water in the fridge, can you grab it?"



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I grab the crystal pitcher that doesn't scream my brother at all. I almost place it right on my flaming cheeks but manage to restrain myself and bring it back to the table. Cole gestures toward the two chairs on the opposite side, and Jax and Finn sit. One looking about as unhappy as he can get, while Finn appears as if he's struggling to stay neutral.

I wish I could do that.

Cole starts digging through the boxes. He spoons plentiful portions onto his plate before stopping when no one else moves. "Dig in," he says, lip quirking into a smirk. "I'm sure as fuck not going to serve you."

Finn doesn't hesitate. He starts looking through the different dishes, even asking Cole to pass him the fried rice. It's Jax and I who are sitting with glares on our faces. This just doesn't seem...normal. First, I haven't had a meal with my brother since he returned to Rawley Heights. Now, I'm about to have it with the two people he threatened yesterday. What world is this?

Oh, right. It's the Dragons. This is probably par for the course.

Cole hands me the lo mein because he knows I love it. "I bought two, so this one is all yours."

Even though I'm still wondering what his angle is for inviting the two brothers, I still get a rush of sweetness that he remembered something from that long ago. Do normal gang leaders do that? I somehow don't think so. "Aww, thanks, bro."

I watch his profile to catch his reaction. His lips thin a little, which tells me this isn't supposed to be a friendly meeting. He's not about to ask Jax and Finn if we want to start a sibling rivalry game night. Like, Mondays we play Monopoly. Wednesdays, Pictionary. No, this is not a social call. Cole definitely has something in mind.

By the time everyone else is shoving food into their mouths, Jax is still sitting there with his arms crossed. Finn nudges the sweet and sour chicken his way, and he just glances at it.

"Which one of you is older?" I ask, even though I already have my suspicions.

"I'm younger and cooler," Finn remarks.

Jax scoffs, but then the hard look on his face returns, deep wrinkles marring his forehead. I keep staring between the two. They have different physiques and personalities, but I notice matching characteristics too. Their facial structures are similar with angular, sharp edges, though Jax has a somewhat rounder face that matches his stockier build. Their parents didn't just give them names that would help them get laid for the rest of their lives, they gave them looks, too. However, Jax's personality is a bit of a turn off.

"You're not going to eat?" Cole asks, and I swear he sounds like a judgmental housewife. Almost like he slaved over dinner all day and his kid is refusing to eat it.

"I really want to know what this is about first."

"After," Cole says easily. "I need some food in me before we talk business."

"He hasn't touched her," Jax spits. "She came to him."

"I know," Cole growls. "Just eat."

“We have a deal,” Jax continues, unable to let it go.

“Jesus Christ.” Cole drops his fork and leans back in the chair. He glares at Finn. “Does he not eat? Can’t we eat our Chinese in fucking peace?”

Finn smirks. “He’s this intense all the time. Well....” He pauses, pretending to think. “I’d say about eighty nine percent of the time. When he watches superhero movies, he relaxes.”

Jax turns a glare at his brother that would turn him to stone if he was Medusa. It’s so comical that both Cole and I chuckle, even though my brother stifles his quickly. So fast no one else probably even noticed he relaxed enough to do it. “Just fucking eat. I’m not talking with you on an empty stomach.”

Finn grabs the fried rice and starts dumping some on his brother’s plate. Then, he grabs the extra lo mein and gives him some of that too. He stops short of placing his fork in his brother’s hand, though I swear his fingers twitch to do it. Jax ends up grabbing the silverware first, poising it above his food. If there’s such a thing as anger eating, Jax does it. He chews so hard I’m afraid he might break a tooth.

Finn and I share conspiratorial smirks. Then, once that happens, it’s hard for us to look away from each other. I take a drink of water while still watching him. “So, what did you do today?”

“Really?” Jax fumes around a noodle.

I shrug. “If we’re all here, we might as well talk.”

“I...” Finn starts with a gigantic grin toward his brother. “...went through my training sessions. Watched some tape with our fighter from last night. Oh, and I punched my brother in the gut when he wouldn’t let me stop you from walking out of the gym.”

Jax's brows lower over his eyes.

"Huh." I say, looking between the two and trying to keep a straight face.

"What did you do?" Finn asks.

"I went right from your gym to here. Been hanging out with my brother all day." I peek at Cole, who is about as stone-faced as you can get. I obviously won't go into details about anything he's told me. "It was nice," I say instead. "We hadn't gotten to hang out in a long time."

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Cole flicks his gaze to me finally. He doesn't outwardly show it, but I know today meant as much to him as it did to me.

"That's nice," Finn says. "What about you?"

He's looking at Cole. No one talks for a few moments, and then it's my brother who grunts, "Fuck off."

I press my lips together to stifle a bubble of laughter once again. It's just so typical of my brother.

Finn doesn't take it personally. "Cool. What about you, Jax?"

"Fuck off," he scowls, and I swear by the immediate expression on his face that he didn't mean to mirror my brother exactly.

I. Fucking. Lose. It.

I start laughing. I laugh so hard I start to choke on my favorite dish, and Cole gets up to whack me on the back a couple of times. I get the noodle up but continue to chuckle. Finn is right there with me. Tears glisten in the corners of his eyes. All the while, the two serious ones at the table glower at us.

Cole sits back down, grumbling under his breath about giving him a heart attack. I can't help it though. Maybe it's just to let loose from all the tension, but damn, that was just too fucking hilarious.

I drink down all the water in my glass, and then Finn reaches over to fill it for me, giving me a wink.

Once I've calmed myself down enough to continue eating, Cole pushes his plate away. He uses a napkin that came with the food and wipes his fingers and face before throwing it on the empty plate in front of him.

The tone in the room switches again, and eventually, we all stop eating to stare at my brother since it's obvious he's running this show. "Colleen had an idea earlier, and I decided to take her up on it."

"Cole," I grumble, trying to infuse a warning into my tone without pissing off the gang leader in him.

He smiles at me. "Sorry, sis. I gotta do it. It was a great idea."

I glare at him as he says, "I'm leaving for an indefinite amount of time, and Colleen needs a babysitter."

Oh no, he did not just fucking saybabysitter.

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Oh, hedidjust fucking say babysitter.Everybody step back because it's my turn to be Medusa.

The corner of my brother's lip twitches. He knows how much I want to hit him right now. In a way, this is typical, pre-Dragon Cole. We were always picking on each other. Practical jokes. Humor. Anything we could think of. We loved to laugh.

I can see it in his profile now. He's loving every second of this. Teasing me at the

highest level. He's just hiding under his gang leader status to do it so I can't retaliate.

"I'll be fine," I say curtly, trying not to freak out on him.

I'm immediately cut off from any further reassurance when Finn asks, "Why? What's wrong?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath while Jax argues, "What's that got to do with us?"

Man, Finn's brother is surly, isn't he? Not that I can blame him under these circumstances but damn, talk about needing a chill pill.

"Actually, it has a lot to do with you." Cole manages to give one of his threatening looks. It's as easy as breathing to him now. "Out of respect for our mutual friends, I haven't asked you for one thing since taking over the Crew's territory."

Jax's shoulders bunch. The already sharp edges of his jawline seem to come to a painful point as he glares at my brother.

"Is Leenie okay?" Finn asks, concern written all over him. He doesn't even notice the staring match between his brother and mine. "Did something happen?"

Cole switches his gaze to Finn. His eyes narrow almost imperceptibly as he takes in the sexy trainer's form who leans over the table, pressing his fingers into the surface until his nails turn white. Cole lets out a breath. "What I'm about to say doesn't leave this room."

Finn nods. However, his brother looks increasingly agitated. Me? I refrain from rolling my eyes. I may as well be a fly on the wall.

“Being who I am, there are constant threats. Some are unfounded, some aren’t. One recently caught my attention because it wasn’t directed at me, it was about Colleen.”



Finn's throat works, and he flicks his worried gaze to me.

Cole lifts his hands from the table in a short gesture. "I haven't been able to verify it yet, and obviously, I take threats about my family very seriously. Unfortunately, I have to leave town for business, and I'm not sure how long I'm going to be gone." He settles back against his seat. "I was going to have one of my top guards stay with her, but then she came up with this equally perfect idea, and I just couldn't turn it down." Again, his lip twitches.

Jax turns his angry glare to me, and I shrink a little in my chair. I only said it to get into Finn's pants, and yet, I inadvertently drew them into this shit. Something I said I wouldn't do. "I don't get it," Jax scoffs. "First, if Finn contacts her, you're going to take away our businesses. Now, you want him to watch her? That makes no fucking sense at all."

"It makes plenty of sense." Cole folds his hands behind his head without a care in the world. "As I said, I've never asked you two to do anything, letting you run your businesses free and clear from Dragon interference. It's time to pay up."

Jax growls. "That was the arrangement we made."

"Well, I'm changing it. Leenie needs protection while I'm gone, and who better to give it to her than two highly-trained fighters?"

"What?Me?" Jax explodes.

"Both of you," Cole explains, dismissing his outburst.

“Done,” Finn answers. “Nothing will happen to her. I promise.”

“Dude,” Jax says, staring at his brother like he has two heads. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You just met the girl, and we’re being sucked into gang shit fucking again!”

“I’m sor—”

Finn and Cole both turn toward me. “Don’t.”

Cole’s the only one who finishes the sentence. “...apologize.” He rubs the back of his neck, and a bit of the vulnerable Cole from years ago comes back. “I can’t have anything happen to my sister. Family is too important to me.”

“One of your highly trained guards would be smarter then,” Jax throws out. “We don’t babysit. We train fighters.”

Um, ouch. My brother doesn’t take his bait though. “I’m stretched thin. The Dragons weren’t prepared to take over Crew territory. We did it as a favor to our mutual friends. We have thousands of members, but they’re spread out over the tri-state area. We’ve been recruiting from old Crew members, but that process takes time, and unfortunately, the business I have is pressing, and an immediate concern. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t leave Leenie’s side until I’d extinguished the problem. However, that’s no longer possible. Dempsey will research and verify the threat. If he doesn’t turn anything up, I won’t need your services for long. You should consider yourself lucky that you’re getting out of this so easy.”

“Fine,” Finn says, nodding.

His brother’s response is obviously harsher. Jax shakes his head. “Listen, if we do this—and it’s a big fucking if—I want to hear that you’ll never threaten our

businesses again. We came to an agreement when you first took over Crew territory that we were allowed to run our completely legal, aboveboard fights with no deference to you or the Dragons, and the first time she showed up, that gets thrown in our faces. If we help out, I don't want to hear you ever use anything against us again."

Cole laughs. "Listen, I don't trust just fucking anybody with my sister. Period. The only reason I'm letting you near her is because Mag already vetted you two assholes, and I know he must have because he allowed you to come within spitting distance of his girl." He leans forward suddenly. "You helped them out when they needed it the most. I'm asking you to do the same thing now. For me."

I glance at Cole. He's not directly answering Jax's question. I kick him under the table, and he only glares at me in return.

"I didn't hear a promise in there," Jax observes.

"Because I won't fucking promise a damn thing!" Cole snarls.

"Not even for your sister's life?"

The Dragon leader stands abruptly, gripping the table. The chair behind him clashes to the floor.

My heart skips into my throat. The red and orange flames of my brother's tattoo dance over his neck from his corded muscles tensing. I bite the inside of my lip, just now realizing how all of this is affecting Cole. Whatever he needs to do on business must be super important, but without knowing if the threat is legit, he's taking a serious gamble by leaving me.

I stand, too, placing my arm on my brother's back. He stiffens, still looking like he

could jump over the table and pummel Jax. The truth is, Cole never used to be like this, and I understand that he has to be. Gang leaders can't have weaknesses because the second they pop up, they'll be exploited...by everyone.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," I tell him, rubbing his back. "I promise."

Finn stands, too. "No, nothing will. I'll make sure of it."

Jax shakes his head. I can't blame him for holding out. I would too. He doesn't understand the way things work once you're in a crime organization. Personally, I've had a lot of time to disseminate what Cole goes through. I see it so clearly in comparing who he used to be to who he is now. If I could, I'd tell Jax that I'll work on my brother regarding a promise to stay away from the two brothers' businesses but I can't say that here. Not now.

Cole straightens, and my hands fall off him. "I think you've misunderstood this conversation. My asking was just trying to be polite. You don't have a choice. I'm ordering. And if you don't, you can say goodbye to the Ring and your gym now instead of later."

My shoulders deflate. I take a step back from my brother. Just because I understand logically that he has to do these things doesn't make it easier to take.

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He raps his knuckles against the table in front of him. “You watch her starting now. I’m leaving tonight.”

My mouth drops. “Cole. What the fuck? You didn’t tell me you were leaving so soon.”

Turning toward me, he still holds onto his scowl even though his eyes say a different story. “I found out earlier that my window of opportunity is quickly coming to a close, and I have to leave. You got what you wanted. The smart brother is all too eager to watch you.”

Afterward, he starts spouting off orders to Jax and Finn that I only half listen to. I drift toward the couch, nerves stretching me thin. He hasn’t said much about what this business is, but I doubt Cole does anything that isn’t at least a little dangerous.... And I literally just got him back. I swallow, fear gripping me. I don’t want to lose him again.

The voices in the other room remain low, and all three participate, so at least Jax has come to the conclusion that he actually has no choice in the matter. Yes, I’m mad about this, but what Cole said makes sense. Dempsey can watch me, or he can actively try to find out if this is a threat that we need to be worried about. Maybe I’ll only need to be babysat for a week, max. Since I also told Cole I would make things easier on him, I won’t fight it. I know the pressure he’s under, and I don’t want to keep pushing him anymore.

And really, there are far worse things than spending a bunch of time with Finn.

A pair of jeans step into my view, and I work my gaze up to meet my brother's shadowy eyes. "Leenie Bear."

I cringe at my nickname. He's called me that since I was a toddler. It sounds foreign coming out of the mouth of a tattooed-up, personified bad boy, but whoever Cole is on the outside, he'll always be my brother.

I gulp, unable to keep the dread from rising again. "What if you don't come back again?" I ask, a tremor in my voice. "Or what if this takes another five years?"

Cole's face falls. It lasts a split second until he gazes over the couch. "You two wait outside," he orders.

I don't watch Jax and Finn go, though I can feel a pair of eyes trained on me. As soon as the door clicks, signaling that my brother and I are alone, Cole sits next to me. "I'm coming back this time. I can promise you one hundred percent that I'll be back. I don't know when," he hedges. "But I will be. You can text me. I'll answer every single time. I promise. The worst thing I ever did was take my family for granted, and I'm not going to do it again." He reaches over to cover my hand with his. "I took over the Crew as a favor to Mag, but I did it for us too. I did it because I want a relationship with you, Leenie. And Mom and Dad. I couldn't stand being away another year, so no matter what the growing pains are to get there, we're going to get our family back. I won't leave again, and I'm not going to let anything happen to you either."

For the third time today, I wrap my arms around my brother. "Just be careful."

"Promi—" He breaks off. "You can count on it," he says instead, squeezing me tighter.

When we pull away, I wipe under my eyes to catch some of the tears threatening to

fall before he can see.

Cole punches me playfully in the arm. “Well, hey, at least you don’t like the asshole brother.”

That makes me laugh. “He is a bit of a dick, huh?”

“He has balls though. I’ll give him that.” The way he says it makes me think Jax earned a grudging respect out of him. “Doesn’t make him dumb for trying though.”

“So...Finn?”

He frowns. “I meant what I said before. One, you’re too good for any guy here. Two, Finn’s total focus needs to be on keeping you safe. Don’t distract him,” he warns.

I want to argue, but I’m pretty sure I just made a pact with myself about not placing anymore shit on my brother’s plate. In this case, I’m going to go with what Cole doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

We hug goodbye, both of us slowly returning to the familiar stages of being a sibling again. “I’m always available,” he says, gesturing toward his phone on the coffee table.

“Same, big brother. If you need me.” He smirks, and I shrug. “You never know what you might need advice with. Clothes. Girls. Peni—”

“Just get the fuck out, Leenie,” he grunts.

I laugh as I pull the door open. “Love you too, grumpy.”

I step out, my heart beating in my throat. For the longest time, I stand there with my

hand still on the doorknob. I don't have a good feeling about this, but there's nothing I can do. Instead, I peek toward the elevator and find Jax and Finn waiting for me.

My hand slips from the handle, and I walk toward them, leaving my brother behind to do his gang leader shit. Finn looks up when he hears me approach, his lips pulling apart into a broad smile. Instantly, some of the stress of the last half an hour lifts from me. I can't think of a better person to pass the time with than someone who literally emits his own light.

Hot damn.

11

"Your brother's a dick."

Man, I'm going to start putting money aside every time someone says that to me. I bet I walk out of this with a fortune.



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The elevator dings, signaling we've arrived on the lobby level. I thrust my hand toward Jax. "Hi, I'm Leenie. Nice to meet you."

He grunts in response. Ignoring my outstretched fingers, he moves around me and out of the elevator. He walks across the huge white tiles of the tower lobby with decently long strides and is already at the exit before I even step out of the stainless-steel box.

"Would it help if I said he's actually a good guy?" Finn asks, frowning at his brother's back.

"I mean, he's not wrong about Cole," I shrug. "I can't get mad at him for it."

Despite the fact that he walked away like a toddler having a tantrum, Jax is waiting for us outside with his hands crammed into his pockets. When we get to him, he turns and falls in line next to his brother. "You'll move in with us until Cole gets back." He checks his watch. "We can stop by for some of your stuff tonight, but we need to hurry."

"Whoa," I say, stopping where I am in the middle of the sidewalk. I peek at Finn. "I have a perfectly fine apartment. I'm not moving in with you guys."

He pulls his shoulders back, and the pensive look on his face dissipates to stone. "I agree with Jax. It'll be easier this way."

"For you, maybe," I counter, placing my hands on my hips.

Finn drops his head to the side, struggling to cover up a smile, which makes me even

more mad. “I mean it’ll be easier for us to keep you safe at our place since we already know the lay of the land, so to speak.”

“But I don’t know what kind of shithole you guys live in.” My lip curls up in disgust unwillingly. “Ugh. Boy apartment. It sounds awful.” Plus, I really just love my apartment with Jaz, and holy shit, she’s going to be so pissed if I move out, no matter if it’s temporary or not.

My sexy trainer chuckles. “My brother’s a straight up clean freak, obsessive compulsive tidier. You can probably eat off the floor.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, anyway,” Jax grinds out. “We’re not upheaving our lives because you need to be babysat.”

The brother is really starting to annoy the shit out of me. I can only let his pissiness at the situation go so far before I start speaking up.

Finn must see it on my face because he spins his brother around and pushes him to continue walking down the sidewalk. “Come on,” Finn says to me, motioning with his head to follow his brother. “I promise we don’t live in a pigsty. We’ll go get your things, and then get you settled before we have to be back at the Ring.”

I blink at him. “The Ring? Again?”

“Fridays and Saturdays are fight nights,” he explains. “We have a lot of up-and-coming fighters that want their chance to show what they got.”

“And people are filling in for us right now,” Jax calls over his shoulder. “So can we get a move on, please?”

I glare at his impressive back. “How long until he realizes he has no idea where I live

and won't know until I tell him?"

"Actually," Finn grimaces. "Your brother told us."

I close my eyes, regaining my cool, and refraining from already sending my brother a nasty text even though he probably isn't even out of the tower yet.

Instead, I pull my shoulders back and keep trudging on, following Jax to the bus stop, and then sitting squished between the two until we get to my stop. They follow me off, and we walk the half block to the dress shop. When we were on the bus, I sent a quick text to Jaz to let her know what was up. She hasn't responded yet, but that only means that she's waiting to freak out on me in person.

I trudge up the stairs with a heavy heart, not wanting to get in a fight with my bestie about something I'm definitely not happy about either.

"Where the hell's the light?" Jax mutters from behind.

"It blew when we left last night," I throw over my shoulder, probably bitchier than I would have, if you know, I wasn't being uprooted from my life right now.

I turn the key in the lock and come face-to-face with a tight-lipped Jaz. She grabs my hand and immediately drags me into my bedroom, slamming the door. "What the fuck, Leenie?"

She's hurt more than pissed. Or maybe hurt but pissed at the situation? I sit on the foot of the bed with a sigh. "It was either them or have my brother's guard-slash-second-in-command follow me everywhere while he's gone." I'd been thinking about what to say to her the whole bus ride, so I hope I've found a way to spin it so she doesn't get super mad. "At least you won't be put out this way. If it was a Dragon, he would've been all up in both of our businesses."

Jaz groans in frustration. “Is it bad then?”

“I don’t know. Cole seemed iffy about it. He was worried enough to get help, but he also wasn’t sure it was legit. Instead of Dempsey—the guy who was going to watch me—following me everywhere, he’ll be verifying the threat instead. Who knows, maybe this won’t even last that long? And hey,” I add for good measure, “You get the apartment to yourself to have all the wild sex you want.”

She drops onto the bed next to me, softening. She places her arms around my shoulders, giving me a quick squeeze. “I’m not happy about it, but I’m sure Cole’s concerns are reasonable. He would know how to handle things like this. Are you mad at him?”

That’s a loaded question. One I’m not sure how to answer. “We had the best day since he’s been back,” I offer, trying to muster up a thread of long-lasting anger, but I just don’t have the energy. “No, I’m not. What I’m mad at is that I have to do this, but I’m not going to blame Cole for it.”

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“Well,” Jaz says, finally pulling away and staring at me with wide eyes. “Maybe you’ll be having your own epic sex sessions.”

I bark out a very unsexy laugh and get to my feet. “I doubt it. I’m pretty sure Cole threatened Finn within an inch of his life.” I grab my old book bag from the closet and start filling it with clothes and essentials.

“What are you doing?” Jaz smirks. “You need to bring sexy stuff.” She immediately goes into my closet and starts pulling together all my “going out” shirts and pants. She even grabs my lingerie indulgences that I really had no business buying.

“What for?” I grumble after she starts shoving everything into the bag.

“Because,” she singsongs. “You should at least get something out of this. There’s something between you and Finn, and I say explore it.”

“Even if he’s been warned off me?”

“Especially if he’s been warned off you.” She cackles a little. Girl is having way too much fun with this.

“You’re kinky. I love it.”

“Everyone loves a forbidden romance,” she announces, then laughs again. “Imagine your brother’s face when you have Finn wrapped around your little finger.”

I don’t want to wrap anyone around my finger, I just want someone to do me. Is that

too much to ask? Apparently. “His brother’s salty.”

“There’s always one.” She brushes my worry away and glances at the handful of my bras and panties in her hand before noticing the lack of space in my bag. “I’ll go get you another bag. Wait here.” She shoves everything into my chest, and I hold onto it as she slips from my room and into hers. It would be fun to try to woo Finn. He’s just so...ugh— “Just a moment,” Jaz calls out, interrupting my daydream striptease as she strides back in. She holds up a mammoth, pale pink tote bag with a zipper top. Excitement gleams in her eyes while she takes all of the sexy undergarments from my hands and throws them in the bag. Then, we search through my drawers for a pair of pajamas that border between sexy and comfortable before moving onto the bathroom to gather my toiletries.

When we emerge, Finn is leaning against the wall near the door. His head snaps up when he hears us enter the room, and he kicks off, coming to a standing position with his arms crossed over his chest. A lazy smile forms on his face. “You have a nice place.”

“Thanks,” Jaz and I say at the same time.

She helps pull the pink tote over my shoulder, and when she starts to help with the book bag, Finn steps up. “I’ll hold that.” He moves to the other one. “And this.”

Jaz looks between the two of us, barely containing a smile before throwing her arms around me. “I’m going to miss you.” She squeezes until her lips are right next to my ear. “You totally have this. Give it one day, and he’ll be kneeling between your legs.”

I stare at Finn over my friend’s shoulder. Something tells me he’s going to be a bigger nut to crack. And if his brother has anything to say about it, he’ll be trying to keep us apart so my brother doesn’t ruin them both.

Yeah, that's what I'm working with here.

She squeezes me again and steps back. "Keep me updated."

"Will do," I say, giving her a mock salute. The three of us start down the narrow stairway. About halfway, I realize the light is on and peer over my shoulder at the working fixture. "Whoa. How the hell did that happen?"

"I fixed it while you were getting your things," Finn says.

I grip the railing to keep from melting to goo right in front of him. Wow. That was sweet. "Thank you."

He turns back around. "No problem. I wouldn't want you to fall down the stairs and have Cole blame us instead of a blown lightbulb."

"Ha. Ha."

He chuckles to himself until we reach the bottom of the stairs. Holding the door open for me, he smiles until we're heading back toward the bus stop. Jax checks his phone, grimacing. "We need to go right to the Ring." Finn clears his throat, prompting his brother to glare at him. With more sarcasm than I knew he was capable of, Jax asks, "Is it okay with you, Leenie, if we go to the Ring first?" Insincerity colors his words, but it was nice to be asked all the same, and obviously, I know who to thank for that.

"That's fine with me," I agree. "Do you have a place I can change there?"

"Why would you—?"

Finn hits him. "Yes, we have a place. Whatever you want."

I smile at him. “Great.”

The Ring is only a few blocks away from the apartment, so we head that way instead of toward the bus. They lead me around the desolate corner to a separate side entrance. A bouncer manning the door nods at them, and Finn introduces me, explaining that if he sees me, I’m welcome any time. I reach out my hand to shake his, and at least the guard has enough manners to greet me properly.

Through a maze of hallways that are much newer than the warehouse itself, Jax, Finn, and I finally step into a room with a horde of fighters in it, most of them in different stages of undress. Some wear whole training outfits while others just sport fight shorts. There are even a few in small, boxer-like, skintight bottoms, and I immediately need to know what Finn looks like in something like that. In fact, I can’t stop imagining him that I bowl right into his back when he suddenly stops in front of me.



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“Oh hey, gym girl,” one of the fighters calls out.

I peek up and recognize him as one of the fighters that was in the boxing ring this morning. Was that only this morning? Because it seems like a hell of a lot has happened since then. First, there was the argument at the gym and realizing what my brother was threatening them with. Then, the whole day with Cole, learning who he is as a person now and how the brother I know is still in there. He’s just deep, deep down.

“Never mind her. Get back to work,” Jax snaps.

The dude does as he says, immediately getting back to fight mode as he punches the air, exhaling in short breaths as he does so.

We move into another small, square room, and Finn places my bags against the wall. One desk sits in the center, but the walls and floors are otherwise bare. “This is our office at the Ring,” Finn tells me.

I glance around, noting the muted tan walls and plank flooring. It still smells new, like paint and some other smell, so it’s obvious they hardly use this area.

“I’m going back out to make sure everyone’s head is on straight. Make sure she’s...arranged,” Jax demands as he leaves the room.

I sneer at the door. “Wow. Your brother really doesn’t like me.”

“He just doesn’t like being pulled into gang shit,” Finn offers. “It’s not personal. I

promise you. He didn't like Kyla at first either."

At least I recognize that name now. "You must have been good friends if they got my brother to give you a pass on your businesses. He doesn't seem like the person to do that."

"We were great friends," he says with a small smile. "Jax will probably still tell you that he doesn't like them, but he's full of it."

The room starts to close in, and I feel our proximity and the fact that we're alone once again. "Where are they now?"

He flicks a piece of lint off the lower half of his shirt. "They got the hell out of the Heights, which is what they should've done. I hope they never come back."

The sadness in his voice is apparent even though he's trying to brush it off. I understand that sentiment though. Just because we know something is good for us doesn't mean it's painless.

Damn. My heart goes out to him. Everything about this guy screams perfect. He always seems so positive.

To drive my thoughts home, he perks up right afterward. "I'll give you the room so you can change."

I bite down on my lip, making a split-second decision. It probably doesn't help that Jaz's words are still in my ear. She's not a good influence. Good friends rarely are. "Oh, no need." I grab the hem of my shirt and peel it over my head. I discard it on the floor, chest hammering now that I'm standing in front of Finn in my bra. A quick check confirms that luckily I'm not wearing something I wouldn't want to be caught dead in, so I heave a silent sigh of relief. I probably should have thought of that

before I whipped my shirt off, but I tend to act first, then ask questions.

Smirking at his wide gaze, I twist on my heel to get my bag. With my ass in the air, I hear his intake of breath. “Jesus, Leenie.”

12

Well, that’s a good sign.

