

A man with a black tank top and a black cap worn backward. He has several tattoos, including a large one on his right arm depicting a landscape with a person and a bird. He has his arms crossed and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a textured blue.

SHE'S THE
FLAME
THAT CASTS
MY SHADOW...

SHADOWS

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL *BESTSELLING* AUTHOR

LARAMIE
BRISCOE

SHADOWS

LARAMIE BRISCOE



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BLURB

“What I want you to do, Isabella, is find out what his real name is...”

Those were the words spoken to me when I sat down to learn about my final grade in college.

They not only shocked me, but changed the trajectory of my life.

Shadows Sampson has always been bigger than life on the campus of our college. Most of the time seemed as if he's older than the rest of us. Like he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders.

When I get close? I find out there's more to it than I ever bargained for.

And when the truth comes out; against my will - I hope I can get the forgiveness I so desperately want.

“You've gotta win this fight. We can't push rent back again...”

Those words from my sister's mouth put an exclamation point on how bad our situation is.

Especially after I lost *the fight* of my life. The one that was going to get us out of this apartment building, the one that was going to put us on a path we'd only dreamed about.

But me? I'd lost the fight, my confidence, and the motivation for the life I'd always wanted.

Until a baby I'd fathered was left at my doorstep, and a seriously hot girl from my college started paying attention to me. With that girl? I fall hard, only to find out I'm the subject of a story for her final grade.

Turns out, that's my motivation.

Quitting isn't an option. Not until my knuckles are bloody and not one person stands in the way of what I want.

“YOU WANT ME TO WHAT?” The words stumble out of my mouth and I raise my eyebrow, hoping to convey just how confused I am at what he just said.

He takes off his glasses, rubbing his eyes vigorously with the tips of his fingers. I let him sit with what I’ve asked, not wanting to frustrate him any more than I already have. Hopefully, giving him a few moments without my voice will lead him to re-think what he’s requesting of me.

“Isabella, you have to prove how much you want this.”

My stomach drops as his gravelly declaration sinks in. He hasn’t reconsidered; he’s doubling down. “What does me interviewing Shadows Sampson have to do with any of this?”

“Shadows isn’t even his name, Isabella.” He’s looking at me over the frame of his glasses now, his brown eyes staring deep into my soul.

They look as worn out as I feel. I’ve given everything to this paper the almost four years I’ve been at this school. I’m in my final semester. This right here? It feels like a huge betrayal. Like everything I’ve held close to me, all the pieces of my soul that were wrapped in this have been completely shattered; scattered against the ground like glass shards.

“What *is* his name then, Pete?” I speak to him in the same tone he used to speak to me.

He sighs deeply, looking at me pointedly. “You’re lucky we were friends before I became your professor. No one else would put up with this attitude.”

“It isn’t an attitude. I’m asking you a legit question. What’s his real name?”

“That’s one of the things you’ll learn in the interview.” He leans back in his chair, steepling his fingers together. “You’ve coasted through the past almost-four years here, and it’s time for you to show me what you’re made of.”

My stomach drops. I’m here on a scholarship, the first in my family to get more than a fucking GED. I’ll hold onto my future with my nails digging trenches into the dirt. Tilting my head to the side, I shoot him a death glare. I haven’t coasted in any type of way. I’ve paid my dues, done everything each editor of this paper before me has done. “So you’re threatening me with my degree? Need I remind you of all the accomplishments we’ve received while I’ve been editor-in-chief?”

“Let’s be honest with one another. Most of those accomplishments had the groundwork laid before you showed up. You and I both know all you had to do was keep the status quo. You brought nothing new to the table. What I’m telling you is that if you want to graduate with your Bachelor’s in Communications, you need to prove to me you can do the hard work - even if this particular story isn’t considered hard work for you.”

“It’s not considered a sport to me,” I argue. “And that’s not what I’m going into Journalism for, Pete. I don’t have this great dream to write about the next MMA or whatever star he is. We both know he does whatever fight comes to him, seems to me he has an anger issue that’s unchecked.”

“It’s human interest, Isabella. Who’s to say you’ll be able to get the job you want? When you’re out there in the big, bad world, things aren’t always what they seem. What if the only job available is at the local newspaper for the sports section? Will you tell them no? How will you live? And all of us in this business know that word gets around. If you give up more than one job, you won’t get offers anymore. You know it’s true.”

A part of me wants to say I would tell them no. I would keep my pride and refuse to do things that compromise my

belief system. There's a stubbornness in my mind that wants to argue I'd be the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, I know I must eat, and my parents will expect me to pay my own bills once I graduate. They've floated me while I've been here, and they've been more than clear that once I have that piece of paper in my hand, it's all on me. Especially since I realize how hard it is for them to help. My mom tells me every time I talk to her. What he's saying does make sense, even though I hate to admit it. "Are you setting up the interview for me?"

He chuckles before taking a drink of his water. "Negative. You're going to do this all on your own, from contacting him, to securing the interview. I'm wishing you luck though, because in the seven years I've known him, he's never given an interview. He'd prefer to not speak, rather than. It's going to take a miracle to get him to talk to you in the first place."

"I feel like you're setting me up for failure, and I don't appreciate it." I'm beginning to think the worst. It's hard knowing everything is stacked against me. The only situation I've been in like this before is trying to figure out how to make college work. This one is uncomfortable.

"Failure isn't an option, Isabella. Any work you've done previous to this doesn't matter, it won't even count. Your entire grade rides on what you do in this moment."

He drops another fucking bomb. This one I really hadn't expected.

"That's not fair," I whisper, trying to push the heaviness out of my chest and the tightness out of my throat. Every single thing I've worked for is disappearing right before my eyes.

Pete levels me with his gaze. "Life isn't fair, and as soon as you realize that, the better off you'll be. This isn't an easy job. Why do you think I'm a professor at a college instead of off in the warzone? As humans we do what we have to in order to survive, and I'm telling you, this is what you must do."

I sigh heavily, finally facing and understanding the obstacles he's laying down in front of me. "Just so you know, I resent you for this."

"It's okay if you resent me," he drops his pen on his desk, folding his hands in front of his chin. "I'm trying to get you prepared for reality, something I wish others had done when I was in your shoes. You understand?"

"Yeah," I glare as I cross my arms over my chest. "I guess I get you're trying to make me a better person and a good journalist, but this feels like a personal attack. I have to be honest with you."

"You gonna be able to do it?"

"Is there really an option that I don't?" I question, giving him a look of death, wishing with everything I have that it would cause him to expire right on the spot. "I've not gone to school for four years to get this damned close to have you pull it away from me."

"I'm not pulling it away from you; *you'll* be pulling it away."

Inside I'm fuming, ready to stop right now and give up everything I've worked for, but I have to keep my cool. My family sacrificed a lot to get me here. Hell, I did too. The long night studying to get the scholarship that's helped pay for a good portion of my education. If I don't finish the degree, or fail, I could be forced to pay back what's been given to me. Pete knows all of this as a friend, and my freshman advisor. "How long do I have to accomplish this?"

"Six weeks, from start to finish."

"Six weeks?!" I parrot back at him, feeling that pit in my stomach increase into a damn crater.

"I didn't stutter, right? There are seven weeks until this semester is over, and you need to have everything turned in to me with enough time for me to grade it."

"But we have this semester and next before I graduate. I've known you long enough to know you typically grade both of them together. I feel like you've decided to fuck me over,

Professor.” Any other teacher I wouldn’t say those words to, but this one? He knows me better than anyone else. He knows my dreams and what I want to accomplish. It’s almost as if it’s impossible.

“You tell me you don’t think you’re up to it, I’ll fail you right now. You can do this, Isabella. Don’t disappoint me.”

If there’s anything I hate, it’s someone telling me I’ll fail. I’ve worked hard to be where I am in life, and I’ll be damned if I let anything stand in my way. Not to mention pulling the disappointment card was a low fucking blow. “I’m up to it. I’ll give you the best interview you’ve ever read in your life.”

“I’m expecting that from you. Go out there and get it.”

He turns away from me, and I know at this moment I’m dismissed. Grabbing my purse and bag, I shoulder them both before getting up and leaving the office. It’s taken everything I have to hold my shit together, but no more.

Once I’m outside, I let my cheeks heat and the flush of anger flow over my body. This is the stuff I do my best to keep in, to not allow others to see, but dammit, I’m pissed right now.

It’s a long haul down the hill to student parking. If I thought I could make it without falling on my face, I’d take off at a run and get rid of all these feelings inside my chest. But I haven’t run in at least two years, and I don’t want anyone having to call the ambulance on me because I’ve about killed myself. When I see my SUV, I pick up the pace, ready to get inside so I can let loose with the tears clogging up my throat. Beeping the doors, I fumble, opening the driver’s side as quickly as I can. Tossing my bag and purse in the passenger seat, I crank the heat and rest my forehead against the steering wheel, finally letting the tears fall.

THE RHYTHMIC POUNDING of my knuckles against the bag is one of my favorite sounds. I can zone out, forget everything running through my head, all my damn responsibilities, the pressure of making sure everything gets done when it's supposed to be.

My life.

It's a lot to deal with, and even I can admit it.

In the background, I hear the buzz of the timer go off, signaling the end of this workout session. It isn't the longest of the week, and it hasn't been my best, but it was well worth my coming down.

"Lookin' good Shads," I hear as a hand claps against my shoulder.

Glancing back, I see the owner and the man who has acted as my trainer since I started, Maddox. "Doing my best, man."

"When's your next fight?"

Of all the people I ghosted since I lost my last fight, he's been the worst. Because he's helped me more than anyone, I thought he would be the most disappointed in my performance. I've kept as far away from him as I can, training at weird times, and dodging phone calls. Instead I've used all the knowledge he's given me over the past few years and trained myself. It's been hard, but it's given me the time I've needed. Today I'm strong enough to make it into *Broken Bridges MMA* and show him what I've done.

“Six weeks,” I shrug my shoulders, trying to get some of the tension out of them.

“Been a while, huh?”

I hear what he’s saying, even if he isn’t saying it outright. “I know. I had some shit to take care of.”

“Must’ve been something big to keep you out of any kind of ring or octagon and away from me for six months.”

If only he knew. My entire fucking life has been flipped upside down. I’ve spun so far in a circle, I can see my ass. The truth of the matter is, I’m still trying to get my bearings, trying to figure out what in the hell I should be doing, and questioning it all at the same time. “You could say that,” I shrug, but I don’t give him more. This is private, and I plan to keep it that way for as long as I can.

“Either way, I’m excited to see you back in here.” Maddox has always been a huge supporter of mine, and right now, I need all the support I can get.

Bending at the waist, I grab my phone from where it sits on my hoodie. There’s a little less than forty-five minutes for me to get to where I make a portion of my money since I haven’t fought in so long. Don’t know that I’d actually call it a job. More than anything, it’s preparation for whenever or whatever my next fight is. “Thanks man, I gotta be heading downtown though. Time to pay the bills.”

“Later, my man. Don’t be shy around here.”

“I haven’t,” I start to explain. “Just been coming in at odd times; between class, before work, sometimes three a.m.”

“What the fuck is going on with you, Shads?”

There’s a part of me that seriously wants to confide in him, but I know I can’t. As soon as I do, everyone will know my business, and I’m way too protective of what’s going on at this moment to let others in. Not only for my sake, but for everyone involved. Fighting the way I have, in unorganized and unorthodox bouts, all the way to matches worth a lot of money on the line. Your opponents will use whatever they can as an advantage. Nothing is off-limits. Grabbing my bag, I

shoulder it before turning to face him. “Just some shit, Maddox. If I need help, I’ll let you know.”

“I think we should both admit you’ll never ask anyone for help.”

I smirk. He’s beyond right. I’d rather shoot myself in the foot than ask for help. “I’m heading out, see you around.”

The night is cold as I step out into the darkness. The moon is full, fuck my life, which means it’s going to be a hell of a night at Secrets, the campus bar I bounce at. Add on the fact it’s a Friday, and the white-girl wasted brigade is going to be out in full force. When I get to my bike, I reach into my bag, taking out the hoodie and beanie. Once I have them over my body, I thrust my arms through my jacket and put on my helmet. The bag securely on my back, I crank up the bike and pull out into traffic. Night riding is my favorite. There aren’t a bunch of people on the streets of this college town. Most are either ride-sharing or partying it up with their friends at houses. It’s almost as if the city sleeps for a few hours before it awakens back up again. I used to dart in and out of traffic, making risky maneuvers because I didn’t give a damn. No one depended on me, and there was no one waiting for me to come home. Now? All that’s changed.

Which means no matter how much I want to squeeze the throttle, I can’t. Or maybe I won’t. There’s a slim chance I’ve grown up, but that’s honestly yet to be determined.

Quicker than I expect to see it, Secrets is up ahead in my line of vision. Slowing down, I pull into the parking lot, coming to a stop along the side of the building. “’bout time you got here, Shadows,” I hear the loud voice of the head of security say as I take my helmet off.

“Sorry, got caught up training. Won’t happen again.”

“You were training today?” He stops in his tracks, giving me a bit of a smile. His breath shows white against the coldness of the night. “I was. First time in a while, but it felt good.”

“Glad to hear it, kid.”

I salute him before taking off toward the entrance. For most of my life I haven't felt like a kid. The last six months, I've damn-near felt like an old man. It's crazy how everything you thought you knew can change with the snap of a finger, or whatever the case may be.

Getting closer to the line outside of Secrets, I see it's hopping, just like I thought it would be. Locking eyes with Carter, the afternoon/early evening bouncer, I motion to the back, letting him know I'm gonna stow my stuff before I take my spot. He gives me a thumbs up before he begins checking ID's again.

The bass thumps loud against the backdrop of barely restrained sexuality and the tensions that always seem to run just below the surface of Bowling Green. Part of me knows it has to do with the location and make-up of the population. I mean for most of the year, we have thousands of kids doing their best to put the money leveraged on them to work. Some make it, some don't. Regardless, both options can sometimes be devastating.

The employee lounge is thankfully soundproof, and right now, I'm the only one here. For a few minutes, I allow myself to collect my thoughts, fire a text message off to my sister asking how things are going, and then change into my bouncer gear. Just as I'm about to walk out, my cell vibrates.

D: We're good here.

S: I'm fixing to head out to the floor. I'll check in when I have breaks. Y'all sleep good.

D: We will. Wouldn't be opposed if you bring home whatever the kitchen has left for lunch tomorrow. Fridge is getting pretty slim.

My neck and shoulders tighten as I read the words. The last six months have been the most expensive of my life, and any little cushion we had is completely gone.

S: Will do. Be safe.

D: You too! Love you!

Putting my phone in my back pocket, I get myself ready for the next few hours ahead.

Isabella

“I DON’T WANT TO GO,” I argue with my roommate, Olivia. “I’m not in the mood, and I won’t have a good time.”

“You don’t know that,” she argues right back. “Just because you’ve been given what you see as an impossible story to cover, it absolutely doesn’t mean you have to be a stick in the mud.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn around to face her. “Fine, fucking fine. You’re responsible for whatever happens though. So if this night goes to shit, it’s on you.”

“I’ll take it,” she shoots me a thumbs up. “If it gets you out of this dorm room and out of this mood, I’ll totally take it.”

“I never promised it would get me out of this mood, but if you’re willing to take me, I’ll go.”

“Do you need to get changed?”

I look down at what I wore to school. On a normal night, I’d say no, I’d wear exactly the same thing I have all day, but for some reason, tonight I decide to say something different. “Give me thirty to forty-five minutes. Do we have time for that?”

She smirks, giving me a once over. “I’ll make time for it. It’s not every day you decide to let your hair down and actually get dressed up for a night on the town.”

Few and far between actually, but I’m feeling like this is exactly what I need - especially after I was blind-sided with this whole Shadows situation. “I’ll be ready as quick as I can.”

Before I’m even back in my room, I can hear her on the phone with our friends. “Bella’s ready to let loose tonight!”

Glancing at myself in the mirror, I nod, affirming to, I guess me, that tonight I'll drown my sorrows. Tomorrow? Tomorrow I'll get to work and research the best damn story anyone has ever read in our college paper.

“ONE, TWO, THREE!”

Olivia and I count with one another before we throw our heads back, downing the identical shots, and then slamming the empty glasses on the counter. I grin over at her, feeling better than I have in months. “Another one?”

“How many is that?” she asks, squinting and counting on her fingers.

“I have no idea, but as long as we’re having a good time, who cares? We’ll catch an Uber back to the dorm. You told me I had to let my hair down,” I reach behind me taking my hair out of its half-up, half-down do; shaking it and letting it flow over my shoulders. “And dammit, that’s what I’m gonna do.”

We giggle with one another as she lifts her hand, gesturing for the bartender to come back down to where we are. “Give us two more!” She moves her finger back and forth between us. “You sure?”

“Ummm, yeah.” She presses her hands on the bar top and props herself up. His eyes immediately go to her v-cut top, catching an eyeful as she bounces up and down. “Hey,” she reaches out, grabbing him by the chin. “Eyes up here.”

He chuckles slightly, a smirk on his face. “You two aren’t drivin’ home are you?”

“No,” I shake my head. “We’ll get a ride home. Promise, we’re not.” “Alright.” He reaches down, grabbing two empty glasses, putting them in front of us. “Same thing as before, or do we want something else?”

Glancing up at the shot menu for the night, one catches my eye. “Give us two of the Washington Apples.”

“Coming right up.”

As he starts to make the shots, I turn around, gazing out at the bodies on the dance floor. It’s packed tonight, more so than usual. It makes me slightly sad seeing everyone coupled up, and knowing I don’t have anyone to go home with. In front of me, two guys start to get into it in the middle of everything. They’re up in each other’s faces, their noses and chests touching one another. It’s the world-renowned sign of aggression. I tap Olivia on the shoulder. “Check this out.”

“Shit,” she sighs. “You know they’re probably gonna get it shut down while they figure out who started it, and who ended it.”

As she says those words, a man pushes his way through the crowd. He commands respect even though I can’t see his face or much more than the people parting like the Red Sea. “Who is it?” I ask her as we stand up straighter, trying to see over the heads in front of us.

“Shadows,” she says, almost reverently as her eyes track him amongst the crowd. “I heard he was working here now. Can’t say I expected to see him, though.”

Just the man I’ve been looking for. The one who’s turned my world upside down with nothing more than his name. Quickly I wonder if I can get him alone, to try and talk him into doing an interview with me. “Let’s get closer,” I whisper as I grab her hand.

“Wait, our shots!”

She reaches back, picking them both up before handing me mine. My eyes never leave Shadows as I down the glass in the palm of my hand, and blindly slam it on the counter. I advance toward the melee, hoping not to get hurt, but knowing this is my chance to get close to him, I decide to just take it.

It’s hard to elbow my way to the front, but I’m determined, and nothing will stop me once that part of my personality kicks in. “Excuse me!” I shout, slightly hopping up and down,

to see over the shoulders taller than I am. “Hey,” I poke at the back of the person standing in my way. “Let me get by you.”

They step back and I pull Olivia along with me so that we’re at the front of the crowd of people. My eyes are wide open as we watch Shadows get up in one of their faces. The guy starts yelling before he pushes against his chest.

“I told you not to touch me,” Shadows steps back, making some room between them. “The best thing for you will be to take your ass out of here and not come back.”

“Don’t act like you can tell me what to do, bro.”

“I will tell you what to do, and you will listen to me. I’m the one who decides if you stay in this club or not.”

I watch him, seeing the tight control he has over his anger, over all his emotions. This is what he looks like in the ring. Although I’ve only seen him fight a couple of times, they’re ingrained in my brain. But even I know the way he attacks opponents in the ring is way different than what’s happening here right now. His hands are clenched into fists at his side, his jaw is tight, ticking against what I imagine is the agitation he has with the man daring to try him.

“Fuck you, dude.”

Wrong. Words.

Shadows moves with the quickness of a panther stalking his prey. I blink and fucking miss it as he takes down the guy with the attitude. Immediately he’s crying like a baby.

“Let me go, you’re hurting me! Fuck, dude. Let me go!”

“No,” Shadows argues. “I told you to leave, and you didn’t listen,” he reaches down, picking him up by the back of the shirt. “You’re fuckin’ outta here.”

My mouth agape, I follow, watching as he escorts the guy out of the club, tossing him out on his ass. The guy is still bitching. “How dare you kick me out? You don’t know who I am, you don’t know what I’m capable of!”

“You think I give a shit? You’re on a list now, fucker. Go down the road and don’t come back. I’m serious. We will have

major issues if you show your face again while I'm here. I don't forget, and I sure as hell don't forgive."

Those words wash over me as I hear them. The tone he uses, the way he says them... I know they're true, which makes me wonder who he hasn't forgiven in his life. The reporter in me knows there's a story there, and I desperately want to know everything behind it. The start. The middle. The end. Every single piece of the puzzle that makes up the man standing in front of me.

OLIVIA and I are sitting back at the bar, both of us nursing waters now, because we need to be at least half-way together when our Uber comes to pick us up. The two of us had a friend who was taken advantage of after a night of fun, and after doing her story, I'm way more cognizant of not only my surroundings, but of the fact no one will watch out for me better than I will. All of a sudden, I'm aware of how warm it is in here. Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and even though I know it's cold outside, I have to get out of here.

"Let's go," I tilt my head to the exit. "I'm burning up."

Olivia grabs my forearm. "Let me go to the bathroom real quick. I'll meet you out there."

I nod, just having to get out. The room is starting to close in, and my stomach turns violently. Maybe I shouldn't have drunk as much as I did. I'm hurrying, doing my best to not run into anyone having a good time, but I do. My shoulder knocks into someone else's. "Hey! Watch where you're going!"

"I'm so sorry," I mumble, looking behind me to apologize, blindly heading for the exit. Breaking into the night, I take a deep breath, feeling the cool air inflate my lungs. Immediately I begin to cool. My cell phone beeps in my hand, causing me to look down. Our Uber is close.

Flipping through the phone, I go to Olivia's contact info.

I: Our Uber is close. You'd better hurry up in the bathroom!

O: Be out ASAP. There was a damn line. If he gets here, let him know I'm coming. Don't leave me, girl.

I: Never. We come together, we leave together.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as I finish texting her, and I realize I've broken my own rule. I haven't taken care to notice my surroundings. I wasn't paying attention when I came out, so I don't even know if there's someone I should be watching out for.

But as I feel the heaviness in my chest, I know I should've been more careful. When a guy comes out of the darkness of the alley, his eyes the only thing visible behind the mask he wears, I know I'm absolutely fucked.

I SLOW-ROLL up to the bar, needing a drink after fucking around with the idiots in here. “Give me a water, Steph,” I yell at the bartender, to be heard over the roaring crowd, full of adrenaline from the almost-fight and the thumping bass.

She slides it across the flat top to me, before nodding at one of the security cameras she has placed back there with her. “There’s some shit going on out back. Looks like a guy is eyeing up a girl.”

Fuck my life.

Apparently this isn’t going to be an easy night for me. It’s going to take every bit of concentration and patience I have. I’d be lying if I said I was in the mood for this shit.

I most definitely ain’t.

“Keep a watch on it. Call me some help if you think I need it.”

She acknowledges what I’ve said before I take off at a run for the back of the club. Mentally I’m already preparing myself for what I know will be a fight. It won’t be like the altercation I just had. This time, I’ll probably throw real fists, like I do in the octagon.

As always, girls reach out, the tips of their fingers brushing against the skin of my arms, trying to get my attention as I rush by. A year ago I would have at least acknowledged them. Now, I can’t. There’s too much at stake. However, it doesn’t change who I am.

I'm the type of guy who loves to feel the pain fighting gives him. The one who needs it to know he's alive. As it usually happens when I'm about to get into the ring against someone - my heartbeat slows down and my vision becomes hyper focused. The exit sign is lit up against the darkness of the club, but to me it looks like the Las Vegas strip on a Saturday night.