I take my time looking through both bags, searching for the perfect shirt. Something acceptable for being out on a Saturday night, and yeah, maybe something that will turn Finn’s head a bunch of times.

When he moves closer, the heat from his body clings to my own like a fiery presence. Mirroring me, he bends to search through my bag, pulling out a scarlet red tank with a plunging neckline. He holds it up then shifts his gaze to me. “How’s this one?”

His blue eyes with amber flecks brand my irises as he passes the shirt over. I straighten, holding the fabric to my chest and wondering if I can get away with wearing this shirt with the bra I have on. Before I make the decision, he moves closer, the tips of his shoes nearly touching mine. “You did that on purpose.”

It isn’t a question, it’s a statement. He damn well knows I did, just like I walked up to him yesterday with laser focus. “When I see something I like, I go after it.”

He reaches out, fingering the flimsy material of the shirt between us. “And I appreciate that,” he says gruffly. “I like a woman who knows what she wants.”

His voice undoes me. Drawn like magnets, I step closer, the shirt just lying over my chest, kept there by my hand around my waist. My knuckles brush against his abdomen, and his jaw ticks.

“Here,” he offers, reaching for the clothing he chose. He grabs the hem and carefully pulls it over my head...dressing me.

Well, damn, that’s not where I envisioned this going. It’s supposed to be the other way around. I’d normally go hide after a rejection but as I slip my hands through the arm holes and he lowers the fabric, covering me, his fingers brush against my sides then settle on my hips. He tightens his grip possessively, releasing a moment later. “Leenie...”

He closes his eyes, and I know a rebuff when I’m about to hear one. I pull myself out of his orbit and step back, making his hands fall to his sides. I clear my throat, looking away. Searching for something to say, I grasp at the first thing that comes to mind. “Sorry about all this, anyway.” I try to infuse some pep into my voice but fail miserably. “Cole’s too overprotective. When he was gone, he forgot what it was like to have a sister, and now he’s going overboard.”

Finn shakes his head. “He’s not going overboard.”

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I give him a doubtful look, then kneel to zip up my bags before standing again. “Do you want me to stay in here? Can I go out there...Captor?” I throw in for good measure because why the hell not. His unspoken refusal still tightens the strings around my heart.

He frowns, the adorable little dip in his lip more pronounced. “I want to keep you safe.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say, laughing. “Everyone in my life wants to do that.” I nearly bite my tongue off to stop from saying what I really want to say. No one cares what I want. It’s a petty thought, but hell, I guess I’m just trivial like that. I try to remind myself that Cole really is doing what he thinks is best for me, and Finn? Well, he’s just doing what he’s been told. “So, what am I allowed to do?”

“Jesus, you’re breaking my heart.”

I flick my gaze to him, and he really does appear contrite. “Well?” I push because I can’t help my temper boiling to the surface right now.

“What do you want to do?”

“I’d like to still be able to watch the fights. Staying in this room sounds pretty dull, actually. And I imagine you have things to do too.”

He runs his hands through his hair, and I watch as it falls perfectly back over his ears, tickling his cheekbones. He’s still dressed in the same shirt and jeans from dinner at the tower. He’s certainly not wearing the same gear he wore for yesterday’s fights,

but he looks just as good.

He gestures toward the door, and I move toward it. Hurrying in front of me, he opens it, and when I walk through, he places his hand at the small of my back again. I close my eyes, remembering how excited I got when he touched me this way only yesterday. There's nothing better than a small, possessive gesture to get the blood boiling, but today, it takes on a whole different meaning.

He's just touching me because I'm his charge.

Everyone discreetly looks at us when we emerge from the room. He doesn't say anything. We just walk straight through and back to the maze of hallways. This time, we take a different route and come out the same door the fighters do to go to the ring. I only recognize it when we start moving down the ramp toward the cage, and when I look up to get my bearings amid the cacophony of people, I realize right where I am.

At the end of the ramp, we stop directly in front of the damn cage. It's near enough to touch, and this close, I see how big it actually is. Finn flags down a guy in a full-on security outfit complete with a collared, yellow shirt. They have a short conversation, and the man nods in response. We stay where we are, and I get lost in the sea of people taking their seats. The same wild, pumped up music is banging overhead like an angry exchange. Goosebumps ripple up and down my arms from the pure electricity in the air.

A few minutes later, the security guard comes back with two folding chairs. He hands one to Finn who takes it and sets it up in front of the first row of seats, in line with the judging tables. Taking my hand, he gestures toward the chair, giving me one of his signature wide smiles. "How's this for a seat?"

I peek around. I'm so damn close I'll have to strain my neck to see the action, but it can't get better than this. "I think it'll work," I tease.

My response only makes Finn's smile brighten. He takes the second chair from the security staff member and sets it up right next to me. As soon as he sits, his leg jumps up and down, eyes glancing to the right where he was yelling from cage-side only yesterday. His harried movements almost make me squirm. Bringing out his phone, I watch as he sends his brother a text, something about a fighter's right hook.

"You don't have to wait here with me."

He puts his phone away and places his arm around my chair. "Of course I do. I wouldn't be very good at watching you if you're no longer within my line of sight, would I?"

"I don't need to be babysat," I hiss.

"I'm not using that term. That was your brother. But I will make sure nothing happens to you while he's gone, and not because he asked me to." The longer he talks, the darker, more hardened his voice gets. "Because I fucking want to."

He looks away right after, and I stare at his profile. I have to squeeze my legs together at the heat pooling between my thighs because holy shit. The nice one has some claws to him, and that's panty-dampening.

I suck my lower lip inside my mouth, chewing it lightly. "I still am sorry," I say aloud even though I'm not sure if it's quite powerful enough to be heard over the music. "I know you have better things to do."

He peeks at me from the corner of his eye before shaking his head, his arm around my chair flexing. He leans over, placing his lips near my ear. "If it weren't for what's going on, the only thing better I can think of is pressing a kiss to your sweet cunt."

His lips brush my earlobe and with the strength of his words, I take a deep breath to

calm myself before combusting in front of everybody. Sweet Jesus.

Before I even have a chance to formulate a response, the lights dim and the music changes. The atmosphere in the air tenses with a different type of electricity. I close my eyes to get myself under control, and as the crowd starts clapping, I trust myself to look up only to find Finn completely ignoring his surroundings and watching me.

My lips part at his hardened focus. His eyes roam mine as if searching for something, and it isn't until his brother claps him on the back that he finally breaks our stare. When he looks away, it's as if I'm released from a gravitational pull and have to stop myself from falling to the floor in a heaping mess. Slow, measured breaths help get my body back under control. There's just something about this guy that does it for me, and quite frankly, it's a little unnerving.

With his arm still around my chair, his fingers brushing the bare skin of my shoulder, he starts talking to his fighter that's getting that stuff wiped across his face right next to us by a referee. The young athlete gives Finn all of his attention, nodding at every piece of advice he shares. It's so damn fascinating that I can't look away. After another referee gives the fighter his final checks, the boy in the black trunks strides toward Finn who releases his hold on me and raises his fists. Bouncing from foot-to-foot, the fighter punches his gloves against Finn's knuckles and then runs into the ring.

I keep looking between the ring and Finn. He's so unassuming, and not in a negative way. He doesn't have a giant chip on his shoulder. He's not walking around like he's the shit and everyone else should be sucking his dick. He's good natured. He's more apt to smile than growl. He's...happy. Something you don't see a lot of in the Heights. And yet, he holds a lot of respect here. He's firm and encouraging. The game plan he summed up in about fifty words even got me hyped for the fight.

I move to the edge of my seat as Finn leans forward, elbows on his bouncing knees.



The announcer introduces the two contenders, and I reach over to place my hand on Finn's knee to steady him. He pauses to look at me, and I give him a sly grin, brushing my thumb over his jeans to try to calm him.

When the bell rings, he gets sucked away, drawn into the match. He's so engrossed I doubt he even realizes my hand is still on him. He starts calling out instructions like I saw him do from outside the cage last night. Muscles flexing, it's as if he's the one in the cage facing down an opponent. He's living every single second with his fighter.

I thought him being in the cage would be hot, but this is sexy and inspiring. Finn cares enough to be their cheerleader and coach wrapped into one.

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When the first round ends, Finn grabs my hand and drags me toward the corner where his guy is given a stool to sit on. He immediately starts giving advice from the ground, one hand tangled in mine and the other pressing into the fighter's back as Jax takes point in the ring.

It's a flurry of movement and quickly uttered words and before I know it, Finn is leading me back to the seats. My heart beats a mile a minute, and I place my hand over my chest as soon as we sit to make sure it doesn't push right through my skin. Finn peeks over. "Insanity, huh?"

"That's one word for it," I utter, barely able to define what I'm feeling.

The same enamored thoughts I had yesterday from the second floor are more prominent this close to the action. I have no idea how to even throw a punch or what the fighter should be doing, but I'm compelled to cheer Finn's guy on. I grimace when a gash opens up above his eye and clap when he returns with his own flurry of punches.

It's wild and untamed. It's completely freaking barbaric, and I love every damn second of it.

Again, when the fight lasts another round, Finn pulls me to the side of the ring to give instructions. I listen in, trying to get a feel for what he's telling him to do. This time, he's encouraging, telling the fighter to stay the course. I tighten my fingers around Finn's, leaning into him as he speaks rapidly. I don't even realize I'm doing it until a voice says, "Leenie."

I glance up to find the hot-as-fuck trainer staring down at me. He blinks. “We have to go to our seats now.”

I’m pressed against him. From thigh to shoulder, I’m practically on top of him. I quickly step back after noting our proximity. Jax brushes past us on the way back to his spot, and he glares at me. Turning away, I walk toward the two folding chairs and leave Finn some breathing room, telling myself not to get caught up in the moment.

Halfway through the next round though, Finn grabs my hand and places it on his knee, covering it with his own.

When my hand gets clammy from the massive amount of heat emanating from him and the inferno inside me, I don’t pull away. Neither does he. He only lets me go when his guy lands a solid punch that knocks his opponent to the mat. The poor guy’s eyes roll into the back of his head. Shooting to his feet, Finn screams, and I watch his celebration from the chair until he spins on his heel, grabs me out of the seat, and hugs me. “That was his first win,” he yells into my ear.

I squeeze him back, smiling into his solid chest.

What a knockout, and I’m not just talking about the fight. I don’t know what I’m going to do about Finn, but I’m completely enamored. Crushing fucking hard.

Fuck.

13

When the fights end, we don’t stay for the afterparty-slash-club scene even though all their fighters try to persuade them. More than a few eyes study how Finn practically has me pinned to his side. I’m sure they’re super curious as to what’s going on between us, and why I’m so suddenly in their faces, practically in the ring with them,

and even standing ringside between rounds.

Finn carries my bags again as we make our way to the side entrance. For some reason, I just can't get over how everyone watched me with blatant curiosity. "So, what does everyone think?"

"The fighters?" Finn asks from behind me.

Jax peers over his shoulder. "I guarantee they're not thinking about you at all."

I roll my eyes at his back, but Finn laughs. "You're delirious, brother. They were watching her like a hawk." He reaches out to pass a featherlight touch across my lower back as we stride down the hall, and I immediately slow so I can feel the full impact. He doesn't disappoint. His fingers press against me firmly, his thumb tracing over my spine.

"Fucking wonderful." Jax spins, making the both of us stop in the cramped space. His dark eyes zero in on me. "Don't fuck any of them. They're off-limits."

I suck in a breath like he's just slapped me. Finn's growling something over my head, but I've had enough of his bullshit. I step up to the broader brother, place my hands on his chest, and shove. "Fuck. You." He doesn't move. Like, at all. He stays right where he is despite my throwing everything I had into it, but I'm sure the ire behind my words did at least something to him. "I'm not a slut, you overbearing asshole. Listen, I don't want to be here with your moody ass either. Maybe we should just agree not to talk to each other."

Finn pulls me back with a hand around my middle. He's not protecting me. Jax isn't going to retaliate. Instead, he curses his brother out himself, and Jax has the good sense to look apologetic. He doesn't say as much, but he does stalk away with his head down. A couple of seconds later, a steel door slams.

Finn huffs behind me. “I swear, he’s a good person. He doesn’t like new people. He’s set in his ways, almost like a grandpa. He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

I ignore his excuses. “How are you guys so different?”

“It’s not his fault. He’s been through some shit,” Finn says, returning his hand to my back and pressing me forward. “I’ll have a talk with him, but really, it’s best to just stay out of his way for now. It takes him a while to get out of his funks.” I don’t respond, and he sighs. “It was a nice attempt at a push.”

I snicker. “Too bad he didn’t go anywhere. I’m not sure I got my point across.”

“You did,” Finn assures. “We’re both fighters, so we get physicality.” Pulling my bags higher onto his shoulder, he continues, “He didn’t mean to imply that you were easy. He cares a lot about our fighters. The gym and what we do there is the only thing either one of us has done that brings us any sort of happiness. He doesn’t want them derailed. That’s all.”

I pull my shoulders back. I can get that. Just, dude needs to think about what he says before he says it.

Turns out we have to take the bus to Jax and Finn’s place, and as soon as we’re seated on the uncomfortable plastic chairs, I find myself thinking about what’s going to greet me when we get there. Finn’s already assured me that it’s the furthest thing from a bachelor pad but getting that kind of guarantee from an actual bachelor probably shouldn’t be taken to heart. It could only be one step above, and I’d still have to live in a gross, male-dominated house for who knows how long.

As Jax and I prefer it, the older brother keeps to himself for the ride there. His hard face never softens as he leans his temple against the bus window. Finn is quiet, too. The three of us are the only ones on the bus, so I occupy myself by sending text

updates to Jaz. I even had a text waiting from my brother, who asked how I was and let me know he'd safely arrived at his destination. I'd ask where that is, but he won't tell me. Instead, I tell him I'm fine and that we're headed back to Jax and Finn's house right now. He responds with: Let me know if it's acceptable.

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I snort at that. If it's not, what's he going to do about it? Put us all up in a hotel for an indefinite amount of time? Either way, it's a nice gesture, so I tell him I'll keep him updated. As soon as I send it, Jax stands and Finn gathers up my bags. "I can carry them you know," I offer as he slings both of them over his shoulder. "Especially the pink one."

"Please, I look damn good in pink."

He's right. He does. I love it when men wear pink. Confidence is so damn sexy.

And there I go thinking everything about Finn is perfect. I got it bad. I'm itching to talk with Jaz so she can talk me down, but I have a feeling she'd just be feeding my head with the exact opposite thoughts.

Finn and I follow Jax down the bus stairs and onto a slab of concrete in front of a bus stop that's littered with graffiti and discarded waste. Sometimes, I don't even see the trash anymore. It's just so commonplace in the Heights that seeing a perfectly manicured bus stop might make me pull up short rather than one that looks like all the others. "It's just a block up this way," Finn explains without me having to ask where we're going next. I give him a grateful smile. My stomach tightens in agitated anticipation. I've only lived in two places my whole life, and beyond that, I barely know these guys. My brain keeps trying to warn me that this is going to be awkward as fuck, no matter if Finn looks like a damn supermodel.

The broken sidewalks and ramshackle houses barely register as the evening air pricks the skin on my arms. At this point, I'm just looking forward to getting inside before I freeze. Up ahead, Jax stops. I can't see around his big, square shoulders, but when

Finn pulls back on my arm and keeps his grip on me, I'm guessing whatever Jax stopped for is something to be concerned about.

A car door slams, and I inch closer to Finn. Just because I think my brother is being paranoid about this threat doesn't mean I'm a dumbass. None of us move, and my heartbeat is so loud in my ears I can't even use my senses to recognize a threat.

"It's Dempsey," a voice finally calls out.

The three of us immediately relax, and I step around Jax to get a glimpse of my brother's second. The dark night hides his face until his shadow moves under the light of the streetlamp.

"I just wanted to make sure you guys got here okay. Would one of you mind taking Colleen inside?"

Jax and Finn stare at each other and share an unspoken conversation. Finn ends up steering me around the two big brutes on the sidewalk and up a small concrete path to a single-family house. I blink at it. It's not new by any means, but it's not rundown like the majority of the housing surrounding it either. It even appears as if it's recently received a fresh coat of paint. The light above the door illuminates contrasting wood-colored planks. Some aged and worn, others brand new as if they're in the middle of renovating the place.

The stairs are solid under my feet as I climb them. Finn takes keys from his pocket, swings open the storm door, and unlocks the interior wood one. He pushes it open and gestures for me to enter first. The interior light flicks on as I take a step inside, and I'm immediately taken back to the house I grew up in.

A lot of the single-family houses in the Heights are old relics. Beautiful in their time but age and disuse have them fading away to rotten wood shambles. This one,



though, has been taken care of. The old world, almost Victorian charm, greets me in the dark cherry trim and columns that separate the living room from an original formal dining room. A stairway opens up in front of me with the same dark, red-tinted wood moving up and then turning out of sight.

A jingling rings through the house, and a dog comes prancing toward us. I make a shocked sound in the back of my throat and immediately drop to my knees. “You have a dog?” My voice goes up a few octaves as I stroke the short hair of the dog who immediately nuzzles his head into my palm.

“That’s Maxie,” Finn says, and I don’t have to look to tell there’s a grin on his face just by the sound of his words. “He’s a mutt.” Leaning over, he pats the dog’s head, and the canine, in turn, eats it up. “He was a stray on the street. I had to have him, much to my brother’s dismay. If you hear him grumbling about dog hair, just ignore him and hold your hands over Maxie’s ears. My poor baby, huh?” he coos, stroking the dog’s fur behind his head.

The dog licks his hand, and then walks his way up my thighs to slobber over my cheek. My heart melts. Cole and I had a dog when we were kids, but we never got another one after the poor thing passed. I would have one by now if it weren’t for the apartment living and Jaz, who’s allergic.

“I know you said mutt, but do you know what kind?”

“The vet thinks he’s a beagle mixed with terrier because the little fucker—and I mean that affectionately—can be stubborn as all hell.”

I laugh. Right now with the little thing eating up all my snuggles, I can’t imagine what Finn means by that. He seems like such a sweetie.

Standing, Finn whistles and pats his leg. Maxie jumps off my thighs to follow him

through the living room, so I get to my feet and trail after them both. Finn leads us through a kitchen to a long room in the rear of the house where he opens a back door. The dog skitters down some steps and goes out into the night. When Finn turns on the backyard light, I peer through the windows and find a completely fenced in yard that Maxie is currently romping through.

“Wow,” I say. “I wasn’t expecting this.” Turning, I take in this room as well as the kitchen. I’m so taken aback by how homey the house is. I could cuddle up on the couch with a blanket and watch Netflix right now and not feel one ounce of awkwardness.

“You thought you’d find cockroaches and ants and—”

“Empty condom wrappers strewn everywhere,” I helpfully supply.

Finn drops his head back and laughs. “We’re too busy to have girlfriends,” he chuckles. “Believe it or not, most women don’t like hanging around a smelly gym or having their weekends already booked out for years on end.”

“I wasn’t talking about those kinds of girls,” I counter. “I was talking about the kind who just want a fun night with someone who looks like you.” But the fact that his first thought was on the level of committed relationships means I’m even more intrigued, not that I need to be.

Finn lifts an eyebrow. “We call them Ring Rats.” He has the decency to grimace a little. “Because they’re more interested in having sex with the fighters than the actual competition itself. Yeah, there have been a few of those who’ve tried, but I’m not interested.”

I smirk. “How did you know I wasn’t one of them when you danced with me yesterday?”

His gaze burns into mine. “I wasn’t sure I cared when I saw you.”

Caught in the moment, I lean closer. He was right about us talking one another’s clothes off. I wish he’d talk me out of mine right now. Maxie takes this exact moment to bark, and Finn immediately pulls away. Stepping back, he takes a deep breath before opening the door. The medium-sized dog with brown, black, and white fur scampers back in.

Jeez, now I’ve got a four-legged cockblocker. Cole’s going to love this dog. He’ll probably give it a medal.

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“Let me show you around,” Finn says. “This is Jax’s office.” He points out a built-in wood desk at the far side of the room. A set of French doors open up right next to it, but we go back through the separate entryway and into the small kitchen before exiting into what was originally the formal dining room. To the right, I spy the same set of French doors with Jax’s desk right behind it. Another desk sits against the wall in here, and Finn smiles. “My office.”

We pass between two ornate columns and back into the front of the house. “Living room?” I guess, noting the TV and charcoal sectional.

“Yep, and the bedrooms and bathrooms are upstairs.”

“How’d you guys come across this place? No offense, but it doesn’t seem like the type of house two bachelors would live in.”

“It’s our family home,” Finn answers. His lips thin, and a ghost of a backstory shadows his face. “We lived here when we were teenagers. When our parents decided to move away, we’d already purchased the boxing gym, so we bought this place from them to make sure we had a place to live.”

I cock my head. It’s not often you hear about people leaving the Heights. Hell, my parents still live here. They keep to themselves, which is a good thing, but if I had the money to help get them out, I would. “Where are your parents?”

“Florida.” He sighs humorously. “They absolutely love it there, living out their retirement. If you talk to them, every day is like Disney World.”

I laugh at that but am struck by how different they're living their lives from their parents. Before I can dwell on it, the front door opens and Jax walks in. I stand there lamely in their living room, watching the older brother lock the front door and place his keys on the small table next to the door. He seems more comfortable in this space. At least, he did until he looks at me, then he stiffens all over again.

I actually feel bad for invading his safe space. I know how that is.

"Where are we going to set her up?" he asks, drifting his gaze toward his brother. "The sofa? All the extra rooms are being used for something else."

Eager to not be too big of a hassle, I say, "I'm fi—"

"She'll take my room," Finn says, cutting me off. "I'll sleep on the sofa."

"I'm fine with the sofa," I finish. Turning my head, I appraise the charcoal cushions and determine it actually looks pretty comfortable. I don't want to uproot their whole lives while I'm here and taking one of their bedrooms is too much to ask.

"Yeah, not happening," Finn answers. "Come on, I'll show you around the upstairs."

Maxie greets Jax with an epic tail wag. The stocky trainer, however, is much more reserved about saying hello back. When the two of us walk up the beautiful wooden staircase, Maxie runs past us.

A plethora of doors feed off of the compact hallway upstairs. He points to the first two doors on opposite sides of the hallway. "Bathrooms," he announces. "We added a second because Jax can't stand to share. It's probably best if you use this one." He points to the one on the left. "It's mine." Inching the door open, he grimaces. "Yeah, I'll clean it."

He moves down and points to two more doors. “Bedrooms.” Pointing to the right, he says, “Jax’s.” Then, swinging his finger to the left, he indicates his room.

We walk in, and I’m met with soft carpet at my feet, Maxie jumping onto an unmade bed, and a few loose pieces of clothing strewn around the moderately sized room. “Sorry. I wasn’t expecting anyone,” Finn apologizes as he places my bags on the bed and hurries around the space to pick his things up. Once he has a whole bunch of athletic clothes in his arms, he shoves everything into a small closet in the corner.

Two bedside tables frame in the bed. One boasts a book, cover and spine facing the ceiling. I can just read the title from here. It’s about grappling artist, BJ Penn. A simple lamp sits next to it, and when Finn flips on the light switch, both the lamp light and the ceiling fan power on. The blades start whirring, and he pulls the chain to slow it down.

“I can change the sheets,” Finn offers, moving to the same closet.

“Don’t bother,” I tell him. “I trust you. And really, I can sleep downstairs. I don’t feel right about stealing your bed. Not when I’m putting you guys out.”

“Hey,” Finn says, turning before moving in close. He wraps a strand of hair around my ear, fingers curling around my soft cartilage. “You’re not putting me out.”

He’s so close I can smell his musky cologne mixed with that sweet tang of exertion from a long day of work. The heat he exudes is like a layer of comfort begging me to snuggle into. Compared to yesterday, there’s so much more story between us. So much more magnetic force. Despite my brother making him watch me, he wants to. He held me all evening, not letting me out of his sight. He’s giving up his room. He. Has. A. Dog.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to stop myself from what I’m about to do next.

I take all of point two seconds to think about it, and then angle my head up to press my lips to his. He immediately responds, capturing the back of my head with his hands and bringing me forward. His other hand wraps around my waist, tugging us close together until we line up in the best of ways.

His lips working over mine is better than I imagined it to be.

14

The sweeping kiss burns from the first moment our lips touch. I may have initiated it, but he competes for control, a challenge I don't back away from. Instead, I give it right back, plunging my tongue into his mouth to tangle with his. He groans low in his throat that starts an inferno in my lower belly. To me, this kiss should've happened yesterday. Would've happened yesterday if it weren't for my brother. Now, it's even heavier with more feelings attached to every nip and press.

His fingers tighten around the back of my head, moving me back with him, and I come willingly. Perhaps a little too eagerly when he falls on the bed and I follow right after. We break the kiss momentarily so we don't knock each other out, but then I'm back on him again, straddling his thighs. I press into his hips and sigh into his mouth when his massive erection greets me.

Dear lord. I've hit the man lottery.

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Filtering my fingers through his hair, I give the ends a slight tug to change the angle of the kiss. He groans, doing the same until we keep challenging each other to take the kiss deeper and deeper, my heart happily pitter-pattering away in my chest. His solid hand on my hip keeps me in place as he arches into me, his cock hard even with the layers of bulky clothes between us. Whoever thought jeans was a good idea is a damn bastard that I'd throat punch right now if I could. All I want is to feel him against me.

Instead...I feel something else.

I pull away as Maxie attacks my cheek with kisses. "What the...?" I sit up, and the dog pounces between us, kissing Finn first, then me. "Hey, little guy," I coo. "This isn't a threesome."

Finn chuckles, but when he gazes up at me, his face falls. He quickly and gingerly moves me off him until he's sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. I'm so taken aback by his abrupt stoppage that I just frown at him while the dog nudges my hand. Absentmindedly, I tangle my fingers in his fur and watch Finn struggle.

My heart pinches. At the same time, my lips still buzz with need. I've never been kissed like that. Never been taken so quickly into a haze I didn't want to take a breath from.

Standing abruptly, Finn wrenches me out of my happy thoughts. He spins to face me, running his hands through his hair. His pants still tent in front of him as he frowns. "I can't do this, Leenie. I'm so sorry."



He may as well have knocked me clean out. I bite my lip to keep from showing the complete betrayal smacking me hard in the forehead and the lump growing in my throat.

“It’s not that I don’t want to. Fuck, I want to. That kiss...” He groans, rearranging his pants briefly. Calming himself down seems to take real effort, and he squares his shoulders afterward. “I have a job to do right now, and I’m taking it very seriously. I can’t watch over you and fuck you at the same time.”

I lick my lips, glancing away. “My brother put you up to this.”

“He may have threatened it, but it’s me saying it because I agree with him. I can’t protect you if I’m so lost in you. Not to mention that I’m sure my brother wouldn’t speak to me again if I fuck up our life.”

I swallow hard. My pride is taking a big knock, I’m not going to lie. If it weren’t for the adorable dog cozying up to me, I’d be lost. That’s not to mention the man saying these words to me is one I’m seriously attracted to both physically and mentally.

“Say something,” Finn pleads, opening his palms up with his hands at his side.

I let out a protest. “I don’t think there’s anything to say. I can’t take your room though, Finn. I want to sleep on the couch.” Talk about torture. Pining after the guy whose bed I’m supposed to sleep in.

He moves in front of the door like he’s going to block me. “Just let me do this one small thing. I’m so fucking sorry, Leenie.” He rests his hand on the door, takes one last look at me with tortured eyes, and leaves, closing the door behind him.

I fall back on the bed. Maxie places his head on my stomach. Of course I have to like the nice guy who won’t let go of his morals since he thinks he’s saving me. And

actually, fuck, that might actually be a turn-on.

I pull out my phone and text my brother. Here. The place is actually really nice. Reminds me of home. Also, don't worry, not getting laid tonight.

His response is a bunch of smiley faces with halos over them. So, I do the rational thing and send him a slew of middle fingers.

Afterward, I tiptoe out of the room toward Finn's bathroom. Low voices drift up from downstairs but I don't stop to snoop. Instead, I move into his bathroom. He must have picked it up before he went downstairs because there's nothing to be embarrassed about in here. Everything is tidy. Clean towels lie on a metal shelving unit. The bathroom counter is clean of any gross number of things. The air, however, does suspiciously smell like Lysol.