Plowing through the door, I ignore the alarm I've tripped, hurrying to the back alley. That's when I see them.

A hunter stalking his prey.

The man facing off with the woman is taller than her, at an obvious advantage in almost every facet of an altercation the two would have. Although he wears a bulky hoodie, his build is obvious. She's in for a world of hurt if this isn't taken care of soon.

"Hey!"

His attention turns directly toward me when he hears me yell. Dark eyes focus on my face. Something about them strikes me as familiar, but it's not an instant recognition.

"Go on inside," I point to her, not taking my gaze off the man. "I'm not leaving you out here by yourself," she argues as she gives him a wide berth, coming to stand behind me.

"Shadows," he chuckles, voice gravelly, seeming as if he's trying to disguise his identity. "Why do you have to get into business that isn't yours?"

"That's where you're wrong," I approach slowly, watching as he holds a switchblade in his right hand. "This place is my business, which means she is too."

He makes a noise in his throat. "Word around town is you've got another mouth to feed."

It takes absolutely everything I've been taught not to react. Nonchalantly I shrug, as if I have no fucking care in the world. "Word around town is wrong. You got anything else to say? Anything you wanna do? If not, get the hell outta here."

There's a sparkle in his eye, like he wants us to tangle. But in the end, he decides against it. "I'll be around..."

"I'll be right here," I hold my hands out; welcoming whatever he thinks he might give me. "Waiting on ya."

The darkness of the night swallows him up as he makes his way down the street, away from the bars and restaurants. For longer than I care to admit I keep watching, not because I'm scared, but because I want him to come back. I'm itching for a real fight, and I want nothing more than to sink my fists into something right now.

A touch on my back forces me to turn around quickly.

The girl shrinks, bringing her hand up to her chest. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You didn't. Are you okay?"

"Y...yeah," she brings her hand up to push her hair back, and it's shaking.

"No you're not. Here, sit down for a second," I help her onto the stairs. "It's the adrenaline. You'll be fine in a few minutes. Just let it flow through you. Breathe in and out." I inhale and exhale along with her.

"Nothing like that's ever happened to me before."

"Something like that's never happened to a lot of people before," I assure her. "It shouldn't have here. Where did he come from?"

Her hand points over to one of the alleys leading from another bar to Secrets. It's been a sore spot for over three months now. Some stupid ass frat guys got drunk and broke out all the lights. The owner of Secrets has been trying to get the other owner to fix it.

Well fuck that. After this, I know we have to do the right thing. "Out of the darkness." Her teeth are chattering slightly.

"That's a little overdramatic," I smirk.

"That's Bella for ya," a female voice interrupts us. "She's dramatic as the day is long. It's her inner reporter."

“Reporter?”

The woman I saved, Bella, throws a glare up at who I’m assuming is her friend. “I write for the Bowling Green Buzz,” she explains.

“The college paper?” I laugh.

Her blue eyes flash with anger and maybe a little bit of rebellion. “You think that’s funny huh? Using our words instead of your fists to throw punches.”

This intrigues me more than anything has in a long time. “Are you saying words hurt more than fists do?”

“I am.”

She stands up, not at all phased by what she just went through and what potentially could have happened to her. Dare I say she’s enchanting in her anger? Rarely have I seen it affect someone the way it’s doing to her. The semi-repressed rage rides high on her cheeks. Her chest is flushed in a way I’ve only ever seen on women beneath my body, and those eyes of hers?

Blue ice.

“Choose yours carefully, Bella,” I wink, doing my best not to chuckle at the instant roll of her eyes.

“Oh don’t worry,” she gives me a tight smile. “I most definitely will.”

“Is this our Uber?” The other girl asks.

Bella glances at her phone. “It is. Thanks again for all your help, but don’t expect me to fall at your feet like all the other girls do.”

“Oh I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Because I can’t help it, I watch as the two of them walk to the Uber and get in. When the door closes, I catch those blue eyes again, and they hold mine until they can’t any longer.

Carter sticks his head out the back door. “We need your help at the bar.”

“Yeah, be right there.”

But as I go inside, I can't help but feel as if my life has changed in a very big way. One of those situations where I don't know why or how, but I feel the ground shift beneath me, and all I can do is hang on for the ride.

MY HANDS SHAKE UNCONTROLLABLY as Olivia and I sit in the backseat of our Uber. I'm reeling from the adrenaline rush pulsing through my body. For someone who normally spends her nights in her dorm room, working on the next scoop or studying for an important test, this is in no way my status quo.

"Are you okay?" Olivia gives me a wide berth. "Are you about to freak out?"

I nod, putting my hand to my chest. "My heart's about to beat out of my chest."

"You're fine," Olivia reaches into her purse, pulling out a vape and thrusting it into my hands. "Here, take a hit."

I cut my eyes at her. "You know I don't agree with this."

"I also know you need to chill the fuck out."

She's right. Fumbling with the device, I put it up to my mouth and trigger the button before inhaling deeply. The cough comes from deep in my throat. "How," I cough harder, hacking like a ninety-year-old with COPD "do you do this?" I wipe the tears from under my eyes.

"Don't inhale so hard," she laughs.

"Nope." I try to give it back to her, but she presses it back into my palm. "Fuck it," I sigh, and inhale again, this time slower.

"There you go," she coaxes me like a mother would a baby trying to take her first steps. "Now tell me what in the hell

happened back there, and why were you so close to Shadows?”

“He saved me,” I use the easiest form of explanation.

“And you aren’t back there trying to get your story by way of thanking him?”

I wish I’d thought of it, but I’ve never been in a situation like that before. One minute things had been fine, the next, I’d been staring down the business end of a blade. “No, I wasn’t thinking clearly enough, but...” I’m starting to calm down now. The vape is finally doing its job. “Now I have a reason to go back, to look for him.”

She cuts her eyes at me. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you for making me go out tonight and blah blah blah. It’s been a real one.”

“That it has.”

As we pull up to our dorm and get out, I look at the sky, cranking my neck to see as much as I can. The clear sky means it’s fucking freezing, but all I can do is enjoy the beauty of the world we live in. Even though we’re in the heart of the city, the black ink still allows sparkles to shine. The little vibrancy in the middle of this craziness reminds me that I’m still here. No matter what could have happened, I made it out alive, and I have Shadows to thank for it.

“I know that look,” Olivia interrupts my thoughts. “What’s going on up there?” she asks as she taps my temple.

“Just thinking about how I can thank Shads for what he did for me.”

Her dark eyes take on a fierceness I haven’t seen since some junior broke up with her our freshman year. “Be careful, Isabella. Sometimes I know you better than you do yourself, and in this situation, there are so many things you have to watch out for.”

I shrug off her worry. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you?” She starts walking for the dorm. They’ll close the doors in fifteen minutes, and then we’ll be locked

out. Neither one of us want to have to call our RA and be admitted in - especially as seniors. The only reason we still live here is because of how cheap the rent is, and we're on scholarships.

I sigh. "C'mon Liv."

"C'mon Belle," she echoes back. "You and I both know he's the type of guy you fucking die for."

"No, he's not."

We get to the door just as our RA is starting her closing procedures.

"Way to make it in time, ladies."

"We do our best," we say in unison.

Heading to the elevator, I continue with Liv. "I can do what I need to, in order to get this story."

"Yeah, but what will it do to you? There's no way you'll be able to keep your personal out of your professional. This guy checks every box for you; tall, dark, handsome, with a hint of mystery, and brooding as hell. Those are all panty droppers where you're concerned."

"Not this time," I argue, still slightly buzzed. Although he had given me a tickling in my stomach when he'd come out of the club, ready to kick some ass on my behalf. "It's my grade."

"It's also your life. I'm trying to be the voice of reason."

For me there isn't reason. Journalism is the one constant I've had in my life. When everything else was burning down to the ground, it was always there. Throughout my high school years where I wasn't strong enough to know who I was as a person; and now where I'm confident. I can't fail it, not when it's never failed me. "Liv," I grab her hand. "I've got this."

She frowns. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

FOUR HOURS after I lay down, I'm still awake, trying to figure out what the hell I'm going to do. I've tossed and turned so much my sheets are tangled around my legs. Trying to get out I feel more entrapped, and I wind up tearing them all off before standing up with a frustrated sigh.

Thank God we have a suite, and therefore have our own bedrooms. Trudging over to my desk, I turn the light on and open my laptop. When my eyes have adjusted, I grab a notebook and my favorite pen. It's felt, black, and if I'm not careful it will bleed through, but the way it slides against the paper is better than ice cream.

My brain is working overtime, trying to come up with an angle. So I do what calms me - I start researching, which for me means looking up social media, and luckily since Shadows is popular, he's got plenty of socials.

"Wow," I click on his Instagram, going all the way to the bottom before I start my investigation. There, right in front of me, is a picture of a much younger Shadows. The tank top he's wearing has an emblem of a local high school on it, the one that was a rival to mine.

"I can't believe I never noticed him back then."

He was good looking, not the man he is now, but I'm willing to bet he had any girl he wanted, and they were definitely fighting over him.

I make the picture bigger, studying it closer than I probably should. The differences in him then and the man he is now are notable.

No tattoo on his chest, no hint of stubble on his chin, and his cheeks are still full of baby fat. Today, he's a lean fighting machine. But it's the eyes that get me. Back then, in this picture, they're sparkling, full of mischief. That's not the man I saw earlier, and these aren't the eyes he's looking through now.

Closing mine, I think back to outside the club.

Tonight they were full of anxiety, perhaps pain, danger, and a whole lot of darkness that I can't wait to discover.

Making a note on my paper, I stick my pen in my mouth,
and do what I do best.

Investigate.

WHAT A FUCKING shit show of a night. My head is killing me as I park my bike. Glancing at my watch, I sigh as I see how many calories I've burned, and the actual time. Three am. I have around five hours before I have to be up in the morning. Not to mention, I've not eaten nearly enough to maintain the muscle mass required to fight the way I do. Like my sister requested, I've managed to bring home what the kitchen was going to throw away, but it's still not enough.

My neck is tight as I slog up the steps to our third-floor apartment. My feet weigh a hundred pounds apiece, and taking the stairs is like wading through the ocean fully clothed. Sighing, I put my key in the door, turning the lock, trying to push myself a few feet forward. If I can just make it that far, I can be in my home and take off the mask I wear for the people I don't know.

"Hey," I hear my sister, Destiny, whisper. "Hey," I answer her. "Brought home some food if you're hungry."

"I am," she yawns. "But I'm more tired. I think he's about to wake up, if he continues with his normal schedule. Do you mind taking it?"

"I think I got it," I grin over at her. "I've learned a lot in the past six months."

"Understatement of the year. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks for all your help, Destiny. I don't know where I'd be without you."

“You’d figure it out,” she smiles, before turning around and heading back to her bedroom.

While that’s probably true - I’ve been figuring out shit since I was a kid - I don’t think I would’ve gotten this far without her. My stomach growls, but I have more important things to attend to. Sitting on the couch, I reach down, unlacing my boots and taking them off my feet. It’s such a relief, the stress melts from my body. Right as I’m about to get up again, I hear a small whimper coming from my room.

Pride, peace, and the most all-consuming warmth of love invades my chest as I quickly scoot across the floor and shut my door, allowing Destiny to sleep undisturbed. My feet move by themselves to the crib in the corner. Looking down, I see the face of the most important person in my life.

My son.

His brown eyes recognize me, and a small smile crosses his face, his little arms reaching up for me. The onesie he wears is bursting as he wiggles, trying to get closer.

“Hey, Gray,” I coo, reaching down to pick him up. “You hungry?” I bounce him against my chest as he puts his fist into his mouth. “I got you.”

One of the things I’ve learned since he came into my life is he’s the one I can talk to about anything and everything.

He never talks back, and I don’t have to worry if he’ll tell my secrets. All he does is listen; and it’s a blessing I didn’t know I needed.

“It was a rough night, my man,” I continue speaking as we go into the kitchen. Reaching into the refrigerator, I pull out a premade bottle. He reaches for it, grabbing hold with his hands, propping it on my shoulder. Quickly making it back to my bedroom, I have a seat on the second-hand chair we were able to purchase. It barely rocks, just enough to give Grayson a sense of security. I move him from my shoulder, cradling him in my arms.

His eyes, so much like my own, look up at me. They shine bright with trust. The type of trust I imagine I had at his age,

before it was crushed and ruined. His lips suck hungrily at the bottle, and no matter how hard it is to feed him, I'm proud that I've been able to. My stomach is empty but his is full, and that's the sacrifice I make.

"I saved a girl tonight." I think back to the moment behind the club. "Nah, she wasn't a girl." I allow a grin, something I don't let myself show others. Grayson though, he gets every part of me I hide from the world. "She was all woman. When I work I'm not supposed to notice any of that shit, but I did."

My job is simple - I keep people from being a nuisance - and to do that, I have to separate myself from the girls who come to the club to look for a hook-up. Otherwise, I'd never be able to get anything done.

"I haven't noticed anyone in a while," I keep on talking. "Didn't even really notice your mom," I admit. "All I wanted was someone to make me forget I lost the fight, that fuckin' money." The failure washes over me again, like it did on the night he was conceived. "It would've changed everything. We wouldn't be in this shit hole, and I wouldn't be worrying about how I'm going to keep you in diapers and food."

It's weird how your greatest achievement can come from your biggest disappointment. Grayson is proof that everything happens for a reason. My mind goes back to Bella.

"Her eyes, my man, her eyes went from sapphires to that light color of blue on glaciers. Yeah, you have no idea what I'm talking about, but I've never seen anything like it before."

And I'm intrigued. Something I haven't felt in years... if ever.

"I shouldn't look for her again."

He gazes up at me, dropping his bottle out of his mouth. Tiny fingers reach up, grabbing at my chin. His grip is strong, and he causes my head to move in a nodding motion.

"I should?"

He does it quicker and with more force. I'm definitely nodding now.

“We’ll see,” but in my heart, I know I’m gonna do it. A force like her? She’s bound to blow me away, and if there’s anything I enjoy, it’s getting back up when I’ve been knocked down.

LIV COMES CRASHING out of her room, making enough noise to wake the dead. Her eyes are tiny slits on her face as she looks at me. “Jesus Christ, you’ve been awake all night, haven’t you?” she whimpers as she shuffles across the floor.

We’ve lived together for four years. We know each other better than anyone else. “Is it that obvious?”

She nods, making it over to the kitchen island and grabbing hold of it for dear life. “You have that weird grin you get; the one where you look like you’re high on air.”

“I am.” I push my legs under me, my laptop cradled there. “You have no idea how much shit I’ve learned.”

“About what?” She tries to put her coffee pod in the machine, but it won’t close. Once, twice, three times. “Shit, can you come do this for me?”

Getting up, I hold my hand out for the coffee pod, managing to get it in and shut in one swift motion.

“Fuck how much did I drink last night?” She leans against the counter, yawning loudly.

“I didn’t think it was this much.”

She sighs, a sly smile on her face. “Possibility that I had a little recreational fun last night.”

“Liiivvvvvvvv,” I warn. “Was that the smartest thing to do?”

“How much longer do we have to be college students with hardly any responsibilities? This is the last few months of our lives where we can identify by the moniker ‘student’. Being able to do that comes with a built-in excuse for doing stupid shit. Once we graduate, we have to grow up, and we’re immediately expected to be the adults we’ve always wanted to be.”

Tilting my head to the side, I see right through her. “You’re scared to death about going out into the real world.”

“Yeah,” she whispers, grabbing hold of the coffee that’s just finished. “Terrified. I don’t know. Last night it hit me. It’s no longer years we have left in school, or even semesters. It’s months, Belle. Months. When we move outta here,” she shrugs, “who’s to say we’ll still talk to each other?”

“Oh come on,” I hug her tightly. “There’s no way you’re getting rid of me that easy.”

“But how do we know? Bowling Green, Kentucky, isn’t exactly a hot bed for investigative articles, or even obituaries.” She rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know where you heard most reporters get stuck doing obits they’re first year, but stop,” I laugh. “The truth is none of us know what the future holds.”

“That’s the problem,” she admits as she holds her cup in front of her. “I need to have an idea of where I’m going to end up.”

“I can’t even think about it, not when my future is up in the air. If I don’t do this, write the best story I can and make Pete take notice of me, I’m not even graduating. The future is something so unattainable for me at this point.”

“You’re always going to come out on top, Belle. We both know that.”

But I don’t believe it. I can’t focus on the assumption I will come out on top - at least not without a whole lot of hard work. “I put in the time and effort,” I remind her.

“Sure you do, but regardless of how much effort you give, you come out smelling like roses.”

My neck jerks back, the rejection of her words stinging. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go get ready. After staying up all night looking through Shadows’ social media, I think I might know where to find him this morning. Good thing it didn’t fall into my lap or anything.”

“Belle - you know I didn’t mean it.”

I turn away from her and keep walking to my room. When I cross the threshold, I shut the door and then have a seat at my desk. Before me are all the notes I made while looking through every single thing I could find about Shadows online. Still haven’t found out his goddamn real name, but I have gathered some info.

He has a routine, one he hardly ever deviates from if his Facebook is any indication. Five bucks says he doesn’t realize he’s got all the location information turned on, and doesn’t know his phone is checking him in every time he’s somewhere. Luckily for me, I’ve written down anything I felt would be of use and taken screenshots of the rest.

Glancing at myself in the mirror, I wonder if I should dress like I’m going to work out, or I’m there to catch his eye for more than a little exercise session. Normally I would go ask Olivia, but I’m still hurt by what she said.

Instead, I close my eyes and think about the lectures I’ve attended, the conferences I’ve been to, and listen to my gut. “Girl next door it is,” I smirk, reaching for a pale pink lip gloss and a hair tie.

STANDING OUTSIDE *BROKEN BRIDGES MMA*, I’m out of place. Sticking out like a sore thumb might be a better description. If I could, I would run away, but from Shadows’ Facebook, I know he works out here in the morning and in the evening if he’s getting ready for a fight. According to all the DISCORD servers for our University, he’s getting ready for a

fight. This is where I need to be. As I eye the people going inside, I realize this definitely isn't the type of establishment I normally head into.

The girls walking in aren't wearing workout clothes as loungewear, while the guys don't have the brand-new shirts they've cut the arms out of just to come look like they lift heavy every single day of their lives.

"You lost?"

The deep voice behind me isn't the one I want to hear, but I still turn to face the owner of it. I've seen him around campus a few times. His name though, it escapes me. "No, not lost, just getting the nerve up to go in."

He's built like a fucking MAC truck. It's easy to imagine that most girls who come into contact with him swoon at his feet. They probably make a comment about the ink covering his body, and want an explanation about what the different drawings mean.

"I can take you in, if you want. I'm the owner of the joint."

"You?" I don't mean for it to come out the way it does, and luckily he isn't offended judging by the grin on his face.

"Believe it or not, some of us ex-cons actually are productive members of society."

This time I take a look at him with a different set of eyes. Gone are the glasses of a girl admiring a good-looking guy. Now I see him as the type of man who could hurt me, the way I almost was last night. Instead of seeing the tall man with two sleeves of tattoos down his arms and a five o'clock shadow covering his cheeks, he appears more sinister now. The strong arms are now weapons he can use to prove a point. "Good on ya," I nod, licking my lips. Pushing back my fear, I stand to my full five feet three inches. "I'd love it if you could take me in."

He steps forward, opening the door with one hand, and with the other, he motions for me to walk through it. "Welcome to *Broken Bridges MMA*," he says.

As I walk in, I'm astounded by the sights and sounds. This isn't like any of the gyms I've been to. No pop tunes bursting from the speakers, no well-lit areas with bright colored machines.

Hard rock blares from one side of the gym where someone uses two ropes, beating them against the floor. Sweat pours from his broad shoulders, down his back, soaking into the torn material of his t-shirt. I'm tired just watching him work. "How long has he been doing that?"

"He's on his third set of fifteen," a guy with a ring through his nose answers before shrugging and turning away. I follow him as he walks to one of the offices, grabbing a clipboard.

He flips through the sheets of paper until he finds what he needs. Coming back out of the office, he bypasses us and heads for the other side of the gym. A force I'm unsure of compels me to follow him. I don't get too close, but I almost refuse to get left behind. There's a spark in the air. No one's smiling, no jokes are being cracked, and immediately I realize there's a lot riding on what's happening during this training session.

This side is serious. There's a ring set up, some boxing bags, and I see guys with mouthpieces hanging from their lips. If they have to put in mouthpieces, they're going hand-to-hand.

"Ready?" The guy who was at the counter glances up at the man who escorted me in.

Looking back and forth between the two of them, I don't understand what kind of conversation they seem to be having.

"Shadows!" the guy who brought me in bellows. "Get in here, let's get some work done."

It finally dawns on me that this guy who owns the MMA gym is also Shadows' coach. I expect him to come out of the area where there's a locker room and showers, but instead, I'm surprised. The person on the other end of the gym drops the ropes.

With the light playing off the darker side of the gym, it gives him the appearance of a giant. If I didn't know who he was, I'd be scared to death of the man walking toward us.

When he gets into the light, his eyes flash with recognition as he notices me. The smirk across his face is sexy as hell. "Bella, didn't expect to see you here. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen you here before."

This is my *I carried a watermelon moment*. "I'm touring the gym, thinking of learning to fight."

He raises an eyebrow, looking over at his coach. The voice that comes from his chest is raspy, deep, and full of a protection I've never heard from anyone before. "If anybody's gonna teach her to fight, it'll be me."

I can only think of one thing as he says the words.

Sign. Me. Up.

“IF ANYBODY’S *gonna teach her to fight, it’ll be me.*”

What the fuck am I even thinking? I have time for nothing else in my life. I’m full to the brim, and here I am offering something I have no business offering. As soon as I heard those words, the only thing running through my head were all the annoying frat boys chomping at the bit to train her.

“Like you have time for it,” Maddox says as he gives me a look of disbelief. “In case you forgot, you have a fight in six weeks.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“Coulda fooled me. You do remember what happened last time, don’t you?”

Like I could forget. I went down. Not in a blaze of glory, but like a bag of bricks. Lost all the respect and credibility I’d built up in the last few years on the underground circuit. Gone was the money that was going to bring us through the next few months. The unshakeable confidence I’d had in myself - that’s been gone since. Then the weeks it took me to recover... the medical bills I’m still trying to pay. I couldn’t forget this shit even if I tried.

“Let’s get this shit on the road.”

Turning to face Bella, I look at her sternly. “You stay and we’ll talk about your training when we’re done.”

She nods, looking slightly scared. I wish I could change the way I am. Intensity is always the name of the game. One of

the things I know about myself is I'm a procrastinator. If there's not a goal for me to accomplish at the end, then what's the actual point of attempting to do anything?

"I'll be here," she answers. "Is there a place I can sit?"

"Over here," I point to my side of the ring. No one's ever sat on my side before. Not even my sister. I make it a habit of not letting others get involved in my life. For some reason I'm not willing to explore, I want her to be. "Sit there until I'm done."

She nods, following what I would say without a doubt are orders.

Maddox looks at me. "Get your head into the game. Don't let her being here fuck you up."

"Nothing's going to fuck me up."

With everything I have, I hope I can speak it out into existence. When I found out I was a father, and going to be a single one at that, it fucked me up in ways I wasn't ready for. Maybe that's just what happens when you live your life not caring about whom you hurt or what you put out there.

"You better hope not. There's a lot riding on you."

"I've got big shoulders."

"They aren't big enough to handle everything for everyone, Shads. You've got to let others help you. That's your biggest downfall."

I don't want to hear about all the things I suck at. I've been there, done that, and I'm trying to be better, to *do* better. But bringing me back to who I was doesn't help me with who I'm trying to be. "Then let's move on to what I *can* handle." I go over and sit on the stool in my corner of the ring.

Holding my hands out, I let Maddox start taping my knuckles and wrists. Exhaustion weighs my shoulders down, but I lean into it the way I always do. Living on the edge of constant potential failure kind of has a way of tiring you out. I've used it as motivation for most of my life, and now it's taken on a whole new meaning. With another mouth to feed

and a continuation of the family line I'd always wanted to die with me, I'm at a crossroads. One I never thought I'd be at.

War with myself is a comfortable feeling. It's a shield I use to prevent the real emotions from coming out. When we were growing up, emotions didn't help anything. They didn't prevent us from going hungry when dear old dad gambled a little too much at the casino, and they weren't there to keep us warm at night when mom couldn't afford our gas bill in the winter. As I always do when I'm getting ready to either fight or spar, I use that anger, that hopelessness, to fuel the determination I have in the ring.

One of the trainers stands behind me, massaging my shoulders, getting them loose for the movements I'll be making. I try not to think about the woman sitting in the seats behind us, why it matters so much I be the one to train her, and why I'm happy to have her here. My brain argues it's because I've never had anyone in my corner, and it's a novelty.

That little part of my heart that aches for companionship and understanding calls it a liar and recognizes it's nice to have someone to lean on.

The question is, will I push it away before it has a chance to blossom into something else? That seems to be my track record for everything in my life. Or will I be able to say fuck it to the shit that holds me back and surprise everyone - including myself? It's a bet I won't take, but I would love for someone to make on me.

"You ready?" Maddox asks, as he stands in front of me, finishing up the wrapping of my wrists.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Not what I'm looking for, Shads." He grabs me behind the neck, bringing our foreheads together. "Are you ready for this?"

He's trying to get under my skin. Trying to make me believe in myself in a way I haven't since my loss. "Yeah," I nod. "I'm ready."

“Alright, get in the ring and do what you do best. Don’t hold back because this is sparring. Show me what you got, and lay him down.”

Shoving the headgear on, Maddox verifies it’s tight enough. Shaking my head, I make sure it won’t move.

I open my mouth for him to put the guard in to protect my tongue. “Let’s go,” my words are garbled, and the adrenaline flowing through my chest is enough to choke me, but it’s what I’ve waited months for. I’m not going to squander this. I’ll give it everything I have.

Isabella

SITTING TO THE SIDE, I take stock of everything that’s happened since I walked into the gym. I’m not entirely sure what my plan had been, but *this* wasn’t it.

Especially not getting Shadows to offer to train me. Not that I want to be trained, but anything to get the story.

Right?

But as I sit here and watch him, the muscles of his back playing against the flesh covering them, I wonder if what I’m doing is worth it. He gives off an aura of suffering and hardship.

And here I am, potentially adding to it.

“Get in there!” Maddox yells at Shadows as he spars with someone I don’t know. “Don’t take it easy, I want to see how bad you want this.”

Even I flinch at the tone he’s using. Although it’s not directed toward me, I can hear it in my chest. The noise reverberates off the sparse walls of the gym.

“Do you want it?” he yells.

Shadows doesn’t say anything, just keeps punching at his opponent.

“I asked you a question! Do you want this or not? We can all go home and not fuck with this the rest of the night.”

“You know I want it,” his words are muffled by the mouthguard.

Maddox grabs the chin section sticking out on the headgear and pulls Shadows closely. “You’re not acting like it. You haven’t been for months. What’s going to make you pull outta this?”

From where I sit, I can see Shads chest heaving.

“Stop,” he yells back at Maddox.

“I’m trying to get a reaction out of you. None of this seems like it’s sinking in.” Maddox presses his finger against the other man’s temple.

“It’s sinking in,” he argues.

“Is it?” He keeps pressing.

“Don’t fuckin’ touch me.”

The tone I hear coming out of Shads is heartbreaking. For some it would be the growl of an angry man, but to me... it’s something different. It’s the howl of a hurt animal, someone trying to keep it together when everything around them is falling apart.

I’m familiar with that, and all I want to do is go down there, wrap my arms around him, and tell him it’ll be okay.

“What? You don’t like this?” Maddox keeps on.

Not able to sit still any longer, I stand, annoyed at him for bothering Shads when it’s so obvious he’s having a rough go of it.

“Told you to stop it.”

“You gonna do something about it?”

“Yeah,” he swats Maddox’s hand away.

“Then c’mon and do something! I’ve been waiting on it. Or have you lost the fuckin’ edge? That’s it, right? You’ve lost it.”

Anyone watching the two of them can see he hasn’t. He’s holding back. From whom or for what, I have no idea, but he’s

keeping a tight rein on his emotions and reactions. I'm wondering how long it'll take before he explodes.

Turns out I don't have to wait long.

"Fuck you!"

The words are thrown across the room like a fighter dropped with a good right hook. I watch as Shads grabs Maddox in a headlock and then brings him over his shoulder, dropping him on the mat.

He gets up, brushing his clothes off. "That's it! You wanna go? Let's go."

What follows is the likes of which I've never seen before. They go at each other with the ferocity of two starving dogs fighting over the last bowl of food. My head and heart screams for them to stop before they hurt each other, but a hand comes out to grab my arm.

I hadn't realized I'd made a move toward the ring.

"This has been a long time coming. Let them get it out of their systems."

Every part of me wants to ask questions. My reporter's mind wonders what caused this moment. Why do they have to get it out of their systems? If they're close, why are they fighting like this? "What happened?"

He shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest. "No one knows. Shads went from having the best fights of his life to fucking up the last one, and then he refused to get in the ring for months. He didn't take calls for weeks, and then when he finally did, he was busy all the time. No one can get through to him."

"Looks like Maddox is right now." I flinch as the two of them land solid hits on one another.

"He's working on it. It'll take a few more sessions like this before Shads opens up. He's notoriously close to the vest but this is a bit much, even for him."

Already I'm trying to figure out what could have changed in his life to cause such upheaval. Obviously it's something he

doesn't want others to know about, which could be many things.

Illegal.

Personal.

Tapping my chin as I watch them, I realize I'll have to get closer. If he won't tell his closest friends what's going on in his life, there's no way he'll open up to me... Unless I become someone important in his day-to-day.

The one woman he can't live without.

In all my years working at the paper, I haven't lied to get to the heart of a story. Never had to.

But desperate times call for desperate measures, and if I don't graduate, there will be copious amounts of blame and disappointment laid before me.

Looking up at Shadows I can imagine the two of us fighting, but for different things.

He's taking on whatever he hides behind the edges of his sharp facade. There's a life he's scared to expose. One he guards with everything important to him.

Me?

I'm fighting for my future, wherever it might take me. But the fact is I'll never know unless I can make Pete's dumb deadline.

The worst part?

I think we both refuse to fail.

CHAPTER 9

ISABELLA

I'M WAITING for Shadows to come out of the locker room. He and Maddox fought it out, just like I was told they would. It was violent, but at the end they'd hugged each other, and Shadows seemed not to be so tightly wound.

I'm restless as I wait, crossing and then uncrossing my legs.

There's a volatile edge to the room as more people come in to work out. Me and women going to stations and starting what I'm beginning to see as their religion. They come to worship at the pulpit of what makes their bodies better.

"Hey, thanks for hanging out."

His deep voice is a surprise, causing me to turn toward him. He's still red with the heat of his fight, and possibly the anger with which he seemed to go after Maddox with. "No problem," I stand up quickly. "You said you wanted to discuss my training, and I do too."

"Mind if we go grab some coffee?" He hefts his bag further up onto his shoulder. "I've got a long night, and I could use it."

I'll do anything he wants me to if it means I get this story. I can't lose what I've worked so hard for. "Sure, wanna go to Cup of Joe?" I mention a place a couple of blocks away.

"Sounds good. I need to see Maddox for a minute. Head over there and I'll meet you."

I'm worried he's not going to show up, but this is also going to be a test. Does he trust me enough to show up? Do I trust him enough to wait? "Ten minutes?"

"That's perfect," he answers before turning on his heel and heading what I presume is the office.

Walking out to my car, I run through my mind what I want to talk to him about. How I need to present what I need, to make myself appear as needy as possible so he's beyond willing to help out. Getting in, I buckle up and head down the street to the coffee house.

As soon as I pull in, my phone lights up on the holder connected to my vent. Inwardly, I groan. It's my Mom.

If I don't answer, she'll call continuously until I do.

"Hey Mom."

"Belle, how's it going?"

I fight not to sigh. "It's going. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I know you hate talking to me, but we need to discuss graduation."

"Mom," I groan. "It's not until May. Why are we talking about it now?"

"Because you're the first person in our family to graduate college, it's a big deal."

It is a big deal, for me. Because I'm the reason I've been able to attend this college. I worked hard, got a scholarship, and have done absolutely everything asked of me by every professor I've had, including this story on Shadows. My family has had nothing to do with it, other than giving me a little bit of money here and there so I was able to eat when things were rough. "Mom, I'd rather not make a big deal out of it."

"Everyone is coming into town, and that's the end of it."

"So it doesn't matter what I want?" I argue. "I'd rather have the people there that have supported me, and none of the

people you're going to invite have done that."

"Isabella, your dad and I want to..."

"You want to pretend like my accomplishments are yours," I finish for her. "They aren't. I did this. I put in the long nights, the hard work, and I had the motivation to do things you and dad told me I couldn't do when I told you I'd gotten a scholarship."

"You'll think differently in a few months," she blows off my arguments.

Shadows parks beside me. "Mom, I gotta go." Before she can say anything else, I hang up.

"You okay?" He asks, as he gets off his bike and I get out of my car.

"Yeah," I sigh. "Just family problems."

Recognition flashes in his eyes. "Don't I understand that. Is there anything I can do to help?"

The sentiment surprises me, although we're friendly I've never expected him to try to relate to me like this. "Nah, I'll handle it, it's just annoying, ya know?"

"I do," he nods. "You wanna head inside?"

"Yeah, a cup of coffee would be amazing right now."

We sit in the back, our respective cups of coffee in front of us. He's drinking straight black, and I have an iced concoction with multiple flavorings. It really says a lot about the both of us if someone were to use our coffee orders to judge our personalities.

"What are your goals?" He asks, after taking a drink.

"To be able to protect myself," I answer quickly. "The guy at Secrets scared the shit out of me. I don't want to be able to maim someone," I smirk. "I just wanna be able to get away if someone comes after me."

"We can do that," he nods. "You'll have to listen to what I tell you. It won't be easy, it'll be a lot like a workout program,

but it's going to teach you how to do what you need to in order to get away and get help."

"That's exactly what I want," I breathe slightly easier.

"Then that's what we'll do."

CHAPTER 10

IT'S RAINING as I hoof it up The Hill on Monday.

Everyone who's gone to college in Bowling Green knows about The Hill.

Situated at the highest point in the city, everything else grows out from it, including student parking, the dorms, and the newer buildings where most of my classes are held. The only student office up this far? The newspaper office.

Tucking my rain jacket tighter around my body, I do my best to avoid the puddles starting to gather on the concrete, cracked with age. One of the motions being voted on at the next regents' meeting is an entire overhaul of the sidewalk system throughout campus. In the past there's been a lot of opposition, so it'll be interesting to see what comes of the showdown.

Glancing up, I sigh. There are a few more feet to go before I get to the awning of the communications building. The meeting I'm going to have with Pete is playing in my mind. I'm visualizing telling him about the possibility of a lead with Shadows, and how he'll react. The problem with Pete is he isn't known for being predictable. With my head back down, steps rushed, all I want is out of this weather. It's bone-deep cold, the type that seeps into your chest and leaves it feeling swollen and barren.

I should almost be there when I run into what feels like a brick wall. My gaze is down at my feet. Another pair, wearing motorcycle boots comes into focus. My cheeks heat. I

recognize them from the hours I spent going through Shadows' social media. He's had them for years.

"I'm...I'm...so...so...sorry," I stumble over all my words.

"Hard to see when you're not watching where you're going."

It takes everything I have to raise my eyes to meet his. When I see the side of his mouth quirked up, my breath stops.

"I do have a sense of humor." His mouth is back in a straight line.

"What you don't have is an umbrella or rain jacket," I point out. His hair is wet, hanging down in his eyes.

Those deep pools of whiskey.

Most say they're windows to the soul, but not for him. They're shuttered with blackout blinds.

"Not in the budget." He shrugs, pushing his hands into his jeans pockets.

The matter-of-fact tone of his voice makes my heart hurt. To not have the money for something like a rain jacket or an umbrella? To me, those are basic needs.

"I don't want you to stand here getting rained on." I point to the building behind him. "I'm heading to communications."

He quirks an eyebrow. "What are you heading there for?"

If he doesn't know, I don't want to tell him. "Media," I blurt out. "Design media. What about you?"

"Came to get my sponsorship money from Maddox. He's getting some design work done for the gym. I don't have class today."

I wipe drops of water from under my eyes. "So you actually do go here?"

He rocks back on his boots. "When I can. I'm on the, like, twelve-year-degree program." That little tilt of his mouth again. It causes my stupid stomach to get butterflies. I've

never been the type of woman to get all fucked up over a grin, but here we are.

“Every little bit helps.” I try to be enthusiastic.

“Yeah, but anyway. I gotta go.”

“Same.” I point toward the door. “Getting wet, right?” Heat floods my face. *Getting wet?*

His gaze fucking smolders as he narrows his eyes. The scruff dotting his face gives the illusion that he just woke up. What would it feel like rubbing against my skin? In the dip of my shoulder, where my neck is the most sensitive?

He leans in, closer than he ever has before. “Are you?”

There’s no mistaking the innuendo in his voice, the little bit of interest. If I want to get closer, I need to play along.

Tilting my shoulder up, I give what I hope is a coy smile. “Maybe.”

For a long moment, we stare at one another, and then he hitches his chin. “See ya, Bella.”

“See ya.” I hurry to the cover of the awning. I should go into the safety, dryness, and warmth of the building, but there’s a force pushing me to turn around.

Don’t fuck with me surrounding him. He commands respect without uttering a word, but judging by the way every woman looks at him as he hurries by, that’s not all he commands.

Pulling my left arm up, I check the time. Shit, it’s noon, I’m late.

Giving him a farewell glance, I hurry in, taking the stairs at a run. The elevator in this old building sucks and even though I’ll be panting when I get to the third floor, it’ll be quicker this way.

Pete is fixing to close the door as I come screeching around the corner, my rain boots squeaking against the tile floor. “I’m here!” I wave my arms.

“Barely made it,” Pete says with amusement, shutting the world out as soon as I make it inside. “I was about to give up

on you.”

“I have good news,” I pant, trying to regulate my breathing. “I have an in with Shadows.”

He has a seat behind his desk, indicating for me to take the chair in front of it. “I’m listening, Isabella. Your time is getting shorter, so you need some sort of plan.”

“I have an in. “He’s going to start training me.”

“Training you?” He smirks. “For what? You going to enter the women’s division?”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “Self-defense.”

“I wasn’t aware he did that.”

The guilt gets shoved out of the way for a warmth in my belly I have no business acknowledging. Not after what I’m planning on doing, but it’s there. Unmistakable and even welcome. “I guess for me, he made an exception.”

“He doesn’t appear to do that a lot.” Pete picks up his pen, twirling it around his knuckles reminiscent of the move from Ice Man in *Top Gun*. How many times he’s used it to get a girl’s attention. I’m sure it’s part of his whole schtick—seeming like he’s too cool to be in the college bars, yet hanging out there because that’s where he can get the most chicks. I’ve known Pete since high school, and it wasn’t until he came into his own as editor of the paper, and now my professor, that he became a douchebag.

“Lucky me, I guess.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are,” he reiterates. “How are you going to play this?”

“Play this?”

“I mean, how long are you going to act like you’re interested in learning self-defense? Before you ask him for the interview? How long can you ride that wave?”

“Until he seems more comfortable around me, I guess. I’ll know when the time is right.”

“You know...” He puts his elbow on his desk, holding up his cheek with the palm of his hand. “Your interview doesn’t actually have to be an interview. You can write a story about him.”

Leaning forward, I meet his eyes with mine. “Why are you changing the rules? What happened to this being my grade? You threatened me, or do you not remember that?”

“I’m working with what we have right now. What if he starts to trust you? What if you get underneath that tough exterior he shows the rest of the world? Can you imagine the secrets you might learn?”

I bristle, annoyed he’s willing to use me just as much as he’s willing to use Shadows. I guess that’s really the point of all of this, but it still hurts. Makes me feel protective of not only myself, but Shadows as well. “So I discover his secrets, then tell everyone? Seems like a real decent thing to do.”

“You can’t be everybody’s friend. One day you’ll realize that.”

Maybe I just want to be a decent human being. But in my heart of hearts, I know I set this situation into motion, and now I must see it to the end. “When do you need a first check-in?” I ask, pulling my planner out of my bag. “I assume you aren’t going to trust me to just come to you at the end of the semester with an article.”

“Damn straight about that. Two weeks, I want to know what you’ve been able to find out. What’s he hiding? What makes him tick? Where does he get that chip on his shoulder that makes all the ladies want to fix him?”

“Are you jealous?” I smirk. “Do you want all the ladies to fix you?”

He rolls his eyes and sighs. “Maybe once or twice, someone throwing themselves at me. Ya know, it’d be nice.”

Thinking back to how I saw Shadows react at the club, he doesn’t want women to throw themselves at him. The differences between the two of them are glaring. “Two

weeks?" I verify, just to make sure I have the right timeline down.

"I want at least a rough draft of five hundred words, and not shit I can find out by hanging around the club or bars."

"I do have to hang out at Secrets," I remind him. "That's where I can see Shadows in his element. That's where I can hear most of the talk about him."

"Are you also planning on hanging out at the MMA gym?"

"How am I going to learn self-defense if I don't? I'm not telling you every single thing I'm going to do. Some of it may not be ethical, but you'll get your story."

He stops for a second, looking at me with almost fatherly caution, even though he's only a few years older than I am. "Be careful. Sometimes playing a role can lead to the real thing."

"Are you telling me not to fall in love with Shadows?" That's easy. I've never been in love with anyone, and I don't plan on starting now.

"I'm telling you to watch your heart. Even when we don't mean for it to be involved, it sometimes gets in the way."

"Like you care," I chuckle.

"Hey." He reaches across the desk, grabbing my hand. "Even though I gave you this assignment, and you think I don't want you to win, I do. I don't want you to get hurt."

Getting up, I shoulder my bag. "Regardless of what you think, Pete, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Famous last words, Isabella." He gives a sly smile and twirls that damn pen again. "Famous last words."

CHAPTER 11

SHADOWS

WHO'S *to say yours is safe with me?*

Who am I? Why am I flirting with this girl who doesn't have any idea what I go home to every night? She doesn't know what kind of life I *really* lead.

I hide it from everybody. The only person who's ever been able to get down deep is my sister, and that's just because she knew me before I put up all my walls.

But I find myself wanting to risk it all for Belle, needing to be a normal guy for a while. The walls are lonely and it's caused a crack. She's managing to push her way through it.

Belle and I walk silently through the slush on the edges of the road. "Get on the other side. Don't want you getting run over," I say as I put myself between her and any car that may pass.

"Such a gentleman."

"Not all the time." I grin over at her, even though she probably can't see it in the darkness already taking hold of the city.

The Diner has only a few people in it as we walk in. It seems to have been the same since it opened in the sixties. Leather booths, with dull chrome that probably once shined. The tiled floor dark with years of use. But this is definitely the kind of place that has the best food.

"Go ahead and seat yourself, Shadows."

“Thanks Crystal.” I wave a hand toward the waitress who normally waits on me when I come in.

“You come here often?” she asks.

We take a seat in my usual booth—on the right-hand side, in the rear, facing the door. Early on in life, I learned not to sit with your back to others. “I guess you could say so. Anytime I got extra cash, I come here for a bite to eat. Lately, haven’t had the extra cash.”

“Because of your loss?”

There’s a pain in my sternum when she mentions the match that started all of this. “Yeah, my loss is the root of everything that’s happened over the past year.”

She rubs her hands up and down her arms.

“Cold?” I raise an eyebrow at her.

“Yeah, that bike ride was something I’ve never done before. Had I known, I would’ve brought a thicker jacket.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you some coffee.” Crystal’s voice interrupts us. “If you’d like one.”

“Yeah.” Belle smiles up at her. “I do, and I’d love a cup.”

“Coming right up. You two want some food?”

There hasn’t been a menu placed in front of us, but I don’t need it. I’ve come here often enough that I know what my favorite is. “You know what I want.” I tilt my head at Belle. “They have a really good burger and fries if that’s your thing. If not, I recommend the pancakes. They’re worth the extra mile I gotta run when I eat ‘em.”

“Give me the pancakes,” she says without hesitation.

“Be right up.” Crystal sweeps past us, a flash of hair and the smell of her cheap perfume.

“I like that.” I grab my wrapped up silverware, playing with the paper ring keeping it together.

“What?”

“You didn’t even have to think about it. You just went for it.”

“Some of us don’t worry about calories like you have to.”

Crystal brings the coffees, placing them down in front of us. My eyes follow Belle as she reaches over, grabbing a couple packets of sugar and shaking them to make sure the granules are at the bottom before ripping the tops off and putting it into the hot liquid.

Twirling my silverware in a circle again, I watch as she uses the spoon to mix her coffee and then takes a drink. “Oh yeah,” she moans, leaning her head on the back on the top of the booth. “That’s really good.”

The noise of contentment is very close to the noise most women make when I slip inside them, which reminds me how long it’s been since I’ve gotten naked with one.

Months.

Since the night I lost the match.

“So,” she continues as if she didn’t just make my dick hard, “losing the match, huh?”

“It was the catalyst,” I confirm.

“For what?” She puts her elbow on the table, balancing her chin with her knuckles.

I’ve never been the type of person to spill my guts, but she’s making me want to. It’s easy to talk to her, maybe because she’s looking at me without an expectation to fix everything that’s wrong in her life. With my son, my sister, I’m the person who takes care of them. The one who’s supposed to make things better.

The truth is, I’ve made them fucking worse.

“For everything.” I crack my knuckles. “Before I lost, I was undefeated. Hardly anybody had ever laid a hand on me. This dude, he served my ass up on a platter. He beat the absolute shit out of me.”

“Was it bad?”

Immediately, I'm transported back to the pain I was in that night. How I'd tried to take the edge off by sleeping with an old girlfriend. How I'd done the one thing I always said I wouldn't and scored some pain pills from a friend. "Oh yeah, my eye was swollen shut for almost two weeks, and my jaw still cracks when I yawn hard enough."

"You didn't go to the doctor?"

Leaning over the table, I motion for her to come in closer. "Fighters don't go to the doctor, Belle. Not when they're fighting illegally," I say. If only it was that simple. "We don't want to call attention to what goes on in the basement of Maddox's gym."

Her eyes widen. Is this what's going to make her bolt. Will this make her decide I'm not even worth being friends with?

"That's crazy." She inhales deeply.

"It's life." I shrug. "For a few months, I wasn't sure I'd fight again, but now there's been a handshake agreement. I'll do a warmup with a guy I know well before the main event." I take a drink of my water. "But if I lose either one of those, I'm done. Nobody's ever gonna give me a chance again. I've been concentrating on training, but other things have had to go to the wayside, like jobs." I hate admitting I'm broke. "So if self-defense is what you want, I'm your guy."

Before Belle can answer, Crystal drops the plates in front of us. "If there's anything else you need, just let me know," Crystal says.

"Oh wow." Belle laughs nervously as she looks at the large amount of food.

"Yeah, you won't want to eat for at least a day after this." I raise my eyebrows at her. "Good luck."