I quickly brush my teeth, clean my face, and get ready for bed. When I return to Finn's bedroom, Maxie isn't there. He must have abandoned me, too. I end the night talking to Jaz on the phone and telling her the whole sordid story, which only reinforces her decision to have me seduce him.

Looks like that's going to be more difficult than she planned.

\* \* \*

Maxie jumping up on the bed wakes me the next morning. I turn over to find the little guy's tail swishing up a storm. Running my hand over his head, I give him a good pet, but then my fingers brush against something solid. I push up onto my elbows and stare down at the paper wedged into Maxie's collar. I take it out, smiling when I read the note. I made pancakes. Don't get your hopes up, but they're probably edible. -F

"Why does he have to be so damn charming?" I groan to Maxie, but he just rolls

over, offering me his belly, so I figure he won't be of any help.

Despite the fact that I'm sure the pancakes are already done, I get ready at a normal speed because I absolutely refuse to go downstairs in my skimpy pajamas when he rejected me last night—and I'm trying to work up the nerve to face him anyway.

Fog still clings to the mirror in his bathroom as I brush my teeth. Today, I dressed in a plain black V-neck and jeans, glad I brought something other than clubbing clothes and lingerie to wear. Maxie is at my feet, following me everywhere and then bounding ahead of me as I head toward the stairs.

With the daylight shining through the windows, I have the same reaction as I did last night. The house is clearly nice. Old school charm but friendly and open. When I walk through the dining room-slash-office this morning, I notice a new small, square table with a gold linen tablecloth thrown over it off to the side.

“You got my message.”

I whirl around. Finn's standing in the kitchen doorway with a stack of pancakes. He wears a hopeful smile along with his normal outfit of an MMA shirt with a pair of joggers. Lingering embarrassment from last night hits me, so I glance at the floor. “Yeah. Cute.”

Walking toward the table to place the pancakes down, he passes right next to me, so I take a step back. I'm not sure I trust myself to be super close to him. He pretends not to notice and watches me from the corner of his eye. “I wasn't sure if he'd do it, but as soon as I told Max to go find the beautiful girl in my room, he bounded away.”

A smile creeps over my face, and I look everywhere but at his face.

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A beat of silence follows, and he fills it by walking away again. “I haven’t put the chairs up yet. Be right back.”

Maxie—which I’ve just found out is a nickname—follows him out of the room. Finn comes back with two folding chairs, and I reach out to help, but he pulls them out of reach. First, he sets one up for me and gestures toward it. I clear my throat and sit. “No Jax this morning?”

“He should be coming,” Finn says. “He has a meticulous morning routine.” A hint of amusement colors his voice, and it makes me want to look up at him. I cave. Clearly, I have no willpower. He’s smirking as he sits in the chair opposite mine. When he sees me peering at him, he locks gazes, his attention never wavering until footsteps hit the stairs and get louder until they’re coming right toward us.

Jax stops in front of the table. I fiddle with my silverware as I wait for him to sit. “What’s this?” he asks.

“I made breakfast.”

“Since when?”

“Since a half an hour ago,” Finn grunts. “Do you want any or not?”

Jax sits down in a huff, and I avoid eye contact with both of them. It’s weird because I’m usually the outgoing one but I’m not in the mood to deal with them today. Jax is cranky at best, a dick at worst. And Finn placed me firmly in the friendzone last night—kind of sort of. It was still a rejection. So, I’m just going to keep my head

down and do what they say until my brother gets back.

Finn serves me first, then himself. He digs into his food without serving his brother, which brings a smirk to my lips. I don't let it linger though. I smother my pancakes in butter and start to eat. An awkward silence follows. The two brothers don't even talk to each other, so I keep myself entertained by imagining how I'm going to explain this breakfast to Jaz the next chance I get. I'm also superbly jealous of all the amazing sex she's probably having. She doesn't have to worry about me being around. Her and Jared are most likely doing it all over the damn apartment. Ugh. Why is she always the lucky one?

"Have you talked to Cole?" Finn asks.

I glance up to make sure he's talking to me. When his blue eyes are waiting for me to answer, I say, "Just last night when I told him we'd arrived here and that your house wasn't a dump."

Jax rolls his eyes. "Not everyone can live in a penthouse."

"Obviously," I say, thinking of my own normal-sized, adequate apartment. "Not everyone lives in a house either."

He eats his pancakes without acknowledging me. Finn keeps trying though. "We should probably talk about what we're going to do tomorrow. I imagine you have to work at the bank, Leenie?"

I open my mouth to answer but Jax cuts me off. "Actually, I forgot to tell you last night. Dempsey got her a leave of absence."

I squeeze the fork in my hands. "Wait. What?"

“A leave of absence?” he says again as if I need the phrase defined for me. “He worked it out with your boss. You probably have an email or something.”

Snapping my jaw shut, I scream internally. There had been a work email this morning, but I’m a strict believer in work shit stays during work hours. I never read at or reply to work-related messages until I’m at work. I bring my phone out and scowl when I read the note from my boss. Not that it’s bad in anyway. It’s quite complimentary. Suzie tells me she hopes everything works out and that she can’t wait to have me back.

I slam my phone down, and Jax casually looks over. “Don’t be mad at us. Cole did it.”

My chair screeches across the floor when I stand. I glare at Jax, take my phone with me, and go into the other room, pushing Cole’s name in my contacts on the way.

It only rings twice before he picks it up. “Leenie. Everything okay?”

“Cole,” I start, but then my voice wavers. I can’t lose my job. I’m so proud of myself for actually having a fucking job in the Heights. A good one, too. I don’t turn tricks. I’m not under the command of the local gang. It’s a decent job, and there aren’t many of those.

A hand presses against the small of my back, and I take a deep breath. Finn’s silent comfort makes my mouth move, interrupting my brother’s rapid speed questions as to whether or not I’m okay. “Why did you do that?” I ask, my voice strained even to my own ears.

“Do what?”

“The leave of absence at the bank? You didn’t tell me. You didn’t even ask.”

“Shit, Leenie. I’m sorry,” he apologizes. “I meant to mention it before I left. It got lost in everything else.”

“I love that job, Cole,” I say more forcefully.

“Okay,” he says. “I know. I just can’t have you working there where no one can watch you. The leave of absence is so you can return to work whenever this is over. Your boss was really cool about it. They love you there.”

Him buttering me up is not going to smooth this over. “What did you tell them?”

“Well, I didn’t do it personally. It was Dempsey acting on behalf of the family. He told her you were going through some things and needed a break of unknown length.”

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I blow out a breath.

“I know you’re pissed. I’m sorry. This is another one of those things that has to happen to keep you safe right now. I meant to tell you myself. I apologize.”

I stare at the ceiling as Finn continues to rub circles into my back. His touch comforting even though it shouldn’t be.

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

“No, I think that was the only thing.” When the silence stretches between us, Cole speaks up, “Hey, is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Peachy.”

He lowers his voice. “I really am sorry.”

“I know.” I press my lips together. He’s already apologized a few times. It’s not like I can keep making him feel bad. “I’ll just talk to you later. Okay?”

“Talk to you later.”

I hang up, dropping my arm to my side. “You okay?” Finn asks.

Turning to face him makes his hand drop from my back, and I immediately miss it. “Fine.” I force a smile, but it feels all wrong.



Both Finn and I turn back where we're greeted by an unsmiling Jax. He gestures between the two of us. "We need to talk about this. And now."

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Finn heaves a heavy sigh. "Actually, we don't."

"I think we do," Jax persists.

I groan and give them both my fakest smile. "I'm just going to head upstairs."

Jax stands from his spot at the table, chair groaning against the hardwoods like mine did. "No, you need to hear this. You need to hear how Finn and I brought ourselves up from nothing. We took the one thing we were good at and actually did something for ourselves in this shitty fucking town, and we're good at it. We don't need you ruining it."

"Jax," Finn interjects, his attempts at getting his brother's attention go unnoticed by the hot-headed jerk though.

"And you, too." He faces down his brother. "You can't do this to us. Tome," he emphasizes, pointing at his chest.

"Listen," I interrupt before this gets too deep. "Nothing's happening. Trust me. Your brother made it perfectly clear last night. Cole won't be touching your businesses. You're both safe." Surprise registers on Jax's face, but Finn looks like someone literally kicked his puppy. I stride between them, grabbing my uneaten breakfast and a fork and turn toward the stairs. "Hope you don't mind food upstairs because it's happening."

Finn takes a deep breath. "You don't have to do that."

“I don’t want to be around either one of you right now, so I kind of do.”

I’m not even halfway up the stairs when I hear Finn snap, “Jesus, dude. Stop being a dick to her.”

This time, I slow my steps to eavesdrop. They started talking knowing I was in the vicinity, so if I can hear what they’re saying, oh well.

Jax lowers his voice. “I know you like her, but man, we have so much riding on this. You know we do. Plus, you let people in too easily.”

“And you’re too hard. Not everyone is out to get us.”

Jax’s mocking laugh sends skitters up my spine. “Keep telling yourself that, kid.”

“Just fuck off.”

“Don’t go running after her, Finn,” Jax warns. “You’re going to make it worse. If she likes you as much as you like her, let her cool down.”

“This is so fucked,” Finn yells, punctuating the curse word with a sharpness to his tongue that I don’t even recognize from him. It’s so the opposite of his personality that I feel bad I’m part of the reason that made him do it.

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I don't feel bad enough to eat with them instead of by myself in Finn's room though. Nope. I don't want to deal with all that testosterone down there. Not right now.

When I finish, I leave the empty plate on the bedside table, closing Finn's book to make space and semi-hoping he lost his page because of me. He deserves a hell of a lot more than just frustration over losing his place in a book, but that's all I can muster as revenge right now.

And even then, I realize I'm being petty. My brother is capable of fucked up shit, and honestly, they should be scared of what he can do. What I hate is that I'm caught in the middle along with the guy I like, who is teetering closer to being on the receiving end of Cole's blanket, don't-fuck-with-him policies.

Hours go by, and I don't hear a word from them. I have no idea if they need to go into the gym today, but I figure if they do, they'll come tell me. To pass the time, I open up the Netflix app on my phone and start watching the latest series everyone is talking about. I quickly get drawn into the reimagined regency era romance, but a soft knock on the door pulls me out of it during the second episode.

"Yeah?"

"Can I come in?" Finn asks.

"It's your room."

"Leenie, it's your room right now. Can I come in?"

I play with the idea of saying no, but instead, I huff out a “Yes.”

I pause the show and move to a sitting position as Finn opens the door. Closing it behind him, he leans against it and stays there. “I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Perfect,” I smile.

“I’m sorry about your job at the bank.”

I’d helpfully put that out of my mind, but now that he’s brought it up again, I sigh. “That job is one of the better ones in Rawley Heights.” Running my hands through my hair, I set my cell phone to the side. “I don’t want to lose it, and I don’t think my brother gets that.”

“He’s trying to keep you safe...”

I give Finn a hard stare, and he holds his hands up in surrender. My gaze roams over him, and then I pick at Finn’s sheets. “I’m wondering what happens after the storm known as Cole runs its course? What’s going to be left of the life I had before he returned?” My heart squeezes. “It’s not that I don’t love my brother because I do. I missed him when he wasn’t here, but his life choices are affecting mine.” I swallow. “It’s just hard to accept, even if I know it’s for my own good.”

Finn sits on the bed next to me. The mattress dips, and I’m jostled closer to him. He smells so good, a musky sort of cologne scent fills the room, and I breathe in deep. Before long, I’m consumed by the memory of the night we met when neither one of us knew who the other was. Sure, it was only two days ago, but damn. To only go back two days to try to fix this before it started.

“I get that,” Finn says, finally turning toward me. His brows pique as he notices how

close we're sitting. I immediately put distance between us because I'm not about to have Jax call me a slut or blame me for losing everything. The adorable trainer takes in the new space between us with a pained expression. "I'm sorry you're going through this. I don't have anything to offer but maybe a chance to take your mind off it. Do you want to hang out? I might be the last person you want to chill with, but Jax went to the gym to take care of some paperwork, and I get bored easily, so..."

He looks at me hopefully, and I cave. I cave so fucking fast I'm surprised neither one of us gets whiplash.

"And what does Finn the MMA trainer do to hang out?" I inquire, using air quotes.

"Watch movies. Read. Play with Max. Anything not involving work."

"That reminds me," I blurt out, changing the subject. "I've heard you call him Max and Maxie now, which is it?"

Finn chuckles. "Basically whatever comes out of my mouth that's some version of Max. Maxie. Maximillian. Max-Max. Max-a-hoy."

I stop him right there. "You made that last one up."

"Yeah, but the others are true."

"Well, you had me at Max. As long as he's involved in hanging out, I guess I can be convinced."

"I also have snacks..."

"Okay, now you're just laying it on thick." I take him in and then peer at him doubtfully. The guy looks like he hasn't eaten a snack in years. "We're not talking

about protein shit, are we? Because that stuff they call food messes with my stomach.”

He laughs again, the sound boisterous and comforting at the same time. “No protein shit. I promise. I don’t like to think about work at all on Sundays, remember? It’s my me time.”

Holding his hand out, he waits for me to accept. I only pause a moment before I place my palm in his. This should be easy, right? We both know where we stand. We can stay away from each other. We can put our mutual attraction aside, but all bets are off when my brother gets back into town. I’m going to sit him down and threaten him until he lets me fuck Finn’s brains out. Let’s just hope that whatever’s between Finn and me hasn’t passed by then.

Turns out, the MMA trainer does not joke around when he talks about a relaxing day. Half a dozen soft blankets litter the sectional. The end tables, including an extra tray table, are set up with different candies and baked goods. Several full bottles of water are on the tables, but he also tells me there are more drinks in the fridge, and that he’d be happy to get me whatever I want if I give him a grocery list.

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As he's naming off all the snacks, I'm already forgetting why I need to stay away from him. We settle on the couch and agree on a movie that came out about a year ago that neither one of us has seen yet. We start out stiff, watching the movie like two new friends, but as Finn gets up and grabs me another water, he sits back down closer to me. The cushion dips, and I end up leaning into him. He doesn't immediately pull away, so I don't either. Instead, I rest my head on his shoulder. Max-Max moves between us, wiggling his butt to separate us, and we both chuckle. "He's so cute," I say.

"Tell me about it." Finn ruffles his fur. "The best part is that Jax keeps pretending he doesn't love the little guy too. I'm waiting to see how long it takes him to break."

"How long has it been?"

"Six months."

"Six months? Jesus. He hates everything."

Finn glances away absentmindedly, his hand already searching for the remote. "Something like that," he mutters, but we both let it drop when he presses play and the movie starts up again.

When the credits are rolling on that one, we decide on another, and we don't even pretend we're not snuggling anymore. He has his arm around me, and my cheek is pressed against his chest. Maxie up and left when we kept getting closer and closer, but he didn't move too far away. He's lying on the opposite edge of the sectional, glaring at me. Well, glaring at me when he's not sleeping, that is.

I pull the covers around us, sinking deeper into his embrace. His hold tightens, his thumb making nonchalant circles over my shoulder.

At some point, I must fall asleep because I wake in his lap. I still, then lift onto my hands. Peek toward him, I find him grinning at me. "Sorry. I didn't drool, did I?"

He shakes his head slowly. "I wouldn't care if you did." He looks at me with soft eyes, the amber in them almost sparking. "I forgot what it was like to hang out with someone who wasn't my brother."

I keep my smart aleck comment to myself. I'm sure Jax is a good person, he's just a bit surly, especially to me. Instead, I scold him. "You should've woken me up."

"No way," he says. "I couldn't stop watching you."

I peek over at the movie to find it paused. I mentally berate myself, hoping I hadn't slept for long. I lean back on the couch, running my hands through my hair. "It's the couch's fault."

"Ouch, and here I was hoping it was because you were so comfortable around me."

"Too comfortable, I guess," I tell him, letting my regret at our current situation seep in.

He turns toward me, cupping my cheek in his hand. "It shouldn't make me happy that you said that, but it does. I keep looking at you and how perfect you are. You're putting up with my brother. You love my dog."

"Sounds like a country song," I joke, trying to take my mind off the instinct to kiss him again.



“Your personality,” he continues as if I never said anything. “That fucking kiss.” He drops his gaze to my lips.

I lose all resolve. Leaning forward, I press my mouth to his eagerly. Like before, he opens up, and I don’t waste time deepening the kiss, only forcing him to retaliate with his own punishing movements. He keeps coming, moving my back to the couch cushions. He lies alongside me, one hand cradling my head while the other flutters over the exposed skin of my belly.

I moan into his mouth, my muscles jumping underneath his soft caresses. “Pretend this isn’t happening,” he whispers quickly before claiming my lips again, making me forget every reason why we shouldn’t be doing this. It just feels too right to ignore.

We kiss each other silly like teenagers until his hand starts drifting toward the top of my jeans. I encourage him with slight hip rolls until he’s flicking the button of my jeans open and lowering the zipper. He skirts his hand under my panties, and I break the kiss to breathe out, my heart hammering inside my chest. He stares down at his hand and then back at me, locking his gaze with mine.

I wrap my hands around his neck and pull him to me, tangling my tongue with his again as his fingers once again continue their descent. He moans when he finds me wet for him. I spread my legs as he skillfully dips his fingers between my folds, spreading my juices around before moving to my clit.

I gasp into his mouth at the incredible sensations, and he pulls away. “Is this okay?” He’s stopped moving, waiting for my reaction.

“God yes,” I tell him, my breaths coming in short pants.

He starts a slow perusal of my bundle of nerves, spiraling closer and closer until he focuses on my tight bud, the epicenter of the pleasure rushing through me. I hold onto

his forearm, sinking my fingers into his skin as he watches my every reaction. It's as if he's learning my body, storing away information for later, and with his expert touch, I can only hope there is a later.

He works the pad of his thumb against me in the most beautiful friction. Embarrassing moans creep up my throat, and I lock gazes with his intense eyes. "I'm going to come soon," I warn.

He swallows, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he watches me. "Come for me, beautiful girl."

I try to hold off. With the knowledge that this might be a one and done thing, I want to make it last. But after those words, my body propels me forward. Pleasure spirals outward, and my body locks up before releasing in a beautiful bliss of ecstasy. My mouth drops on its own accord as I moan into the air between us. "Finn..."

He slows his movements, my body trembling in the aftershocks. When I'm finished, he moves my panties back into place, zips and buttons my jeans, and then places his hands on my hips in that same sort of possessive grip I love.

His eyelids flutter closed. "I want to do that again."

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“That can be arranged,” I tease, ready to pounce on him again.

At that exact moment, footsteps sound on the porch outside. Finn and I separate as quickly as if we just learned a fire was roaring through the house. He moves toward the armrest, sitting casually, and throwing the blankets off him while I move to the corner of the sectional, taking all the blankets with me.

Just before Jax walks in, Finn pushes play on the movie, and we both pretend like we’re engrossed in the film because what else would two people be doing who are supposed to be staying away from each other?

Fuck.

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Iyawn, my mouth so wide it hurts my jaw. It’s stupid early in the morning, and my brain doesn’t want to function yet. The three of us move wordlessly around in the kitchen to prepare cereal. Well, I’m eating cereal. Finn’s eating oatmeal with protein powder in it, and Jax is eating a form of cereal that looks like cardboard and probably tastes worse.

Damn. When Finn warned me they went to the gym early, they weren’t kidding. The shower I had this morning only woke me up so much.

“You shouldn’t eat that,” Jax says, motioning toward the sugary goodness in my bowl. “It’s just carbs. It won’t sustain you.”

I grunt at him because I don't have the capacity to get into a debate about health foods this morning.

Plus, I kind of feel bad that he was none the wiser yesterday when he walked in right after Finn and I shared something special. He took one look at what movie we were watching and sat on the other end of the sectional, placing his arm on Max. As for me, I kept looking at Finn's fingers, thinking how he'd just brought me to orgasm and all I could do was sink further into the couch in guilt.

I can't change the situation any more than they can.

Flicking my gaze toward Finn now reminds me of how many times I peeked at him yesterday while he stared steadfast at the screen as if he was transfixed by the characters. Every once in a while, his fingers would flex, and I wondered if he was replaying what happened in his mind. Eventually, I couldn't take it and went to bed early.

At some point, Maxie came up to join me, and attached to his collar, was a note that read: I can't get your face out of my mind. -F

I fell asleep smiling. This morning, however, we're still acting like nothing happened. He wordlessly got me a bowl and the cereal, but that was it. No lingering looks. No whispered promises. The steady thrum of my heart that kicks up every time I think he's going to look at me tells me all I need to know. Despite the guilt of what we did, I want to do it again. Like now. Surely, I could talk some sense into Cole if he knew we weren't just fucking around. This seems deeper than just wanting sex. I actually like Finn. A lot.

"I was thinking," Finn says as we prepare to leave the house. He has on his signature joggers and shirt. Today, the logo of their gym is in block lettering across the front, stretched tight over his taut chest.

Jax is wearing something similar, but like, who cares about that? He eyes Finn. “I just love it when you think,” he says sarcastically.

Finn flips him off but continues as if his brother never said anything. He lets Max out the back door and then walks back into the kitchen. “Since Leenie is upset about not working at the bank, I was thinking she could run our shop. If you want,” he says, glancing at me for the first time.

My cheeks flare with heat. His eyes are less intense this morning, but the longer they stay on mine, all I can think about is his fingers swirling around my clit. Before I make a fool out of myself, I swallow and look away. “Yeah, I can do that. I mean, I have to be there anyway, right?”

“Don’t feel like you have to,” Finn offers.

“No, I’d rather have something to pass the time.” The more I think about his suggestion, the goofier the smile gets that crosses my face. He knew how upset I was about leaving the bank. I was damn proud of that job, and here he’s giving me the opportunity to do something else worthwhile that’s not entangled in Heights bullshit.

“We can’t pay you,” Jax sniffs. “So, don’t think you’re going to get anything.”

I turn my gaze to him. “Let’s call it a swap of services. I get your protection. You get my office knowledge.”

Jax’s mouth shuts, and he stares at me for a long time with discerning eyes. After Max barks, Finn lets the dog back in, and then we all head toward the door. I squat to pet Max on the head, already wishing I didn’t have to leave our little secret communicator here for the day. Finn must notice me fussing over him because he says, “Don’t worry. We get a neighbor kid to take him out and play with him during the day.”

My heart squeezes, and I shake my head. Of course Finn would do that. Can I find nothing wrong with this guy? A quick peek at him tells me no. Definitely not physically.

On the bus to the gym, I quiz them about their store, and Finn promises that he'll give me a quick tour before his first class of the day starts. However, I get the gist that the store is Finn's baby and that Jax thinks it's a waste of time. Which only makes me want to prove the moody one wrong.

The empty gym has a different feeling to it than when it's bustling with energy. I walk in sandwiched between the two owners, and I notice how each one reacts as they take in the space. Even Jax has a moment of scanning the area with something akin to a smile, even though he quickly moves on to the office in the corner with determination.

Finn, however, lingers behind with a genuine smile on his face. He reaches out absentmindedly to put his hand at the small of my back, and I lean into his touch, loving the delicious waves of heat and nerves he gives me from just one short moment. "You're so proud of this, aren't you?" I whisper.

Finn turns to me, lips parting. "Unbelievably," he answers in the same low tone, like we're sharing a secret. We get caught up in staring at one another again, and we don't move until the office door swings open and Jax marches out. Finn flicks his gaze over my head in his brother's general direction, and then back to me. "Over here," he says, gesturing toward the store. "And don't feel like you have to."

"I don't," I reassure him. Now that it's closer to a decent hour in the morning, the sleep haze has lifted from me and I'm becoming myself again. I never had to work the early morning shift at the bank—thank God because I'm not a morning person. At least we're at the hour now that I would be getting up to start my day. The early morning wake-up calls are certainly going to take some getting used to. "I'm actually

looking forward to keeping busy. I meant what I said, I want to help too.”

Maybe some of their pride rubbed off on me when they walked in. I’ve always been a sucker for people making it in the face of adversity. Trust me, anyone growing up in the Heights faces hardship. It’s all around. You can’t escape from it. I’ve always counted myself as one of those people who rose above it. Sure, I might not have done it in a spectacular fashion as Jax and Finn have, but I have to a lesser degree. Even my brother’s done it too. He’s the most respected person in the Heights. I don’t care what he actually does, he’s risen above all the shit that threatens to take us down.

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Finn stops us on the other side of the huge boxing ring. A small reception area with glass display cases faces the left wall. Different gear hangs on hooks above the counter but it's barely noticeable. Unfortunately, it looks like the store was an afterthought. It's facing in a different direction than the only doors in and out of the gym. The space is nice, resting against the walls built to accommodate changing and restrooms, but it's hidden away—in my opinion.

Opposite the counter is a weightlifting area complete with two bench presses and free weight dumbbells on a rack. Next to that area is where I saw people grappling the other day.

“Unfortunately,” Finn says, “I haven’t been able to put as much work into it as I’d like. After the Crew left, we started getting really busy, and this is one of the things that fell through the cracks. I don’t know if you can tell, but Jax thinks it’s a complete waste of time.”

I’m still studying the area when my gaze snags on a huge poster of a ripped girl with purple boxing gloves. “Hey, is that—?”

“Kyla,” Finn finishes. “Uppercut Princess,” he muses. “She was amazing. One of the best fighters I’ve ever seen, and I’m not making the distinction of female fighter, I’m saying fighters period. She could hang with the guys no problem.”

Her name is splayed vertically across the left-hand side of the poster, making it look like an enlarged trading card. The girl is gorgeous. Positively beautiful muscles cut across her body. Her projection of strength is something to be admired, and I absolutely have body envy staring at her. “She’s a ten, for sure,” I tell him.



Finn chuckles. “She was beating guys off with a stick, and even then, she kept four for herself.”

I laugh at that. “I still can’t believe my cousin Jacob is with her. He was always so tightly wound, I’m surprised. I don’t see him sharing, I guess.”

The corners of Finn’s lips pull up. “He really adored her. They all do,” he muses. “I got her to pose for this poster. She’ll never say it was because of her, but she’s the reason we have so many clients now.” He leans toward me. “Between you and me, she was already badass when she got here. Some people just have it, you know?”

His shoulder brushes mine, and a thrill chases down my arm, goosebumps rising in its wake. I try to ignore it but fail miserably. I peek over, watching the spot where we connect and then follow the corded muscle up his shoulder to his neck, over the strong line of his jaw, and eventually to his eyes. He greets me with the same intensity.

“It was her determination,” he says. “Something you have too.”

“Please. I am definitely not that cool.”

I attempt to turn back to her poster, but Finn catches my chin, moving my stare back to his. “Don’t sell yourself short. I certainly haven’t.”

I tell myself not to. I beg myself, but my gaze drifts down to his pouty lower lip anyway. My heart starts a crazy rhythm, everything in me pleading to lean forward. Instinct would take back over then. We’d come together in a clash of lips, just like we have before.

Instead, the bell rings above the door, and Finn steps away. I blink out of the trance and stare up at his rosy cheeks. “I have to get ready.” His eyes give me a sincere

apology that has me grinning like a crazy person. “Do whatever you want with the store. I trust you.”

With that, he jogs toward the office, and I grip the side of the counter, so I don’t pool into a mushy pile of feelings. No one needs that embarrassment in arguably a place made in masculinity.

For the next couple of hours, I acquaint myself with the store, its products and pricing, while the gym comes to life. The most predominant sound is fists thumping against pads. The thunk, thunk, thunk never ends. In second place, are Jax and Finn’s loud voices. They rise above the chaos as they coach and mold one athlete after another. At times, I get so caught up in watching them work that I lose myself in their intensity. Then, one of them will look up at me, and I’ll pretend like I wasn’t just watching them like a creeper. Jax, despite his general orneriness is a caring coach. Intense, sure. He doesn’t take as much shit as Finn does, but then again, that’s just Finn’s easygoing personality. He jokes with the athletes, getting them to work harder and faster because he’s a genuinely likable person.

Every time the bell sounds above the door, I glance up. I almost die when Jared and Jaz stride inside. Jax greets them as Finn is currently in the boxing ring with an entire class. He points me out to Jaz but then sends Jared in the direction of the changing rooms.

Jaz practically runs over to me, hair feathering out from her face. I come around the counter to embrace her. “I’ve missed you, bitch,” she breathes.

I smile into the side of her head. “It’s been two days.”

“Two days too fucking long.”

I hear that.

She breaks away, taking in the shop behind me. “What are you doing?”

“Finn told me I could work on their merchandise and that sounded like a perfect way to pass the time since I have to be here anyway.”

“You don’t want to get in the ring?”

We both laugh. I’m not saying no, never, but I’m also saying I’m not going to go making a fool of myself in front of my crush, so... There’s that.

“So....?” she pushes. As expected, Jaz wants to get right down to the nitty gritty.

I peer behind her, watching as her boyfriend approaches the boxing ring. “Is Jared taking a class?”

“Stop changing the subject, but yes. I mentioned wanting to visit you on my day off, and he said he’d been wanting to take a class with these guys, anyway, so here we are. Now spill,” she says, widening her eyes.

I pull her to the other side of the counter, out of most everyone’s line of sight except for the one guy who’s using the free weights. The smile I can’t take off my face is two-sided. First, I’m beyond ecstatic about what happened. Yet, who knows if we’ll ever get to do it again.

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“I’m going to punch you if you don’t come out with it right now,” Jaz warns.

“Let’s just say he knows how to play theclitar,” I tease, pretending to strum a guitar in my hands.

“You crazy bitch. Aclitar?”

“Shhh!” I whisper-yell. “They’ll hear you.”

She laughs, the deep throaty laugh that’s quintessentially my best friend’s. “Who in their right mind would know what we’re talking about?” I forgot what it was like to be around another girl with all the masculine energy spanning the last few days. She fans her face then shakes her head. “Okay. That’s it? That’s as far as you got? I was sure he’d be eating off the buffet by now.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. “You’re forgetting that I’m not supposed to do anything with him.” I turn, searching the gym and finding the two brothers. “Cole could really screw this up for them.”

“Leenie,” Jaz says, her serious voice on. “You can’t let your brother run your life. You and sexy MMA trainer have real fucking chemistry. I saw it from the first moment. You practically bounded over the second-floor barrier and landed in a crouch right next to him to stake your claim.”

I smile at that visual. I definitely bee-lined my way toward him, but we all know what would’ve happened if I did fling myself over the railing. I’d be a pancake by now. “Which is why,” I inform her. “...we shouldn’t be doing anything to upset what he

has.”

Jaz shakes her head. “Girl, you need to have a serious talk with your brother, explaining that you’re not just jumping on Finn’s dick because it’s a nice dick but because you like the whole dick package. Cole cares for you. He’s not going to do anything to put that in jeopardy.”

I hear what she’s saying, but I’m also not sure she’s right. In theory, Cole would let me do what I want, but in reality, he’s put my safety above everything else, even my own wants.

“Anyway, life’s too fucking short,” Jaz concludes, staring in the same direction I am.

And we both know that in the Heights, sometimes it’s shorter than most.

17

I spend the next week and half pining over Finn, avoiding Jax, and working on the store like it’s my pet project. So far, I’ve increased their total sales by twenty five percent, and I aim to make it fifty to one hundred percent in the next two weeks. My bank training is coming in handy, and even though Jax only thinks people are buying because a hot girl is running the counter, I couldn’t care less.

Also, I took that compliment with an alarming amount of satisfaction, then glanced at Finn for his reaction. I got none whatsoever. I’m not exactly getting the cold shoulder, but nothing has progressed as far as it did that one day. During the week, they work so much that I had to fall into their routine. The following weekend was more fights, me with Finn at the side of the ring. That Sunday, Finn was the one to go into the gym, so there was no chance of repeating our secret tryst—unfortunately.

Still, Maxie brings me messages every now and then, and I bite my lip like a

schoolgirl while reading the cute, short notes.

Jared has shown up at the gym a couple of times without Jaz, but I still get my nightly talks with my bestie on the phone where her first question is always, “Did we progress to the love tunnel yet?”

We’re now just amusing each other by finding different names to call our pussies. I plan on using hoo-ha tomorrow.

Cole and I message every other day or so, but his messages are succinct and to the point. Whatever his business is, he must be right in the thick of it, so I only text him when I want to make sure he’s still alive and kicking.

“What are you doing?” a gruff voice sounds from behind me. I stop, pausing to look down at Jax from my position on top of the counter, leaning toward the wall where I’m trying to apply the black vinyl “Store” graphic I purchased and had delivered.

“Putting up a sign.”

“You’re going to hurt yourself.”

I shrug. The heavy thwacks of fists against pads in the background serve as music to my war march. This damn sign has been pissing me off for about ten minutes.

“Whoa, whoa,” Finn calls out. From the corner of my eye, I see him jog over, concern etching his features. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“That’s what I just told her,” Jax grunts.

“If I could just—” I slap the vinyl as it starts to peel away again.

“Let me get the ladder...” Finn suggests.

I stare down at them. “I can get the ladder. You guys are busy.” I start to teeter, and immediately pull back, crouching on the top of the counter until I’m eye level with both of them, my fingertips gripping the beveled edge. I grimace and their answering looks of disapproval make me smile. “A ladder actually sounds like a great idea. Just point me in the right direction.”

“I’ll show you,” Finn says as Jax helps me off the counter with a firm hand on my forearm.

The older brother immediately walks away to return to his client, but I watch him go with a dubious look. He actually seemed like he cared.

“I told you he’d warm up to you,” Finn says.

“Yeah, well, I guess I have that effect on people.”

He takes me through the entryway where their office is held. Pulling open another door, he finds and pulls out a ladder, his shoulders bunching under his stretched tight t-shirt. He catches me staring, and I immediately look away.

“Same to you,” Finn says, taking his time perusing my work outfit. He stares at the slip of skin showing around my midsection and then the way the skintight workout capris hug my curves. I decided the best way to sell the gear was to actually use it. I’ve even talked a few of the guys into buying the ladies’ clothes we stock for their girlfriends. Finn leans the ladder against the wall, peeks over his shoulder at the door, and then moves close to me. “Can I touch you?” he breathes. Our proximity makes the muscle in my stomach tug in anticipation. I nod, and in the next instant, he has me pressed against the wall, his hand sliding over my backside. “I’ve been wanting to do this for ages.” He groans, taking a big handful of my ass for himself, squeezing and kneading.

“Does this mean I’ve been doing a good job?” I tease, biting on my lip as he works me into a frenzy.

He dips his head, his breath feathering over my exposed neck. The cute, light purple halter crop top I’m wearing exposes the bare skin of my shoulder and neck. Not to mention a sliver of cleavage and stomach. I doubt I could actually work out hard core in this number. It’s more like a yoga outfit, but I’m silently thanking the barely—there outfit so I can feel him on me again. “It means you’ve been driving me



crazy.” His hot breath teases my skin, fanning the flames burning like embers between my legs.

He leans his head against the wall, his hands rounding down my ass to my thighs, then back up again. I shiver at his touch, my chest rising and falling. The friction between us is so delicious I know I’m nipping, and there’s absolutely nothing in this shirt that will hide it. The shelf bra is flimsy as all hell, but I’m here for it. His hands capture my hips again, fingers pressing into my side until he meets bone.

He groans, then knocks his head against the wall a few times in a move that portrays his frustration. Pulling away, he sears his gaze right into mine. “I’m struggling, Leenie.”

The pure desperation in his voice has me reaching out, placing my hands on his hips, mirroring his hold.

“It’s so hard for me not to do everything I want to you. I’m not just saying sex either. I like cuddles. I like hugs. I’m an affectionate person, but I’m reining in my baser instincts so we don’t get in trouble.” He moves his hands up to my ribcage, his thumbs passing over my skin.

I drag him forward, his erection clear as he settles against me. We both moan. “I see the positives of these clothes now.”

He chuckles into my ear, his lips trailing down my neck. They’re not even full-on kisses, just enough to drive me crazy.

I rock into him, and he meets me with his own pelvic thrust that sends my nerve endings sparking. I suck in a breath, holding it for fear even breathing will ruin the moment. I’ve been lying in Finn’s bed, touching myself to daydream scenarios that encompass this very thing. I’m so close to combusting, I can’t stand it. In that

moment, I have to know if he's done the same. I stroke my fingers up his neck, making him pull away to look me in the eye. "Have you touched yourself thinking about me?" I breathe, hoping his answer is yes. I press my palms against his chest, feeling his heart beat rapidly under my touch. "I've thought about you. I thought about the orgasm you gave me. I've screamed your name into your pillow."

He drops his forehead to my chest, pressing small kisses right through my shirt and moving lower. "My hand is definitely getting a workout," he admits. Reaching up, he cups my breasts together and lets his lips linger over the curve of my cleavage.

I thrust my tits forward, and he moans, kissing me even more hungrily. Tracing his tongue up and down the slit in the shirt, getting dangerously close to slipping the tip under the fabric and moving right where I want him over my nipple. "Finn, fuck," I say so eloquently as I rake my fingers up his back.

He presses his erection into me again, breathing heavily before suddenly stopping. Moving his chin to my shoulder, he pulls me into a hug and wraps his hand around the back of my head. "Not here," he whispers.

"Of course. Right." I close my eyes to get my bearings and think of something that doesn't have to do with Finn's cock inside me because right now, I'm certainly ready. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he all but growls. Squeezing me one more time, he backs away, putting at least six inches between us.

I rake my gaze down his body, spending an extraordinary amount of time staring at his hard cock through his joggers. I run my hands through my hair. "I'll go out first. You need...a minute."

"Or ten," he murmurs.

I give him a small smile and then grab the ladder. He helps me maneuver it out the door, but that's as far as he can go until he calms down. My face is flushed but I can pretend it's because I'm carrying the bulky ladder around. Unlike Finn, I don't have a physical representation of how fucking horny I am. No one on the outside can tell how wet my panties are right now. Thank goodness.

I avoid looking at Jax, but my stare betrays me and wanders that way. He's staring right back at me, then surreptitiously glances down at his watch.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I ignore him, hoping if I don't continue eye contact that my face won't betray everything Finn and I just did. Instead, I set the ladder up next to the vinyl sign I was working on. It's only now hanging on by one little section. Climbing to the top of the ladder does actually help. It's much easier to get the vinyl to stick from this angle. I spend the next hour rubbing the material against the painted wall before climbing back down. At the very least, it was a good distraction to keep my mind off Finn.

Standing back, I admire my work. Big, black letters in fancy writing say Shop with a huge arrow pointing toward the perpendicular wall and the counter. Now, everyone will know what's here.

"Looks nice," a hard voice says from behind me.

The hairs on my neck stand, and I spin to come face-to-face with my brother's second in command. I clench my hand to my chest. "You scared me."

"Sorry," Dempsey grins unapologetically.

Over his left shoulder, Jax is frowning hard core. I've pretty much caught on to the fact that his issue isn't really with me. It's with gang life in general. I just happened

to be tied to it, and of course, my brother has to go and threaten the things he's worked so hard for. A vein pops out of his neck, and I'm already trying to figure out how quickly I can get Dempsey out of here before Jax freaks the hell out.

“What's up?” I question. I haven't seen him since that first night, and even then, he didn't come to me. A horrific thought suddenly hits, and I scramble for my phone. “Is it Cole? Shit.”

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“No, no,” Dempsey immediately counters, reaching out to stop my shaking hand from calling my brother immediately. “It’s not Cole. It has to do with the threat against you.”

Once again, I press my palm against my beating chest. Jesus. I’m not made to freak out twice within the span of a minute. My heart just can’t take it. I blow out a breath. “Okay, so, you cleared it?” I ask, not liking the sudden tug in my gut when I realize that means I have to leave Finn and Jax’s house.

“Fraid not, Colleen. You’re going to be getting a call from your brother in oh...” He smiles smugly when my phone rings. I grab it off the counter, power walk past all the guys training, and exit out the glass doors.

I pick it up, breathless. “What’s up?”

“Is Dempsey with you?”

“Yes.” I sneak a look up at the massive figure who’s followed me outside. Both Jax and Finn are walking toward the doors, too. “What’s going on?”

“I’m so sorry, Leenie Bear. I’m coming home.”

“Wait. What?”

“Dempsey verified the threat. It’s legit. I’m coming home to help take care of it. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I promise.”

My heart pounds against my ribcage. It's so loud, I can barely hear my brother inform me of the details of when he's going to get here. The only thing that calms me is the sure hand on my back. I lean into Finn's touch, not caring who sees. I need the reassurance.

A part of me didn't think the threat would be real. As Cole still talks in my ear, my gaze darts around the small, shared parking lot that Elite Boxing uses. I catch a car going around the corner slowly and wonder if that's what's coming for me.

"Who is it?" I manage to ask Cole before he gets off the phone.

"We're not sure yet. We found the threat on the dark web. It traces to someone legit, but we're not going to move on it until I get there."

"Can you even come home?" I worry over my lip. "I thought you were busy."

"I am," he sighs. "But this is important, and I've got some guys that can stay here until we neutralize everything, then I'll come back."

"This is insane," I mutter, mostly to myself.

"I'll be there," Cole growls, and then the line goes silent. I pull my phone away from my ear and check the screen to see that he did, in fact, hang up on me.

I blow out a breath, and then immediately realize that Jax is pumping Dempsey for information. The guard is tight-lipped, though, only giving the information out that Cole just gave me.

They verified the threat.

They don't know who it is.

Cole's coming home.

"And..." Dempsey adds, looking at me. "You're returning to the tower until Cole gets there. You'll be safer surrounded by Dragons. They would be dumb to attack you there."

My shoulders deflate. I've already resigned myself to that happening, but Finn throws his arm around my shoulder, pulling me to him. "No," he growls.

Dempsey blinks in our direction, narrowing his gaze. "Don't overstep. She's not your concern right now."

"Bullshit," he spits, and to my amazement, Jax echoes his sentiment. I blink at the both of them but they don't back down.

"I don't have time to deal with this." Dempsey glares at the two fighters. "Colleen's coming with me, and that's final."

18

Dempsey is scary as fuck when he wants to be.

The huge guard sneers in our direction, jaw taut with barely restrained violence. I know because I've seen Cole get this way. Surprisingly, Jax and Finn mirror him.

"Get the fuck over here, Colleen," Dempsey grinds out.

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I start to go because really, there's no sense in prolonging this. Finn doesn't hold me back, but he snarls, "We can handle it."

Behind the two trainers, a whole slew of sweaty, trained men gathering behind them. Dempsey lifts a brow, his face still a mask of fury. "You know it's better for her."

A murmur rises up behind the guys, and it's Jax who turns first. "Go back inside," he orders. "Or I'll have you all doing burpees until you fucking puke."

Most of them listen, but a few still linger. I meet Finn's gaze. He's frowning. A pissed sort of look that says he wants to pummel Dempsey, but also that he's trying to behave like a gentleman. "You call me," he says, gesturing toward the phone clutched tight in my fist. "Whenever."

I nod.

"Car," Dempsey orders. I take one last longing look and turn to find a shiny black car parked a couple of spaces over. I keep my shoulders back as I walk toward it, but when I get in, I start texting furiously to Jaz, needing an outlet for what just happened. She's still at work, so she won't be texting me back anytime soon but I need to get it off my chest. Dempsey sighs when he gets in the car. "Damn boy is smitten."

"Who?" I ask, tugging on my lower lip even though I damn well know who. I'm just too chicken to look for him—or more importantly, see his face right now.

"You're not fooling anyone."



I rest my head against the seat, keeping my eyes closed. “I’m not really trying to.” Minutes go by. I don’t bother to watch out the window as we drive further into the Heights. I know where we’re headed. I know where we came from. I just wish we were turning around and heading back the other way. “What now?” I ask as soon as Dempsey rolls the car to a stop.

He salutes the Dragon inside the booth then steers the car down the ramp to the underground parking garage. “We wait for Cole. We make a plan. We eliminate the threat.”

“And me? I doubt we includes me.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He parks and turns off the car. “You get to stay in the tower until everything is clear.”

“Fun,” I snark.

He chuckles, but I have a hard time finding any of this funny. “I had someone go out and buy groceries. We’re setting you up in the second best suite in the whole tower. Bulletproof walls. Building security. Personal security,” he says, pointing to his chest. “Nothing can go wrong here.”

“I might die of boredom,” I sigh dramatically.

“Nah. There’s all the TV you could ask for. I bet your brother will even spring for you to order movies if you want.”

“Ooooooh,” I say mockingly.

As big guards turned second-in-commands go, Dempsey’s not bad. He gets my humor and lets me use it without being a Jax. Yeah, that’s right. I just used Finn’s

brother as a verb meaning ornery.

However, I should take that back because he clearly wasn't happy with Dempsey when he ordered me back here. Maybe I really am growing on him. It would be a huge help if the brother of the guy I like actually could stand to be in the same room with me.

Dempsey and I step out of the car and head toward an elevator. He hits the P button, and we shoot up, dinging through the different floors until the doors open once again. Two guards come to attention, but immediately relax again when they see it's us.

Dempsey nods in their direction, and then we continue down the hall. Instead of turning toward Cole's suite on the right, we go a little further, and he steers me toward a door on the left. Well, if Cole's new place was Big Daddy K's...holy shit. "Is this Rocket's suite?"

"I have no fucking clue," Dempsey grunts.

I'd almost forgotten Dempsey came as a Dragon with Cole. He has no idea about the people who were in charge of the Heights before they were. In any case, I'm pretty sure I'm right because this suite is smaller but just as nice. It's still on the Penthouse level, so of course it would be Johnny's. Who else would have stayed here?

I walk in, but Dempsey stays behind. He reaches his hand out. "Phone."

I fish it out of my pocket and hand it to him. "If you need anything, call me." He taps on my screen before handing it back.

I give him a mock salute just like I saw him give to the Dragon in the parking booth. "Will do."

He leaves, going off to do whatever gang leader guards do, and I step inside an unfamiliar room. Jax and Finn's house couldn't be more different from this one. It's all hard lines with the same motif as the big suite. Lots of silvers and whites with modern, shiny finishes. I literally have nothing with me to put away, so I snoop inside the suite first, checking out the bedroom and then the en suite. It's nice. It's not homey by any stretch of the imagination but it's a lot fancier of a place than I've ever stayed before.

I head back into the main room. A small kitchen is situated against the wall directly opposite the bedroom door. A peninsula with seating separates the small area from the rest of the living space. Stainless steel appliances, white marble countertops, and white cabinets round out the design. I go to the refrigerator and grab a bottle of water out of the fully stocked shelves. Dempsey wasn't kidding. They really did buy groceries for me, filling it right up. I hope that means they don't think I'm going to be here for a while.

I plop down on the couch next. A plume of flowery scent with a hint of Lysol greets me. Cole must have people who come in to clean all the suites whether they're being used or not. It makes it easier to relax in the space, considering Johnny's player reputation. If this place wasn't regularly cleaned, I'd be worried about what I was sitting in. Obviously, the notorious son of the leader of the Crew probably calmed down when he got with Kyla, but who knows how many girls he had on this couch before then?

Grabbing the remote from the coffee table, I turn the TV on and flip to Netflix. I start watching the same regency series I was enjoying before. I get through two episodes before a knock sounds on the door.

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Checking my phone to see if Dempsey texted me, hesitation claws at me when I don't find anything. I move cautiously around the coffee table that I've been using as a footrest and tiptoe toward the door. I peer through the peephole and recoil when I recognize the figure on the other side of the door.

Holy shit. Finn's here.

I swing the door open and spot the two tote bags that I left at his house on his shoulder. "Hey."

"Hey," he greets me. I step back, allowing him to come in. Before shutting the door, I peer back down the hallway toward the elevator and spot the two guards still there, talking amongst each other. "Apparently I'm on an approved list." My stomach tugs at his dejected voice.

Shutting the heavy door behind us, I flip the lock before spinning to face him. "You brought my stuff."

"It's the least I could do." He sets the two bags down next to the couch, and when he turns, he opens his arms wide.

I walk willingly into them, squeezing his back and settling my head on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" He shakes his head. "I'm worried about you. Did you hear anything more about what's going on?"

“No. I’m supposed to sit pretty in this room until Cole gets back. Oh and probably after he gets back, too.”

He squeezes me one last time and then steps away. He glances around the place, but he seems oddly comfortable here. It would make sense that he’s been in the suite before since he was good friends with Kyla and her four men. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry for what happened back in the parking lot. I shouldn’t have tried to stop Dempsey from taking you. I just—”

“Wanted me with you?” I ask hopefully.

He lifts his gaze. “So fucking bad.” He takes a deep breath then lets it rattle out of his chest. “Jax had to send me home because I couldn’t concentrate on anything. I was just petting Maxie, watching him run around the house looking for you, and then I remembered you’d probably need things to wear.”

I smirk at that. “You know there’s nothing in those bags I can wear in front of my brother.”

His gaze heats, then his fingers flex at his side. The hair skimming his ears falls forward. Everything about him says he’s one step away from dangling over the edge of a razor blade.

Little by little, he lets his gaze drop. I’m still wearing the same outfit I left Elite Boxing in, but this time, he takes his damn time studying me. He spends so much time inspecting the curve of the bra cut that shows off my cleavage that my nipples turn to points.

His slow perusal moves lower, faltering on the peek of bare skin showing above my belly button and then the tight pants that hug every line of my thighs and calves until he moves back up again.

“I’m scared,” he admits. He places his hand over his chest. “I’m scared that what happened to Kyla is going to happen again, and even more terrifying is the fact that it’s you. I liked Kyla like a friend, but you’re so much more.”

I walk forward, feeling like the world is tilting beneath me. It’s not because of the situation I’m in. It’s because of Finn. Maybe I just don’t understand how bad this is because I’ve been staying out of gang shit for so long. I repeatedly looked the other way and avoided everything that had to do with the Crew because of who my brother was.

Rationally, I understand, but I’ve never been in deep with it. Not like Finn has.

I finally reach him, cupping his face in my palm. The electricity that passes between us in just that small touch is a precursor that launches us together. He moves into my palm, kissing the inside of my wrist. Then he tugs me forward, swooping down to capture my lips in his with bruising intensity. It’s as if the time period between now and when we were in his office never existed. We pick up right where we left off, his hands on my ass, his kiss trailing over my jaw, down my neck, and finally to my collarbone.

I arch into him, giving him as much space to explore as he wants. I thread my fingers through his hair, tearing my nails back down his scalp, and he grunts, increasing the pressure of his kisses.

“Finn,” I breathe out at the same time I force his lips back to mine. We attack each other with a ferocity. Call it need. Or desire. Or call it just desperation that we’ve been holding back on something that’s just begging to break free.

He skims his hands back up my sides, his thumbs caressing the sides of my breasts. I can’t take it anymore. I need to feel him. Taking his hand, I move it to cup my breast, and he groans. He kneads me, fingers working my tit in his hands. I break the kiss to

moan, arching even more into his touch.

His free hand roams down, cupping my ass and then sliding across my thighs as he tugs me up. I make a short sound of protest, but then I'm in his arms and he's carrying me across the floor.

Dear fucking lord. I thought this only happened in movies.

I wrap my legs around his hips, his rock-hard cock greeting me between my thighs. He passes his thumb over my hardened nipple, and I roll my hips, encouraging him to keep going, to explore more, to do everything he imagined when he was touching himself with thoughts of me.

He holds my back steady while carefully lowering me to the bed. The mattress is like a soft embrace as Finn follows, nudging my legs wide so he can kneel between them.

Pulling away, he stares down at me. His hair falls forward, obscuring the corners of his amber-flecked blue eyes. It's dark in the bedroom. The halo of light from the door lights him up from behind, giving him an almost ethereal glow. I press my lips together to keep from telling him that he looks like an angel because that's ridiculously unsexy, but the thought stays with me anyway. His dirty blond hair highlighted in light only solidifies my thoughts. If he was smiling, I'd be thoroughly convinced.

Instead, he's studying me. Our gazes collide, and I breathe out. "Do you want to have sex with me, Finn?" I ask coyly.

A grin breaks across his face. "I want that...and so much more."

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I reach between us, grabbing the hem of his shirt and tugging upward. The entire time I've been living with him, I haven't once seen him shirtless. I've tried. I've walked toward the bathroom when he was coming out, but he's always clothed. Always.

He takes over, reaching behind his head to grab the back and lifting. I lie back in appreciation as every rippled ab comes into view. His miles and miles of torso are highlighted by dips and muscled planes. His clearly defined pecs are revealed next, and I bite my lip as he sits back to tear the shirt fully over his head and drop it to the floor behind him.

He starts to move back down, but I touch his biceps. "Stop."

His mouth drops. "Anything. Whatever you want."

He starts to move away, but I dig my fingers into him. "No. No, God no," I reinforce. "Stay. I just want to look at you."

Understanding dawns on his face, and he leans over me again. I'm literally caged in by a man who has more muscles than anyone I've ever met.

"I guess protein does do a body good," I mock.

The corners of his lips turn up. "Your turn."

I'm suddenly stupidly embarrassed. I've always had the normal body struggles, but to be in front of someone like Finn, I suddenly want to ask him if I can keep everything I can on and maybe also shut the door to keep all possible light from illuminating me.



He reads me. I'm almost positive. Leaning down, he presses a soft kiss to my lips. "You're so damn beautiful, Leenie. Trust me."

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He runs his hands up my sides, taking the crop top with him. He moves the band of the shelf bra out and over my breasts, and then I lift my hands as he peels the fabric off, dropping the article of clothing next to us on the bed. He stares down, awe-stricken. Or at least, I'd like to think so. He presses his hand to my chest, then moves his palm down the valley between my breasts to my stomach before dropping to his elbows, his chest pressed against mine.

Slow kisses break up our normal speed. It's like we're searching for something that's hard to find, so we take our time, acquainting ourselves. His erection hardens more and more until he starts grinding his hips against me.

Like before, the fabric of our outfits leaves nothing to the imagination. More comfortable in my body, I break the kiss to hook my thumbs under the waistband of my pants. I shimmy them down my legs as Finn pulls back to watch. With one solid knee between my own, he helps me remove the leggings the rest of the way until I'm lying there in soaked panties. I've already flooded the crotch from our grinding.

He guides his palms up my thighs then grips my hips with that same possessiveness I love. Standing, he trails his fingertips over my skin until goosebumps erupt all over my body, settling in when he pushes his joggers down to reveal his straining boxer briefs. He must kick his shoes and socks off because when he settles between my legs again, he's as clothed as I am. "We're even," I say, reaching down to rub my hands up his ripped thighs. I didn't know legs could look like this. Mine certainly don't. When I've finished my perusal, I wrap my ankles around his ass and tug him closer, groaning as his dick meets my heat. "I don't want to go back after we do this," I tell him. "We come clean. I'll tell Cole not to fuck with you guys."

Cupping my cheek, he gives me a curt nod. “Agreed. Whatever the consequences are, I’m willing because I can’t accept the flip side.”

I swallow at the meaning behind his words. He’d rather jeopardize everything he’s built with his brother than lose me. Rather than waste one more day not being true to the feelings we have for each other.

He lowers his head, letting his lips trail over my collarbone again. He doesn’t kiss, he just gently glides over my sensitive skin in featherlight touches that drive me out of my mind. “When you were touching yourself...” He grinds into me as if I need a reminder of where he’s going with this. “What was I doing?”

“Straining inside me,” I tell him, reaching down to cup that hunk of muscle he calls an ass and moving him into me. “Like you could barely hold yourself back.”

He shivers. “Fuck.” His unrestrained hip thrusts hit me exactly where I want him. We grind against one another, and my core heats, but it’s not enough. It won’t be until he’s inside me.

“I want to see you,” I beg.

He kisses my collarbone and sits back. With much more grace than I could’ve mustered, he moves his boxer briefs down his thick thighs, kicking the black cotton off when they get to his ankles.

More arousal dampens my panties as I lay eyes on his cock. Through his boxers, I had a suspicion he’d be big. Suspicious now confirmed. “Jesus.”

“In a good way?”

I rake my gaze up him. “In a very good way.” I’m practically pulsing with desire.

He lowers himself over me, pressing his lips to mine like the dam just burst. He sucks on my lower lip, then plunges his tongue into my mouth, taking control, taking every rational thought with him as he works me up.

Just like when we were on the couch, he sneaks his hand under my panties, moaning when he finds me wet. He trails his fingers down my slit and then up, moving his adept touch to the bundle of nerves just waiting for him. He circles, still keeping my lips busy with intense kisses that blow my mind until I can barely think.