"I'm gonna need it." She starts getting it ready, spreading the butter on her pancakes. "But I haven't eaten all day, so please don't think badly of me when I go in on this plate." She puts her fork up to her lips and inhales the first bite.

"I like a woman who isn't afraid to get her mouth dirty."

Her throat works against the food she's just eaten. The apples of her cheeks turn pink. "Somehow, I'm not surprised."

Reaching in, I grip my burger in both hands. My mouth waters. I haven't had a good meal in a few days and my stomach aches with the emptiness I'm starting to get used to. Trying to forget the hunger that gnaws at me, I concentrate on what she said about not being surprised. "I'd like to surprise you," I say before I take a bite.

"Why me?" She smothers ketchup over her hash browns—more ketchup than it seems any one person should use on anything.

"What?" She must catch the way my eyebrows go toward my hairline.

"Want some potatoes to go with that ketchup?"

She giggles. "Stop. Everybody always makes fun of me, but I love it." She smirks, stopping her fork. "Why me?" She questions again.

"You're one of those enigmas. From the outside, anyone looking at you can tell what you're about, but then they start talking to you." I pick up a fry, putting it in my mouth. "And realize everything isn't always what it seems. I'm still trying to figure you out, but I'd love to see surprise on your face and know I put it there."

"Maybe you can start trying the first day you train me?"

"Hmm, maybe I can."

"Since we're talking about it, and that's why we're here, how much are you, Shadows? What does it cost to train with the one of the hottest fighters ever to grace our little town?"

"Hottest?" I smirk, a bit of the old Shadows peeking through. The one who knew he could get any woman who came up to him.

She rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean. What about best? It has nothing to do with your looks and everything to do with your reputation."

“Fifty bucks a session, and I like to do two a week. Good for you?”

“It’s doable for a month or so, then I’ll have to look at my finances.”

I can’t tell if she’s trying to make herself relatable or not, but a hundred extra bucks a week will be a true difference right now. “Sounds good. Wanna start the first session tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yeah, let me enjoy my last meal before I have a feeling that tomorrow you’re going to make me puke.”

“I won’t work you that hard.” My voice cracks with laughter.

She tilts her head to the side. “Is it wrong I kinda hope you do?”

Picking up my water, I take a drink to wet my dry throat. “Darlin’ your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER 12

SHADOWS

“HEY LITTLE MAN,” I pick Gray up from his crib, holding him tightly. He smells like baby powder and the lavender soap he likes. It helps him go to sleep at night. “Good morning.”

It’s not often I get to spend these moments with him. Can probably count on one hand how many times I’ve been able to do it. Most of the time, it’s my sister putting him to bed and getting up with him. I hope I’m not doing something to damage him. Is he going to have daddy issues when he gets older since I’m never here? Is he going to think I’m abandoning him? Will he understand everything I’m doing is for him? Trying to keep a roof over his head and food in our stomachs is a full-time job. Not to mention the classes I should be attending, but that more often than not, I miss.

The whole world is passing me by, and I can’t seem to grasp hold tight enough and dig my feet in to slow it down. If I’m not at the gym or Secrets, I’m taking the two classes I’m required to take to be a student. It’s a never-ending cycle I seem to have put myself in. One I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to break. But in moments like this? All I want is something that’s mine and his. For a small part of the day, I get him all to myself.

Having a seat on the bed, I prop up his head, putting him into a sitting position. “I miss the hell outta you. Wish I could hang out with you every day.”

“You know I don’t mind taking care of him,” my sister interrupts us.

Holding back the sigh I want desperately to let loose, I don't take my gaze off him. While I appreciate she's here to help all the time, there's a part of me that resents her too. She's always around, and because of that, I'm not able to connect with him the way I want to. "I know. I just want more time with him."

"You're a parent now, and sometimes that means doing what you have to instead of what you want to."

"Don't you think I know that? I've been doing shit I have to do instead of what I want to most of my damn life. What I'd like to do is come home at a decent hour, have enough money for what we need, and not have to worry about shit all the time."

Gray starts crying.

He reaches for my sister.

It breaks my fucking heart.

He finds more comfort in her than he does in me, and I'm his dad. This shit hurts. Worse than I ever imagined it could. Right now, I'm recognizing the consequences of my actions.

Actions that were determined because of my inability to win that fuckin' fight. It's always going to come back to that.

"I'm sorry ..." She takes my son from me, comforting him when it should be me.

"I gotta go. School and work, ya know?"

"NICE OF YOU TO come to class," Professor Singleton says as he walks in front of my desk in English class.

I still haven't declared a major, and it's taken everything I have to get these general ed classes done. Not that I'm breaking any records, but eventually I'll end up somewhere, right?

"Had nothing better to do." I shrug.

The girl sitting beside me giggles in that annoying way—the one where she wants attention, but doesn't want to be super obvious about it.

Professor Singleton leans into me. “If you put in more effort with this class, there'd be no stopping you.”

I'm fucking annoyed he seems to think I don't put effort into things. I have only so much time in the day. “My man, today is not the day, and I am not the one.”

“Then I think you'd better decide if this is the class you want to be in.”

Younger Shadows might have felt bad for causing a disturbance and being a fuck, but not this one. This morning, hell, this year has been a testament to my patience.

Patience I no longer have.

While I'm not leaving the class forever, I need to leave it for today.

Getting up from my seat, I grab everything I brought with me, and leave. The door makes a very satisfying slam behind me as I complete this act of rebellion. Walking out into the sunshine, I take a deep breath and head down The Hill.

Hopefully the rest of this day goes better than the first half.

“ARE you sure this is a good idea?” Maddox asks.

I'm warming up, waiting for Belle to show, and after the day I've had, my temper is on a hair trigger. But I'm not angry at Maddox, and I do my best to soften my tone. “What do you mean, ‘Is this a good idea?’ I realize people like you don't have to worry about money, but those of us who live in the real world do.”

“Quit being a fuckin' punk. That's not what I mean and you know it.”

“Do I? You can be a dick with the best of them. Why would this be any different?”

Maddox lifts an eyebrow, looking down his nose at me. Not many men can do it, and I give him respect even if it pisses me off.

“Then why don’t you tell me what you mean? I’m not good at taking hints.”

He gets closer, bending his face down to mine so that he’s near to my ear. “Look, you and I, we been close for a long time. Love you like a brother, and there’s not much I wouldn’t do for you. So what I’m about to say isn’t me being a fucker. It’s me looking out.”

“Hurry up and spit it out, Mad.”

“Hmm. You ain’t gonna like it, but here it goes. I know the last year has been rough on you. Things haven’t gone the way you wanted them to, and you’re struggling. Lil man is something you didn’t plan on,” he says, mentioning my son. He’s one of the only people who knows I even have him. “Not being the fighter you thought you were. It’s all been a hit. So what I’m saying to you is when some hot girl comes to you asking to take some classes, don’t take it at face value.”

There’s a burning in my gut as he speaks. Something about the way he’s beating around the bush when he should be getting right to the point. Almost like he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings. Which is stupid because we’ve never cared about that shit with one another. “Just tell me.”

“She’s a journalism student, Shads. You’d make a damn good story, especially after everything that’s happened to you.”

That burning in my gut is back. “Shut the fuck up...” I drag out the words, giving him the full brunt of my irritation.

He holds his hands up. “Don’t shoot the messenger, my man. I’m just saying, maybe you should think about it. How often have things in your life gone according to plan? Doesn’t it seem a little suspicious to you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Women who are on the take can be spotted a mile away. Trust me, this girl isn’t one of them.”

I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince. Me or him.

“It’s your funeral. Whatever you wanna believe, go right ahead and do it. Just do me a favor and make sure your eyes are wide open when it comes to the girl.”

“Mmmm,” I make a noise in my throat.

“Speak of the devil and she appears.” Maddox nods to where Belle is entering the gym. “Lock up when you’re done. I’m out.”

It’s not very often I get to watch her incognito.

She’s wearing a tank top that shows off a rack my hands itch to get hold of. Leggings, or whatever they’re called, cup a tight ass. One I wanna jerk against me. It’s been a while since I’ve had thoughts like this - with so much pressure and other things needing my attention.

I’d love to bury myself in her, fist her hair around my hand and let go of all this tension I’ve been carrying around.

“Shadows, I’m here,” she announces as she flounces over to where I’m standing.

“So I see. Are you ready to work?”

“I am. Is there a place I can put this?” She points to the backpack in her hand.

“The locker room. You won’t have to worry about locking it up. We’re the only ones in here tonight.”

Her eyes move around the room, the realization we’re alone hitting her, making those sapphires of hers sparkle. “You’ll be on your best behavior?”

“Can’t promise that, darlin’. I’ve learned not to make ones I can’t keep.”

CHAPTER 13

ISABELLA

NERVES FLUTTER in my stomach as I shove my bag into an open locker. This is it. A make or break-it event. Either I start to make headway with Shadows or I don't and risk losing what I've worked so hard for. Which means I'm either sinking or swimming.

Sighing deeply, I try to use those nerves to push me out of this room. Why can't I put one foot in front of the other? Is it the situation that has me scared, or is it the man himself?

Slowly, I take a few steps. But I hide, not in his shadows, but in mine.

He seems to go through a routine only he knows. First to the left, checking on pieces of equipment, then to the right, grabbing a bottle of water. He holds it in his palm, testing its weight, bouncing it up and down before taking a long drink.

The muted light defines his silhouette, bathing the dips and curves of his muscles. His Adam's apple bobs up and down as he pushes the water down his throat.

I've been back here long enough.

Sighing deeply, squaring my shoulders, I walk slowly into the main gym.

"You good?" he asks, turning to face me.

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as I get a look at the man in front of me. Unfortunately his chest and abs are covered by a tank top, but his arms are enough to write home to my mama about. "Yeah, I'm ready when you are."

“Okay.” He smacks his hands together in front of him. “Have you ever done anything like this before?”

A snort works its way past my throat. “No.” I chuckle. “Not at all.”

“Alright, so the first thing you need to do is warm up. C’mon over to the treadmill. Do about eight minutes for me?”

“Hopefully walking up the hill every day will make this eight minutes easier,” I quip, hopping on.

He leans over my shoulder to press the button to get it moving. Our skin lightly touches, causing a spark deep in my belly.

“This too fast?” His voice is soft almost next to my ear.

“Nope, just right.” I attempt to make my tone even, but it doesn’t work. Although I’ve not been walking long, being in close contact with him, and my nervousness leaves me breathless.

“When it goes off, come on over here.” He hitches a thumb behind him to where the mats and bags are. His footsteps echo off the floor since we’re the only ones occupying the space.

Although he’s a good twenty feet away, his eyes are on me. They’re burning my skin through my clothing. If only I knew what he was thinking, what he sees when he looks at me.

I keep walking, and while each step becomes easier, my mind constantly wanders to the man in the room behind me. It’s the longest eight minutes of my life.

The treadmill comes to a stop as my time is up.

“Alright, Belle, c’mon. Let’s get started.”

The way he says my name burns like bourbon sliding down my throat. Here in this moment, it’s intimate and all mine.

“Tell me what to do...” What the fuck? I sound like I’m giving my virginity to him, but, I know I need to gain his trust by showing him I can follow instructions and eventually

proving he can confide in me. That's the objective, and I can't lose track of it. Not yet. Not when we've only just begun.

"Okay, show me what you've got. Put the tape over your knuckles and hit the bag." He gets behind it. His long fingers grab hold of the leather. The way he touches it is a caress.

"Just hit it?" I kind of expected a little more instruction than this.

"It's not gonna bite you. Just fuckin' hit it. Something's made you mad? Irritated? Got a bad grade? Take it all out on this bag and let me see what we're working with here."

"Are you sure?"

He rolls his eyes. "Look. I'm not here for me. I'm here for you. In order for this to work, I need to know where you are. If you're afraid I'm gonna look at your tits jiggling or whatever, don't be. This is all business."

Sure it is. "I wasn't afraid, but I'll make them jiggle extra hard for you."

"Oh, she's got a mouth on her." He grins. "Don't know that I've ever seen that side of your personality come out."

It's because I've been trying to keep my sassy side hidden. I don't want to scare him off before I get a chance to accomplish what I came here to do. "I can show you more if you'd like."

His lips tilt up on one side. "I like it."

Heat rises to my cheeks.

"Come on, Belle. There's no reason to second-guess yourself or be embarrassed. It's just us here."

"Alright," I sigh. "Here I go."

But I don't. Not for a long moment. I'm trying to drag up something that makes me angry enough to punch this bag. Out of nowhere, an image of Pete starts playing through my head. Him threatening what I've worked so hard for. The surprise of having to interview Shadows. It's like the beat of a drum building up to a crescendo. My heart starts racing, my body

warming with anger at the manipulation. The flat-out douchery he demonstrated when giving me an almost impossible story. After all I've done in my time at the paper.

“Yeah, you're getting pissed, aren't you?” Shadows says from where he stands. “Whatever it is you're thinking of is working.”

“Who,” I correct him. “Who I'm thinking of.”

“Wind up and hit that cocksucker right here.” He moves his hand around, pointing to the middle spot on the bag.

I'm not sure I can. Don't think I'll make any sort of dent in it. But I give it my all. With every ounce of uncertainty I have, I throw the punch, putting my weight behind it. My knuckles burn, but the pain is good, knowing I'm exorcising some demons. Shadows doesn't have to move to take it, but I didn't expect him to.

“Good,” he encourages me. “Now step into it. Throw another one.”

I do as he asks, grunting when my covered hand makes contact. The anger and annoyance dissipates with each punch.

“Feels good, doesn't it?”

“Yeah.” I grin at him.

“Now, let whoever this is in your mind's eye have it. Get it all out. Learn to feel the bag, step into it. Judge how your body responds to the movements you make. What I want you to do is get comfortable, and next time? We'll start working on the proper form. For now, I want you to know how your hands are going to ache in the morning, how your thighs will tremble from exertion, and realize how tight your stomach gets after a session. Have at it.”

All these things he's said—I want to feel them. Long to know how my body will react to hard work and punishment. In some weird way, I wanna know how Shadows feels after he's fought in the ring. This will be a small taste of that, but it'll be something I can add to the story.

And I think I've proven I'll do anything for the story.

With the abandonment of a person fighting for their lives, I attack the bag with everything I have. I throw my weight against the bag, imagining it's Pete I'm pummeling, hitting over and over again as his words ring in my ears. I punch it until my arms are screaming, my throat is raw from grunting, and sweat is pouring down my torso.

When I finally stop, I'm wrecked. Every part of my body is jelly.

"You done?" His dark eyes watch my face with the perception of someone who knows how I'm feeling.

"Yeah." I clear my throat. My arms sag at my sides. "I'm done."

"Give me your hands," he instructs, coming out from behind the bag. "Let's get these off you."

He's working on taking the tape off my wrists. His big hands are encompassing mine completely. Although they'd been protected, my hands are red and already starting to feel sore. I stretch them out. His thumbs work into my palms.

"Mmmm..." I can't help the noise that comes out.

"Feel good?" This time when he asks, his voice is low, intimate.

"Yeah." I lick my lips, completely aware of what his touch is doing to me. The reaction it's causing in my body. Thank god I have two sports bras on.

"You did really good for your first time." He continues rubbing. "Ice these tonight; be gentle with your wrists. If you can, take an Epsom salt bath tonight. You gonna come back for lesson two?" He chuckles, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I laugh along with him. "Although I'm wrecked right now. I liked it."

"It's addictive," he admits.

"Hey Shads, I'm about to close up. Time for y'all to leave," Maddox calls out from his office.

“Be there in a minute,” he yells back, his eyes never leaving mine. “Know what else is addictive?” His gaze is dancing mischievously.

“No, what?”

A bad boy grin pops along his face. “Those jiggling tits of yours.”

CHAPTER 14

SHADOWS

THE EARLY HOURS of the morning are quiet as I climb the stairs to the front door of my apartment. A yellow piece of paper taped to the door catches my eye and a pit forms in my stomach.

I'm sick of seeing this goddamn paper every few months. In big black words, almost like a fucking billboard, it reads: EVICTION NOTICE.

Reaching forward, I palm the paper, rip it down the middle and throw it on the ground.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I speed dial the one person who can get me out of this. He never sleeps and he's always awake when I need him. While I'm waiting for him to answer, I let myself in and lean back against the door. Closing my eyes, I wish I were anywhere but here.

"Figured you'd still be busy with that girl."

"Maddox, I need a fight." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"What? I thought we agreed. No fights until the big one."

Opening my eyes, I look around the apartment my family calls home. The walls at one time must have been white; now they're tinged with yellow from the smokers who rented before us.

Threadbare carpet is hidden by a rug. The place my son sits, does his best to crawl on, is covered by one of those blankets for pets with a plastic protectant layer on one side and

a soft layer on the other. I don't want his bare skin to touch the floor that was probably last deep-cleaned before I was born. The window to the left that doesn't close all the way always lets a damn draft in. We're constantly running up the electric bill in ways we can't afford. I can't even sit in the chair with him in my lap; I'm too scared he'll catch a cold.

Somehow, somehow, I have to get us out of this fuckin' mess.

"You don't understand." My breath is comes in short pants. I'm spiraling quickly and it won't stop until I explain. "I have to get my kid outta this hell hole. There's another damn eviction notice on my door, and I'm lucky they haven't changed the locks yet. Choices are easy for people like you. You can choose to say I can't fight, but you don't have the urgency I do. I don't have an option right now, Maddox. I have a sister and a kid to provide for. Either fucking *help me*, or move outta my goddamn way."

"How much do you need?"

A dark chuckle answers those words. "More than you can come up with. Get me on a card. I'll fight tomorrow night."

"You know that might very well void the contract you already have. What if the promoter sees you?"

"I'll wear a mask. This security job *does not* pay enough. I'm about to go hit up a store, swear to God. I'll do anything so my kid has food and a roof over his head," I threaten.

"This is against my better judgement," he starts to relent.

"Fuck your judgement. I gotta do what I gotta do."

"Alright, calm down. No sense in working yourself up. Be at the Blue Door tomorrow night at eight."

My heart starts pounding when he mentions the last place I lost. Of course the fight is going to be there. "See ya then."

"Don't make me regret this."

He hangs up before I can say anything else. Pocketing my phone, I sigh deeply, trudging to my bedroom. Grey is sleeping, all curled up, unaware of what's going on around

him. He has no idea we could lose everything we have. Reaching in, I lightly run my finger down his face, wishing I could see the little smile he's started to give, but also knowing I shouldn't wake him up. Instead, I let him bask in the blissfulness of ignorance.

I vow that he's never going to know the way his life started. A drunken night after a fight I lost with more than one woman. Me not knowing he was alive until he was left on our doorstep. Even before I got the DNA results back, I knew he was mine. The only thing he will know is I love him. He'll never know his mother didn't want him.

Not if I can help it.

SEVEN-THIRTY, and I'm already here, hiding behind one of those Purge masks made popular by TikTok. All of this is weird. I've never been one to hide. Not even when I got my ass beat.

The crowd is hyped. They're screaming and bouncing their feet off the concrete of the basement floor. Luckily for me, there was someone working the entrance I've never seen before, and I got in with no issues. Glancing above most of the crowd, I scope the place for Maddox.

It's dark, dingy, and wet down here. Hard to see with this damn mask on, but I give my eyes a few seconds to adjust.

I make another trip around the room with my gaze when I see him, holding up the back wall, looking like he doesn't have a care in the world. His booted foot rests against the peeling paint. Phone in his hand, he isn't paying attention to what's going on around him.

It's a straight shot from me to him. I keep my head down, avoiding anyone in the crowd who may know me. Once I get close enough, I whistle. His head snaps up. When his eyes meet mine, I jerk my chin.

“Duuuude,” he draws the word out. “Didn’t expect you to show up in that. What are you wearing for the ring?”

Lifting the bag higher on my shoulder, I keep my voice as low as possible. “I have some old gear that doesn’t have any logos on it. I’ll look like a complete newbie.”

“Yeah until you fuckin’ start fightin’. How much you looking to earn tonight? Got a couple of matches I can put you in. There’s a few that already have good bets placed.”

“At least a thousand—more if possible. Around two to three to make me comfortable until the big fight.” I watch the crowd as I talk to him. In the corner two guys toast their beers, yelling to be heard over the thrum of noise. The crowds roars as a popular fighter enters. I soak in all their excitement, letting it pump me up for what’s to come.

“Alright, you’ll go out third. Sound good?”

“Whatever you can do for me works. I need this money yesterday.”

“Go on to the office and get dressed. I talked to my buddy. Told him I had someone coming who wanted to stay on the DL. He doesn’t know it’s you.”

“Appreciate it. I’ve even got long sleeves that I’ll tuck into my tape.”

“That’s what you get for having tattoos, fucker.” He punches me in the shoulder. “Hurry up. You’ve got about twenty minutes.”

He hands me a set of keys, directing me to the back where there’s a bank of offices. Twenty minutes isn’t enough time for the nerves to get going. I need to change, do some warmups, and then it’ll be time to head to the center of the crowd.

All of this is good. I don’t need to dwell on what happened last time. This fight? It’ll be different.

It has to be.

If it’s not, we’re not gonna make it.

Isabella

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you got me to come here.” I do my best not to touch any of the side walls. They’re, for lack of a better term...moist. I’m not sure if it’s because we’re underground or the amount of sweaty bodies shoved into this small space.

“Oh c’mon.” Liv takes a drink from her red solo cup. “Aren’t you the one who told fighter boy you needed to learn how? Isn’t this the best way to do so? Get an up-close-and-personal look?”

“How up close and personal?” I put my hands in my jeans pockets.

“My friend from class has ring-side seats saved for us. Her boyfriend is in the third match,” she says as we come to a section where chairs are set up. Looking around, I can’t help but notice the unbridled electricity in the room. Everyone is here tonight to see someone get the shit beat out of them and they’re excited about it. The adrenaline is bouncing from one person to the next. “Up here.” Liv grabs my elbow, pulling me through a couple of crowds of guys.

“Belle, this is Kat. Kat, this is Belle,” Liv makes the introductions.

We smile, do the whole “nice to meet you” thing and then I have a seat next to Liv.

Although I’ve been to other fights before, I need some reassurance that Shadows will do well. I’m seeking out someone who can do that for me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Maddox. He notices me at the same time. Not wanting him to think I’m stuck up, I give him a wave. He notches his chin in the air, then turns back to the person he’s talking to.

I’m beyond out of my element here. The first two matches are absolutely nothing to write home about. I don’t think I’ll be able to use any of this in my article, except the atmosphere changes. The crowd screams a little louder. Maybe this is how I can set the scene for Shadows’ piece – by describing this thrill before the fight. I’m about to take some notes in my

phone when Kat begins screaming as a good-looking guy comes into the ring.

“That’s my boyfriend,” she yells, pride in her voice.

I don’t hear the name of the person who is fighting him, but as the tall guy comes to the ring, a mask over his face, wearing a nondescript long-sleeve shirt, and black shorts, I’m hit with a rush of familiarity.

My stomach clenches as I watch the men meet in the middle of the ring, tapping hands. “Who is that?” I ask Liv. “I didn’t hear.”

“Me neither, but according to Kat, he’s some no-name loser.”

As soon as they square off, I realize that’s not a no-name loser. That’s Shadows Sampson, and he’s about to fuck Kat’s boyfriend up.

CHAPTER 15

ISABELLA

GLANCING AROUND, it's apparent no one else notices this is Shadows. He barely got a rise from the crowd, and if they'd known everyone would've lost their shit. Especially since this would be the first fight since the one he lost. Maybe it's because he has the mask on, or because no one else expects him to be here. Regardless, they're all blind to the man in the ring.

My heart pounds as I watch them bump fists. At some point, they must have introduced the fighters and explained the rules, but I can't seem to pull my gaze from Shadows.

"Girl, you got a little something," Liv wipes at the sides of my lips.