Before I let him take me all the way, I grab his wrist, making him stop. "I want you inside me when I come," I breathe. "Please."

He kisses my forehead, then hooks his fingers under the waistband of my panties and starts to peel them down. I bring my knees together, so he can skirt them over my calves and off.

My vibrating body waits for him as he peruses every square inch of my bare skin. His gaze lingers on the patch of coarse hair leading to my pussy. I watch him with the same intensity. A bead of cum hovers on his slit. I can't decide if I want to force him to the bed and lick it off, then take him into my mouth, or keep going with what we've started.

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Who am I kidding? I want him inside me. It's non-negotiable.

"There are condoms in my bag." Hallelujah for Jaz. That girl knows what she's doing.

He smirks, then lifts from the bed, turning on his heel to walk through the lit doorway. The best part is that I get to watch this fine specimen walk away. When he returns with the condom, I'm debating which side I enjoyed the most, but I figure I don't have to choose, so there's no way I'm going to.

He rips the condom wrapper open and rolls the rubber down his shaft. I move up the bed, and he follows, kissing my neck, teasing me with punishing kisses and scrapes of his teeth. I reach between us, fisting him in my hands, encouraging everything he wants to do to me.

He moves down my body until I can't reach him, but I don't protest when he sucks my nipple into his hot mouth, his tongue lashing against it. I arch into him, wrapping my hands around his neck and holding him there as I arc off the bed, searching for the same attention on my pussy.

Moving to the other nipple, he gives it the same delirious pleasure until my breath escapes in short pants. "Finn."

"Mmmm," he murmurs, kissing a trail to my belly button. My pussy clenches the further south he gets, but instead of placing his tongue on me, his fingers work me up again. "So wet," he praises, fingers circling my hole until he dips a finger inside. He swirls it around and then pulls it out, only to return it a little deeper the next time.

I reach down, grabbing his wrist and holding him there so that the next time he pushes inside, I thrust up at the same time and his finger enters all the way to the second knuckle.

“Yes, baby. You like that?”

My answer is an incoherent string of breaths that only encourages him. He retreats, then pushes two fingers inside, dipping and circling in a delicious pattern that has my muscles locking up. “Finn, please,” I warn. “I’m going to...”

It’s coming on fast, my body ratcheting higher. Finn pulls his fingers from me, and then lines us up, pushing inside as my body clenches around him, my orgasm hitting with his first thrust.

I grip his shoulders. “Oh, yes. Oh my God.”

My fingers grip his bare skin as I keep him in place while I climax around his cock, body pulsing. The feeling subsides after a few moments, and I release my hold on him, my chest still warring to bring in breaths. Locking gazes with his sparkling blues, he smiles. “That was...fucking hot.”

I thrust up to meet him, encouraging him to move again. He doesn’t waste time. He lowers to his elbows to get closer to me, tucking one hand behind my head. He kisses me senseless, his body moving over mine in a steady rhythm. I lift my hips to meet his as he plunders my mouth before moving to my neck and shoulders. Trailing back up, he traces my ear with the tip of his tongue, and a cry escapes me. Lord knows I fucking love that.

“This is better than I imagined,” he whispers. “My imagination didn’t do you justice.” He moans, teeth biting down on my lobe as he does so.

My hips move up of their own volition, breaking his rhythm, but he's all too willing to comply with quicker thrusts.

He separates just until we can look into each other's gazes as he rolls his hips into me again and again. His face falls, sweat dotting his hairline. I tug my lower lip into my mouth, knowing he's holding back because of me. Knowing he probably is eager to explode but also wants to give me one more before he does.

I'm happy to oblige.

I lower my hands to grip his ass, and he shudders for a moment. "Leenie baby, I don't know how much longer—"

"Just enjoy me," I tell him, lifting to kiss him. He moans, following me down and shortening his thrusts while our tongues war with one another's. Whatever new angle he's just found kicks me into the next gear. I moan into his mouth, deepening the kiss as his short, fast hip rolls undo me. My hands find the back of his head, working into his hair. His thrusts send me into the bed, the mattress creaking beneath our joined bodies. "Finn, oh my God," I breathe over his lips as my body creeps toward coming apart again. I double down, meeting him exactly where it feels too fucking good. "Yes," I cry out. His constant barrage sends me higher and higher. I alternate between kissing him and letting my moans fill the room.

My body starts to tremble and his follows suit. "Leenie, fuck. I'm going to come so hard. Right in this tight, slick—"

His thrusts punctuate his words and that's all I need to tumble over the edge. My body reacts, pulsing around him. He groans low in his throat and then thrusts deeply twice before following me over the blissful edge. I watch him as he climaxes, his beautiful face breaking apart in relief as if he's experiencing the greatest ecstasy. He slowly moves inside me one last time, sending aftershocks through the both of us

before he lowers, capturing my mouth in a kiss again. One that brands. One that sears. One that promises so much more.

I smile into his mouth, and he lifts up. “Same,” he affirms, as if I voiced the thoughts that are repeating in my head.

Best I ever fucking had. Hands down.

He kisses my neck, then backs up, unsheathing himself from my sensitive core. He slips the condom off and moves to the attached bathroom. The water runs for a few seconds but then he walks back in, his pure, angelic, happy face back on.

I move up the bed again, tugging one of the pillows behind my head. He lies next to me, lifting the blanket and pulling it over us. “I meant what I said. I’m not going back.”

“Me either.” I lift my hand to trace the curve of his cheekbones. “Jax is going to be mad.”

“I don’t know. He seemed pretty upset that Dempsey up and took you from us. I’m telling you, you’re growing on him. He’s looked at your sales spreadsheet. He realizes what you’re doing.”

“Is he going to eat his words about the shop?” I ask, pinpointing the brotherly debate the two get into all the time about the shop being a waste of time, energy, and money. Finn wholeheartedly disagrees, and so do I.

“He’s too stubborn to eat his words, but even if he doesn’t say it out loud, I know he is.”

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“Mmmm,” I pull him down to kiss his lips, and as soon as I do, all other thoughts leave me. “I’m up for exploring you all night.”

“Does that mean you’re inviting me to stay?”

I smile into the kiss. “No, it means I’m not allowing you to leave.”

He waggles his eyebrows suggestively, a gesture that’s so uniquely him and has me laughing as he grabs my hips, tickling me. At some point, the playing turns to more. He returns to teasing my body with his hands and lips. He forces my knees apart, slinking down to the foot of the bed where he moves one of my legs over his shoulder.

“I don’t know if I can—”

With a grin, he licks a trail up my pussy, completely silencing my attempt at warning him that I might not be able to orgasm again.

“Fuck it, I can,” I say as the sensations hit me all at once.

As Jaz said, he eats from my buffet, slowly bringing me to another head. Languidly kissing my thighs to teasing my clit. He spends an hour between my legs, building me and building me. Keeping it slow, spending his time completely devouring me in soft kisses. He brings me to the precipice, then backs off until I’m a sweaty mess on the bed, begging for him to bring me to climax.

He disregards my pleas, relishing in my pleasure as if it’s his last meal. My body is



wound so tight, my only thoughts are of his tongue on my sensitive flesh. I fist the sheets in my hands as more moans push past my lips. I'm beyond caring how desperate I sound. I'm beyond caring about much except for the feel of him on me.

His moans rival my own, which only works to send me just to the edge. His delectable sounds coax me into just shy of oblivion territory. The murmurs he presses into my skin, the sweet words, the sometimes very naughty talk sends shivers down my spine. "Mine," he states every now and again, sucking my clit into his mouth. "My pussy." He licks a trail up and back, the tip of his tongue a gentle kiss of pleasure. "My pleasure," he growls.

He lifts my back while moving to his knees and pulling me forward until it's only my shoulders pressed into the mattress and he's staring down the length of my body. His gaze hoods as the tip of his tongue rims my bundle of nerves. The flecks in his eyes deepen to the color of pure sex as I tremble in his arms.

When I dangle over the cliff this time, he doesn't hold back. He teases and teases, watching me as I shake. As I get closer, I realize how big this climax is going to be, and I'm suddenly worried about my reaction, but when his hands bite into my hips, securing me right where I am, I let everything overtake me.

I scream his name as I explode. He sucks on my clit, and I thrash against him as he sucks and sucks, ratcheting up my already intense orgasm higher and higher until my bones liquify beneath him. The pitiful moans that escape my throat don't even do my orgasm justice. I'm so damn sensitive down there that even his last chaste kiss on my clit sends a shockwave through me and a loud whimper.

Crawling up my body with a full-blown smile teasing his lips, he knows he just rocked my world.

"Holy shit," is all I can muster.

Cuddling is the last thing I remember before I wake to loud voices.

I blink heavily, trying to wash away the heavy sleep. My body still feels like Jell-O, and in my still dreamy consciousness, I remember what it was like to fall asleep in Finn's arms. The way he held me to his chest, our breaths deepening and deepening.

"Fuck you!"

I sit up in bed, sheets falling around my waist. Finn's not next to me anymore, but his side of the bed is still warm.

"I'm going in there."

My brother's voice rings out loud and clear. Oh, fuck. I scramble out of bed, pulling on clothes. A body moves in front of the crack in the door, completely blocking out the light. "No, you're not."

"Move out of my fucking way," Cole growls.

With as pissed as my brother sounds, Finn isn't backing down. "No."

There's a scuffle. I pull the same crop top Finn peeled off me a few hours ago on and hurry toward the door to find them in each other's faces. I move behind Finn, placing my hand on his lower back. His completely clothed lower back. "Hey," I whisper, hoping to calm them both down. The last thing I need is the two most important men in my life at each other's throats.

"Leenie?" Cole grunts, shoving Finn out of the way so he can see me. His murderous face instantly relaxes. In a nanosecond, it turns to anger again like he's a hot-cold

version of Jekyll and Hyde. He takes in what I'm sure is straight up sex hair, plus the fact that I'm wearing something he's probably never seen me wear in my entire life, and he knows. He glares at Finn, his knuckles turning white at his sides. "I asked you to watch her. Not fuck her. I thought we understood each other."

I move to Cole and tug on his hand so he stops looking at the guy I like as if he could easily put a bullet in his brain. His chest heaves in front of him. "He did watch me."

"How could you be so reckless?" he demands, pulling his hand from mine. "The threat is real. I explained that to you over the phone."

"I know."

Finn tries to move toward me, but Cole stops him. "Leave. Leave now before I do something that's going to break my sister's heart."

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“I’m not leaving her,” Finn argues, standing right up to the leader of the Dragons.

“Really? Because it seems like you were sneaking out of the suite when I got here, but you got caught. So, you just fuck my sister and leave? Fuck you.”

Finn turns toward me, not even bothering to give my brother an explanation. “I just thought it would be easier, considering...” he says, drifting his gaze toward my brother.

I nod. I’m with him one hundred percent. We both knew Cole was coming here, and it was stupid to fall asleep with each other. When he woke, he probably freaked out about this very scenario occurring and decided to leave before it got this far. “It’s fine,” I tell him with a small smile.

“Have more respect for yourself, Leenie!” Cole growls.

“Don’t talk to her that way!” Finn yells back, jaw so hard it could cut glass.

I move toward Finn. “It’s fine. Just leave, okay? I’ll talk to you later.” I burn my gaze into his, trying to convey everything I’m feeling inside. How I so badly want to kiss him, to give him a proper send-off, but I don’t want to poke the beast either.

He heeds my unspoken warning and gives me a slight nod before walking toward the door and exiting out the apartment without looking back. I sit on the couch, my head in my hands as Cole wears a trail in front of me. He keeps sighing, grumbling to himself. After a few minutes of this, he moves to the kitchen and grabs two waters before setting one on the coffee table in front of me and opening the second. The snap

of the plastic seal sounds before he exhales. "I'll take care of Finn."

I glare up at him. "For being so smart, you're kind of dumb."

He recoils like I just smacked him.

I groan. "You're not going to take care of him because I like him, Cole. I really like him. And not just physically. If you stopped being so worried about me, you'd realize he's a good guy, too."

"Stop being so worried about you?" he spits. "Are you kidding me? I'm supposed to stop being worried about you even though it's my fault you're being targeted in the first place? We can't trust anybody, Leenie. No one. Not even Finn. Or his brother. Hell, I don't even trust most of my guys with you."

I frown up at him. "But Dempsey..."

"Dempsey and I have been together for a fucking long ass time. I trust him with everything. I have an inner circle I entrust with my life. They're all here in the tower, which is why you're in the fucking tower." He squeezes the bottle of water and the plastic protests. "I tried to give you space. I didn't know what kind of relationship you would want when you realized what would happen with me returning. I didn't want this exact thing to happen. I didn't want you to resent me but I want a relationship with you more than anything because everything was taken away from me. Everything."

I stand, moving toward him. He crushes the water bottle in his hands, and the water explodes like a volcano. Spinning, he throws it into the kitchen. The bottle bounces around the sink, but not before leaving a trail of water between him and the kitchen.

"We can trust Finn," I hedge.

“You don’t know that.”

“Give me a little credit,” I mutter. “I’m a good judge of character, and I’m asking you to trust me on this one.”

“It’s hard to do that when he put your life in danger.”

“How? By fucking me?”

He closes his eyes. “Don’t fucking say that.” His throat works. “This is why my guards aren’t allowed to get involved with their charges, remember? I explained that to you. The fact that he put his base needs before your safety proves to me the kind of man he is.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I tell Cole, shaking my head and praying he’ll just fucking listen.

“You should’ve taken this more seriously, too, Leenie Bear. I ran home because of how big this is, and then I find you in here with him.”

I steel my shoulders, reminding myself that he means well. Yes, he’s overbearing and protective. He always was. The threats are even more real now, so of course he would respond in kind. It’s just...fuck. “I wish you trusted me,” I confess, all fight leaving me. I don’t want to argue about Finn. Hell, I don’t want to argue with my brother at all. “I want the same things you do, Cole. I want to stay in your life regardless of who you are. I get all the pressure you’re under, but right now, Finn’s non-negotiable.”

Cole shakes his head. “Someone who would sneak out of your bed?”

I swallow, the area behind my eyes heating with unshed tears. “He was avoiding you. Not me.”

“Great. So, you’re hiding him from me.”

“No, Cole. We were fighting it because of you, but we could only both fight it for so damn long.” Tears track down my face. Damn stupid hormones. I’m mad, I’m not sad. For whatever reason, whenever I’m frustrated and there are no right roads to take, I bawl like a baby in a display of weakness, instead of staying strong.

Cole’s face falls. He moves around the coffee table and hugs me, bringing me in close. Kissing my temple, he rubs my shoulders soothingly. We don’t talk for the longest time. He just waits until the tears dry up before separating again. “I have to go figure this stuff out. Please just stay in here where it’s safe. Don’t let anyone else in. I’m going to fix this.”

He kisses my temple again and then strides from the room. Somehow, I think his promise to fix this isn’t about Finn at all. It’s about the threat, of course.

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I lock the door behind him, grab the bags Finn brought me, and take them into the bedroom. Rifling through my things to find a pair of pajamas, I strip and throw them on before returning under the covers where everything was still so perfect about forty-five minutes ago.

The sheets smell like Finn and me. I turn over, my fingers moving over the side of the bed he was sleeping on. I'm met with emptiness and cold. If it weren't for my memories, there's no evidence that Finn was even here. Except...

I lean up, spotting a piece of paper on the pillow. I take it, unfolding the little note with excitement.

I know it's not as cute because Max didn't bring this to you... but I just wanted to tell you how damn beautiful you are. I left for obvious reasons but I'm already counting down the minutes until I see you again. Love, -F

I flop back on the pillow, the paper dangling from my fingers. He's so damn perfect. Why does he have to be so damn perfect?

Also, I'm going to miss that dog.

Folding the paper back up, I place it on the nightstand and curl back into a ball, facing the side of the bed Finn was sleeping on. Despite the jumbled mess that is my brain, I fall asleep easily.

I wake the following morning unaware of the time. The windows are completely blacked out. For all I know, it could be the next afternoon. I lie in bed for a little



while thinking things over before I hear my phone ping from the other room. Throwing the covers off, I pad into the main living space and grab my phone from the coffee table. The unopened bottle of water Cole got for me from the fridge last night still sits there.

Peeking at my notifications, I see ten messages from Finn. I hurry and bring them up, smiling as I read each word.

Let me know you're okay when you get up.

I'm still thinking about you.

Hands down the best fun I've ever had in bed.

It's really hard to concentrate when I can still feel you underneath my fingertips.

I guess you reverted back to someone who sleeps in, huh?

Please tell me he did not take your phone from you.

God, I miss you. Maxie was searching for you again this morning. He kept waiting for me to slip a note underneath his collar. Even Jax was pouting, but he did ream me a new one for getting caught at your place.

I hope you're dreaming about me.

Do you have food? Should I bring some by? I didn't even think about it last night.

I swear I'm not a stalker.

I pound my feet against the floor in excitement, clasp the phone to my chest. I

quickly write out a text to him telling him I'm fine and that I have food and everything else I need except him.

His reply is immediate. Soon, baby. \*kiss emoji\*

I take his cute sentiments to the shower with me, keeping my phone nearby in case he sends me another message. I hope that whatever threat Cole has found involving me gets resolved quickly so I can be with Finn. Cole will hopefully be able to let go a little and trust others into his inner circle.

It must be so lonely to be him.

I shake my head, getting those thoughts out, and instead, think about Finn and me in bed last night for those absolute, awestruck few hours. It wasn't just a quick romp where he thought more about getting himself off than me. It was the exact opposite. The fucking care he took. The time, the attention. I've never had a lover like that.

Jaz is totally getting a rundown of the whole night in complete detail. It's what she deserves for giving me a play-by-play of her and Jared's first time.

And not to brag, but Finn totally wins.

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By evening, no matter how many times I pick up my phone to see if Finn's texted me, he hasn't.

I rub my hands together, trying to watch the very sexy scene on Netflix but I keep getting drawn to my silent phone. Now, I'm wondering if Cole took his fucking phone away from him.

The man sent me ten messages within the span of two hours, and now he hasn't said anything since. I pause the show, needing to get up before I crawl right out of my skin. I had a long talk with Jaz earlier, and she tried to come see me, but Cole forbade it, telling her separating from me was best for her, too. That, I get. I don't want my best friend around if something is happening, but I haven't heard from my brother either.

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He told me to sit tight, but I hadn't realized he meant all day with no people to talk to.

With different scenarios all crowding inside my brain, each one trying to take shape to guess what's happening, I march out the door and across the hall to Cole's suite. The guards next to the elevator don't stop me, so I throw the door open with a little too much force. It bangs against the opposite wall, and even though it makes me jump, I keep walking in, striding past the formal area, but skid to a stop when five men in various positions have their guns drawn and aimed right at me.

"Stand down," Cole demands, holding his arms out with his own handgun in his left fist. He hurries toward me, giving me a look that tells me this is the last place I should be.

Well no fucking shit. Apparently, that's the case.

Behind him, everyone relaxes, including Dempsey who was the closest to the door, and no doubt would've shot me first, but the other Dragons in the room would've followed suit right after.

My limbs feel flimsy. I place my hand over my chest, my furiously beating heart rams against my ribcage. Cole frowns. "Are you okay?"

"Jesus Christ. I just had a bunch of guys pull guns on me."

He takes my hand and forcibly moves us to the corner of the room. "That's because no one else is stupid enough to come in here. You're supposed to be in your damn room."

I lean against the wall, resting the back of my head against the flat surface with my palms open at my side, trying to calm myself down. “You haven’t given me an update all day. I have no idea what’s going on. Plus, Finn hasn’t texted me back, and I’m worried.”

Cole blows out a breath. “We’re making a plan to counter the threat right now. Don’t worry. We got this. You don’t need to be concerned.”

I fan myself. I didn’t think I’d ever know how I’d react when a gun gets pulled on me, so at least I know now that I freak the fuck out. Probably the most rational reaction I’ve had to something in my entire life. “Okay. You just have to keep me updated because my mind keeps working overtime to fill in the silence.”

He smirks. “You always were like that.”

I rub my temples. “Anything I can do?”

He gives me a dubious look. “Ha. No. The only thing I want you to do is not worry and stay in the room. It makes it easier for me to know that you’re safe so I can focus on this.”

Right. Okay. I can do that. “So, you know who it is?”

“Yeah, we know,” he snarls before glaring at me. “We’ll neutralize him, and then we can go back to normal. Okay?”

Ha. Does he really think he’s going to get away with not telling me who it is? “Who is it?”

He frowns, but when I drop my head to the side, he answers me. “Someone we went to high school with.” He shakes his head. “Dumbass thinks he’s going to take back

the Crew territory and use you to get me to give it up.”

“Like as ransom? Really?” I start to laugh but snap my jaw shut. Well, that explains why someone is targeting me. Someone we went to school with would know Cole and I mean something to each other. But to be used as a ransom? That’s kind of fucked up. “Who specifically?”

“Not important. He’s about to be a past tense.”

The dead look in my brother’s eyes unnerves me. A solid plate of ice freefalls into my stomach, hardening everything. It’s one thing to understand what Cole does, it’s another to actually hear the ins and outs. “Right. Okay. What about Finn?”

He shakes his head and looks away.

The ice immediately thaws and is replaced with a roaring fire of anger. “Cole.”

He shrugs. “I sent him to do something for me.”

“Cole,” I snap again. “You’re kidding.”

He slips his gun into the back of his pants, and it’s only then that I realize we’ve been having this whole conversation while he held a firearm in his hands. “Decidedly not kidding, Leenie.”

“What the fuck?” I burst out.

He moves in closer, peeking over his shoulder briefly before glaring at me. “Calm yourself.”

My hands turn to fists at my sides. I won’t get anything out of him if I scream

because he'll just revert to the Dragon's leader instead of my brother, but it takes an awful amount of willpower not to strike out against him. "Where is he?"

"He's not in the Heights."

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Panic claws up my throat. “Did you take away his phone?”

“No, but I told him it might be best if you didn’t talk for a little while.”

I just stand there, staring at him. The longer I do, the more disappointment seeps in. For one second earlier, I thought maybe showing him my vulnerable side would’ve prevented anything like this from happening, but it didn’t. All it did was make him act out in the opposite way I wanted. “You’re a dick,” I say simply. I shoulder past him and leave the room. He doesn’t even attempt to come after me and smooth things over. And he should probably count himself lucky on that front because as soon as we’re alone, he’s going to hear everything I fucking think about this.

I slam the door to my new apartment, breathing through my nose. Immediately, I move toward my phone. I sent Finn three unanswered messages already, but it’s time for another one.

I don’t think. I just start typing. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know he was going to do this. Don’t hate me. When you get back, I’ll be here.

I stare at the screen for a few minutes. When I don’t get an immediate response, I slam the phone down on the coffee table and throw myself backward on the couch, letting real tears slip out. Not the frustrated ones, but the grief-stricken ones. They’re not just for Finn either. They’re for my brother who feels as if he has to take this giant leap. They’re because even though I want to hate him, I can’t.

After a good, long cry, I head into the kitchen and find some ice cream in the freezer. I decide to wallow in some sugary goodness, imagining what Jax would say to me if



he knew I was eating this shit.

Then, I remember that I have both the brothers' phone numbers in my cell. I pick my phone up again, still eating the chocolate chip cookie dough smothered in chocolate sauce and send Jax a message. Is he okay?

I don't even know if he'll answer me. He's not my biggest fan by any means, but if Finn is correct, I did start to grow on him.

His two-word reply is at least something to tide me over. He's fine.

I roll my eyes. He's always so chatty, I snark to myself.

Unbelievably, he writes back again without me having to prompt. I don't know where he is. He won't say.

Thank you, I reply. And I mean it. If he was anyone else, I probably would've added some hug emojis to let him know I'm actually so thankful I could squeeze him, but for some reason, Jax doesn't seem like the type to want my sentiment reinforced with an emoji.

However, to shock me even further, he texts back. Are you okay?

I'm good. Pissed, but good.

The texts stop, but even then, they make me feel better. I can dry my tears and finish my ice cream without feeling like there's a missing piece of myself. At least he's good.

Later that night, Cole comes into my room. He must have a key for the locked main door, but he knocks lightly before entering the bedroom, rousing me from sleep. He

sits on the edge of the mattress. “I know you’re pissed, and I’m not saying you don’t have a right to be. I just wanted to let you know the threat’s been eliminated, Leenie. I love you.”

I reach out, moving my fingers over his. In the dark, I nearly miss him, and it seems like it’s a physical manifestation of our relationship right now. We keep missing each other. We keep not understanding one another. But even with all that, he’s still my brother. “Thank you,” I tell him. “Love you too.”

He nods back and leaves. In the dim light, I don’t get to study him except it looks as if he just got back from going out. He’s wearing his signature jeans and a white shirt, and as he passes through the doorway, I’m almost positive I spot blood splatter, but I don’t ask. He’s obviously fine. He was calm and contrite even. Those emotions are so rare for him that I take it as a good sign.

Since he woke me up, I pick up my phone that’s charging on the nightstand and frown when I don’t have any messages. Tomorrow, though, is a different story. Maybe I can go back to work. Maybe Finn will return. If the two brothers will let me, maybe I can just stay and help them at the shop. I don’t know if I can go back to working at the boring bank now. I’ll miss the ever-present volatility of people hitting things and the shouts of encouragement. Hell, even the fighters were growing on me, some of them making sure to stop by and say hi while I was at the counter.

Of course, that all hinges on whether Finn is willing to put up with who I am, and the possibility of being dragged into Dragon business while simultaneously putting his own businesses and his brother in jeopardy. I still can’t believe my brother pulled him out of the Heights with no explanation other than because he knew we’d slept together. He can state safety reasons all he wants, but I think it’s a little more than that. He’s still struggling with wanting a better life for me, and if I get with Finn, he probably realizes I’ll never leave the Heights.

Those are a lot of pills to swallow, and honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if Finn decides I'm not what he wants. He has everything going for him. If we were playing the Heights Bachelor, he'd be the clear winner.

I swallow the hard lump of acceptance that works its way up my throat. Right now, I could use some of his positivity because I'm pretty sure I'm about to lose him. And that breaks my heart.

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My brother and I have a near wordless breakfast together before I leave the tower. He won't answer questions as to where Finn is. Apparently, whatever Finn's doing is wrapped up in the business my brother went away for. The only thing Cole promises is that the sexy trainer is not in any danger.

It's the least he can offer me.

He's hesitant to let me head back to my normal apartment, but now that the threat is gone, he doesn't really have a say. Sure, there might come a time where there's another one hanging over my head. Or one might pop up when we least expect it, but I've gotten it across to him that I still need to live my life no matter who he is. I can be careful while still doing that. I always have been. I had to live that way while he was joining up with the Dragons because I wasn't sure if the Crew were going to retaliate against the family he left behind.

I've been watching my back for years. He just wasn't here for that part.

Jaz must hear me walking up the stairs because she throws the door open as soon as I hit the top and gathers me in a hug. My girl's been there for me, listening to me cry over the phone when Cole sent Finn away. Neither one of us thinks it's permanent but it's still a big deal. In fact, this was the first time my level-headed friend said

anything bad about my brother since he's been back, so that's saying something. "I made cookies," she cries into my neck.

I laugh, patting her back, dropping my meager tote bags filled with sexy shit that I didn't even get to use just inside the door. "My favorite?"

“You betcha.”

As she says it, I recognize the sweet smell of chocolate chip cookies in the air. Nothing fancy, just straight up Nestle Toll House because that’s how we roll. Why mess with perfection when the recipe is already on the back? “It’s kind of early for cookies, isn’t it?” It’s not even technically afternoon yet.

“Pffft. It’s never too early for cookies.” She pulls away, eyeing me. “Are you sure you’re my best friend?”

I push her shoulder playfully. “You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She grabs my wrists. “Oh God. He broke you, didn’t he? Must have been that good dick.” She drops my arms and spins on her heels. “There’s only one way to find out,” she calls out over her shoulder.

Curious, I follow her into the little kitchen. She uses a spatula to take a cookie that’s still on the oven sheet and hands it over. The morsels are gooey, and when I grab it, the cookie is still warm. I take a huge bite, and the treat practically melts in my mouth. “So good,” I moan.

Jaz throws her hands into the air, spatula and all. “Yay, she’s back.”

I roll my eyes but then I decide this is exactly what I need. I smile at her, and she grins. Taking a few cookies from the tray, she sets them on a plate and leads me back to the living room. Looking around the place, I still get homey vibes, but it’s not exactly the same. I still love the apartment. I love Jaz. I love what we did with the

place, but nothing can compare to how much I loved that house on that side street where Jax and Finn live.

It seems so dumb to even think it, but I felt at home there from the beginning. It's a settle-down type of place. Jaz and I never thought of this apartment as a forever kind of situation. It was just our in-between apartment. The place you live before you find husbands and make a life somewhere else.

Finn's house gave me all of those nesting vibes. And fuck, I didn't know I was even looking for something like that. Here I was, prowling the guy because he looked damn sexy in that MMA outfit, but what I got was so much more.

"He'll come back," Jaz says.

She knows me too damn well. "He will," I agree. "I just don't know if I factor into anything when he does. Cole probably scared him off." I shake my head. "I'll actually be surprised if he doesn't run away screaming, Jaz. He's smart. Hell, if the situations were reversed, I would've been out from the beginning."

"Luckily, he's not you."

"You don't even know him," I mutter.

She runs her hands through her cute bob. "Yeah, but I know you, and anyone who runs away from you is an idiot. Plus, you've just told me he's super smart, so..." She shrugs. "I'm right." I shove another warm cookie into my mouth and lean against the velvet couch. Jaz pulls her feet up on the cushion, hugging her knees to her chest. "Did Cole talk to you this morning?"

"Barely," I grumble. "The worst part about it is that I know why he did what he did so I'm finding it really fucking hard to be mad at him when I really want to just throat

punch his ass. On the flip side, a part of me is really happy that I have my brother back, and he's here to watch after me."

"But like, totally lame that he ran your guy off."

"Exactly!" I sigh. "I told you he thought Finn was skipping out on me, right?"

Jaz laughs. "I've met him for all of five minutes, and I know he's not like that."

I stuff the last bit of cookie in my mouth and wipe my hands against each other to get rid of the crumbs. "Well, take my mind off everything. How are you and Jared? You were surprisingly quiet about your sexcapades while I was gone."

She blushes.

Ha! I knew it. "Well?" I press.

She shrugs coyly. "I just really like him. He's sweet. The sex is good. He's not a gang banger or a loser."

"All positives."

"He asked if he could come over today. I told him I didn't know..." She avoids my gaze, picking at the settee.

"I'm fine if he comes over," I tell her, reaching out with my foot to give her a nudge. "You know I don't care. I have shit to do anyway. Talk to boss lady about going back to work and all that."

"Pining over Finn..." she adds. I flip her off, and she grins. "Cole's really going to let you just go back to your life? What about a guard?"

I've been wondering that same thing. It seems like going guardless would be too good to be true. "I think they'll be around sometimes. I don't know. I didn't ask him. He understood that I was not in the mood. We'll probably just go back to the way it was before. If I want to go out, I have to let him know. But when I'm going back and forth to work, he won't bother me about it."

"That's good, at least," she offers. "Did he say what happened?"

I shiver. I still see what could've been blood spatter on his shirt when he left the room that night. Sometimes, I kick myself for not pushing him to talk. "I didn't even ask. I know it was some guy he went to high school with who obviously knew about me from before he defected from the Crew. Cole mentioned something about using me as ransom to take back the Crew's territory, however I'm pretty sure the guy isn't living anymore to worry about."



Jaz widens her eyes.

“Yeah...” I trail off.

“He wasn’t messing around.”

“I guess there are some things I really don’t want to know,” I echo the thoughts that have been spinning in my head lately.

Jaz and I spend a couple of hours catching up. Not that we hadn’t talked every day since everything started, but when you have a best friend, there’s always something to talk about. We only break up the welcome party when Jared knocks on the door.

Jaz greets him with a hug, and he reaches down to pinch her ass. I smile and look away, telling myself I’m definitely not going to be the girl who’s jealous of her best friend just because her relationship didn’t work out. I’m still talking myself into smiling when Jared greets me. “Hey, Leenie. Good to see you back here.”

I press my lips together then turn toward him with a smile. “Thanks, Jared. How have you been? Sorry to come back and interrupt your house of loving.”

He chuckles. “Eh, I’d rather Jazzie have her best friend back.”

Jazzie? Ummm. Well, that’s a new one. “Aww,” I turn to Jaz with a quizzical look. She did not tell me they were into the weird nicknames part of the relationship. “He’s a keeper.”

She fits under his arm, placing her hand on his chest. “Isn’t he?”

She’s got that lovesick look on her face, so I get up from my spot on the couch. “I really need to unpack and get reacquainted with my room. You guys have fun,” I sing-song as I make my way into the bedroom, shutting the door without looking back. I don’t want Jaz to tell me I can hang out with them because even though I know I can, it doesn’t mean I actually want to. Funny how I hated being alone in the tower, but right now, I kind of just want to be by myself.

At some point during our conversation, Jaz had dropped my two bags back into my room, so I return all my sexy clothes to my drawers and closet, frowning. All of the extra planning was a waste because every single time something did happen with Finn, I wasn’t dressed appropriately.

It takes me all of five minutes to unpack, so afterward, I go to the bed, lying down with my arms outstretched. It’s different from Finn’s. The mattress is kind of lumpy, actually. And it doesn’t smell like him either.

Holy Christ. I’m being pathetic.

I sit up, write an email to my boss to tell her that I can come back to work tomorrow. Then I screw around on the internet, looking for rescue dogs. I check the local pound’s website but I soon get bored of that too. Through the thin walls, I hear Jaz and Jared talking, so I put on some headphones and play the last playlist I put together.

The angry music almost shocks me. I’d forgotten when I got home from the fights the first time that I scoured the streaming service for hype songs. I listen for a little while before pulling out my phone. While the loud music still reverberates in my ear, I type out a text to Finn, telling him that Cole fixed everything here. Someone might not have thought to tell him that, so instead of feeling like I’m stalking him, I figure I’m just

keeping him updated on what's going on. The text ends up being a whole paragraph long, informing him that I'm back at my apartment and that I'm going to work at the bank tomorrow. Instead of worrying about how to end the message, I just hit Send, cringing when the whole block of text comes up.

I nibble over my bottom lip reading through all the heartfelt messages he'd sent me. When I get to my huge paragraph, I read over what I sent and realize I didn't explain anything to him. Nothing.

I swallow the fear down and start again.

I miss Max.

And you.

I hope you're coming home soon, Finn. And that you'll want to see me when you get here.

For the rest of the night, my phone sits on the table by my bed. I keep glancing at it, and it's worse than waiting for a pot of water to boil. I will the phone to give me that shrill tone that alerts me that I have a message, but it never comes.

Jaz tries to draw me out of my room a little later with the idea of us all watching a movie together but I decline. "Babe," she frowns. "You okay?"

I nod. "Just want to be alone. You know?"

"I can get rid of Jared," she offers.

"It's not even that," I tell her. She gives me a doubtful look, and I smirk. "I promise. If it was, I would tell you. I just really want to be alone. We'll head into work

together tomorrow though?”

“You got it.”

Right before I go to sleep, I check my phone to make sure I didn’t miss anything, and sure enough, not one single alert.

I sigh, set my alarm, and then turn over, shoving the pillow under my head so I can hopefully get some rest.

You’d think because I grew up in the Heights that I’d be used to disappointment. And I am. Just not one as big as this.

After two days of mind-numbing work at the bank, Friday comes. No texts from Finn. No news from Cole. I've even thought about talking to Jax again, but the thought of bothering the ornery brother of the guy who's currently ignoring my texts doesn't sit well with me.

Jaz enters the lunchroom during break smiling into her phone. It's a small room in the back of the brick building with a folding table and mismatched plastic and wood chairs. The furniture and appliances are a mishmash of employee contributions throughout the years. A year ago, the staff pooled money together and purchased a new microwave because the other bit the dust when Fran accidentally (because she's a moron) placed Olive Garden breadsticks in the microwave and never took them out of the bag that says Do Not Microwave across the side. The packaging is rimmed in foil, so of course that was the last straw. The microwave smoked so bad, we got complaints from customers.

I heat up my soup before joining Jaz at the table. Previously, we would've gossiped about co-workers or those annoying clients that every business has, but today, Jaz beams at me. "Soooo...."

"Oh jeez," I mutter, teasing her. "What now?"

She gives me a playful scowl. "Jared wants to go to the fights tonight." I go to make a face, but she charges on. "You liked them before you met Finn. Plus," she hedges. "I was kind of thinking—and don't get pissed..."

She waits for me to answer, so I roll my hand over to make her say whatever she wants.

“I was thinking that maybe he’s back and he just didn’t tell you.” She grimaces. “If we went to the fights tonight, we would know for sure.”

My brows practically creep into my hairline. I hadn’t thought of that. I don’t think Finn’s that kind of person. Then again, I didn’t think he’d be the kind of guy who didn’t text me back either. His only saving grace is that I don’t know exactly what he’s doing for Cole and maybe he just hasn’t had the time.

“You really loved the fights the last time,” she pressures. “Maybe, all you need is to fall in bed with someone else to get over him.”

My stomach turns over. It clenches so hard and so fast, I’m actually worried I’m going to get sick.

I know it seems like it wasn’t enough time to really like Finn the way I do, but I don’t care about shit like that. I care about what I actually feel.

I shake my head to rid myself of her words. “I’ll go with you. I’m not looking for another guy though,” I tell her. “But you’re right. I should probably get out.”

It beats staying at home and looking at my phone every ten seconds. Or letting Jaz do funny shit to try to keep me upbeat. Ever since the first night, she hasn’t invited Jared back over. No matter how many times I’ve told her that I really don’t care, she refuses. “It’s bestie time,” she keeps saying, and I love the hell out of her for it. But...I’m fine.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“Definitely,” I tell her. “Let’s do it.”

Later that night, we get ready, but I don’t have the same amount of enthusiasm as I did the first time we dressed up to go to the Ring. Apparently, Jared hasn’t gone back to Elite Boxing since Finn left. He was alerted that his future one-on-ones were canceled unless he wanted to sign up with Jax. He tried that, too, but Jax was booked out.

I feel bad for the grumpy trainer. He’s probably drowning in work because my brother sent him away, and that really isn’t fair.

Still, I make sure I look damn good before we leave in case Finn is there. I don’t know what I’ll do if he is, probably ignore him because he obviously made up his mind not to contact me again, a decision I can’t blame him for.

Jaz knocks lightly on my door. She’s dangling her cute boots by the heels. “You want to borrow these?”

I throw my head back and laugh. She really knows how to lift my spirits. Even so, I think about saying no, but who would turn down a pair of perfectly cute boots? “Who knows?” I shrug. “They were good luck last time.”

She smiles and plops them at my feet. Looking me up and down, she says, “You look cute!”

“Um...” I gape at her risqué outfit. “As do you. Damn. Are you trying to get Jared to propose?”

She blushes, something she’s been doing a lot more lately. “Oh God. We’re a ways away from that. Just showing him what he’ll miss if he fucks up.”

The burst of laughter that bubbles from my throat is genuine. That's our go-to line when one of us has a man. It started in high school when we specifically went to a party to call out Jaz's then boyfriend. Boy done fucked up when he cheated, that's all I got to say.

Here we are years later and Jaz can still rock an outfit. The deep blue tank of hers is skin-tight, leaving nothing to the imagination. The fabric hugs her curves, dipping to just above her ass. Her jeans take over from there, ending tapered at the ankle. Silver heels complete the outfit and give it a nice little upgrade from skanky to swanky.

Next to her, I look like a bag lady.

The regular boots I was going to wear with my good pair of work jeans and a black blouse scream bland. The peep-toe boots dress the outfit just enough so it's respectable. Either way, it's better than the t-shirt and jeans I originally wanted to wear, so there's that.

Earlier, I texted Cole to ask for a guard as we were going out to the Ring. He told me he'd send Dempsey to pick me up, and I was okay with that. Dempsey's cool. My brother proceeded to go overboard, informing me I can do whatever I want. Dempsey is just there to watch, not to comment. I asked him if he'd be coming himself, but he told me he had some business to take care of.

The firm knock on the apartment door makes Jaz jump. She sighs. "Dempsey?"



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:34 am*

“Most likely,” I tell her as I slip my feet into the boots.

“He’d be fine if he didn’t have that chip on his shoulder,” she calls out over her shoulder.

“I think that chip is always being on duty.”

“True,” she yells out as she opens the door. “Hey, Dempsey,” she says, her voice bright and enthusiastic.

“Jasmine. Is Colleen here?”

“In here,” I call out. “I’m almost ready.”

I take one last look at myself in the mirror, run my hands through my hair, and walk out. Dempsey, the huge Dragon, has taken sentry near the door. “Thanks for coming,” I tell him. “I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“Nothing better than making sure Cole’s sister is safe,” he says, lip tilting up in the corner.

“A man after my own heart,” Jaz sighs dramatically.

She steps out the door, and I follow after with Dempsey taking up the rear.

We take the short, brisk walk to the Ring a few blocks down. The same funnel of excited spectators line up around the block. I frown, wishing I could just go in the

side door like I used to with Finn and Jax, but I think better of it. Jared joins us a few moments later, raising his brows at seeing Dempsey's hulking form. "You got a shadow today?" he jokes, but it lands a little flat when his forehead pinches.

I shrug. "It could be worse."

He leans down, greeting Jaz with a peck on the lips. They stay glued to each other's side as the line crawls forward. It takes us twenty minutes to get to the guy manning the door. Inside, we can already hear the first fight being announced over the music.

Despite myself, shivers run up my arms as soon as I step in. A blast of excitement hits, making me smile. I'm glad I came, and a happy buzz settles in my gut with a contented sigh. I was worried it would remind me of Finn too much, and even though I am reminded of him, it's in a good way.

Jared takes the lead, showing us around the open walkway and then up the metal set of stairs again. This time, we don't have seats right next to the square opening in the middle of the room. We're a couple of rows back but still on the aisle. We sit like normal, and I glance over my shoulder to find Dempsey standing guard by the wooden bar table directly behind us. He nods at me, and I return the gesture.

So far, having him here is fine. He really isn't intruding like I thought he might when my brother first suggested I take a guard with me when I go places.

Jaz elbows me, grabbing my attention. "Happy?"

Her hopeful face shoves a blade into my ribcage. I've been a shitty friend lately, moping around like an ass. She's been doing nothing but trying to make me feel better, and I haven't thanked her for it.

I place my arms around her shoulders and pull her in. "Really happy," I tell her.

She pats my back. “Ugh. Thank God.”

When we pull away, Jared leans forward. He shifts his gaze over his shoulder and then back at me. He has terrible bags under his eyes that are almost a little concerning. I make a note to ask Jaz if he’s okay. “Is he staying with you all the time now?” he asks, flicking his gaze back to the big man.

“No, my brother just wants him with me when I go out.”

His brow furrows. “How do you feel about that?”

I shrug. “It could be worse. He could make him stay with me all the time.”

“Or you could be back at the tower again,” Jaz grumbles.

It’s hard for me to resent all of the time at the tower. I did spend a couple of hours there in pure bliss. But, I have to agree with her about that. There are people constantly around that place. Mean, scary looking people who draw guns on innocent girls. I can’t forget that.

The next round in the fight begins, and Jared tells us he’s sparred with the guy in the white trunks before. Automatically, my gaze drifts cageside. Jax is there. Like Finn used to, he’s yelling things rapid-fire as his guy faces off with his opponent. Another figure stands next to him, and I recognize him from the gym. He seemed to always be there. I can’t quite place his name, but it looks as if he’s taken Finn’s spot for the time being because he also puts his two cents in, cupping his hands around his mouth to call out advice.

I close my eyes briefly, telling myself not to look ringside. I need to keep my eyes on the fight. Focus on the energy I loved so much before Finn came into my life.

Miraculously, it works. I get caught up in the brutality, the fierceness. But now, I even search for the strategy between the two fighters. Everything Jax and Finn have called out while I was at the gym must have taken root somewhere inside my thick head because I keep thinking things Finn would be wanting his guys to do.

The fights come one after the other. Every guy that is in Jax's corner, I recognize from Elite Boxing. It's actually pretty awesome because I'm even more invested in what's going on. It takes my mind off the last few days, and I can just let go with the crowd, cheering on the fighters I know like they're my friends, too.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:35 am*

It makes for a fun night until one of the Elite Boxing athletes gets knocked out bad. The ref stops his opponent from causing even more damage while the guy is sprawled out over the baby blue mat with his eyes rolled back into his head and everything.

“Damn,” Jared grimaces. “That was rough.”

My heel bounces on the ground as Jax rushes into the cage with medical professionals. Blood streams from a gash in the athlete’s hairline, and even though I can’t see the exact moment he regains consciousness, I spy his feet move through the bodies crowding around him. I sigh in relief, hoping the guy will be okay. I’ve never been knocked out, but I imagine it sucks.

He’s still out of it by the time they announce the winner, the other guy’s hand gets raised in the ring solo. It’s his sixth knockout in a row, the announcer informs the crowd. There’s a whole section in the third level that goes crazy, and I glance up to see them jumping up and down, drinks spilling everywhere.

When the last fight ends anticlimactically, I still can’t keep my mind from the poor guy who got knocked out. Jared wants to go down and talk with some of the guys he knows, so we all head down to the first level again. He and Jaz move toward a group I recognize. For a moment, I stand there, greeting the guys with a smile, but I can only stand it for so long. I lean over to Jaz to tell her where I’m going, and then I motion for Dempsey to follow me.

I walk toward the door in the corner, pushing it open and navigating the back hallways like I know where I’m going. Dempsey’s footsteps are close behind as I make my way to the locker room. Surprisingly, the door opens in front of me when I

get there, and I'm greeted with an expanse of bare man chest. "Hey Leenie," the guy says.

I smile in return.

"We miss you at the gym."

A hard lump lodges in my throat. "Me too," I tell him. "Can I um...?"

"Yeah," he says. "Everyone's dressed."

I walk in. The sounds and the smells hit me all at once. They're both comforting and make a dull ache start in my chest at the same time. Searching for the guy who got knocked out, I find him in the corner, Jax sitting next to him talking softly.

Ignoring my rapidly beating heart, I stride toward them. Jax lifts his head when I get closer, complete shock registering on his face. "Leenie. I didn't know you were here."

My mouth dries out. I lick my lips and put on a brave face. "Yeah, I'm here with Jaz and Jared. Jared trained with you a few times."

"Right," he says. He glances behind me as if he's looking for Finn. Instead, his eyes shadow over because I'm sure he sees the Dragon flame licking up Dempsey's neck.

"I just wanted to check on your guy," I say, motioning to the fighter next to him. "I was worried."

The guy glances up, grinning. Sweat drips from the ends of his hair, and his teeth are stained red. He looks like he's been through war. "All good," he assures me. "I've had worse." Turning, he spits into a bucket. Jax runs a lumpy washcloth over the

fighter's back that more than likely has ice in it.

"Okay, well..." I look around, and it hits me that I didn't just come back here to see if the guy was okay. That was a major part of it, but I was also sick of sitting on the sidelines. It seems so wrong now. I should be back here with everyone, listening to them talk shop about how they're going to win next time. "I guess I'll leave you guys alone." I clear my throat. "See you later, Jax."

I spin on my heel, brushing past Dempsey to get the hell out of here. He's right at my back when Jax comes jogging up to me. He puts his hand on the door before I can open it. "You okay?" His eyes are similar to his brother's, and they burn right into me.

I glance away. "Totally fine." I give him a fake smile that I'm sure isn't fooling anyone, but he moves aside so I can leave anyway.

As soon as I can take a clear breath without everything in that room fogging my brain, I realize leaving the locker room isn't enough. I want to get the fuck out of this place, too. I tell Dempsey as much, and he leads me out the side door while I send a quick text to Jaz telling her that I'm leaving.

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Dempsey walks me all the way back home and up the stairs to mine and Jaz's apartment. He doesn't linger, I'll give him that. Something I really appreciate.

Jaz replies to my texts with a couple of sad faces, but she understands. I'm not in the mood to get all hot and sweaty with anyone on the dance floor right now, but she should totally stay and hang out with Jared. I don't need to be anyone else's buzzkill, I'm doing enough of a job of being my own.

Settling in for the night is rough because I'm too worked up. I can't shake the feeling that being here is wrong. It blows my mind. I love this damn apartment. However, at this point, I'm just a slave to the thoughts running circles through my mind, and they're all revolving around Finn and the world I was a part of—if only for that short period of time.

Groaning, I sit up in bed, breaking my staring contest with the ceiling. I pull on a hoodie over my outfit and some sensible sneakers before leaving. You're just going to go look at the house, I tell myself all the way to the bus stop. That's perfectly acceptable and non-stalkerish at all. Just a quiet stroll in the waning hours of the night. Maybe Max will be in the window, or maybe Finn will return home and I'll get to see him walk through the door. The only thing I know is, I can't go another minute thinking about their house—him—without actually seeing it.

The uneventful bus ride is quiet, keeping my own thoughts on repeat. Since there's nothing else to occupy my mind or a voice of reason to tell myself this is a dumb idea, the silence only reinforces the loneliness I've been feeling. In trying to help me, my brother has become more inaccessible than ever and he sent Finn away. It's no wonder why it feels like everything is falling apart.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as the bus nears my stop, and speak of the devil, it's Cole. Dempsey told me you left early. Are you okay?

I give him a thumbs up back.

His reply is unexpected, and my stomach clenches. I'm leaving again, Leen. Just wanted to let you know. Dempsey will be here for you. If you need anything. ANYTHING. Call me.

I don't know what I expected. He already told me he'd have to return to his business that's not quite finished. He fixed my problem like he said he would, and now he's



gone. I want to tell him to send Finn back, but at the same time, Finn hasn't even messaged me, so I won't have my brother give my crush a message like a total stalker. Instead, I text back: Be careful, big bro. Love ya.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:35 am*

Since my head is buried in my phone, I almost miss the stop. I jump up at the last second and pull the cord, hurrying down the aisle to exit out into the crisp, twilight air. Cold wind barrels down the street, so I hunker down in the hood, turtling to try to stay warm. Garbage rolls down the street and sidewalks. A trashcan must have been upended and no one has cleaned it up yet. I avoid a hamburger wrapper and stand at the junction between the public sidewalk and the short slabs of concrete that lead up to Jax and Finn's house. A light is on inside, and a figure moves. Jax's shorter, stockier build stands out from his brother's.

Before I realize it, I'm walking up the steps and standing in the spotlight of their harsh yellow porch lamp. I knock, and Max barks on the other side of the door, the sound menacing. It makes me smile, but it falls off my face when Jax whips open the door.

He tilts his head to the side, and I give him a short wave as he pushes the storm door. I catch it with my foot. "I just um..." Fuck. I start to backtrack, wondering what the hell I'm even doing here. Jax barely even likes me, and his brother has probably woken up from this flirtation and realized I'm not worth it.

Jax steps back, and no matter what I tell myself, I'm drawn inside. Maxie jumps at my feet, and I lean down to run my fingers through his short coat. He licks my hands and paws at me, and I smile even through the heaviness weighing my heart down. After a moment, I stand, chancing a look at the moody brother. My bravado doesn't hold up after that. I turn away, but not before seeing the frown on his face and the way he's staring right through me.

I want to spill my guts to him, but I hold back because saying everything out loud

will only make me feel like a loser, and obviously, no one needs that. I'm already at his fucking house...uninvited. A girl can only take so much depressing shit a day.

"Can I?" I gesture toward the stairs, hoping he'll understand what I want.

"Yeah," Jax says, swallowing. "Take the mutt, would you? He's a pain in my ass."

I smile at that then walk up the steps, calling for Max to follow. He bounds up next to me, then nudges Finn's door open and jumps right onto his twisted sheets. Leaving the light off, I head right in and lie down on his pillow. It still smells like him. And me. A mixture that puts a genuine smile on my face.

Max rolls over, kicking me with his paw. I place my hand on his belly and easily fall asleep far sooner than I have been in my own bed.

The next morning is a wake-up call of acting without thinking.

Maxie wiggles out from underneath my hand, and I blink awake. The sunlight streaming through the curtains practically blinds me so I roll over, stretching. Then, it all hits me with a raging inferno of embarrassment. Shit. I spent the night in Finn's bed—without him. Escaping out the window instead of going downstairs to face Jax sounds like a damn good idea at this point. I can only imagine the thoughts running through his head. Who the hell is this girl, and why the hell is she all up in my brother's business?

I groan and sit up while running my hand through my hair. A yawn rips through me a second later, and I stifle it so I don't bring any more unwanted attention to myself. At some point in the middle of the night, I must have toed my shoes off, so I force my heels back into them and head toward Finn's bathroom. There, I splash water on my face and use his mouthwash so I don't embarrass myself further if I happen to see Jax this morning. When I'm almost—but not entirely—presentable, I tiptoe down the

wooden steps.

Max comes running to me as soon as I hit the bottom step. I can't just shoo him away so I bend to pat the happy dog on the head. Before I can sneak out afterward, movement catches my attention from the corner of my eye. "Morning," Jax says gruffly.

I take a sobering breath and straighten. "Hey. I'm sorry about—"

He shakes his head, cutting me off. "I made breakfast. If you want some..."

I blink. Okay, that wasn't exactly the response I predicted. He takes in my reaction with a smirk before turning and moving into the kitchen. I peek at Max whose tail is going a hundred miles a minute. "He made me breakfast," I whisper.

As if the dog can understand what I'm saying, he licks my hand and then runs into the kitchen himself. I follow after the sweet little thing, my heart already warming. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to tell Cole about their dog. He wasn't in the mood to hear anything about Finn the last time we discussed him, so I kept my mouth shut. But I know for a damn fact that Cole would be losing his shit in front of a dog. He's always been an animal lover—same as me.

I walk toward the kitchen when Jax emerges with two bowls. He sets them down at the folding table in the formal dining room-turned-office, which apparently now serves a dual purpose as an eating space. I walk over and peer into the bowl, sneering at the tan mush. "You made me...oatmeal?"

Shrugging, he says, "I put brown sugar in yours." As if that's supposed to make it a hundred percent edible.

"No protein powder?" I chuckle.

He pauses his descent into a chair across from me and points over his shoulder toward the kitchen. “I got plenty if you want some.”

I make a gagging sound, and he smiles before plopping down fully. I follow suit, frowning at the porridge-like substance. I’ve never actually eaten porridge either, but I do know my fairy tales, and I’m pretty sure the last person to eat someone else’s porridge got in trouble. However, I’m not about to turn down a friendship offering, if that’s what this is. I shovel a spoonful into my mouth. Jax watches me, so I make sure to stifle my reaction. By the time I swallow, I realize there was nothing to suppress. My eyes widen. “This isn’t half bad.”

It’s his turn to make a gagging sound. “Yours probably tastes like pure sugar.”

He’s not wrong, and I’m sincerely happy about that fact.

Maxie lays at my feet, propping his head on the top of my shoe. I sneak a look down and smile.

Jax follows my gaze. “He hasn’t known what to do with himself with you two gone.”

My heart wrenches. I shove another spoonful of oatmeal into my mouth so I don’t have to answer.

After a few moments, Jax tries again. “You didn’t come back to work at the gym.”

I glance up, brow furrowing. “Did you want me to?”

“We gave you a job,” he supplies. “People are asking about shit, and I don’t know what to tell them.”

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I hide a smile. I think that's Jax speak for I miss you. "I went back to work at the bank."

"So, everything good then? Your brother took care of everything?"

"Swooped right in and cleaned it up," I answer with fake enthusiasm.

His eyes turn hard, and I concentrate on eating the oatmeal. At some point, he's going to bring up Finn, and I don't know what to tell him. If he knows his brother is avoiding me, then he'll probably ask me what the hell I'm doing here. Or tell me he's going to call the cops if I show up again. He could've just felt bad for me yesterday. Who knows?

Jax flicks his bowl out of the way and then leans back in the chair. It groans under his muscles. His face sours, and he sighs. "I'm sorry about being a jerk." He lifts his shoulders as if it's something he can't avoid. "I don't trust many people. I don't actually like many people..." He ends the thought, but it sounds so unfinished. There has to be a reason why.

When it's evident he's not going to continue, I pick up the conversation. "I don't blame you for being upset. I was thrust on you guys, so I understand. Plus, I get not wanting to be involved in gang shit."