"What?"

She rolls her eyes. "You're drooling at whoever that guy is in the mask. I admit, he's hot AF, even if you can't see his face. The way his shirt is sticking to those washboard abs? He must spend a lot of time in the gym."

"He does."

"How do you know?"

"I'm assuming," I cover my misstep. "Anyone who looks like *that*," I hold my hand out palm up, moving it from head to toe as if I'm caressing his body. "Spends a lot of time on their physique."

Liv's eyebrows pop up, like she doesn't believe me. Before she can read my face, I turn so that she can't see me directly.

The noise around us fades as I home in on the ring. Kat's boyfriend is playing to the crowd, standing in his corner, talking shit to the people around him. Shadows though? He's quiet, bouncing back and forth on the balls of his feet. There's nothing fancy about him, no flash that would make others turn their eyes on the *no name loser*.

The bell rings, and they meet up in the middle of the mat. The referee motioning for them to go ahead.

My mouth turns dry as the desert as I watch them square up.

"C'mon Davey!" Kat screams. "Kick his ass!"

I roll my eyes at her high-pitched voice before giving her a grin. She laughs right back at me. Putting my phone in front of me, I press record, hoping to get every bit of this I can. I've never seen him in a sanctioned fight before. If it's mine, I can watch it all the time.

Davey throws a left, which Shadows allows him to land.

"Yeah baby, get him," Kat throws her own punches to the air.

"Who the fuck is she fighting? The invisible man?" I whisper-shout over to Liv.

She snorts, throwing her hand over her mouth to hide her giggle. When she's got herself back under control, she leans into me. "Kat gets fired up when Davey fights," she winks, pursing her lips. "In more ways than one. She'll leave us as soon as he's done to go fuck him in the locker room."

Ohhh now that's an interesting perk I hadn't thought of. Before I can say anything else, there's action in the ring.

Davey pushes Shadows to the corner, landing blow after blow. Shadows blocks, putting his hands up toward his face. While it appears he's not in control of things, I have a feeling we're about to see what Shadows has up his sleeve.

It's apparent in the way Davey lets up that he's become complacent, and I notice a difference in Shadows demeanor. Feet that had been light are now planted firmly on the mat. My

heart beats faster than it should, when I realize what's about to happen.

Shadows has been biding his time, letting Davey think he's got him where he wants him. Davey pulls back slightly, giving Shadows a centimeter of space so he can get his hands up in front of him. This is the biggest mistake he could make.

Exploding from the corner, Shadows leans forward, landing punch after punch, pushing him across the ring toward the opposite side. The crowd goes wild, and a big smile spreads across my face. "Unless this *no name loser* fucks him up too bad."

Liv eyes me. "Do you know who this guy is?"

"No," I shake my head. "I just have a hunch."

"Do share."

Making a motion to lock my lips and throw away the key, I refuse. This is my secret and it's one I'll keep for as long as I need to.

Shadows

I'M REELING this guy in, letting him think he's better than me. It's what I did back when I first started. When others had no idea who I was. I lulled them into a false sense of security, and then beat the shit out of them when their cocky attitudes got the better of them.

Which is what I'm about to do to this prick right now. He's smiling around his mouth piece, cocky as shit.

I'm waiting...waiting for the moment he gives me all I need in order to reclaim my power.

He leans back, allowing me to put my hands up in front of me, plant my feet, and square up on him. In a burst of energy I know he wasn't expecting, I use the speed of my fists, pounding on his skin as I push him across the ring.

“Motherfucker,” the guy grunts as I push him into the corner. “Let up,” he pleads. “Let’s give them a show.”

I don’t say anything, he’ll know my voice.

Old me, the one who didn’t have a son counting on me, would like to give a show, but right now I need to pay my rent, and he’s the person standing in the way of me and accomplishing just that.

Quicker I move my arms, landing punch after punch. He puts his arms up around his face. Poor piece of shit. It’s pretty and it won’t look like that when I get done.

The only thing I can think about is that yellow piece of paper. How I need it gone, what my family needs from me. I keep hitting until I’m pulled back by the referee.

The bastard falls to the mat, knocked the fuck out.

The knock out is confirmed, a sense of accomplishment washes over me, one I haven’t felt since I lost. Behind the mask, I allow a smile.

The ref takes my hand, holding it up, declaring me the winner. With the mask on, it’s hard to see the crowd, but I do see a group of girls in the front row. One of them runs toward the other fighter. Obviously a girlfriend or a side piece, afraid I’ve ruined him for her.

My gaze moves along, until I see a pair of blue eyes I know.

They’re becoming way too familiar for me.

A smirk plays at the corners of her mouth and she’s got her cell phone up in front of her.

Belle knows.

She knows it’s me.

And judging by the quirk of her brow, she’s willing to keep my secret.

CHAPTER 16

SHADOWS

THE WALK to the locker room is different than I imagined it would be. Everyone is reaching out, trying to grab my hand, slap me on the back. The praise is insanity. They all keep saying what a good match it was. The funny thing is all of these people know who I am. But they don't know it's me. If they knew, I wouldn't be getting the congratulations. They'd be telling me what a punk I am because of how I went down last time.

This is fun. More fun than I'd thought it would be. Maybe because there's no pressure. No one knows it's Shadows under this mask. A sense of pride washes over my chest as I think about what I've done here. Because of what's gone on tonight, my family will be fed—we'll have a roof over our head for another month. And I can focus on the bigger upcoming fight.

Maybe if I ask nicely, Maddox will have another under the radar match for me. As I get closer to where Maddox is standing with his friends, I hitch my chin at him. He comes over, leaning in so that I don't have to speak loudly. I don't want anyone to recognize my voice."

"I've got the locker room ready for you. But you've only got fifteen minutes."

If there's one thing I know I can count on?

It's Maddox.

He's been there for me since the beginning, even when I wasn't really there for myself. I pull him in, we tap each other

on the back in a bro hug, and I head off to where I can be alone, where I can take the mask off.

I'm ready.

Ready to wash the sweat of hard work off me, to go home and tell little man that Daddy's taken care of what needed to be taken care of.

Pride roars in my chest. I've been able to do it. This time I accomplished it.

If I had known he was in the world, I would have taken care of business from the beginning. Unfortunately that option was taken from me because I never even knew he was on the way.

It's quiet when I get back to the locker room—obviously everyone else is still out front. It's the type of quiet I love. It allows me to be alone with my thoughts, to think about what I've just done.

Was the fight good? Hell yeah.

Did I win? Fuck yeah, I did.

Was it clean? Eh, maybe.

But overall it gives me a boost of confidence I haven't had in a long time. And knowing that Bella was here? It gives me a little bit of cockiness I haven't had in a year.

Why I want to impress her? I don't know, but it's there, at the back of my neck, like an itch I can't scratch. Maybe old Shadows is coming back. The one who was a little cocky. The one who wanted to perform for women, who wanted them to look at him with a little gleam in their eye. The douche who wanted women to gaze at him with their lip between their teeth, wondering if what he had between his legs was as good as what he could do in the ring.

Yeah, maybe I am thinking about that. Maybe I do wish she was wondering about me too.

Either way, that douche can't be here anymore. The man he's become has gotta get home. I have people waiting on me, counting on me in ways I never imagined.

Not the least of my worries is getting some sleep before I have to go to the one class I'm pretending to take tomorrow. It's a lot. More than I ever bargained for. But I'll do this any and every day, as long as I can be better for my son. Better than what me and my sister were ever given.

Every day I will strive to be for him what we didn't get.

Going into the back of the locker room, I see the showers and I can't get out of my clothes fast enough. When I step in, I press my palms against the wall letting the heat seep into my aching muscles. It's a tiredness I haven't felt in a long time, one I've fucking missed.

I remember the way the nights after matches used to go.

It wouldn't be me alone.

In the locker room, there'd be some girl waiting to give me a congratulations on the accomplishment I'd just achieved. Sometimes there wasn't just one—there were two plus me. It was offered, and I took it. I took advantage way more than I should've.

Which is why I'm trying to be better this time. I don't want to be the douche I was before, the one who cared only about his dick. It's what I've been striving to be for months.

But fuck, there's only so long you can be better. Only so many times you can be good, especially when you excel at being bad.

There's a noise in the front of the locker room, someone's coming in. Quickly, I turn the knobs off, stepping out from under the spray. I hide as best I can, hoping that the person doesn't see me.

For long minutes I hold my breath, lingering in the shadows of the lockers. Tentatively, I step out. With a sigh of relief, I don't see anyone, but then, I hear *the voice*.

The one I've been thinking about more than I should.

"I knew it was you. That was an amazing fight, Shadows. Why are you not telling anyone it was you?" She asks the

question in a quick rush, like her adrenaline is pumping as fast as mine.

Fucking Bella. The girl who has more options, more opportunities than I ever had. But also seems to thrive on putting herself in dangerous situations.

“Well, get out of here. This isn’t the place for you. They catch you back here? I’m gonna be in trouble.”

“Maddox knows who I am. He knows who you are. What does it matter if I’m back here?” She questions.

“Nobody else knows, Bella. That’s why this is our little secret. Mine, Maddox’s...”

“And mine too. Considering I’m the only person in the crowd who knew who was behind that mask.”

She puts her hand on her hip jutting it out in a way that I’m sure is meant to be cute. But for her? It’s sexy as hell.

“Come on, Bella. Do we have to do this right now?”

“What do you mean, do we have to do this right now? I’m just a friend, congratulating you on a good fight.”

There’s something about the way she says it. I’m a little hungry tonight. Missing the man I used to be. The guy who had no care in the world, who could do whatever he wanted.

The man who lived this life? I don’t even recognize him anymore. But I want to. Fuck, I want to so bad. I don’t want to think about rent or diapers or baby food. Or how the fuck I’m gonna get my kid on state insurance when I don’t know his mother’s name.

I don’t know his mother’s name...

There were so many girls that night. It could have been any of them. She didn’t leave me her name.

I can’t figure it out, so I can’t find her. I’m responsible for this baby and I don’t know who his mother is.

I don’t know what his real name is or even where his birth certificate is. All I know is on the note, she told me his last name was mine. I named him Grayson. I call him Gray.

Looking at Bella, I envy her life. I envy the fact that she's just a college student.

That she doesn't have to worry about the things that I worry about. She doesn't have to fight for her life, literally and figuratively. For once, since I lost that fight...for once, I want things back to the way they used to be. To be the dick who didn't think about other people, didn't care about all this emotional shit that was going on behind the scenes.

I ache to be that man one more time. And I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it more than once, twice, three times, four. Or even five.

The thing on my mind right now?

The way her lips taste.

What would she do if I took them?

I'm holding my towel and my sanity by a thread. I decide to give her one out. One more opportunity. "If you haven't noticed, I'm not in any position at all to have a conversation with you right now. First of all, I gotta get out of here. Second of all, I'm not even dressed."

She gives me this goofy grin and a look that I never expected from her. "Shads."

She uses my nickname, the one only Maddox uses, and there's something so intimate about it. Something that travels to where my heart beats. For someone to know that about me, to know that I'm someone besides a failed fighter and a failed father? It gives me hope.

"Shads," she says again. "I don't think it matters much to me."

"Well," I sigh. "I gave you plenty time to get out, sweetheart. So when I do this, don't act like you weren't warned."

Bella hitches an eyebrow at me. Almost to the top of her hairline. "What do you mean?"

The minutes Maddox gave me are counting down quicker than I imagined they would. Making sure my towel is as tight

as I can get it, I tie it at my waist and move in closer. Planting my feet on the concrete, I get all up in her business, leaning in to capture her cheeks with my palms, still wearing the tape from the fight. I give her another moment. Just one more so she can back out if she wants to because I'm a gentleman. Still a dick. But a gentleman who won't make a move if a woman doesn't want it.

Her eyes dilate. She knows what I'm gonna do and she wants it. She wants it fucking bad, judging by the way her mouth opens and she leans closer to me. And for once, for once in such a long time I'm not going to deny myself. I'm not going to deny her.

Cupping my palm around the back of her neck, I go in and take the kiss I've wanted. It's like a burst of strawberries on my tongue, that piece of watermelon Hubba Bubba that I chewed as a kid. So bright, so loud, so juicy.

She makes a little noise in the back of her throat and it's everything I can do not to tackle her to the floor. Our lips meet and fucking angels sing. It's the craziest thing I've ever had happen. Never have I believed in fairytales or that things work out the way they're supposed to. But in this moment, when my lips are on hers, my tongue is teasing against the roof of her mouth, and her fingers are gripping my shoulders ... This right here?

This makes me believe.

CHAPTER 17

HOLY FUCKING SHIT.

I run my hands appreciatively over the strong shoulders, down to the equally strong back that allows him to dominate in the ring. Most guys I see on campus have left-over muscles from high school. Before they started drinking and partying every night with their fraternity brothers.

Not Shadows.

His body works for him in ways others can't even think about.

I hadn't expected him to be half-naked. That was one thing I didn't count on or the affect he would have on my body.

But I guess it makes sense, considering he probably worked up a hell of a sweat. Now here I am, in the locker room, making out with him like some cheerleader with a captain of the football team boyfriend who's hoping to get lucky after the big game.

Is that who I've become? Is that what this man has turned me into?

Yes, he has.

I've been around him so much. I've seen him in so many states of undress. So many times when he's been sweating. He epitomizes male sexuality.

He seems so comfortable in his body and with the way he looks and the way he feels. I must say those words out loud because he pulls back.

Chuckling, he wipes at his lips. “Belle, I used to be that guy who was totally aware of what he did to women, played the part well, used what I could to my advantage. But girl, it’s been a while.”

I laugh at him. “Girl? Like, you can’t even call me some overused term of endearment like babe?”

He pulls back a big smile on his face, one I’ve never seen before. “This may surprise you, but I’ve never had to call anybody babe to get between their legs before.”

Immediately, my cheeks heat. Obviously, he has this effect on women, and he’s not shy about it. I’ve never seen him attempt to be playful. This is the Shadows I’ve been missing. The one I knew was there, lurking beyond the surface, struggling to get out.

This is the guy, the one who could be so dangerous to me. He could turn my world on its goddamn head. And I would let him. Because this is the man that I like—the type of man who can laugh, who can be strong. Who is hot as fuck, and doesn’t seem to realize it.

Because as good as Shadows looks, he’s not arrogant.

Cocky, yes.

Arrogant, no.

Fear like I’ve never felt before enters my chest and I want to fight. I want to fight to get out of his embrace. But at the same time, I want to get closer.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, perhaps seeing something in my gaze, or in the way my body has tightened.

I sigh. “This isn’t a joke for me, Shads. I want to get closer, get beneath this towel. I mean, you won’t even tell me your real name.” I lay it out there. Will he tell me?

His face hardens and I don’t know what I’ve done. But he pulls back completely, shutting down in only the way he can.

“Isabella.” He uses my full name and the way he says it freezes me like the coldest winter nights. “You haven’t earned the right to know my real name yet.”

And there it is. It douses the flame of passion between us and I don't know how to react. I don't know what's going to make it better or worse. And how can I push him for this when I've been keeping a secret too? That I came to him for a story. And I worry that I've offended him to a point where I'm not going to be able to get us back.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," I apologize.

His jaw tightens. "You don't have to fucking apologize. Fuck!" He clenches his fists. "I just wanted to enjoy winning a fight. Do you know how long it's been since I won a fight?"

"Everybody knows how long it's been since you won a fight." There I go again. My mouth getting me in fucking trouble.

His gaze is hard as stone. "I think you should leave, Belle. There's nothing else for me to say."

And surprisingly, as I walk away, a lone tear travels down my face.

CHAPTER 18

SHADOWS

IRRITATION RUNS through my veins as my tongue collects the taste of her from my lips. Her scent lingers in my nostrils. Disappointment is an emotion I'm beginning to recognize well, and fuck if I'm not disappointed at the way this turned out.

For just a moment, I'd allowed myself to be the cocky son of a bitch I used to be. Now, the quick burst of adrenaline gives way to the slow ebb of loneliness.

"Fuck!" I throw my clothes against the locker, knowing exactly what I'm going to have to do. The sound is loud in the silence of the room. Breathing heavily through my nose, I bend down and pick them up. Putting them on is a test of patience, but I finally manage to get every bit of my skin covered.

"Shit." I realize I haven't put the mask back on right before I go out into the crowd. It's a pain in the ass, but for now, I have to keep my identity a secret.

"Hey," Maddox greets me as I come out of the locker room.

"Not right now." I throw his hand off me. "Did you see Bell?"

"Yeah." He smirks. "She went running that way. Looked a little hot under the collar."

Sighing, I take off in the direction he's pointed. The chick she was with at the bar the other night is there with a group of other women. "Where'd Bell go?"

“Who the fuck are you?” She puts her hands on her hips.

“A friend.”

“Not one I’ve ever met.”

Instead of arguing with her, I take off toward the door and hope that’s where she went. in the. This mask is annoying, but to keep my identity a secret, I have to wear it. I tower over most of the people, and that’s how I see her, almost at the door.

Running, I catch up to her as quickly as possible, calling out as we hit the parking lot. “Bell.”

She comes to a stop, her head hanging down, but it’s only for a second. As quickly as it happened, she lifts her chin and squares her shoulders, walking away from me. Her shoes echo as they hit the asphalt.

“Come on,” I rush behind her. “Please talk to me.”

Bell turns, her eyes on fire as they meet mine. “I think we’ve talked enough.”

There are tracks of tears on her cheeks. Reaching out with my thumb, I wipe at the streak. “I’m sorry. Look.” I stop, sighing heavily. “I’m not used to people being and staying in my life. I keep secrets to save myself the hurt. If you look up *not an open book* in the dictionary, I’m right next to it.”

She smirks softly. “I guess I just thought we were better friends than that.”

“We could be.” I rock back on my heels. “Just because I don’t trust you yet doesn’t mean I’m never going to.”

“I guess it hurt a little. For you to kiss me the way you did back there, and then for you to refuse what I was asking.” She shrugs.

“I’m a dick.” I chuckle. “I don’t like it, but it’s a necessity. When you’ve lived the life I have, you don’t take things at face value. So yeah, Bell. I got secrets. A bunch of them.”

“I do too,” she admits.

“Here’s the thing. I wanna keep hanging out with you. Maybe figure out your secrets and tell you about mine, but it

won't be overnight. There's a lot nobody knows."

Reaching out, she wraps her arms around my waist, hugging me tightly. I haven't been hugged in so long, I'm not sure how to respond, but eventually I reciprocate, burying my face in her hair, inhaling deeply.

"I'll be patient, Shadows," she speaks quietly, nuzzling her nose against the mask I'm still wearing.

Groaning deep in the back of my throat, I rasp. "Patience isn't my strong suit, so we'll just have to see who breaks first, sweetheart."

She's sassy when she pulls back from my embrace. "Guess we will. I'm up for the challenge. Are you?"

Isabella

I'M WALKING into the dorms with a stupid grin on my face. After the parking lot moment with Shadows, I had to go. If I didn't move quickly, the doors would be locked, and then I'd be stuck trying to find some place to sleep for the night.

"Just made it, Izzy," the RA says as she locks the door behind me.

"I know. Thanks for being slow tonight."

She winks. "You have that look of infatuation, and you have a bit of stubble burn on your cheek. Figured you had a reason why you were slinking in here so late."

"Sure did." My face warms with the thought of it being so obvious.

I wave at her before making my way to the elevator, still in my dream state, thinking back to right before Shadows and I parted ways.

"Why don't you text me?" He winks. "That way I have your number, and I can make sure you get home alright."

"Or you could text me." I play coy with him.

“Oh I get it. You don’t want to give me your number; you want me to be the one to bend.”

“It’s only fair right? Bending doesn’t mean breaking,” I remind him.

“Alright, alright. What’s your number?”

I rattle off my cell to him, smiling brightly when I get a text from him seconds later.

S: Don't know about you, but those kisses in the locker room weren't enough. Maybe we should meet tomorrow and do a little training?

“Training, huh?”

“I mean, you do still want to learn how to defend yourself, right?”

There’s a clenching in my stomach as I realize how deep I’m getting into this. Instead of letting it show, I smile brightly. “Of course I do. Meet you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but earlier. I have to work at Secrets. Is noon okay?”

Quickly, I go over my schedule in my head. “That’s perfect. See you then?”

He wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me in for a kiss. “I hate this mask,” he grumbles.

“Not me.” I grip his T-shirt in my fingers. “It gives you a mysterious edge. It’s hot.”

“I’ll remember that,” he says as he walks me over to the Uber I scheduled before we came outside. He opens the door and ushers me inside. “Be safe. Text me when you get home.”

“I will.”

As I watch his image get smaller, I sigh roughly. All of this just got so much more difficult.

On the elevator, I thumb through my contacts until I get to Shadows.

I: Just got back to the dorm. Hope you made it home okay.

The elevator dings and I step off, thankful the girls in the room across from ours aren't blaring mumble rap. Opening the door to our room, I walk in, dropping my purse and leaning back against the door. Looking up at the ceiling, I try to rationalize everything that happened tonight. My cell dings with a text. Excited that it's probably Shadows, I hurriedly look.

But it's not Shadows.

Pete: Need an update tomorrow on where you're getting with our resident fighter.

And just like that—I worry that none of us are going to get out of this with our hearts intact.

Smarter people would stop. But I'm not smart. I'm an achiever, and sometimes that means doing things that others won't. Even if those things equal parts make my dreams come true and rip my life apart.

CHAPTER 19

ISABELLA

“WHERE DID YOU GO LAST NIGHT?” Liv asks as I walk slowly into the common room.

“That coffee smells amazing.” I yawn.

“It was a late night.” She grins. “We’ll both need it, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

Liv hands me a cup with coffee made just the way I like it. The first drink is always the best. As it slips down my throat, I savor it while trying to figure out how to answer her question without giving his identity away. “Did you see Shadows last night? He was there,” I sigh. “Up at the bar, I saw him on my way out. It got too hot inside for me, and I needed some fresh air. He followed me, and we talked.”

“You talked?” She has a seat on the couch across from me, pulling her feet up underneath her. “That blush doesn’t indicate you *talked*.”

“What blush?” Although I know what she’s talking about. My face is hot; hell, my body is warm. “I’m drinking coffee. You know it makes me sweat sometimes.”

“Jesus Christ, Belle. He’s gotten to you, hasn’t he?”

I blow out a deep breath, and let it go. “We kissed.”

“You. Did. What?”

“We kissed.” I hide behind my hair.

“How was it?” She shrieks.

I'm transported back to that moment when his lips captured mine, when I didn't own my own body.

He did.

I would have willingly given it to him any way he'd asked.

"It was good." The smirk plays against my lips.

"Good?" She squeals.

Rolling my eyes, I finally give in. "Probably the best I ever had."

"Girl, so his reputation is worthy?"

"One hundred percent worthy."

She kicks her feet against the couch. "I wish I could sit here and talk to you about it all day, but I have to go to class."

My stomach clenches. "I have to go meet Pete."

"Oh, that's going to be fun," she mumbles.

"We'll see what happens." I take a drink of my coffee before putting it on the side table.

"Rain check on gossiping?" She gets up, pouring her coffee into a Yeti.

"Rain check." I nod, doing the same with my drink.

She leaves as I go into my room and pick out my clothes for the day. Looking at the calendar I have hanging above my desk, I realize that time is passing me by. Instead of completing this interview and getting the grades I need. I'm playing with fire and letting my heart get involved.

But at this point, I'm not sure I could stop it. Even if I tried.

"YOU GOT ANYTHING FOR ME, ISABELLA?" Pete asks as I walk into his office.

“He’s a great fighter, not only in the ring, but in life. He’s got so many things working against him, and he manages to show up every single day. Shadows is a good man who takes care of those around him. When it would’ve been easier for him to turn his back, he came out and helped me when I almost got attacked,” I continue.