He runs tattooed knuckles over his chin and shakes his head. "What I'm trying to get at is that my brother is one of the only people I do like in this world. I should've trusted his opinion sooner." Cheeks flaming, he rushes out his next thought. "I guess you're alright by me."

My lips part. I was not expecting that. Considering Finn won't even talk to me, I was expecting this conversation to go in a completely different direction. It's my turn to get red. "Thanks, but um, I guess it's a moot point considering Finn hasn't responded to my texts in days."

His brow furrows as he studies me. At some point, something must click because he says, "He can't. He's in the mountains or some shit. I thought you knew."

My jaw practically hits the table. "You mean he's not ignoring me?"

"Jesus Christ, no. The fucker won't shut up about you." I'm still trying to process everything he's saying when he lets out a laugh that makes me jump in the chair. It's a full-bellied guffaw that lightens all the features on his face. In that moment, he looks more like Finn than ever.

"What the fuck?" A smile breaks over my face, and I feel lighter than I have in days. "Are you serious?"

"I'm sorry," he says, trying to calm himself down. "It's not funny. I'm just picturing Finn getting back and having to smooth this over with you because you're not getting each other's texts." He laughs again, clenching his stomach. "He's going to lose his shit."

"Lose his shit? I was losing my shit."

He presses his lips together, but the corners keep quirking up. "I guess that's why you didn't come back to the gym, huh?"

I squeeze the side of the table, letting myself laugh right alongside him. "So, he does like me?"

Jax runs his hands through his closely cropped hair, the tattoos on his knuckles standing out. “Listen, I’m not playing matchmaker, but yeah, he likes you.” Afterward, he goes back to shoveling more oatmeal into his mouth while intermittently shaking his head and laughing. “Ahh, this is going to be so much fun,” he says, eyes glassy as if he’s still imagining Finn getting back and having to scramble to explain why he didn’t respond to any of my texts.

And being a sibling myself, I understand the humor. I’d be laughing my ass off if this was Cole and not me. Now, I’m actually just relieved Jax isn’t going to call the cops on Finn’s stalker.

“Do you know when he’s coming home?”

Jax shakes his head. “I lost contact with him as soon as he got there. I only know he’s okay because your brother told me.”

I narrow my gaze at that bit of information. I didn’t actually ask Cole if Finn was okay, so I can’t get mad at him for keeping that from me, but damn. He knew I would want to know. “Cole’s on my shit list,” I confirm.

“It’s tough being the older sibling,” Jax muses. “I get that he wants to keep you safe. It’s the same reason why I give Finn shit.”

“But you don’t like Cole.” I don’t even pose it as a question because I already know. There’s no love lost between them.

He shrugs. “I don’t like what Cole does. There’s a difference.”

The conversation fizzles out after that. Jax seems lost in his own thoughts, and I know that feeling, so I don’t bug him.



When we finish eating, he shoves his hands into his pockets. “You want to come to the gym today? Sort things out in the shop?”

“You really want me to?”

“As long as you don’t tell my brother I think the shop is working.”

I chuckle at that. “Sure, I just—” I suck in a breath. “Oh fuck. I never told Jaz where I went last night.” I pull my phone out of my pocket, and sure enough, a slew of mixed calls and texts wait for me. The last one reads: ARE YOU FUCKING ALIVE OR NOT?!

My eyes round. Jax comes to stand next to me. “Shit. You better fix that.”

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I press her name and bring the phone to my ear. “Are you fucking kidding me?!” is followed by a minute-long tirade of how now was the worst timenotto respond considering there was just someone after me. The word selfish was thrown around. Uncaring. Bitch was used more than a few times. When she finishes, she huffs. “Are you still there?”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

She groans in frustration. “I know. Where are you? You are okay, right?”

“Yes. I’m at Jax and Finn’s.”

She brightens up at that. “He’s back.”

“No.” I peek up at Jax who gives me a little space. “Not yet, anyway. We don’t know when. I just found myself here last night. I’m so sorry. I fell right asleep, and I didn’t even hear the calls and texts. I slept like the dead.”

“You probably needed it,” she concedes.

“So, we’re good?” I probe. I hate it when Jaz is mad at me. It’s the worst.

“We’re good, skank. Just don’t do it again. Jared’s been just as worried as I have.”

“Awww,” I coo, warming up at the thought of the two lovebirds.

“Shut up. You coming home?”

I tap my foot on the hardwoods. “Jax actually invited me to go to the gym to help with the store again. Do you mind?”

“No, ‘course not. Now that I don’t think you’re dying in some fucking alleyway somewhere, I don’t care.”

I chuckle. Leave it to my best friend to be hella blunt. “Love you.”

“Same, bitch. I’m going to go back to bed because I’m fucking tired from being worried about your ass all night. You’re so lucky I never called Cole. I was so close.”

I grimace at that. Yeah, that was definitely lucky.

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Since I spent the night at their house, my body must have known to wake up at the ass crack of dawn. I have time to make myself more presentable before we head to the gym. After our heart-to-heart, Jax doesn’t talk very much as we walk to the bus stop and ride across town to Elite Boxing. When we get there, we each go our separate ways. I return to work on the shop like he asked me to, and he readies things for a full day of training. Within ten minutes, clients start entering, and the beating of fists on pads and masculine grunts fill the air like I never left.

A few guys approach the counter while I’m working, asking where I’d gone. In a way, this place is like a family to the athletes. The same faces are here all the time, working and committing to becoming a better fighter while they receive help from two of the best coaches around—my completely unbiased opinion, of course.

It takes me a few days to straighten around the mess that occurred while I was gone. I work at the gym after my shift at the bank where I’m all but going through the motions. The gym is where my heart lies. I’ve been going back and forth between the

brothers' house and my own apartment. Jared is always shacking up with my bestie now, so I feel more comfortable in the big traditional house with the grumpy trainer and thinking about Finn. Who'd have thought?

During a lull at the shop one evening, I decide to give my brother a call. Since finding out Finn isn't actually ignoring me, I need to have a conversation with my brother about how we're going to move past this bump in our relationship. It's probably a talk best to have face-to-face, but with Cole, who knows when that will be?

His phone immediately goes to voicemail, and I frown. The message tone beeps in my ear, and I quickly lick my lips and take a deep breath before starting. "Hey, it's me. I'm going to leave this on your voicemail so I can let everything out that I want to without you getting mad at me." The more I talk, the easier it gets. I word vomit things I've been wanting to say to him since he got back. "When you left, I was devastated. I got why you did it, but I mourned you when you were gone. I wasn't sure that you were ever going to come back. Then, you did, and I was so happy I got my big brother back."

I smile, remembering how thrilled I was. Emotion starts to clog my throat, so I choke it back and move to the far wall where I'm out of the way of everybody. "Then things started to change. I became an object for you to keep safe, like a precious piece of glass or something. I get it. I do. I wish I'd been able to help you all those years ago, but I'm not going to shatter. Cole, I'm strong. I grew up in those years you were gone. You're still my big brother, but I'm not so little anymore. I want to be in your life more than anything. However, you can't dictate my life anymore. You have to respect what I want. I'll listen to your advice, especially when it comes to threats or safety, but I'm not your responsibility. You have so much on your plate already, and I don't want to be that extra thing added to it. I'm not your job. I'm your sister." I bite my lip. "I love you, big bro. I'm sure I'll be getting a response as soon as you get this. I hope you're safe."

I end the call, pressing the red hang up button. I fret over my lip some more, but in actuality, I feel so much lighter with that off my chest. I had no idea the baggage I was carrying around by feeling as if I was adding to Cole's long list of responsibilities. Hopefully, he'll understand what I'm saying.

Shit. I turn, leaning my temple against the wall. I forgot to bring up Finn. I call back, praying the phone goes straight to voicemail again. When it does, I heave a sigh of relief. After the tone sounds, I say, "One more thing. Hopefully, you're listening to this voicemail last because the other one explains everything. I'm going to be with Finn, Cole. If he'll have me, anyway. I know you get protective, but this is one of those times where you just have to trust me. He's a good guy. A great guy, actually. And also, it's bullshit that you sent him away. Still kinda pissed about that." I blow out a breath. "That's all, I guess. Call me."

I lower the phone after hanging up. I don't immediately recognize the fact that all sound has stopped in the gym. I'm too caught up in getting all that shit off my shoulders. Then, a single voice breaks through my maze of thoughts. "You're going to be with me?"

Spinning, my heart lodged in my throat. Finn's standing at the counter. He's dressed in his normal joggers and athletic shirt, the tips of his dirty blond hair teasing his ears. I blink, making sure he's actually in front of me.

I don't answer him. I run and throw myself into his arms. He catches me in the air, and I hook my ankles around his backside. The whole gym erupts into applause, but it's white noise to me. My nose finds his neck, and I breathe him in. His musky scent an addiction I don't want to go without smelling again.

"Leenie," he breathes, fingers tightening around my middle and moving up my back. "Did you just tell your brother off for me?" The curve of his smile melts against my neck. My breath hitches in response.

Behind us, Jax calls out, “Get back to work. Mind your business.”

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The two of us chuckle into each other. I kiss a line up his jaw, and then pull away to stare into his amber-flecked blue eyes. They're sparking as he studies me. Reaching up, I cup his cheek. "You're damn right I did." I lace my fingers at the back of his neck and pull him forward until our lips meet hungrily.

A whistle rips through the air, and several chuckles and catcalls spread like wildfire, but I'm too busy showing Finn how much I missed him to care.

He groans, the sound like a dark promise. "I can't believe I was missing this," he whispers against my lips, then delves his tongue into my mouth, sure strokes sweeping inside me as I tighten my hold, trying to bring him closer even though we're already pressed so tightly together. The thickening of his cock serves as the only reminder that maybe I shouldn't be pawing at him in public. In his business. In front of all his clients.

He pulls away to lean his forehead against mine, taking in deep breaths. I press my palm against his chest, feeling his heart beat like crazy under my touch. "Are you okay?"

"More than okay." He presses a chaste kiss against the tip of my nose. "My girl waited for me, even though I couldn't respond to her texts."

I smile. "Your brother saved the day. He told me you couldn't get service in the mountains. By the way, the mountains? Where the hell were you?"

"Arizona. But rewind what you just said. Jax saved the day? My brother?"

A deep voice chimes in beside us. “You’re welcome, asshole.”

Finn turns with me in his arms. He greets his brother with a smile then reaches out so they can touch knuckles. “I’d say hello properly but letting her go right now is a bad idea.” I start to retreat, but he holds me close. “No, baby. I’ll embarrass myself if everyone sees me right now.” He covertly grinds against me, and I finally understand what he’s talking about by my more than stiff welcome.

I glance at Jax. “It’s true. Not a good idea.”

The older brother shakes his head. “Kids,” he mutters.

Finn flips him off, and I do, too, for good measure.

“Just get the fuck out of here you two. No one’s training because they’d rather watch the show.”

“Don’t mind if we do,” Finn says, leaning his forehead against mine with that warm smile I missed like crazy. He tightens his arms around my back and starts walking toward the exit. More catcalls and whistles pierce the air, but Finn keeps going with me tucked into his embrace.

When the evening air hits my back, I glance back into the gym. I lock gazes with Jared whose hard stare shakes me for a moment. I hadn’t even seen him come in. I smile, and he immediately grins back. I am pretty out of it right now, so I probably misinterpreted his stare. The only thing I’m concerned about is getting Finn in his bed.

At the edge of the parking lot, my hunky MMA trainer finally loosens his hold so I can lower to my feet. He clasps his hand in mine, squeezing. “You missed me,” he says, echoing the text I sent him.



“A scary amount,” I admit. “I’ve been sleeping in your bed.”

He doesn’t hide a wide smile. “Oh great, so you went full on stalker-status when I left?”

“Pretty much. Don’t run because I’ll just come after you.”

He chuckles and leans down to kiss me again right there on the sidewalk in the middle of the Heights. We get lost in each other until we hear the whining bus brakes. Tugging on my arm, he forces us apart, and we have to run to the stop. Thankfully, the driver waits for us. We swipe our passes and take the first seats we can find.

I cuddle in close, not wanting to lose any more time. “Why were you in Arizona?”

He turns toward me on the seat, and I note how exhausted he looks. Bluish-purple shadows sag under his eyes. “To help train a girl in self-defense. I don’t know why, and I probably should be thankful for that. Knowing your brother, it could be any number of things.”

He’s right about that. “Who was she?” I ask, wondering why my brother would care about some random girl he claims isn’t a girlfriend. She must be important to him if he wanted her trained.

“Dakota Wilder.” Wrinkles crease his forehead. “Really nice girl. Do you know the name?”

I shake my head, frowning. “Never heard of her.”

He reaches out to grab my hand before bringing it to his lips and kissing my knuckles one-by-one. “I’m sure he’ll tell you some time. Have you been taking care of Max for me? I was worried about him.”

“Yeah, he’s been sleeping with me.”

“Lucky dog.”

“He misses you though,” I grin.

“So I heard.”

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I almost snort. “I’ve never written my feelings out in text, okay?”

He locks eyes with me. “I didn’t get them until I left Clary at your brother’s instructions. Instead of writing you back, I figured I’d say everything in person.” I look at him expectantly, waiting for him to come out with it then. He leans forward with a mischievous smile. “Oh, I’m going to do all that but I’ll be inside you when I do.”

My face flames. I lay my head on his shoulder, and he holds me until our stop. We get off the bus hand-in-hand, walking silently. When we get closer to the house, Finn picks up the pace. He unlocks the door and throws it open when Max saunters forward to greet us.

The poor little thing yips, throwing himself into Finn’s arms, and I wonder if that’s exactly what I looked like when I did the same thing at the gym. He loves on the dog, cuddling Maxie while I stand next to him, tracing my fingers up and down his spine. His muscles ripple underneath my skin. I can’t stop touching him. I don’t want to.

“Give me one second.” Finn stands, pressing a quick kiss to my lips and then strides toward the kitchen. He rummages around in the treat bin and showers Max with a bunch of meat bites before letting the dog outside. He all but marches back to me like he’s on a mission. Immediately, he wraps his arms around me again, kissing me with so much force that I nearly topple backward. His fingers tangle in my hair, tugging to change the angle and deepening his exploration of my mouth. He walks us backward until my back presses against the wall with a solid thud. His hips find mine, grinding his erection against me. The dig of his fingers into my hips has me gasping for breath, my panties dampening at his reckless passion.

Kissing up the line from jaw to ear, he sucks my earlobe into his mouth. His hot breath caressing the same sensitive area sets me on fire. “I immediately wished we had so much more time together,” he breathes. “I want to live between these thighs.”

I place my hands on his shoulders and climb his body, once again locking my legs around his ass. We both groan simultaneously when the movement brings us together right where we want. “Take me upstairs, Finn,” I demand.

He complies with another moan, kissing down my neck to my clavicle. I drop my head backward as he easily navigates the steps before walking into his room and kicking the door closed behind us. The waning light outside deepens the shadows in the room, making it so I can only see his outline as he lays me on the bed.

“Can you turn the light on? I want to see you.”

He reaches back, flipping the switch until he’s illuminated before me, his hot gaze raking down my body. “So much better.” He drops to his knees, fingers wrapping around the waistband of my leggings and pulling them to my ankles. He takes my panties right with them, eases my shoes off then my barrier of clothing. Parting my knees, he wraps his strong hands around my thighs and yanks me forward until his hot breath caresses my folds. He darts his tongue out in an exploratory kiss. “Just like I remembered.”

I buck off the mattress into his moaning full lips, and he takes my offering with abandon, working me up in a short amount of time.

My memory did not do him justice. Holy hell. “Finn,” I gasp. “I want you inside me.” I fist the sheets as spikes of pleasure roll through my body.

He looks up, taking me in, and the determination in his gaze sends a shiver from my toes to the crown of my head. Anticipation crawls over me, and I lie back, waiting for

his wild ride.

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Slowly, he rolls his tongue over my clit with his steely eyes on mine. It feels like a dare, a challenge to make me tell him to stop because he knows how badly I want his dick inside me. My thighs clench.

“I’m just saying,” I breathe out, stopping myself from lacing my hands behind his head and holding him to me. “I know how long you can spend down there, but I want to feel you.”

Ignoring me, he closes his eyes, lips and tongue driving me completely mad. He brings me to the brink and backs off. “Remove your shirt, Leenie,” he instructs, mouth hovering over my sensitive flesh.

I lean up, grasping my athletic tank by the hem and peeling it over my head. The bra is stitched in again, so when I toss it to the side, I’m bare, my breasts rising and falling in quick succession.

He glides his hands up my sides, up over my ribcage, to the swell of my breasts. His fingers knead and play in a rhythm that he takes up with his mouth on my bundle of nerves. I peek down my body, watching him savor his every move like he’s eating the most delicious dessert off an expensive buffet. The noises emanating from his throat turn me on as much as his movements.

The more I try to hold back a climax, the further up he ratchets me. “Finn!” I warn. “I’m not going to be able to—”

“I want to taste your pleasure,” he hums, sucking on my clit again.

My hips come off the bed, right into him. He moves his grip to my ass, propping me up as he feasts on me. “Cock...” I manage to get out.

“I’m going to give it to you. I promise.”

He places one arm around my back and moves his free hand between us. He doesn’t test the boundaries this time. He doesn’t make sure I’m wet enough. He guides two fingers into my pussy, and I buck against him wildly.

“Yes. Ride my face. More.” He thrusts his fingers inside my core in time with swirling his tongue around my clit. My shaking body hits the precipice, and I cry out. He removes his fingers, gripping my ass again with focused attention on my tight bud, driving me higher and higher, prolonging my orgasm until he mercifully kisses up my thigh and to my hip.

My muscles relax, and I all but melt into a puddle on his bed. “You’re so fucking good at that. Holy shit.” I can’t even be mad that I didn’t cum around his cock yet.

He chuckles, and I open my eyes to find him reaching behind his head to remove his shirt. His gloriously defined body awaits, and I take in every hard dip and chiseled muscle until I get to his belly button. Standing, he pushes his joggers down his muscular legs. Again, he doesn’t waste time with undergarments. Whatever he was wearing underneath his joggers is gone, his cock standing at attention, straining.

He reaches over to his bedside table, removing a single condom. Tearing it open, he grins at me. “I want to take my time with you, beautiful.” He rolls the rubber down his impressive length, and thank the heavens, my body comes alive again. Crawling over me, he takes his time kissing up my eager flesh. Licking my inner knee, sucking the junction of my thigh, then moving higher, dipping the tip of his tongue in my belly button crevice. Moving up, he brushes featherlight kisses over my ribs, then trails his tongue over the curve of my breast.

With a firm hand around my back, he hikes me up the bed, following after me with sensual kisses between my breasts that raise the hair on my arms. He settles at my entrance, and my breath hitches. My body is screaming for him. Slowly, he peeks up, eyelashes fanning over his cheeks. He moves one hand around my leg, holding it in the crook of his arm while he steadies himself on his other palm.

Poised there, I'm practically coming apart with need. "Is this okay?" he asks, his cock settling against my pussy. I nod eagerly, sucking my bottom lip into my mouth. He presses inside, moving so slow that I moan at his leisurely pace. It takes him forever to fill me. Every last hard ridge works past my opening in excruciating and pleasurable detail. We never look away from each other, as if a promise passes between us in that moment. When he's finally buried inside me all the way to the hilt, he leans over me, taking my leg with him and moving it against my body.

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“Oh shit,” I moan. The foreign position heightening my senses.

He starts a methodical, steady pace, his movements all flexes of the hip. His muscles ripple, and I practically drool watching him work in and out of me.

My name on his lips makes me look at him. “I missed you. It scared me how much I missed you.” He bites down on his lower lip, moaning as he thrusts hard once, pausing when he’s fully seated only to draw out again in his tortoise pace.

I drop my head back on the pillows, keeping my gaze on his. My toes curl. “I was worried about you.”

His gaze turns hard, and with it, comes a burst of speed. Rapid thrusts that force a cry from my mouth before he slows again. “It was killing me not to know if you were okay.”

“You might kill me,” I tell him, wrapping my hands in the sheets. “Death by sex seems like a fun way to go though.”

He lets my leg go and drops to his elbows, caging me in. “Nothing’s going to happen to you while I’m here.”

I reach my hands around his neck, pulling him down to kiss me. I force the pace, and he complies with faster rolls of his hips, pinning me to the bed. I kiss him until the pleasure gets too much, and I have to break away to moan his name. Throwing my head back, I arch into him, meeting every determined stroke.



He wraps his lips around my nipple, sucking the pebbled tip into his hot mouth. Powerful sensations zip through me, settling in my core. He lashes out with his tongue, as if demanding the cries that pour from me. Switching to my other breast, he gives it the same treatment with the same result.

I meet him thrust for thrust, another climax rushing toward me. He reads my body like a damn manual, keeping the pace until I shudder around him, pussy clenching his cock.

A shudder runs down his body as I orgasm. The pure adoration in his eyes slays me, and my heart stretches as if filleting open with quick slices.

“Your turn.” I buck into him, turning him over, and landing on top.

“Fuck,” he grunts, gripping my hips. I move over him in the slow, deliberate pace he set for me. He lets me do it, his hands on my hips as if he’s only along for the ride. “You feel so good.” He skims his hands up my sides and palms my tits, squeezing and kneading. “It’s like you were made for me.”

If I was made for his dick, I’m one lucky girl. From this position, I’m well aware of his superb length and girth.

I drift my hands over his abs, lightly skimming his taut body. His muscles jump underneath my touch, and he moans. Falling forward, I place my palms on the bed next to his shoulders and kiss his neck, licking the taste of salty sweetness from his skin. I playfully bite his earlobe, and he thrusts his hips into mine, forcing me to cry out. I was about to be smug and ask him how I feel, but fuck, he has everything over me.

Instead, I rim his ear with the tip of my tongue then lower again, tracing my lips over his jaw. He turns his head to find my mouth, and we come together in more punishing

kisses, each of us unable to get enough of the other.

He moans my name as I sit back again, my hands drifting to his abs. They constrict underneath my palms, and I start a new rhythm that's meant to drive him wild but is soon taking me right along with it. "I can't get enough of you," I gasp. "Fuck. Finn."

His fingers dig into my thighs, moving up my skin to grip my hips, urging me to move over him faster. "So sexy. This pussy...damn girl."

Holy dirty talk. I swear my cunt spasms in response.

"Take what you want, Leenie," he orders.

I'm desperate for more. I rock into him, heavy breaths and moans escaping with every untamed movement.

"I'm close, baby. So close."

My climax is an eventuality. It's a spot in the distance that I know I'll hit if I just stay the course. My hands on his abs, I rock into him again and again until the apex of the pleasure nears. My body shivers uncontrollably the closer it gets, so Finn uses his hands to help me move over him as the wrenching euphoria takes over. My pussy clenches repeatedly as I grind against him.

He growls low in his throat, his abs tensing as he jerks inside me. I bear down on his cock, feeling him pulse inside me until my climax takes over again. I work my hips, wanting to keep us suspended for as long as we can, and when we finish, I'm fucking dead.

The haze of ecstasy dissipates, and Finn comes back into focus. He tugs on my arms, and I fall against him. He locks his hand behind my neck and guides me to his mouth,

kissing me frantically, arching into me until he turns to his side. I fall back on the mattress with a giddy smile.

His drawn face sobers me up. I blink at him as he reaches out to pinch me. “Are you real?”

I burst out laughing, kiss him solidly on the mouth again. “I should be asking you that.”

He hitches his lips up in a lopsided grin. “Hold that thought. I have to take care of business.”

He rolls off the side of the bed, pinches the end of the condom to slide it off, and throws it in the wastepaper basket on the other side of the nightstand. He opens the door to the hallway, then looks both ways before shooting out of view. The plumbing runs next door and then shuts off. Returning, he saunters back into the room much more slowly than when he left. “Jax isn’t back,” he explains. “I thought he might be.”

“He’s going to tell you how big of a stalker I am.”

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“You can stalk me all you want, baby.” He lies next to me, opens his arms, and I scoot next to him and place my hand on his chest. It raises and lowers with each breath he takes. “You want to catch me up on what I missed?”

I don’t really want to but I figure naked conversations with Finn—even if they entail my brother—are better than clothed conversations with Finn. “Well, after Cole neutralized the threat...” I say, mimicking my brother’s voice so he knows those aren’t my words. “...I went back to work. Then I went to the Ring and watched the fights with Jared and Jaz. One of your guys got knocked out. Like, scarily knocked out cold.”

He freezes his slow perusal of his fingertips against my hip. “Who?”

I shrug. “Sorry. I don’t remember the name. You’ll have to ask Jax. Afterward, I just couldn’t stay away any longer, so I showed up here like a true creeper. Your brother let me in, and I slept in your bed. The next morning, he asked how come I hadn’t been back to work at the shop. I didn’t think you’d really want me there since you weren’t answering my texts...” His lips pull down into a frown. “So...that’s when it came out that you didn’t have cell phone service. Your brother thought that was hilarious, by the way. He probably needs a throat punch.”

“Throat punch?”

“Yeah, that’s what I threaten my brother with when he pisses me off.”

Finn shakes his head. “Nope, we do kidney punches. Hurts a lot more.”

Well, he would know. “Then he deserves a kidney punch.”

Finn chuckles, the sound like pure warmth. He turns over to start running his fingers through my hair. “You should know I’m not mad at your brother. I deserved to be called out that day in the tower, but I just couldn’t fucking stop myself from wanting you anymore.”

“He was wrong,” I tell him, biting the inside of my lip. “He shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

“He’s just being a big brother.”

“Ugh,” I grumble. “That’s what your brother said.”

“Of course he did,” Finn muses. “In any case...” He curls his fingers around my ear. “I don’t care who your brother is. I don’t care who you are past the girl I see in front of me right now. I’m not willingly leaving you again. Period.”

My heart squeezes. I tangle my legs with his as if I can keep him true to his word with that small action. “Ditto. I’m done hiding from my feelings. I don’t care if Cole doesn’t like it. Or Jax.”

Finn breaks out into another award-winning smile. “If Jax let you spend the night here without me, you’ve won him over. You don’t even need to worry about that.”

“Well, that’s a step in the right direction.”

He moves his hands down to cup my ass, and I wrap my arm around his neck, kissing the side of his throat.

Now, all I have to do is make sure Cole doesn’t put on his gang leader persona and

try to force his will on either of us.

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Unsurprisingly, when Finn and I come up for air, Jaz has left a slew of messages on my phone.

HE'S BACK?!?!?!?

STOP GETTING DICK, I NEED THE DEETS

BITCH, I SWEAR TO GOD.

IF YOU'RE IGNORING ME FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN DICK, WE CAN'T BE FRIENDS ANYMORE.

Finn reads over my shoulder while we're at the breakfast table, pressing a chaste kiss to my shoulder. He breaks out into a smile. "Well, there was lots of that," he says, playfully nipping me.

Jax looks like he's going to throw up, but he keeps his comments to himself. The big lug is happy his brother is home, too. I can feel it. Even if it is because Finn can take care of the dog again. "Are you coming to work today?"

Finn nods, then narrows his gaze when Jax slips a bowl of oatmeal across the table toward me. The bastard's been lessening the sugar in it each time, but I'm too happy to call him out on it right now. Plus, I'm going to need energy to keep up with my sex drive. Finn is a tank. Built to fucking last.

Praise the sex gods.

“And you?” Jax asks, glancing at me.

Since we’re up at the buttcrack of dawn again, I’m not in any danger of being late to work. My plan is to drop by the apartment with a coffee for Jaz to smooth things over with her, and then we’ll head to work together. Instead of giving the brothers a play-by-play, I tell them duty calls, and that duty is sitting behind a counter playing with other people’s money.

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Finn pouts, the adorable creased lower lip making me goofy smile at him.

“I liked it better when you had the leave of absence.”

“Well, a girl’s gotta make money. I can’t just lay on my back all day.”

Finn breaks out into a grin, but Jax pretends to gag. “I’m so excited for this new joint future,” he deadpans. Grumbling, he adds, “My little brother getting some...”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a bear to everyone,” I tease.

He grunts in response. “I’m not changing. Whoever wants to get with me can fucking deal.”

I glance toward Finn, and he gives a half shrug, as if to say, Sounds about right.