“But you still don’t know his name, do you?”

“You act like he’s this easy puzzle to break, Pete, and he’s not. He’s complicated, a Rubik’s cube and it takes a while to figure out which way to go.”

Pete’s eyes widen. “He got to you, didn’t he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” His grin is smarmy. “He got to you. I thought you were smarter than that.”

Anger gives me more courage than I normally have. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m smarter than that?”

“I didn’t expect you to fall for a smoldering gaze and a hot body.”

“Look, Pete, we know each other outside of here, and it’s the only reason I’m trying to keep professional, but screw you. You have no idea how hard I’ve worked on this. No clue how difficult it is to get close to Shadows. You may have known him before the loss of that fight, and he may have been easy to get to know, but not anymore. There’s a wall there, one that’s very hard to penetrate.” My chest heaves as I finish making my case.

“A good journalist will do whatever it takes.”

Tears pool in my eyes. Both out of frustration and because he expects me to break the small amount of trust I’ve been able to build with Shadows. In the times I’ve gotten him to speak freely, there’s a sadness in his voice, as if everyone he’s trusted has let him down. I don’t want to be one of those people. “That isn’t true at all,” I whisper. “A good journalist also knows when to keep the trust of her subject at all costs. I’ll get what I need, but on my time, not yours. The original deadline stands.”

He flips his pen over in between his fingers. “There’s not a finite amount of time on this project. Remember, it’s your grade.”

“Oh, I remember.” I grab my bag and head out the door.

I rush into the hallway, my head down, but all my bravado leaves me. Dammit. I didn’t want him to get to me. And how can I do this without hurting Shadows?

Tears prick my eyes and I swipe at them-then run right into the person I’ve been discussing.

“Whoa, where you goin’ all pissed off, Bella?”

I’m trying—hard—not to let the tears fall, but my chin is trembling. I hate that I show emotion this way. “Anywhere but here.” I sniff, trying to hold it together.

He reaches down, grabbing hold of my chin. Instead of it being a strong grip, it’s soft. “Hey, hey, what’s got you so upset? Do I need to kick some ass for you?” He grins.

“No,” I clear my throat. “I think I could handle it with the small amount you’ve taught me so far. Just a rough day.”

His gaze goes down to the book he’s holding under his arm. “I hate this fuckin’ class. What do you say we get outta here?”

“Aren’t you still mad at me from last night?”

He tilts my head back. “Not with those tears in your eyes. C’mon.” He hitches his chin toward the parking lot. “Let’s go.”

“Where we going?” I ask, putting my hand in his, letting him lead me away. I shouldn’t be doing this-and I don’t want to hurt him-but I can’t stay away. I’m addicted. “Please don’t let it be somewhere that I have to be something I’m not. Right now, I just can’t take it.”

“What about Secrets? It’s pretty quiet right about now. The only people around are the ones doing the books, and they don’t care if we hang out. We can have a drink or two?”

“Sounds good.” I give him a smile. “Thanks, Shadows. I needed a friend today.”

He swallows roughly, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “It’s Seth. My name is Seth, and I’d like to be that friend whenever you need him.”

CHAPTER 20

SHADOWS

“YOU SET?” I ask, pulling my helmet down so she can hear me.

She nods, tightening her arms around my waist. “Yeah, go as fast as you can. I want the silence for a while.”

The downtrodden tone of her voice is my undoing. Whatever’s gone on this afternoon pisses me off. Typically, Bella is fire. An orange flame, driven to overtake everything around her. To sweep it up in her wake, although burning it down, also making sure it comes back stronger and more alive than it was to begin with. I vow to get the woman I know back, the one who intrigues and arouses me, the friend I’ve reluctantly made over the last few weeks.

As she requested, I take the streets at a fast, yet safe, pace.

The landmarks of our college town roar past me in a blur of muted neutrals and dizzying color until a red light stops us in our tracks. In a surprising show of vulnerability, Bella tightens her grip around me, and rests her head against my back. Emotion constricts my throat, and against my better judgment, I reach back, gripping her thigh in a show of solidarity. She nudges my shoulder with her head, acknowledging she accepts it.

The light turns green again and our speechless ride continues until I slow down, pulling into the Secrets parking lot. I go around the back and park in a nondescript spot. After getting off and putting one of our helmets on the handlebars and another on the taillight, I reach out, taking her hand.

“It looks much different in the daylight.” She grins over at me. “Almost seedy.”

“Well, yeah.” I laugh. “You have no idea what kinda shit goes down in the bathrooms.”

She giggles, a slight snort working its way past her nose. “Did you mean to make a bodily fluid joke?”

It takes a second, but I realize what I said. “No.” I shake my head, smiling back at her. “I didn’t, but if it makes you giggle, then I’ll tell them all day.”

Her face brightens to a pink, and she bashfully lets me pull her close to me, burying her head in my chest. Reaching down, I cup the back of her neck. “You gonna be okay?” Without meaning to, I drop a kiss to the top of her head.

“Yeah,” she sighs. “I just have some serious decisions to make.”

“We all do, sweetheart. It’s the part of life that sucks the most—when you’re old enough to make them and no one else will do it for you.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Conversation lulls, so I take her into Secrets. We go through the back door. “Anybody here?” I call out, not wanting to scare the few people that might be working.

Behind the bar, Carter counts a row of bottles, murmuring the numbers as he takes stock and then writes down a figure on his notepad. He glances up as we walk closer. “Just me here today, man. What’s up with you two?”

“School sucks,” I answer for the both of us.

“Amen to that. Precisely why I didn’t keep going.”

“Bull. Shit. You didn’t go because you’re a Walker and your place in this town is cemented as the grandson of an MC president. What-the-fuck-ever, dude.”

“Yet, here I am, tending bar and working security. You’re the one riding a bike too, so there’s that.”

“Oh boo hoo, Carter,” I tease him.

“Kiss my ass. I’m done.” He slaps his hands on the bar. “Lock up when y’all leave? I’m heading home to get some sleep before I have to open at six. Be sure to set the alarm.”

“See ya, man. Get a good sleep.”

“Yeah, I’m beat,” he yawns. “I’m out.”

I follow him out the back door and lock it behind him. I turn to go toward the empty room, then stop in my tracks. I’m alone with Bella, and I’m not sure I trust myself after what we shared last night.

Slowly, I walk back into the main room. Bella’s sitting on one of the stools, her back to me, with her head on the bar top. The way she’s slumped over breaks my heart. She’s usually so full of life and ready to take things on. Whoever did this to her? I vow to smash their teeth into their face.

Going behind the bar, I grab for a bottle of whiskey and slap two shot glasses on the scarred wooden top. “You look like you could use one of these.” I pour the amber liquid almost up to the edge of the glass and slide it across to her.

“I don’t normally day drink.”

“Me neither, but I’ll take one or two with you. We can stay here for a bit, and then we can head wherever you wanna go.”

She picks up the shot glass and raises it toward me. We hit them together, and then we tilt our heads back. It’s been a long time since I drank, and the burn feels better than I remember.

“That hit the spot.” She sighs.

“It did. Want another one?”

She lifts her eyes up to the ceiling before a smile spreads across her face. “Yes, please.”

“What she wants, she gets.” I pour another shot and we do our same ritual.

There’s music playing in the background—always is here. I don’t think anyone knows how to turn it off; the only thing that changes is the volume. Right now, it’s soft and relaxing.

Bella slaps her glass down. “Wanna dance?”

“Dance?” I don’t think I’ve ever danced with a woman before.

“Yeah. No one’s here to see. You won’t have to worry your image is going to take a beating,” she teases.

“I’m not worried about my image,” I argue.

“Oh yeah? Then come on, tough guy.” She takes her jacket off, puts it over another stool, and sways her hips as she walks out onto the dance floor.

Never one to back away from a challenge, I do the same with my jacket and follow her out. Her eyes are bright as she turns to face me. “Are you drunk?” I ask.

“No. I normally just don’t drink full-alcohol liquor. Usually it’s cut with something else. I’m feeling good though.”

A slow, spicy number comes over the speakers, and she starts to swing her hips, putting her arms over her head. I stand back, watching her for as long as I can, but when I have to touch her, I step forward, wrapping my hands around her waist, matching her movements with my own.

“You can dance?” she asks.

“Most fighters have agility. We can do lots of things well.”

“Do show me.”

“Oh, I will.”

Grabbing her hands, I pull her close, grinding my hips into hers. We’re swaying to the music when she loops her arms around my neck and gets even closer. Dipping my head down, I inhale the scent of coconut and strawberries. I close my eyes. I’ve been in an endless cycle of waking, existing, working-and now, it snaps. With her, I can be anyone I want to. Of its own accord, my nose nuzzles its way toward the pulse point near her throat, my lips brushing a soft kiss against her flesh. Her fingers tighten in my hair, tugging me closer. I smear my mouth up her neck and along her jawline until my lips find hers.

Steamy and passionate, we come together. Hard and hot, I devour her, palming her the back of her head, not letting her

escape as I explore each inch of her mouth. Her fingers dig into the cotton of my shirt, holding me to her as closely as I'm pressing us together. The way she tilts her head to give me control is my fucking undoing.

Reaching down, I grasp her hips, pulling her up against my waist, carrying her over to the bar top. When I sit her there, she makes room for me in between her thighs and we go at each other hard. Her hands explore my shoulders and biceps, running along my neck as I yank back her hair, exposing the column of her throat to my lips. There I nip, suck, and soothe, nuzzling my way down farther to her chest where I'm stopped by the top of her shirt.

Moving my hands down to where it meets the top of her jeans, I push my hands up underneath the shirt, slowly. I want to give her enough time to ask me to stop, but when she doesn't, I venture up farther.

Our mouths break apart, and we pant in the almost-silence of the bar. "No one's here?" She questions, looking around.

"Not today." I assure her. "Carter does inventory today and then opens up on his own. The owner doesn't come in to do paperwork until tonight. We're alone for a few more hours, but we don't have to do anything..."

She reaches down, grabbing hold of my hard length pressing against the zipper of my jeans. "Trust me, Seth."

Holy fuck, she used my real name.

"There are lots of things I wanna do." With those words, her fingers grip my shirt at my shoulders, bunching it up before pulling it off and throwing it on the bar top beside us.

Standing there before her, I lick my lips, my eyes moving to hers. They're pink and swollen, looking thoroughly kissed. "What's good for me is good for you, Bella. Your turn."

Her eyes meet mine, and that fire is back in them. She gives me an impish grin as she reaches down and begins pulling the shirt over her head. A quick flick of her wrist puts it on top of mine. I wasn't prepared for the tight little body hidden under her clothes. Sure I've seen her when she's been

in workout clothing, but this is different. Proudly, she sits in front of me, almost daring me to do something.

“Hold on, babe. I’m about to take us on a ride.”

“You promise?” She wraps her legs around my waist, bringing me closer to her.

“Your wish is my command.”

Her head tilts toward mine. “Then my wish is for you to make me feel good.”

“Making you feel good would be my pleasure.” Grabbing her mouth with my lips again, I push my hands up so that I’m palming her tits, and try to remember what it was like to do this before I became a dad, before I lost confidence.

And, more importantly—back when I was just Seth.

Because this woman? She knows both Shadows and Seth, but for the first time ever, I’m not wearing a mask. She’s getting it all—including the Seth who doesn’t need to block the sunlight to cast the shadows. This one? He can stand right there and let the rays warm him without fear of burning so bright no amount of aloe vera would soothe the skin.

Bella is the balm I’ve needed, and I don’t plan on ever letting her go.

CHAPTER 21

ISABELLA

SETH “SHADOWS” Sampson is a ton of man, I’m finding out. Even more than I’d believed he was. Those hands that were at my chest have now been replaced with his lips. Heat covers the lace as he drives me crazy.

“Get it off,” I beg, reaching up to the straps of my bra, pulling them down.

He moves back long enough to get rid of the lace, throwing it over on top of our shirts. The green of his eyes darken as he takes a long look at my bare torso. Proudly I sit before him, fighting the urge to reach up and cover myself.

He holds my arms to the side, grasping them slightly harder when I jerk instinctively. “Nah,” he whispers. “Look at you.” He moves his gaze up and down my body. “Sitting there all pretty, nipples hard, waiting for me to shoot my shot.”

I smirk. “Waiting for you to shoot something.”

Eyebrow raised, he leans in, capturing that nipple he’d looked at so intently. Digging my fingers into his hair, I hold him tightly, throwing my head back when he runs his tongue along the nub. Immediately I recognize I’ve been with boys and not men, because Seth? He knows his way around a woman’s body like no one else I’ve been with ever has.

He’s everywhere I turn—his scent in my nose, his hands roaming all over my body, and his lips where he can’t touch. It’s intoxicating and all-encompassing. I’m falling, trying to keep my head above water.

Digging my fingers into his shoulders, I gasp as he takes the soft skin above my breast into his mouth, sucking harshly.

Wrenching his lips from my flesh, he groans. “Yes, mark me. Dig those nails into my skin. Let them be another tattoo when I take my shirt off at my next workout.”

He attacks my neck causing me to do exactly as he asked. My legs spread wider, making more room for him. The wood from the bar-top bites into my back, but even it feels good. “Yes, give me more,” I beg.

His palm flattens against my stomach, sliding down to the button of my jeans. He fumbles until a frustrated growl echoes in the back of his throat. “Fuckin’ thing.”

The denim rips and the constriction on the lower part of my body let go. His fingers move my panties out of the way and two fingers thrust inside me. Gasping, I try to ground myself as his thumb finds my clit and his fingers move in and out, setting a pace that threatens to break me apart.

“Feel good?” His voice is deep as he pushes my legs further apart.

“So good.” I blindly reach for anything I can find.

He hisses as my hand brushes against the hard length of his cock. My fingers manage to wrap around it over the denim of his jeans. “Shit, Bella. Like that.”

Finding my voice, I say, “Take off the jeans. Let me feel you.”

He removes his hand from in between my thighs.

“If I take ’em off, this might be over. I haven’t had sex since the night I lost the fight.”

It’s a vulnerability I didn’t expect from him. Not something he’s shown to me before. My heart goes out to him. “Don’t worry. I’ll take it easy on you.”

There’s a laugh. “Be sure you do. Don’t know if I could handle it if you turned out to be like the rest.”

Our eyes meet, and I long to tell him everything, but now isn't the time. I may go to hell for it later, but Lord help me, I don't want to ruin this. Not right now. Not when I'm about to get everything I want. "I'm not gonna hurt you." I pray in the end I don't. I need to find a way to get what I want without hurting him too.

"I know you won't. You have something no one else has had in a long time—my trust."

Before I can say anything, his lips claim mine again. He owns every part of my body as I fight to unbutton his jeans. He groans deep in his throat as my fingers press against his heavy cock again. "Help me," I beg.

We fight both with and against each other as we work to get his jeans unzipped and down around his hips. It's just enough for me to shove my hand in between the band of his boxers and the flat stomach that I can feel the ridges in.

He pulls back, his lips smearing across my jawline before going down my neck, stopping at the dent in my collarbone. Those same lips suck on my skin as he moves his free hand down our bodies and takes over where mine stroked him.

Once he's replaced my hand with his, he spreads his legs farther apart before stepping forward and rubbing my aching clit with the head of his cock.

"Do. Not. Stop." I grit between teeth clenched in ecstasy.

When he lets up on my collarbone, his face comes over mine. "Don't plan on it, Bella."

His hooded eyes, his mouth slightly parted—just that look is almost enough to send me over the edge. "You know, in the ring you look like a warrior," I breathe out. "And I used to think you were hottest right then."

Cocky as he is, a smirk lifts the edges of his lips up. "Did you?"

I throw my head back as I try to handle the emotions rolling through my body. I rub against his hard length. I wish he was slipping inside me, but as soon as he does, it might be over for me too. "I did, but now I know this look."

“Which is what?”

“Passion. Your neck is stretched, barely restrained. Your muscles are bulging, and I can almost feel your cock pulsing. Can’t wait to have you inside me so I *can*.”

“Goddammit, Bella.” He drops his forehead to mine, perhaps struggling for control.

“Let go,” I whisper. “Do to me what you want. I can take it.”

Those green eyes of his go almost black. Letting go of me for a few moments, he groans. “I don’t have a condom. I haven’t had sex in forever...” His Adam’s apple moves up and down with the disappointed gulps of air.

“I do,” I admit, running my tongue over my lips. “Always be prepared in case the guy isn’t.” I raise an eyebrow. “In my purse over there.” I point. “Outside pocket.”

He grabs my bag, fumbling as he pulls the outside pocket back, smirking when he sees what I know is a varied selection. “Were you a Girl Scout?”

“And what if I was?”

“Sexy as fuck.” He grabs one out, rips the foil packet, and then starts to slide it over his length.

I have to watch as he does so. Something about the latex hugging the force between his legs is a big turn on. His gaze sweeps over me as he secures it to the base, and the flat of his hand goes to the top of my pussy, his thumb right on my clit. It’s now, as he’s rubbing, that he enters. Slowly, as if he has all the time in the world.

Our groans mingle, as do our bodies. “You ready?” he asks.

Voice gone, I nod.

As he presses in and then pulls back out, he takes me on a ride—one I’ve been on before, but never like this. It’s both out of control and measured at the same time. He thrusts a little harder each time. Reaching up with one hand, I grip the edge

of the bar-top, digging my fingers in to help me push against him.

“Fuck yes,” he groans as he bottoms out. His free hand moves up to where mine is, entwining our fingers together, both of us holding on for dear life.

His face transform from the tense, always serious man to the one finding some measure of relief in his stressful life, I want to be the person who gives this to him all the time. His pace picks up, and I push all those thoughts out of my head, concentrating on what’s happening between us. The way the blunt edge of his thumb rubs my clit, and how he’s kicking up feelings I haven’t had with a man before.

“I’m almost there,” he warns.

“Me too.” I turn my palm over, gripping his fingers in mine, digging my nails into his knuckles.

As he buries his face in my neck, his hips piston back and forth until he grunts. His cock jerking within me sets me off. We’re a mass of sweating bodies, lazily riding out an explosion of pleasure neither one of us expected.

All I can do is hope that when it comes to an end, I haven’t broken my own heart.

CHAPTER 22

SHADOWS

GLANCING AT MY PHONE, I see that I've got a few minutes before Bella's class lets out, which means I'm right on time. My stomach is doing this weird fluttery thing it's never done before as I wait by Taylor Hall for the students to be released.

The drink in my hand shakes slightly. I chastise myself. No nerves today, not after what we shared not even twenty-four hours ago.

The doors open, and like a river, people come rushing by, all of them with some place to go that's not here.

My eyes move along the nameless faces Until I see the one I want.

When her eyes meet mine, a smile spreads across her lips. "What are you doing here? You never go to class."

My smile answers hers. "Didn't go today either. Just thought I'd bring you a little pick-me-up after the fun we had yesterday afternoon. Since it was the first time for either of us in a while, I took a chance on thinking I wore you out."

Her eyes glow with mischief. "Yeah, I'm definitely dragging. What'd you bring me?"

"I've never seen you drink this before, but it's one of my favorites. Strawberry Acai Lemonade."

"This is a favorite of yours? I would have expected you to be a straight up unsweet tea guy or plain water drinker."

“Typically, I am,” I confirm. “But every once in a while I like a sweetness in my life.”

“You do, huh?” She lifts up on her tiptoes, leaning in.

I capture the back of her neck in the palm of my hand, pulling her close so that our lips can meet. “Yup, and right now I think I’ve got all I can handle with you. I slept better last night than I have in months.”

“Me too,” she admits. “All the stress of school is just gone.”

“Maybe we should be working on our stress management a little more often?”

“I think we could work that out.” She winks before taking a drink.

We lean against the wall, staring at one another.

“What do you have planned for the rest of the day?”

It strikes me as odd we’ve spent so much time together, but I don’t know her schedule. That’s what I get for being involved in my own world so much.

“I need to head on up.” She points to the top of The Hill. “Then I was planning on messaging you to see if you were up for another self-defense session.”

“Favorite part of the day.” I grin at her.

“After that, I have to work on my last assignment for the school year.”

“There’s still a couple weeks,” I remind her.

“Yeah.” She frowns. “But this one is basically my whole grade. It’s what I’ve worked my entire career for.”

“Let me walk you up.” I nod toward the building located on the top of The Hill.

She reaches out, shyly grabbing my hand with hers. Letting her slip her palm into mine, I follow as we take off walking. “All you’re going to do is listen to me huff and puff.”

“I promise not to judge.” I make a cross motion over my heart.

“If you don’t, then that’ll really mean you like me.” She tilts her head, smiling.

“How long do we have to make it up there?” I ask, noticing we’re not going at a very fast pace.

“It’s a free period for me, but I have work to do. I’m not looking forward to it.” She blows a piece of hair out of her face.

“You don’t strike me as someone who runs from a hard assignment.”

She takes a drink before pressing her lips together. “I’m not. Typically, the harder the better. I like being able to spread my wings and challenge what I already think I know about myself. It’s just that this latest assignment feels really, really personal to me. It’s never hit me square in the face that the subjects I write about are people too.”

“Are you serious, Belle?”

“Yeah.” She ducks her head down. “For so long, I’ve had to separate myself from them. They aren’t the same as me. There’s a reason I’m writing about them and not writing about myself. But this story I’m working on for my senior project? It’s got me questioning a lot of things in my life.” As we continue walking, she chances a look over at me. “And now you think I’m a horrible person.”

“No,” I assure her. “I don’t. But I’ve never been in the position to think of myself as better than anyone.”

“Touché.” She laughs.

“Not that I’m saying you do...” I rush to hopefully cover up what I’ve just said.

“You’re right. I did say I think I’m better than others. Realizing I’m not has been a lesson in humility.”

“We’ve all gotta have that lesson sometime.” I sigh, putting my arm around her neck, and holding her close as we walk steadily upward. “Take me for instance. I never thought

I'd be on my ass in the middle of the ring. Yet there I was. Learning I could get beaten was a hell of a hard pill to swallow."

"See? You kind of get it. So I'm struggling. Any other time in my life, what I'm being asked to do would just mean another story. Instead, I'm scared I'm going to fuck up one of the best things I've got going."

There's a nagging at my gut. No way she's talking about me, right? I've never been called the best thing in anyone's life, much less a woman like her. We get to the top of The Hill, and I bring us to a stop in front of the journalism building.

We turn to face each other. In this moment, I'm transported back to the teenager I once was, stealing kisses from my girlfriend between classes while our locker doors covered our faces. Grasping her free hand with mine, I pull her into me. "See you later?"

"Yeah, I don't expect you to take it easy on me."

A smirk jerks the side of my mouth. "Now that I know what that skin looks like all sweaty just for me, you can guarantee I'm gonna put you through your paces at the gym."

"Am I a sadist if I say I'm looking forward to it?"

"Nah." I lean down so that our lips are barely touching. "I'd say you're my kinda girl."

She lifts up on her tiptoes just enough so that we kiss. Then she coyly lets go, turning from me to hot foot it into the building. When she gets to the door, she turns slightly. Her face is over her shoulder, and I remember vividly that she'd looked at me that way yesterday. With a wave of her fingers she's gone, and I'm left standing there with a goofy fuckin' grin on my face.

Shaking my head, I scoff. Who knew one afternoon with a chick could blow my mind? Shadows Sampson has officially found his kryptonite. Now the trick is not to let anybody else know. The last thing I need is for her to be used against me. After the last year, I'm not sure I could take it.

CHAPTER 23

ISABELLA

AS WE'RE FINISHING my latest session, Shadows clears his throat before grabbing hold of the bag. He stops it, then waits for me to make my eye contact with him. "I have a request."

My arms and shoulders are on fire from working out my aggression. Gulping in air, I push my hip out to the side. "What's that?"

"Tonight, there's going to be a fight downstairs. Not like the fight you came to the other day. I'll still be wearing a mask, since I'm supposed to be in hiding. I want you to come."

My chest warms, he's not asked me for much, and he's never asked me to come see him fight. This is hovering on relationship territory. Maybe we're both getting in too deep, but I can't seem to stop myself. "You want me there? I will be."

He glances around the gym, before stepping closer. "I *need* you here."

"Then this is exactly where I'll be. Can you tell me anything about the fight?"

He shakes his head. "You don't need to do anything before it starts. That way you have deniability if shit goes down."

I don't know what he's talking about, but I trust him. Probably more than I should. "What time should I be here?"

His hands cup my hips. "At nine. I wanna see you before I go out."

“Okay.”

Surprising the fuck outta me, he leans in, taking a kiss in only the way he can. It’s slow, thorough, and full of a fire threatening to burn out of control. “I need to cut this short today, but I’ll see you later?”

“With bells on,” I promise before grabbing my stuff and leaving the gym.

“DOES THIS LOOK OKAY?” I ask Liv, standing in the middle of the living room. I’ve gone back and forth on what I should wear tonight. Not wanting to be too flashy, but at the same time yearning to be the kind of woman who would show up at a fight on Seth’s arm.

“Tie the shirt up around the waist,” she instructs.

“You don’t think that’s going too far?” I’ve got my shirt tied up slightly in the front, but you can’t even see my stomach.

“No, you’ve got to be hot if you’re going to be there to catch Shadows eye.”

She doesn’t know what’s been going on between the two of us, but she knows I enjoy the way he looks - as does half the women both on and off campus. Since I want his eyes to be on me, I do as she suggests and tie the shirt up so that it shows from where my jeans sit right below my belly-button to almost where the band of my bra is. “Like this?”

“Yes! There you go. You’ve worked hard for the body you have now. Since you started training with Shadows you’ve tightened up.”

She isn’t wrong, and I am definitely proud of how far I’ve come. “Okay, I’m outta here. Don’t wait up.”

“Trust me I won’t, have a good time!”

The ride to Broken Bridges MMA is faster than I expect it to be. Usually on Friday nights, traffic is rough, people trying

to get to the bars or off campus to head home. Tonight it's a barren wasteland, and once I see the parking lot of the gym, I know exactly why.

The lot is completely packed, full of cars and trucks, all waiting to see the fight that's about to go down. Carter, the guy from Secrets, sees me and waves me to the front of the lot. "I've got you a spot saved up here," he points next to what I've come to learn is Maddox's truck.

"Thank you," I grin as I get out of my car and put my bag across my body.

Making my way downstairs is easier thanks to Maddox, who escorts me as soon as he sees me enter the gym. "I got a spot right for you up front," he grins.

This ring is much different than the last one we were at. It's fenced in, and more shaped like an octagon, the floor only has mats over top of it. If either of them go down hard, they'll be feeling it.

Because this is a fight Shadows invited me to, I know it means a lot to him. My nervousness doesn't allow me to appreciate the entrances of both him and his opponent. They say the opponent is Mad Dog Miller. I don't recognize the name, but when I see his face in the ring, I do. He's the guy who Shadows saved me from at Secrets.

They touch knuckles and then the fight is on. Mad Dog throws a series of kicks toward Shadows, which he avoids. Watching him, is almost like watching a ballerina. He's light on his feet and effortless in his movements.

Shadows catches a break and throws a round of punches with all his power, backing Mad Dog into the opposite corner. Sweeping his feet out from under him, Shadows gets him on his back and works in a chokehold.

"Get him, Seth!" I scream. "Kick his fucking ass!"

No one knows Shadows real name, so I feel safe in calling him that right now. I'm jumping up and down, cheering him on when Mad Dog gets his feet beneath him again, squaring up and knocking Seth's head back with a hell of a punch.

Blood pours from above where the mask is, and my stomach turns as I think about him being hurt.

This pisses Seth off, causing him to go after Mad Dog with a loud grunt, I can hear from where I stand. He unloads, punch after punch, while Mad Dog throws ones that are uncoordinated - he still manages to hit Seth in the chin, but it doesn't slow him down.

Shadows backs him into the opposite corner and eventually gets him on his back, coming around to wrap his arm around his neck, and his feet around his waist. I've heard Seth is just as good at grappling as he is with his fists, and for the first time I see it.

It's a master class on holding onto your opponent and refusing to let him go.

After what feels like an hour, the ref reaches down grabbing hold of Mad Dog's wrist, lifting it up, and watching it fall right back down. He does it once, twice, three times more, and that's when the fight is called.

Seth is brought to the middle of the ring, his hand being raised above his head to claim him as the winner.

As the crowd cheers, I desperately make my way back to the locker room, so I can make sure he's okay.

"You're poor face," I reach in with a washcloth, wiping the blood off his chin.

He grins. "It's worth it, this one was personal."

"That was the guy who tried to attack me outside of Secrets wasn't it?" I question, although I'm already pretty sure of the answer.

"It was," he confirms. "When his name came up wanting an opponent, I told Maddox to reach out and set the fight up."

"This is the second time you've defended my honor where he's concerned."

"And I'll continue to defend it every fuckin' day if that's what it takes."

CHAPTER 24

ISABELLA

I'M NOT LOOKING FORWARD to this. Especially not after the way Pete and I left off yesterday. He was surprised when I'd texted him this morning to meet, and maybe I'd been a little taken aback by wanting to talk to him too.

He'd pissed me off, and he'd damn well known it.

Before going into the building, I turn around, looking at Shadows - Seth - as he jogs down The Hill. Reaching my hand out, its almost as if I can stop him by force of will. I wish I could bring him with me. Instead of trying to do so, I pull my hand back, letting him go.

It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

With a new determination, I square my shoulders and walk into the building, taking the stairs two at a time. The Shadows who watches me huff and puff through workouts would be proud of the way I handle them.

Once I'm outside the door of Pete's office, I take a deep breath before knocking.

"Come in."

"Hey." I greet him.

"I'm surprised to see you after how things went down yesterday." He doesn't get up from where he sits behind his desk.

Can't say I really expected him to. Sometimes he can be a bit of a dick. Especially when it comes to not getting his way. "I didn't appreciate the way things were done."

“It’s not your job to appreciate the way things are done.” He steeples his fingers together before resting his chin on them. “It’s your job to get the information I asked you to get.”

“Why does it matter to you if I know what his name is?” I push a frustrated hand through my hair.

“The only way you’re going to know what his name is, is if you’ve gotten to him.”

“Why do you want me to *get to him*?” I throw back, suddenly suspicious as to what all of this even means. “What did he do to you, Pete?”

“Who says he did anything to me?”

“I’ve thought about this. Spent more time than I care to admit thinking about it, but there are only a few things that make sense.”

He rolls his eyes, blowing out a breath. “So what? You’re going to play shrink with me right now? This isn’t what you’re going to school for, Isabella. You know that.”

“I do.” I run my hand along the edge of his desk before having a seat. “But there is something to be said for knowing the psychology of the person I’m interviewing.”

“So tell me, Isabella. Psych me, if that’s what you wish. What do you think of me?”

He’s begging me to put my foot in my mouth and tell him exactly what I think. The me of a few weeks ago would’ve backed down, but Shadows has given me confidence to do things, to say things I would’ve kept to myself. Whether it be someone stepping in front of me at the canteen or a driver not paying attention when I’m crossing the street.

“Shadows is everything you want to be, but aren’t. He stands in front of crowds and takes their hopes and dreams on his shoulders. Instead of forcing them to *prove* they deserve those dreams, he simply makes them come true.”

“He’s a fighter.” His tone is annoyed. “It’s not like he’s solving the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle or curing

diabetes. His dreams? They're of beating the shit out of another human being."

"Which shows how little you know him. He works hard, he trains even harder, and he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. Maybe he doesn't have a degree on his wall." I point up at the plaque behind him. "But he's real."

"Is that what you think?" Pete's grin is so full of shit.

"It's what I know."

"You're willing to throw all this away, aren't you? Because he gave you a taste?"

It's starting to come together. "He stole a girl from you, didn't he?"

Pete's teeth grind together. "A girl? He stole the girl from me. The one I wanted for the rest of my life. I was ready to propose to her."

I'm fuming, absolutely fuming. "You used me?"

"Belle, you're really naive if you think he didn't use you too."

CHAPTER 25

“HOW DID HE USE ME?” I question Pete as I step closer to him. He assumes he knows my life? Let’s see what he really knows.

“To pump up his ego. After he lost that fight, he needed someone to make him feel better about himself. I’m sure he saw you. Let’s face it, Izzy—you’re hot. You’d have to be crazy not to see it. You know you’re nice to look at, and you use it to your advantage.”

This feels disgusting. It doesn’t matter if we used to be friends; he’s my superior, and my professor. I don’t love this. In fact, I hate it. “Who do you think you are? You still need to treat me with the respect you would any other student. For you to stoop to this level? It’s beneath you.”

“Oh c’mon, Izzy.”

“Don’t call me Izzy. There’s no taking liberties here anymore. I walked into this office seeing you one way, and I’m leaving seeing you a complete other. Used to be, I would’ve vouched for you with anyone. This? This is blowing my fucking mind.”

He doesn’t seem to comprehend, or maybe just doesn’t care, what I’m saying, doesn’t seem to realize he’s ruined any respect I ever had for him, that any admiration I may have possessed is so far gone. Instead of responding to what I’ve just said, he gives me a creepy smile as if he hasn’t heard a word I said.

“I bet he hasn’t told you his biggest secret, has he? He wouldn’t have. He’d want to keep that from someone like you.” He claps his hands in front of him.

He’s losing his mind.

But now I’m curious. Glancing at him, I see the glee on his face, in his eyes. What is it Pete knows that he’s going to enjoy laying at my feet like some sort of medal? “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He hasn’t introduced you to his son, then?”

His son? What the fuck? This is the biggest surprise I’ve ever heard. The one thing I never would’ve begun to imagine.

“What do you mean he doesn’t have a son. He’s never said anything about a son.” Internally? I. Am. Screaming. So much now makes sense. The worry that seems to override everything he does. Most of all, the all-in attitude that permeates every step he takes.

“Of course he wouldn’t. He doesn’t want to seem unavailable to anyone. I always knew he’d be the shittiest type of dad. Barely looking after the kid and bringing in stepmom after stepmom.”

Only he’s not been that guy.

From everything I’ve seen, he’s been working his ass off. Trying to do the best he can for his family. Worrying how he’s going to make ends meet. Obviously Pete doesn’t really know him.

Or at least the Shadows he is now.

Suddenly it hits me. “Pete, if he’s taking care of his son, where is the mother? The woman you were ready to give your all to?”

Those eyes that held glee a few moments ago are now hollow, devoid of any emotion. “She left. She couldn’t seem to handle what it took to be responsible for anyone besides herself. Whether it be a significant other, or a child.”

“Well wasn’t that better to find out now than before you married her? I mean, correct me if I’m wrong, but shouldn’t

you be thanking Shadows for getting rid of someone who wouldn't have been there for you in the long run?"

"You don't understand. She wouldn't have left me if she hadn't gotten pregnant with him."

Pete doesn't seem to have a strong grip on reality, and the gleam in his eye scares me. Something else hits me, another bit of understanding.

"Was this your plan all along, for me to form an attachment to him and then you to ruin it all?" I whisper the words out, not quite believing this could be the person I've looked up to so much for my entire college career.

I'd chosen this journalism track because of him, because of the reputation he's built up for this school. Wanna-be reporters come from all corners of the United States to attend this program. All because of Pete and the way it's become so coveted under his direction.

He leans closer, whispering. "Unfortunately for you. Yeah."

I don't want him to see it. The devastation that he could use me like this. That I could be a pawn in whatever this game is. I don't understand it, and I really don't fucking like it. It's hard to see the man in front of me and think about how I've looked up to him in the past. "I thought we were friends. How can you act like this doesn't bother you?"

"We were." He shrugs, as if he's helpless and I'm just collateral damage. Like our friendship, our working relationship means absolutely nothing to him. "But you got in the way."

"*How did I get in the way?*" I scream. "I did everything you asked me to do. I wanted nothing more than to make you proud, to do whatever it took to get this grade. It was a fucking game to you?" I'm gutted, shaking, and trying to keep it together, but failing tremendously. My chin wobbles, and I do my best to stiffen it up, but this is too much. It's not happening, I've had enough for today, and I need to get out of here.

“I’m not sorry, Izzy.”

“I told you not to call me that, and I have half a mind to go to the President of the university about you.”

“And say what? That I gave you an assignment and you slept with the subject, and it was all my fault?” He laughs.

“I can’t begin to tell you how much this hurts, Pete.”

“Better for you to hurt than me. Shadows deserves it, and if you believe he’s not the problem here, then you deserve it too.”

Opening my mouth, I try to get words out, but they get stuck in the tightness of my throat. My lips open, shut, open, and shut again. “You know what? Fuck you, Pete.”

Turning on my heel, I rush out of the office.

It’s nearly impossible, but I hold in the tears until I get out of the building. I have a class, but I can’t go there.

Not now.

More than anything, I need to get away from this place. What once was a haven for me is now tarnished, and I’m unsure if it’ll ever be the same again.

Running down the hill to my car, I don’t pay attention to anyone or anything around me. When I run into what feels like a brick wall, I rock back on my heels, wind-milling my arms to keep my balance. Standing in front of me is the only man I want to see.

Shadows.

“Hey, why the tears? What’s going on?” He grabs hold of my shoulders, keeping me steady. “Are you okay? Did someone hurt you?”

I should ask him about the baby right now, but I’m almost afraid of the answer. I trip over my words, but continue anyway. “They did, but not in the way you think. I’m not physically hurt. My heart is fucking broken. I have all this anger.”

“You know where the best place to get anger out is, right?”

“If you say the bedroom, I might hit you.”

He smirks. “While that would be fun too, I’m talking about heading to the gym. You haven’t been in a few days, and neither have I. We both have some aggression to work out.”

“Let’s go. You drive.” I throw the keys at him.

He catches them with an annoying ease. Nothing but a flick of the wrist. Is there anything he isn’t good at?

“Making a fried egg sandwich.”

I realize I’ve said the words out loud. “Good for you. I make a really good one. You teach me yours, I’ll teach you mine?”

Leaning over, he opens my passenger side door. “Don’t have to ask me twice, Belle. Let’s fuckin’ go.”

CHAPTER 26

SHADOWS

SHE'S BEATING this bag to within an inch of its life. Whoever pissed her off is lucky she's taking her aggression out this way instead of on their face. It's so ferocious, others have stopped their workouts and are now watching her.

"Be careful with your wrist," I instruct her from where I stand at the edge of the workout space. "You'll break it if you aren't careful."

Belle stops, wiping her forehead against her forearm. "At this point, I don't care."

Now this, I don't believe.

She does, otherwise she wouldn't be so upset.

The only people that can make you this angry are those you care about. She starts beating on the bag again, and I have to hold tightly to the bag.

Jealousy flows through me as I think about it being a relationship. Although I've been inside her, I don't have a claim on her. Don't have a right to it. I haven't asked for it, and I can't expect her to give it on the off-chance I might want it. I mean, fuck, I haven't even told her about my son yet.

If I haven't trusted her with my most important secret, how can I expect her to trust me?

"Who fucked you up today?" I can't help but ask.

She stops, putting her gloved hands on her hips, inhaling deeply.

My eyes go to where her chest is being held in by a tight sports bra. Might make me a bastard, but no matter what, I'm still a man.

Belle turns around in a circle, growling. "I love to write," she starts. "It's everything to me, and there's someone threatening that now."

Immediately, I'm pissed. Who the fuck would threaten her? "Tell me about it." I take a seat against the stacked up mats. "Tell me who's messing with you. I'll take care of it."

Her eyes soften. "I don't need you to take care of it for me—I just need you to listen."

"Whatever you need, I'll be here for you." Even I'm surprised by what I've just said. I've never been the type of person who offers to help others. So many times in my life I've needed others to help me and no one has. I've never made it a priority to be a good guy, but here I am, wanting to be one for her.

She comes over, standing in front of me. "I appreciate it, but I need to take care of things myself. It's what I've always done."

Opening my legs, I give her the invitation to come closer. I need her to, want her to be by my side. I've never been the type of guy who needed a woman to stand with me, but the more I hang out with her, the more I want her to be around.

The invitation is answered. Her body comes in toward mine. Reaching out with my legs, I wrap them around her, a smirk covering my face.

"Don't try to put me in a better mood before I tell you about this," she grumbles.

"I'd much rather see a smile on your face than this anger and stress." I use my thumb to erase the wrinkles between her eyes.

Her gaze softens. "Why are you being so nice to me? I don't deserve it."

“Why don’t you deserve it? In the short amount of time I’ve known you, I’ve come to realize a few things. You’re an incredibly hard worker who is regularly in a great mood. It worries the fuck outta me that you’re letting whatever this is get you down.”

She tilts her head back. I take the moment to dig my fingers in her hair. Using my fingernails, I scratch lightly against the skin there.

“That feels so good,” she moans, moving her head around in a circle on her shoulders.

“C’mon,” I encourage her. “There’s something about what we have-it makes me want to tell you things I’ve never told anyone else. I don’t know how you did it, but you got under my skin.”

“I tried.” She shrugs. “I meant to.”

“A lot of women have tried.” I reach down, starting to take her gloves off, needing to feel her skin on mine. “Only a couple of times have I let them in.”

She licks her lips as I unwrap her wrists. “No, that’s what I mean. I tried to get under your skin. That was part of my plan.”

My fingers falter as I continue working. “What does that mean?”

One of her hands is now free of its glove. She brings her fingers up to her lips. “This is going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

This doesn’t instill warm fuzzies inside. My hands tremble.

Mine.

The ones that stay strong and firm inside the ring, can beat the shit out of my opponent, and hold my son with the reverence he deserves. They are fucking shaking in this instant as I try to anticipate what she’s going to say. “I’ve said a lot of hard shit in my life. The best way to do it is to just speak it into existence. We’ve all got secrets.” I think about the son at

home, waiting for me. The one I don't see nearly enough, growing up in the background of all the stuff I'm trying to do.

"We do," she breathes heavily through her nose. "But some secrets are worse than others."

"C'mon, what could be so bad?"

"I'm not a liar by nature..." she starts. "In fact, I pride myself on being honest, in always doing the right thing in all situations. Until someone dangled my dream in front of me and then threatened to take it away, just like that." She snaps her fingers.

I stop her, covering her lips with my palm. "If there's anyone who knows what it's like to lose your dream in the blink of an eye, it's me."

"No, you don't understand. When I went into college, I did it with the express goal of coming out as an investigative reporter. The absolute best damn investigative reporter Kentucky has ever seen. I've been on this fucking track since Freshman year. I've done everything I can to make this dream come true." She crosses her arms over her chest.

Watching her is killing me. She leans in, almost as if she's holding herself up, and I say, "You don't have to tell me this."

"No, I do. I was given an assignment at the beginning of this semester. One I didn't and still don't agree with."

A commotion at the front door catches my attention. Recently we started requiring everyone to scan in because of some free loaders. The guy manning the door seems to be having an issue with whoever is there.

"I know he's here, he's always here if he's not at school or Secrets."

That's my sister's voice. What. The. Fuck?

Walking toward what's happening, it starts to come more into focus, and it dawns on me Bella is going to see it all.

"Seth, you've got to watch Gray." It's my sister and she's got my son in his car seat, all his shit with her. "I've got to go

into work. If I don't, they're going to fire me. You need to watch him."

The woman in front of me grabs my hand. "Seth. That assignment?"

"Yeah..."

"Seth, come get your son!"

Bella's looking over my shoulder, and the recognition in her eyes is enough to drop my stomach to my knees.

"Son of a bitch," I sigh. "I'll be right there." I say the words as I look at Bella.

Just as she's about to tell me her secret, mine walks through the door.

CHAPTER 27

ISABELLA

“SETH, I can’t do this right now.”

I’m shocked, seeing this woman walk in carrying a car seat with what appears to be Seth’s child. It has to be. They have the same chin, eyes, nose. He couldn’t deny this baby even if he wanted to. Part of me wasn’t sure Pete was telling the truth, but there’s no denying it as Seth hurries over to her.

I can’t hear what they’re saying, but given the way she’s gesturing and he’s got his arms crossed over his chest, they’re arguing. It’s quiet, but intense.

I glance around the gym, the crowd turns to look at me as if I have some sort of idea about what the fuck’s going on.

Dipping my head, I do my best to appear smaller than I am. I’ve never been comfortable being the center of attention in situations like this.

Seth looks over at me, his eyes sad, his face angry. But instead of being loud and threatening, he’s quiet, which I think is worse.

Eventually, he comes over, carrying a car seat, along with a base and a diaper bag. “Bella, I am so sorry,” he starts.

“So it’s true, huh? You really are hiding a baby?”

Those green eyes of his flash. “Who the fuck told you?”

“Does it even matter now?” I cross my arms over my chest, well aware my irritation with him is not a reflection of him, but of me. I was interrupted in telling him my secret, and now his is right in front of my face.

“Yes,” he hisses. “It does.”

Instead of staying there to look at his red face and flashing eyes, I do what I do best. I turn and run to the locker room. I need some time to figure this out and get my head clear.

He follows; heavy footsteps behind me slap against the floor. The sounds of him struggling with the carrier make their way up to me, and I have a moment of satisfaction that he’s not perfect at everything he does.

When I enter the locker room, I slam the door as hard as I can, glad when the door bounces off the other side of the wall.

“Don’t think you can get away from me that easily.” Seth opens up the door I closed, not worried that this is the women’s spot.

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

“When have I ever backed away from being somewhere I shouldn’t?” He fires back.

I need something to hold in front of me, to keep him at arm’s length, but there’s nothing I can find. Instead, I get as far away as I can, until I’m backed up against the lockers. “Why didn’t you tell me about him?” I thrust my chin toward the baby in his carrier, green eyes wide.

“It’s hard.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know about him until a few months ago. Do you know how hard it is to take care of a kid? Especially when you didn’t even know you had one, and you’ve failed at the one thing you were good at?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t know what it’s like to take care of a kid, but I do know what it is to fail at the one thing I’m good at.” I lick my lips, facing him head on. “And I’m failing because of you.”

His face moves as if I’ve slapped him. “Because of me? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I’ve never done anything to you.”

Uncharacteristic tears come to my eyes. Emotion clogs my throat. “What I was going to tell you before she showed up

with him—it's gonna piss you off.”

“Well, it won't be the first fuckin' thing today.”

“I'm a journalism major at Western. Things were going splendid until my newspaper editor told me my final grade depended on how close I got to you.”

“What?” Seth's jaw works double time as he seems to be grinding his back teeth together.

“Yeah.” I swallow roughly. “That wasn't it. I was to find out your first name because you guard it so much.” My bottom lip trembles as I lay my secrets bare in front of him.

“So this,” he motions between the two of us. “Was a fucking game to you? An assignment?”

I sniffle, rubbing the back of my hand against my nose. “It started out that way, because I'm on scholarship, Seth. I have to pass my classes. If I don't, I don't graduate. There's no way my parents can afford to pay my tuition for even a semester. You think you struggle? Well, there are other people who do too. I'm going to be the first in my family to graduate with more than a GED, and I'm proud of it.”

“But are you proud of how you played me, Isabella?”

A slap in the face wouldn't have hurt as much. “No, I'm not, but I did what I had to do. Pete held your name and your secrets over my head. I'm to write a story and turn it in within the next two weeks for my final grade. You tell me what I'm supposed to do.”

“Pete? That son of a bitch.”

“So you do know him. His ex is his mother?” I point at his son.