Jax certainly has everything going for him, too. I don’t know his story other than what I’ve partially gleaned from Finn. He was burned super bad in the past, so who can blame him for being gun shy? However, I find it hard to believe that girls aren’t throwing themselves at him when the Ring turns into a club post-fights. He’s all tatted up and muscley. A girl with a few shots in her might brave his scowl and go for it.

When I tell him as much, he glares at me. “It’s the quality of the lay, youngin’. I don’t want just any.”

I’m shelving this conversation with him for another day because what I really want to



tell him is that he won't be attracting any good ones with his permanent pissy face. But I'm new here, so I don't want to test his hard stare either. Next thing I know, he won't be letting me come back, and I quite like Finn...and his bed...and many other things I explored last night.

I spoon the last of my oatmeal in my mouth and stand. "I have to get going." I kiss the top of Finn's head on my way to the kitchen to place my bowl in the sink. "Call me."

He catches me around the waist on my way back through. "I can ride the bus home with you."

I give him a placating smile. "I'll be fine. Situation neutralized, remember? I'm a big girl."

"I've been thinking," Jax pipes up. "You should take a few classes with us as a precaution. I'm not saying you can't handle yourself, but some training is better than no training."

Finn widens his eyes at his brother, shocked, and then turns the same look to me. "I wholeheartedly agree."

"We can discuss," I offer, inwardly grimacing at what I've seen them make their clients do. "Honestly, I'm worried you guys will eat me alive."

"We'll go easy on you."

Jax hits Finn upside the back of the head on his way to take care of his own bowl. "The hell we will."

Finn presses his lips together to keep from laughing. When his brother's back is

turned, he mouths, “We will.”

I lean over to press a hard kiss to his lips and then make myself walk away. “Bye. See you both after work.”

My furry friend follows me to the door, and I reach down to give Max some loving before heading out the door. I stole Finn’s hoodie this morning, so I pull it tighter around me, breathing in his scent. This freaking early, there is hardly anyone out and about. The bus rolls to a stop within ten minutes, and I climb the steps in the clothes I wore to the gym yesterday. The only other people riding are dressed way better than me at the present moment.

The bus travels along the Heights streets, and I watch the city come alive out the window. More and more cars start to pass. The pedestrians on the sidewalk wait at crosswalks as we cruise on by. When we finally get to my stop, I wave at the driver and step down. The crisp morning air wakes me even further, and I head right for mine and Jaz’s favorite coffee spot. I didn’t bother to text her that I was coming home. Knowing her, she’s still sleeping. Plus, the coffee will be a peace offering for not answering any of her texts yesterday while I was rolling around in the sack with Finn.

The barista calls out my order, and I pick it up before heading back out onto the cracked sidewalk. The one person I haven’t heard from since yesterday is Cole. Either he’s avoiding me, or he’s gotten wrapped up in the business he had in Arizona and can’t write me back. It’s unlike my brother to leave me hanging, but Dempsey is in town, and if he knew anything happened to Cole, he’d tell me.

As I’m walking up the wood stairs to my apartment, my phone rings. I fish the device out of the pocket of Finn’s sweatshirt and grin when I see his name scrolling across the screen. “Hey,” I answer.

He groans. “Even your voice is sexy. Can you come back?”

I laugh, biting my lower lip in the process. “You’re going to wear me out.”

“I just want to be around you. Skip work. Let’s watch Netflix all day and cuddle.”

I hold the phone between my shoulder and ear as I pull my keys out. “You have a bunch of fighters who missed the hell out of you.”

“Yeah, but they’re not as hot as you,” he says dismissively.

Finally getting the lock to click, I push the door open. I’m jostling the two coffees, my phone, and the keys, so I lightly tap the door shut with my heel, so I don’t wake Jaz up. “I promise some other time. I have a best friend to dish to about the amazing sex I had last night.”

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He makes an amused sound, and I imagine he's smirking. "Fine. Tell Jaz I say hi."

My ears perk up as a thump sounds from her room. I move past the couch, throwing my keys on the coffee table. "Actually, I think she's up. I'll tell her right now."

I hold the phone between my shoulder and my ear again to push her door open when everything starts to slip. I save the two coffees but lose my phone. "Shit," I curse as it hits the carpet.

"There she is," a dark voice says.

I nearly jump out of my shoes. I squeeze the cups of coffee so hard, the tops pop open. "Christ," I mutter, about to give Jared a piece of my mind when I glance up. My heart jumps into my throat. I skid to a stop as icy dread fills the pit of my stomach. Jaz is tied to the bed, and Jared sits at her desk chair, a knife in his hand.

I blink. "What the fuck?"

The Jared before me is nothing like the guy my best friend first met. The shadows around his eyes I noticed at the fights are deeper, huge dark caves circling black eyes. He holds his finger over his mouth. "Shhh." Scowling, he peers over at Jaz. I follow his angry stare, my heart nearly ripping in half. My best friend in the whole world's wrists are bound tightly to the bedposts by two strips of fabric. Her pale cheek is pushed into a pillow, scraggly hair spider-webbing over her face and mouth. My gaze works lower, and I spot a circle of crimson staining her shirt.

I scream, dropping the two coffees as my hand flies up to cover my mouth. "Jaz!"

I try to run to her, but Jared steps in my way. “You took way too long to get here,” he tsks. “I don’t know if she’s going to live now.”

My gaze rakes down her again. Her pale skin is ghostly white. Her legs open oddly, pulled up but also attached to the foot of the bed by the same bright blue cloths. “What did you do?” I stammer.

His maniacal laugh chills me to the bone. “What did I do? Let’s talk about what you did,” he counters. He pushes my shoulders slightly, and I stumble back a step. “Do you know how hurt she was when you completely abandoned her after the Ring that night and started staying with those two trainers? I kept telling her you weren’t a good friend. She didn’t want to hear it. She always gave you excuses. You were just too damn sad. You were dealing with too much stuff,” he mimics, pressing his lips together. “Can I just tell you howfucking annoyingit was that with Cole and Finn gone youstillwent over to that house instead of staying here?” He lets out a roar of frustration and pulls the knife up to stare at the red-stained tip. “Or else it would’ve been you in this bed.”

He switches his dark eyes to me, and I back into her dresser. “Jared...? What the fuck are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” he growls. “That I’m herefor you. Your friend’s a nice girl, but I was supposed to get to know every little thing about you.”

I tamper down the fear clawing up my throat. “W-why?” My gaze travels back to my unmoving bestie, and Jared screams at me to look at him. I comply, swallowing.

He waves his hand around. “Because Dean asked me to. That’s why.”

“Who the fuck is Dean?” I reach up onto the dresser, searching for something—anything—and my hand clasps around Jaz’s perfume bottle. It’s heavy

glass, so I grip it tightly, holding it so that the pointy bottom sticks out of my fist.

“Your brother didn’t look for me,” Jared continues like we’re just having a Sunday chat about recipes. His voice alternates between the same tenor I’m used to hearing from him and a sort of deranged voiceover. “I was the one person he didn’t see coming.” He chuckles, and I take small steps, trying to get as far away from him as I can without cluing him in to what I’m doing. “My cousin Dean left the threat so the Dragons would find it. He thought he would spook the leader, maybe make him leave the Heights for good. I kept telling him it wasn’t going to work, but he didn’t listen.”

I blink at him, still edging away as he nears. “Your cousin is the one who threatened me. Why?”

“Gang related bullshit. I was only doing what he asked, but now that he’s dead,” he snarls. “It’s a different story.” He doesn’t give me any indication as to what he’s about to do until he lunges for me. I lift the perfume bottle too late but somehow still manage to smash it against his temple. He cries out, fingers reaching up the side of his face where broken glass is embedded in his skin.

I try to slip past him, but he charges me again, tackling me against the dresser. The wood bites into my back, and he quickly knocks my feet out from under me. I fall to the ground, a surge of pain flaring in my elbow. He forces my shoulders to the carpet by banding his forearm across my clavicle. I push and kick with everything I have, finally connecting with something, but his grip never loosens.

A slicing pain rips through the side of my calf, and I cry out. His answering sinister smile tells me he cut me with the blade in his hand. I flail and break free long enough to crawl to the doorway, but he’s on me again, yanking me back. “Your brother killed him. Dean. I didn’t care about getting dragged into his shit before, but I care now.”

He flips me back over and kneels on my thigh. Warm wetness trickles down my leg. I

spot the knife discarded under the bed still wet with my blood. It's still within his reach. All he has to do is lean back, and since he has me trapped here, I don't want to think about the damage he could do. I stare into his crazed eyes. Seeing this version of Jared, I can't imagine how I ever thought he was good looking, pushing Jaz to pursue him when he came into the bank. I thought it was fate. "Don't hurt me," I whimper.

Jared throws his head back and cackles. My heart ricochets against my ribcage. His utter lack of humanity tightens my chest. "Do you think your brother listened when Dean said that?" He leans his entire weight into my thigh, and a searing pain lances from that spot. He notices me hissing and smiles. "Hurts, doesn't it? Your boyfriend showed me this pressure point. I thought it fitting to use on you."

"Fuck you." I scream in frustration. "You really think this is going to work? Cole's going to hunt you down and kill you."

Jared lifts his hands out wide, still using his weight to keep me incapacitated. "Looking forward to it. I hope I can get some shots in myself."

I laugh, leaning up to put as much feeling into my voice as I can. "You won't even see it coming unless he wants you to."

A dark smile curves his lips. "But where is he now, Leenie? Not here to save you. He'll know what it's like to have someone taken away from him now."

I shake my head. This guy knows nothing about what my brother's been through. He's lost people before. It hardened him into the person he is today.

Fuck. I can't let this fucker get me. He already lost me once.

I bring my free leg up and kick out, sending him off kilter enough so I can slip out

from underneath him. I spot my phone on the floor next to the door as I turn on all fours to scamper away. My hands sink into the coffee-stained wet spots on our already disgusting rug.



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“Bitch!” He roars after me. My leg gives out from the pain in my calf as I try to stand. Instead, I limp as fast as I can, swiping my keys from the coffee table when I hear him right behind me. I turn, swinging my arm out in an arc with the pieces of metal between my fingers. I get him right in the face. Angry red lines score his cheeks, but all it does is make him madder.

He grabs my shoulders and wrestles me down to the couch. I keep lashing out, stomping him square in the junk, but he slams his head down on mine in a punishing blow that makes me see stars. Red hot pain flares from my forehead. My vision doubles, and I close my eyes to ward off the aftermath of the excruciating, sledgehammer-like impact.

I fumble around, still clawing and kicking when his weight is lifted from my body. My vision comes back into focus as Dempsey levels the barrel of a gun at Jared. The fucker in question scoots back, trying to get away as fast as he can on all fours, but Dempsey doesn’t even give him the chance. He pulls the trigger, and two bullets release that sound like soft little puffs of air. The only evidence Dempsey shot him is the two holes in Jared’s head as he falls backward.

Freaking out, I retreat, reaching the side of the couch. Dempsey has to lunge for me so I don’t fall right off the edge. “Relax, Colleen. Deep breaths. Let me check you over.”

A bone-deep tremor takes over my body. His hands pass over my clothes and limbs. “Jaz?” I sob. “She’s in the bedroom.”

“I’ll check her. I promise. Just let me do this first or Boss will fucking murder me,

okay?”

Cole’s second passes his thumb over the knot on my forehead, and I hiss. His fingers run down my torso, stopping at the growing red spot on my leggings. “He stabbed me.”

Dempsey growls and pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket before wrapping it around my leg. “I’m going to check on your friend. Sit tight. Don’t move.”

He steps over Jared’s body and moves toward Jaz’s room. I don’t hesitate. I get up, swaying on my feet. I make it to her room with the help of walls and furniture, then stumble forward onto the edge of her mattress. Dempsey places his fingers to her neck. Time stops. It takes what seems like forever for him to say, “She has a pulse.”

Crushing relief sweeps over me. I crawl next to her, and he curses. I start untying the knot on her wrist, and he does the same with the other. “Jaz, baby. You there?” Her limp hand falls to the mattress, and I cup her cheek. Hot tears sting my eyes and fall down my cheeks. “We have to help her.”

“I’ll get a paramedic, just let me hide the body.”

My fingers fret over the blood staining her stomach. I don’t dare touch anything because I don’t want to hurt her further, but the wound doesn’t even appear to be fresh. “Fuck!” I scream, ending on a whimper when it feels as if my head is in a vise.

Dempsey rambles off our address to someone and pockets his phone. He runs into the other room, more than likely moving Jared’s dead form. When he returns to Jaz’s room, sirens are a faint sound in the distance. He turns my chin until I’m facing him. “You had an intruder. He accosted you when you walked in this morning. I’m a neighbor. I heard your cry for help. He got away. Understand?”

I blink up at him.

“Understand?”

I nod. “Intruder. You’re a neighbor. You heard me cry out for help.” When he nods back at me, I ask, “How the hell did you get here so fast, anyway?”

“I was close by because Cole wanted me to check on you. Finn called me.”

I gasp, gaze darting to the phone I dropped when I first came in. He must’ve heard the whole thing.

“I’m sure he’s on his way. I have to call your brother. Remember the plan?”

I nod again. “Intruder. He tried to hurt us. Neighbor who came to help. Fucker got away.”

Dempsey slips into the other room as voices call out from downstairs. “It’s the paramedics. Are we clear to enter?”

“Come on up,” Dempsey yells. He’s silent after that, staying in the other room as the EMT’s enter Jaz’s bedroom. They help me off the bed, attending to my friend first. They confirm she has a pulse, and then say a lot of things in medical speak that I don’t understand.

A minute later, someone brings a gurney up the stairs, and they help Jaz onto it. As they’re prepping her, more loud footsteps stomp up the stairs. Dempsey says, “Woah, woah. They’re attending to them. Hold up.”

“I need to see her,” a voice barks.

“Finn?”

Next thing I know, Dempsey curses and Finn comes flying into the room, skirting around the gurney until he sees me sitting on the bed. His gaze rakes over me, and I really come apart then. Tears track down my cheeks. I’m caught between watching them wheel Jaz away and wanting to go to Finn.

One of the paramedics tries pushing him back. “We’ve got to get her in the ambulance. Stand aside.”

My hottie trainer easily pushes past him. “I’ll do it.” With concern etched all over him, he places one arm around my shoulders and another under my knees, hoisting me into the air. I lay my head on his shoulder, closing my eyes.

Now that Finn’s here, I know everything is going to be okay.

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Jaz is still unconscious when they take her into surgery. The surgeons need to repair the damage the blade made when Jared fucking stabbed her and did who knows what else when she was tied to the bed.

An elderly doctor with a handlebar mustache stitches up the side of my leg where Jared sliced me. Finn holds my hand through it all, thin lips pressing together and watching the doctor work. Dempsey and Jax are just outside the room. Every time a nurse comes in, Dempsey looks up, his hand clutching his phone tightly. I can imagine my brother is chomping at the bit to talk to me.

“I shouldn’t have let you go home alone,” Finn whispers. He runs his thumb over my knuckles.

“We had no idea this was going to happen,” I tell him. And honestly, I count myself lucky. I could be Jaz right now. In fact, I’m pissed because I should be Jaz right now. Some fucking crazy person infiltrated our lives because of me...and my brother.

I peek up at Finn, my vision fracturing in front of me. He frowns, reaching up to slide his fingers across my cheeks. There’s so much that needs to be said, but we need to be alone to do it.

The harsh lights of the emergency room show every worry line on the trainer’s handsome face. His pinched gaze softens only when he looks at me, but it rips me apart all the same because he’s blaming himself when he shouldn’t be.

My skin pinches when the doctor tugs on the thread. He gave me a really awesome localized pain reliever in the form of a couple of shots, so the only thing that really

hurts is my head. The ice pack on it helps to numb it for now, but I'm going to have a huge bump there. I can already tell.

"You were pretty lucky," the doctor tsks. "I'm sure it hurts but in reality, this knife wound was just a graze at best. We see a lot worse here."

I'm sure they fucking do. This is the Heights after all.

"Thank you," I tell him. "I guess that's one positive for the day."

He gives me a small smile with wise eyes under bushy white eyebrows. "I'm going to put some more germ-killing stuff on this." He dumps an amber brown liquid onto a cotton ball and wipes it across my calf, turning my skin an orange yellow. A sterile pad goes on next, placed there by his steady fingers, then gauze, and finally, he wraps my leg in white cloth. "You should stay off this leg. Give it time to heal so you don't pull the stitches out."

Finn places his arm around my shoulders, squeezing me as the doctor wheels away on his stool to start throwing away the remnants of the medical supplies he used on me. "She will," he answers for me.

The doctor peels off his rubber gloves last, throwing them in a separate container. "I'm going to let your other friends in now since they've been giving everyone the stink eye."

I can't contain the smile. Of course they are. "Thank you for everything," I tell him. Those words are beginning to sound like an echo. I've been doing nothing but thanking everyone from the moment we got here.

"You betcha." He uses hand sanitizer before pulling the door open, speaking softly to the two guys waiting out in the hallway for me.

As soon as he's out of the way, Dempsey strides inside. He already has his phone to his ear. "Here she is."

I take the offered black cell with a Dragon case and hold it to my mouth. "Hey."

"Leenie," Cole sighs. "You okay?"

Dempsey toes the door shut, and I smile. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He doesn't say anything for several moments. Instead shuddering breaths meet my ears until he says, "Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out."

I lick my dry lips, still holding the package of ice to my head. "Hold on. I'm going to put you on speaker." I pull the phone away and press the appropriate button. "You there?"

"Yeah."

His voice filling the room instantly relaxes me. Everyone else has been wanting to hear what happened, too, and this is the first chance we've all gotten to be alone. Three pairs of eyes stare at me, so I take a deep breath. "I'm in the emergency department with Jax, Finn, and Dempsey. Jaz is in surgery." My voice breaks.

"I'm so sorry, Leenie." His first words are filled with so much emotion, but his next words may as well be stained in blood. "We vetted that fucker."

Dempsey's scowl tightens, and he pulls his shoulders back. Some of the blame will probably be placed on his shoulders.

"It's not your fault."

Cole grunts, but he doesn't say anything more.

"I left Jax and Finn's this morning to get ready for work. Oh shit, work."

"I called the bank," Finn tells me. "On Jaz's behalf, too. They're worried about you both."

I peer up at him gratefully, and he leans down to kiss my temple, narrowly avoiding my new ice-cold accessory.



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“Okay, I stopped at the cafe down the street to ply Jaz with her favorite coffee since I left her alone again. I was on the phone with Finn when I came in the door. I was sure Jaz would still be sleeping, but then I heard a noise. When I got in there...” I clear my throat, picturing my best friend’s body on the bed again. Finn squeezes my shoulder in encouragement, so I take another deep breath.

“Take your time,” Cole whispers. Through the line, I hear other voices in the background. One asks him to put his seatbelt on.

When it quiets back down, I start again. “He had her tied to the bed. Bound with this blue cloth at the wrists and ankles. She had a huge circle of blood on her stomach, and she was super pale. I didn’t know if she was alive.”

Finn rubs my shoulder. “I heard her scream on the phone. It was muffled, but she said something about Jaz and there was true terror in her voice. I tried to get her to answer me. When it was clear she’d probably dropped her phone or something, I called the tower who hooked me up with Dempsey.”

I blink at Finn, so relieved that I happened to be talking to him when I walked in the door. If Dempsey hadn’t gotten there, I don’t know what would’ve happened.

“So, Jared had a knife in his hand,” I start the story back up from my point of view. “He told me it was his cousin who put out the threat on me. He asked Jared to get close, so I imagine that’s why he started dating Jaz.”

“His fucking cousin?” Cole roars. “Dempsey, what the fuck?”

“I’m on it,” the guard growls, his face sharp and deadly.

A shiver runs up my spine. Someone’s going to pay for this mistake. “Cole...” I whisper. No one should be getting in trouble for this. We didn’t know.

“I’m sorry. Continue,” he says, voice harder now.

“He said that since you killed his cousin, he was going to make you feel the same thing. I don’t know. Maybe it was just the way he talked, but he didn’t sound as if he cared about what his cousin was doing until you killed him. Then he got mad...and snapped.” Finn rubs my back in big circles, and I lean into him, clutching the phone tightly. “He lunged at me. I hit him with the perfume bottle from Jaz’s dresser. He tackled me to the ground next, and that’s when he stabbed me in the calf. Just a graze,” I interrupt before Cole goes apeshit again. “That’s what the doctor said.”

I wait, but when Cole doesn’t say anything, I keep going. “I kicked the knife out of his hand, and it landed kind of under the bed. He never got it again. I broke free, ran into the living room, and slashed him with my keys.”

“He had scratches on his face,” Dempsey confirms.

I nod, pretty happy that I was able to at least keep him occupied until Dempsey stormed inside.

“He wrestled me onto the couch next. Headbutted me. I was really out of it, but that’s when Dempsey came in.” I smile at the Dragon. “You know he saved me, right?” I say to Cole. If anything, he shouldn’t be getting in trouble.

My brother doesn’t respond to that either. I set my icepack on the bed and sigh. Finn combs my hair back from my face. “You did a great job fighting him off. Maybe you don’t need those lessons we talked about this morning.”

I shake my head. Fuck that. “No, I’m taking lessons.” If anything, this only proves that I need to be more vigilant. Nothing happened to me but only because Dempsey burst in the door. I don’t know if I would’ve been able to fight Jared off much longer if Dempsey hadn’t killed him.

“Leenie, take me off speaker,” Cole orders.

I do so, bringing the phone back to my ear. “Hey, you’re off.”

He chokes. “I’m so sorry.” The amount of emotion in his voice tears at my heart. “I never wanted this to happen to you. This is the last thing I wanted.”

“I know.” My voice sounds small. I bite down on my lower lip to keep from losing it.

“I’m coming home to make sure you’re okay. We can talk more then.” He breathes out. “I got your message, by the way. You’re right. If anything, this only proves that you’re right. I can’t control everything, and I don’t want to control you so much that you hate me. Plus, I guess having Finn around comes in handy,” he says grudgingly.

I smile at that, glancing at the man in question over my shoulder. He must not be able to hear what Cole’s saying because his eyes are still worried, his brow pinching together. I reach over and place my hand on his. “Yeah, he does.”

“Okay, we’ll talk more later. Pass me back to Dempsey. We have to strategize about how to clean this up. And please, get your phone back as soon as possible so we can be in touch within a moment’s notice.”

“Will do. Love you, bro.”

“Love you too.”

I hand the phone back over to Dempsey who takes it and leaves the room. Jax moves closer, studying me from head to toe. “That bastard head-butted you?”

I peek up and can see the bump on my head. “It really freaking hurt,” I say, half chuckling. “I think I kicked him in the nuts, and that was his response.”

His lip curls into a snarl. “When you get better, we’ll give you private lessons. But you really did do well. The perfume bottle, the keys. Excellent choices.”

I perk up like a peacock under his praise. “Thank you. I’m so glad you guys came when you did.”

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Jax glances at his brother. “I’ve never seen his ass so worried.”

Finn squeezes me again. He hasn’t stopped touching me since we got here, even refusing to leave the room so the hospital personnel could triage me. “I thought my heart was going to explode,” Finn says, a soft chuckle pushing past his lips. “Or rip apart.”

Jax gazes between the two of us and nods to himself. “I’ll leave you guys alone. There are a couple of our guys out in the waiting room for support. So, don’t be shocked when they release you and you see a few badasses out in the waiting room.” He focuses on me. “I’m really happy you’re okay, Leenie.”

I wiggle myself out from under Finn’s grip and hold my hands out to his brother. He and I have come so far. Like Finn said, I’ve gotten to the big guy. He hesitates for a moment, then moves forward, placing his arms gingerly around my torso. I pat his back. “Thank you for being here.”

He gives me a short squeeze. “I’m so glad Finn found someone like you.”

A huge lump forms in my throat while he strides from the room, all tatted up and surly. The only thing I can think is that we need to find him a girl.

“Told you he liked you.”

I grab Finn’s shirt and yank him toward me, meeting him with a solid kiss that just avoids clanking our teeth together. I kiss away the shittiness of the last few hours. I kiss away the fear and the guilt and everything in between.

He moans into my mouth. “You probably shouldn’t be doing that.”

“It’s my leg, not my libido.”

He smiles, breaking away from the kiss to feather his fingers over my forehead. Frowning, he picks the icepack back up and places it on the knot, leaning down to kiss me again but much softer. After a few moments, he leans back, using just enough pressure to keep the ice pack on my head without pushing too hard. “So, did your brother tell you to leave me?”

“The exact opposite actually. He may have grudgingly agreed that you’re a good guy to have around.”

His answering full smile does something to my insides. “I’ll take it.”

Leaning forward, I give him a teasing grin. “And I’ll take you.”

We kiss, sealing my words like a signed promise. Later, when I’m discharged after learning that Jaz is out of surgery and stable, we walk out to a whole emergency room filled with Finn and Jax’s fighters. I’m used to seeing all the masculinity and tattoos, but in such a small space, it’s overwhelming.

They come up to me one-by-one, each giving me a white carnation and shaking Finn’s hand. Tears threaten my eyes for only like the hundredth time today. When I have more flowers in my hand than I can count, I turn to Finn who sweeps me off my feet, lifting me into the air. “Let’s go home, beautiful.”

The automatic doors whoosh open for us, and when the sun hits my face, highlighting Finn’s strong arms around me, I know I’m exactly where I should be. With a brother who leads a gang. With friends who love me. And a guy who couldn’t be more perfect if he tried.

## Epilogue

I chuckle down at my screen. Jaz keeps drawing funny shit over her scar with these tattoo pens she bought online. Today's masterpiece is a rendition of my calf, using her puckered stomach scar to represent the similar mark on my leg. It's complete with an arrow, helpfully labeling the drawing Leenie's leg. Across her ribs, she's written, Twinning!!! with about a billion exclamation points.

I show Finn, and he laughs his ass off, rubbing his hand up and down my foot. I text her back right away. I fucking love you.

Not as much as I fucking love you.

Max lifts his head, then goes back to being curled into a small ball on the couch.

The gym was on fire today. Finn and Jax started women's self-defense classes, which really took off. The free sessions have brought them even more fighting clients as the women help spread the word to any guy they know about this awesome gym they train at. Boyfriends, brothers, fathers. The new guys aren't all trying to be cage fighters, and that's okay. They've separated classes into hobby and professional routes.

We go back to watching our movie, but then Finn pauses it. "Did that shipment come in?"

I poke him with my toe. "We don't talk shop at home."

He gives me that over-the-top grin I love. "Right, but nod for yes and shake your head for no."

I smirk, not giving him anything. It's been so hard to separate our time versus Elite

Boxing time, especially when I started working there. I don't just run the shop anymore, I run the whole back office. Memberships, billing, etc. When it became clear our clientele expanded, they needed to put every last energy they had into the classes.

Obviously, they're both having a hard time giving up control. "Don't you trust me?"

"Oh, I trust you," he says, wagging his brows. He leans over, about to crawl over me. My body is so ready for it but when we hear Jax's footsteps come up the porch, he backs away. "Later," he promises, and I know he'll fucking deliver. He always does.

Jax strides in, shutting our extra security door inside our new extra security house that Cole insisted on adding. The brothers' family home now boasts a state-of-the-art alarm system. He punches in the code onto our keypad, arming it even though we're home. The security features prevent anyone from coming in the doors and windows. Basically, it's a huge relief to know it's there while also hoping we never have to use it.



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“Hey, that shipment of new protein powders came in,” Jax says as he strides toward the kitchen. He stops after Finn starts laughing. “Shit. Sorry.”

My new rule of not talking shop at home is basically being broken every chance they get.

He grimaces when I give him the side eye. “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

He’s only able to retreat a couple of steps when the doorbell rings. As if on cue, each of us pull out our phones to check the video doorbell—also courtesy of my brother.

A girl with long blond hair, impeccable makeup, and a hoodie tied around her waist fidgets outside. I frown at the video, about to ask the guys who it is when Finn says, “Oh shit.”

I glance up in time to see him flick his gaze to his older brother with wide eyes.

Jax roars, a sound like none other. He pulls his hand back and throws his phone against the wall, smashing it to pieces. Maxie jumps into my lap, cowering. I pet him reassuringly while my boyfriend’s brother fucking loses it. His shoulders heave, his face twists into agony and so much painful hate that a sliver of ice forms in the pit of my stomach.

Whoever this girl is, she’s unwelcome here. Especially to Jax.

THE END