“Look, there was a lot of shit that happened in my past. At one point I didn't care about who I walked over or who I hurt to get what I wanted. I'm not proud of it.” He hitches his chin up. “But I swore the moment that piece of shit left him at my door, I would do whatever it took to take care of my child and make him proud. I've been *busting my ass* to keep him in diapers and formula. The fight is in three weeks. The one

where I can redeem myself and give my family a little lee-way when it comes to bills. He wants to do this to me now?" He turns from me, digging his fingers through his hair. "What if they talk trash about my son? What if they try to use him and his safety to get at me?"

I falter, my heart hammering. "I-I hadn't thought of that."

"Yeah? Well keeping him safe is all I think about."

I sigh. "Looks like he fucked us both over."

When he turns back around, the eyes that have looked at me with such warmth are now cold. "Guess so, but I didn't lie to you. I may have withheld the truth, but I didn't lie. I don't know how the fuck you can live with yourself."

I can't either. "You weren't honest."

"Because you never asked. No one ever asks," he rages. "They never want to know what the fuck is going on in my life. All they see is the guy who takes care of everything. The guy who can beat the shit out of his opponents and take the world on his shoulders. No one ever fucking asks if I'm okay. And ya know what?" He shrugs. "I'm not, and I don't know that I ever will be. You betraying me? I don't know that I'll ever get over it. So congratulations."

The look in his eyes kills me and I can't allow myself to watch anymore. Turning to the locker, I grab my stuff out and shoulder my bags.

"We need a ride," he announces loudly. "You gave me your car keys and told me to drive you here. There's no one I know at the gym who has a car; they all drive bikes. Grayson can't be in the front seat."

Although I want to be angry at him, I can't in this moment. He's worried about his son, and he's willing to do the right thing. "Then come on. I'm not sticking around here any longer than I have to. Where am I taking you?"

"I'll show you where we live."

It doesn't escape my attention that Shadows will only show things about himself he's not happy with when backed

into a corner.

Which says more about him than anything else I've learned since we met.

CHAPTER 28

SHADOWS

THIS IS MY WORST FUCKIN' nightmare come to life. I never wanted Bella to know where I lived, and I wanted to be the one to tell her my secrets.

I'd been about to.

Up until the moment my goddamn sister walked in carrying my biggest secret of all.

This car ride is the most uncomfortable twenty minutes I've ever had in my life. "Turn right up here," I instruct her.

In the back, Gray is cooing, oblivious to the tension. She hasn't even turned on the radio, hasn't looked at me, and refuses to acknowledge my presence. Fuck Pete, man. Fuck him straight to hell.

"We're on the left." My voice is quiet. "It's not much, but it's home."

I'm well aware of the rundown apartment building we live in. How it looks to an outsider. It's not one of those nice ones made of brick and windows you can open with a screen inside. This one has dingy siding that was new forty years ago. It's almost black, but was probably white when it was first built. Litter strewn across the parking lot makes it look even worse than it is. There are three broken down cars to the side that have been her since I moved in.

She comes to a stop, parking in the space I direct her to.

We're silent, but I don't want to leave yet. I've never been much of a talker, but she deserves to hear this. "What we've

done to each other is brutal,” I start, rubbing at my sweatpants. “If you were anyone else, I’d tell you to fuck off and get the hell out of my life, but I can’t.” I shrug. “I like everything about you, Bella. The way you go for what it is you want, the way you refuse to take no for an answer, the tenacity you have when faced with less than perfect odds. Do I wish you hadn’t lied to me? Of course. Do I wish I had been honest with you? Hell yes. But the fact of the matter is, your lips are the only ones I’ve kissed and your body is the only one I’ve been inside since him.” I point back to where Gray is still bawling in his car seat. “After I found out about him, I stopped everything, went on the straight and narrow. I knew he’d need a role model, someone to look up to. I didn’t have any of that growing up and you can see how I turned out.”

“Seth...”

“Let me finish. I’m not perfect at anything and the only thing I do well is talk with these.” I hold my fists up. “But one thing I do know? When I’m with you, all the noise in my head is quiet. I can smile. Hell, I even laugh once in a while. Even though I’m mad as hell, I understand why you did what you did. I get what it means to be the person in your family that everyone is counting on. That’s a tremendous pressure most people will never feel. Do I need some time? Yeah, and I think you do too.”

She makes a noise, running her hand along the steering wheel.

“If you want to give us a try, with all the cards laying on the table, come to the fight in two weeks. Not before, not after. If you’re at the fight, I know we have a shot.”

I glance over at her. She swallows roughly and then opens her mouth.

“No, don’t say anything now. Not when we’ve been pissed, but let me have this, in case we never get another chance.”

I lean in, kissing her. It’s laced with hunger and anger, the passion fierce as our tongues fight one another, saying what we can’t put into words. Her fingers grip my tank top, pulling me closer to her. If my kid wasn’t in the backseat and we

weren't in a public parking lot, I'd have her one last time before I let her go. A fuck to get the anger out of my system, to punish us both for not being honest.

But I can't. Not with her, not right here, and not right now.

Pulling back, I unlace her fingers from my shirt, and set myself over in my seat. "Bye Bella."

"Bye Seth," she whispers as I get out, and get Gray taken care of.

When I shut the back door of her car, it feels as if I'm shutting the door on a piece of my life that isn't mine. One where I was someone different, was able to be a man who liked a woman, instead of a guy who spoke with his fists.

Climbing the stairs to my apartment, the loneliness envelopes me the further I get from her. In his car seat, Gray begins to cry, and more than anything I want to join in. To let all of these emotions out and cleanse the dirtiness of the feelings coming up inside of me.

Once I get to our door, unlock it, and get us inside, the weight of everything I've just gone through hits me like a ton of bricks.

I unbuckle Gray from his car seat and hug his little body to mine before walking over to have a seat in the rocking chair. He hugs me as best he can, nestling in against my jaw and collarbone.

"I hope nobody ever lets you down the way they have me. I hope I'm always there for you in your time of need, and I pray you never feel this loneliness," I whisper, inhaling deeply. The smell of his shampoo comforts me in ways I never expected when he was first dropped off on my doorstep.

Putting a hand behind his head, I hold him tightly, and that's when I let the tears fall. For everything I've lost.

The fight.

My confidence.

Bella.

And when I'm done, I'm resolute. I'm going to keep pushing, keep being the man my kid needs even if my secrets get splashed over the headlines. And if I ever get a chance with a woman like Bella again, I'll be nothing if not honest.

I'm a better man because of her.

As they say—the comeback is bigger than the failure.

CHAPTER 29

ISABELLA

“LET’S GO DO SOMETHING,” Liv throws a pillow at me as I sit on the couch in our room. “You’ve been moping around here for a week, nose stuck in that damn laptop. Let’s go to *Secrets*.”

“Can’t.” I push my glasses farther up onto my face. I haven’t put my contacts in since the night I left Shadows at his apartment with his son. I haven’t put on any makeup or fixed my hair either. Now that I think of it, the only thing that’s graced this body is lounge clothing. I’ve given up. “I have to finish this story.”

“You’re going to finish it? After what Pete did to you?”

It’s the only thing I have left. That feeling hits me hard. Pete’s taken away everything else, I need this article. My chin quivers when the desperation and sadness envelopes my body.

Annoying tears pool in my eyes. When they drop I slash them away. “I’ve lost Seth. I can’t lose this too.”

Liv’s gaze softens. “Girl, I have never known you to get so fucked up over a guy.”

“Guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“You sure you won’t come out with me?” She tries one more time. “If we see him, we will leave post haste.”

That gets a slight smile out of me. “I promise, once I’m done with this story, we’ll have a night out. I’ll even dress up and smile.”

“I’m holding you to it. Not that we don’t appreciate a Sad Girl moment, but it’s been going on for too long, Izzy.”

“I know. Let me get this story done, and I’ll be better. Maybe I’ll even be able to put Shadows behind me.”

“We both know it’s not going to be easy. He’s got a hold on you the likes of which I’ve never seen when it comes to you and men.”

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I put my head down. “I think it’s because I’ve never been with a man before, and he was one. None of his complaints were about the way his dad didn’t get him the car he wanted, or that his Fantasy Football team didn’t do well, or even that he didn’t get a good grade in class. His worries were real. Things people worry about every single day.

“I agree. Shadows Sampson is one hundred percent man. From the top of that head to the ribbed mid-section, and he probably has really nice toes.”

I giggle, sniffing slightly. “His toes are ugly.”

“Thank the Lord. No one is allowed to be as perfect as he seems to be.”

Sighing heavily, I give her a look. “Let me get this story done, get my head on straight, and then I’ll be on the prowl with you.”

“Promise?” She tilts her head to the side as she asks.

“I can’t promise, but I can let you know I won’t be sitting here in the depths of despair like I am right now. Either I’ll figure out how to make it work with Shadows, or I’m going to move on.”

“How are you going to make it work with him? Somehow I don’t see that happening Izzy, and you know I love you, but you two seemed to hurt each other.”

“We did, but I think I did more of the hurting than he did. I know I did.” I glance down at my laptop. “This story I’m writing though, I think it will help. Hopefully it’ll explain where I’m coming from and will show him in the light he

deserves to be shown. If he doesn't accept my apology after this? Then I know it wasn't meant to be, but I at least have to try."

"What about his apology?" Liv presses. "You've been moping around here and crying pretty hard."

"I know where his heart is, and he apologized when he asked me to come see his fight. It took a lot for him to ask me to be there."

"You're a better woman than I am." Liv shrugs, before walking over to put her shoes on. "I'd make him grovel and beg."

"Both of us were wrong, and I have as much to make amends for as he does. And it's not like everything was bad – he made me laugh, and we had a great time together. He helped me not take myself too seriously, and lord knows I needed it."

"See ya, Izzy. Don't stay up too late."

"I won't." I wave as she walks out the door.

We both know I'm lying. Since the night with Shadows I haven't slept well. My brain refuses to allow me to forget the intensity of the feelings between us. It keeps me awake at all hours of the night. If I don't get some of these emotions out, I don't know that I'll ever be at another vulnerable place like this again. Which is sad to me, because I want to be vulnerable, but only with him.

Grabbing my laptop, I begin to write, pouring my heart and soul into the words.

Like I did in every assignment up until this one.

Because Seth is worth it, I'm worth it, and together we can prove to Pete and the world that love is real. Something that people experience, they can work through issues, and at the end, if they come out of it together, they're stronger.

Relationships are about the things that matter

Forgiveness.

Understanding.

The ability to know we aren't perfect, but together? We're a hell of a lot better than we are apart.

CHAPTER 30

SHADOWS

“DIDN’T REALIZE there was going to be a story about you in the school paper,” Maddox interrupts my session with the bag.

Shit. I close my eyes, thinking of Bella. She actually did it. Wrote the story she didn’t want to. “Only found out recently it was happening. Can’t say I was too excited about it.”

“You should be.” He gives me a look of respect. “It’s a damn good article. If I didn’t know you already, I’d think you were a fucking saint.”

Since I found out what happened with Bella, I haven’t wanted to think about her. It’s been fucking hard. The only time I’ve allowed her in is at night when I’m exhausted, and trying to sleep. It’s those lonely moments when reminders of the fun we had together creep in. When I allow myself to admit she was good for me. I didn’t take things as seriously when she was around. *Until she betrayed me.*

What I thought she felt for me more than likely wasn’t real. It was a ploy to get close to me, to find out my secrets.

“Nah, I’m good,” I continue with my bag work.

This time I punch harder, thinking of her face as she told me about what Pete had her do, thinking of the way my stomach dropped, and how I had let her in.

When that happened a week ago, I felt like an idiot.

Today I’m fucking sorry, and gutted that none of it was real.

My entire life, I've never been the type of guy who needed someone to count on. I've not been the person who wanted a partner.

But I'm the one who got played, because it felt really good to have her by my side. Even if she didn't know about my son or the money issues, just knowing she was there? It was enough.

Maddox gets behind the bag, effectively stopping it from swinging. "No, man, I'm not asking, I'm telling you. You need to read the story. If you don't, you'll never forgive yourself. Go on, you need to see what she said before you go into this fight."

Sighing I snatch the paper from his hands. "Have fun finishing the training."

Turning my back to him, I head out to the rear of the gym. Letting the door slam, I take a seat on the steps and put the paper down next to my thigh. There's a part of me that wants to say fuck this. There's another part that desperately wants to know what she's written about me.

Rubbing my hand over my chin, I blow out a deep breath. Reaching over, I grab the paper, and hope like hell I'm not about to get my heart broken again.

Coming Out of the Shadows

By: Isabella Winters

THE SUN KISSES the edges of the horizon as it rises over The Hill. Most students at Western are tucked into their dorm beds, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. A good percentage of them having stayed up all night to finish a paper or get a little more studying done before their morning class.

But there's another percentage.

The non-traditional students.

Like Shadows.

He hasn't been tucked into a bed, his eyes haven't closed all night, and he most definitely won't be making it to his morning class. Although he definitely should, it's not his top priority, and it hasn't been for a few months.

Instead, he's coming home from a long night at work, using his size and the intimidation tactics he's learned in the ring to bounce for Secrets. He puts himself into situations that some would run away from, to make the students at Western safe when they decide to go out for a night on the town.

But there are other facets to Shadows.

He'll go without to keep a roof over the heads of those he cares about. He'll work for twelve hours and then go workout for twelve more. Whatever it takes, he'll do it.

He's a man of integrity, honesty, and respect.

Shadows Sampson may not be on the Dean's List, but he's teaching others life lessons. He's taught me lessons.

Instead of running away when things get tough, he's taught me to stand and fight for what I want.

Even if it's hard.

Which is why I'll be in his corner on Saturday night, and I hope all of you will be as well. He makes his return to the ring, and I have absolutely no doubt he'll show you all who he is.

And I can't wait to show him who I am, too.

We may have met under circumstances that caused us to be less than truthful with one another. What I can promise you, Shadows, is that I'm sorry, and I'll prove to you how you've allowed me to realize that the most important thing isn't the next story. It's the person you spend time with, it's the integrity with which you go about your life, and what makes us better people.

I love you.

I'm proud of you.

I promise to never take the man you are for granted again.

Kick some ass.

CHAPTER 31

ISABELLA

“THANKS FOR COMING WITH ME,” I yell at Liv over the roar of the crowd.

“And miss this fight? You crazy, girl? I woulda been here without you,” she laughs. “But, I’m also kinda hoping to see a Romeo and Juliet reunion between a fighter and my best friend.”

I’m hoping for the same thing. For the last week I’ve spent every second trying to imagine what it will be like to see Seth again. Wondering what he will say when he sees the article. If he’ll be pissed it came out the day of his fight.

If someone were to ask me, I’d have to admit part of my past attraction with him was the fact he was so mysterious. But now that I know so much more about him, it’s even stronger. A loud whistle catches our attention as we move through the crowd.

It’s Maddox.

“He wants you up here,” he points to a couple of chairs in the front row.

I nod, my heart pounding with hope. My stomach flips and hands shake when I realize he’s giving me an olive branch. My feet go slower than my mind as I head to where I’m supposed to sit.

“Are you okay?” Liv asks, grabbing my hand, forcing me to walk faster. “You look like a zombie.”

“I’m nervous,” I admit. “To see him, to watch him fight again. This is way too much pressure.”

“No pressure. All you need is to be here for him, Izzy. That’s all he’s asking, no reason for you to make it into anymore than what it is. He’s not asking for the world, just you.”

When she breaks it down like that for me, it seems to be the simplest thing.

My leg shakes as I wait for the fight to start. My stomach is rolling with unresolved tension.

“You’re making *me* nervous.” Liv slaps her hand on my thigh. “He’s got this.”

“He didn’t have it last time,” I remind her. I can’t let her know he’s been the masked fighter the last few times there have been unsanctioned fights around here.

“That was also the first time he’d lost, Izzy. He’ll be fine; he has you right here. There’s no way he’s going to lose in front of you.”

While I wish I could believe her, I’m also pragmatic enough to know this isn’t going to be a cake walk for him. He’ll take hits, may be down on the mat—there’s even a chance he’ll be knocked out. I don’t want him to be in pain, would hate to see him hurt again. I’m not sure how I’ll take it, but I have to be here regardless of how hard it may be.

The lights go down, and the entrances begin. Colin “Corner” Fitzgerald is lean, covered in tattoos, and red-headed. He typically wins matches by brute force, and not by respect. I’ve only seen pictures of him on the internet, but I can’t see Seth being intimidated by him. As he’s announced, there are boos throughout the building. He’s not been a favorite since he beat one of Western’s top fighters four years ago.

When Shadows is announced the crowd goes wild, supporting the home-town fighter who’s ready to make a comeback. It’s the type of cheering and pounding on the

ground you'd expect at a college football game, but it's all for the man who's turned my life around.

I'm standing, screaming and stomping my feet on the ground with the rest of them.

As he enters the ring, he looks out at the crowd, his dark eyes searching. When they land on me, he taps his fist against his chest, over his heart.

He's got my initials written on the tape of one fist, Gray's written on the tape of the other.

I nod at him, acknowledging how much it means to me to be a part of this.

Bouncing from one foot to the other, he heads over to his corner. I watch as Maddox puts a mouth guard in, and then rubs Seth's face with Vaseline.

The referee gets them into the middle of the square, before making them touch gloves, and the match begins with the ding of a bell.

"C'mon Seth!" I scream.

Liv and I are standing amongst the crowd. Seth's fist connects with Colin's face, causing it to rock his head back on his neck. Then Seth explodes with a fury of punches, backing Colin into the corner.

When the referee sends them both to their corners, I groan. "Why won't he let them fight it out? I don't want to wait and see what's going to happen after this guy has time to regroup."

"It's how it works."

"I know," I blow out a breath. "It still makes me mad."

They go back into the ring and start fighting again. The first punch his opponent throws lands hard against Seth's face. Colin gets another in, and I'm screaming with everything I have, giving him all my energy. Seth's head is rocked back, causing me to wince. He will feel that in the morning. He goes down onto the mat. My eyes meet his, and judging by the faraway look in his, he's close to losing this match.

The referee is counting, and although I can hear him in the background of my thoughts, I make my voice clear. Because I desperately need Seth to hear me.

“Get up,” I scream, jumping up and down. “You’ve got this, Seth. I know how strong you are—do not give up. You haven’t given up on me. Don’t give up on yourself. Seconds feel like hours as he lays there, unmoving. The crowd roars and so does my pulse. And still nothing. And then...a twitch of his arm as he reaches for the edge of the ring.”

Slowly he starts to rise, grabbing hold of the ropes, using them to help him get his feet underneath his body. His gaze is on me. He shakes his head and some of the dazed look clears from his eyes.

“Yes!” I nod. “Stand up and fight for this.”

He nods back at me. Turning on his heel, he puts himself back in the bout.

“Win it for me!” I yell.

It’s almost as if a switch is turned on. He explodes toward the other guy throwing his hands so quickly I can’t see them move. Backing his opponent into a corner, he continues to go at him as the guy puts his hands up to cover his face. Shrinking into himself, Colin takes a seat on the mat.

People are screaming in the audience, telling him to get up, but he’s bleeding profusely from a cut on his head. Even more than Seth was. The referee goes down, grabbing the opponent’s hand. He lifts it once, twice, three times. Each time it’s lifted, it falls down limply.

I have no idea what’s happening, but when Seth comes to stand in the middle of the ring and the referee raises his arm up, declaring him the winner, I’m out of my seat.

Within seconds I’m at the ring, and trying to grasp the ropes to pull myself up to where Seth is. He runs over to the ropes, reaches down, grabs me under the arms with his gloved hands and lifts me up with nothing but his strength. Once I’m there, I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. Every bit of the fear I had that we would never be

together again, every bit of passion I have for this man who makes my life interesting, and every hope I have for us is in this melding of lips. I'm giving myself to him and he's giving himself to me, right here in front of everyone.

I don't care who sees it or what they think. This moment right here? It's for the two of us.

"I read your article," he says loudly over the crowd.

"What did you think?"

"I think you see more than I thought I allowed you to. I accept your apology, and if you only knew how much I've missed you since you allowed me to walk out of your life."

"It killed me." I hold him as close as I can. "But it's what needed to be done."

"I agree. Without you around to bust my balls all the time, it's been boring, Bella. Fuck I missed you."

"I missed you too." I lean into him.

"You'll never miss me again—that I promise. I love you just as much as you love me."

This is all I've wanted to hear. The rest can work itself out. "Let's go home?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Home is where you and Gray are. You let me know where you wanna go, and we'll go there. I know my apartment isn't what you're used to. Yours must be nicer."

Reaching up, I put my finger over his lips. "It's a dorm room. Wherever you are is perfect."

Closing his eyes, he leans his forehead against mine. "Thank you."

Around us, everyone is screaming and shouting, congratulating each other. But in the middle of this hall of chaos, I'm as content as I've ever been

CHAPTER 32

SHADOWS

“THAT PRETTY FACE.” She smiles softly as we sit on my bed, her finger caressing my abused flesh. She’s changed into one of my old t-shirts and I’m doing my best not to let my eyes go right to her tits. “Do they ever not go for the face?”

“They always go for the face,” I confirm, before getting up and heading for my closet. I took a shower at the gym, but I’ve got to change into some clothes that are a lot more comfortable. It’s a habit for me to change in there. I throw off the shirt, in favor of nothing, and then put on a pair of old sweatpants that barely have any staying power. When I walk back out, Bella’s eyes widen. Her bottom lip goes in between her teeth, and she swallows visibly.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head.

She smiles when she sees something she likes. Reaching up over my head, I grasp the edge of the doorframe, knowingly showcasing all the muscles I work fucking hard to maintain.

She smirks. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“I mean, do I? We haven’t been alone like this—ever, Bella. Maybe I just wanna take advantage of it.”

“Where is Gray?” she asks, looking over at the crib in the corner of my room.

“My sister has him. There’s no guarantee she’ll keep him all night, so…” I break off.

“So if we’re gonna do this, we should do it now?” She laughs, glancing down at the threadbare, blue carpet before looking back up again.

“I didn’t really wanna say it like that, but it’s the truth.”

“What if I were to say although I’ve forgiven you for keeping Gray from me, I’m still slightly irritated about it?”

“That’s okay, darlin’. We can fuck it out, and I’ll introduce you to him later, I promise.”

Her reaction to me is instant. Her eyes darken, her mouth opens, and her breathing speeds up. Reaching for the hem of her shirt, she pulls it over her head, leaving her in just her bra and panties. “You know this isn’t the answer to everything, Seth.”

“I know, but it’s a damn good start, right?” I reach down, grasping my cock in my hand. “And I’m always fuckin’ horny after a fight.”

“I can see that.” She licks her lips. “And I can see why. You’re so virile in the ring, using all your strength, and just beating the shit out of your component. It’s all instinctual, no worrying about what you’re doing. It’s heady.”

“There’s gonna be no finesse in what I’m doing with you here tonight,” I look down at her, hoping she can see I’ll never hurt her, but I fuckin’ want her. “There’re condoms over there.” I jerk my head toward the nightstand. “If this is what you want, you let me know.”

She walks over to the nightstand with her back straight and head held high. Reaching in, she grabs a condom before walking back over to me. “This changes everything,” she whispers. “Once I let you have me again, you’re not going to be able to let me run.”

“I’m holding on with both hands, Bella. You best believe that.” I grasp her around the waist, pulling her body towards mine.

She circles her arms around my neck and holds on tightly. When one of my hands goes from her waist to her jaw, she tilts her cheek into my caress. “Seth.”

“Shhh...” My mouth claims hers in a way I’ve never claimed it before. Our noses mash together, and I inhale deeply as my tongue owns hers, devouring. I stumble backward, landing hard against the wall.

I laugh, the sound deep in my throat. Reaching down, I pick her up by her thighs and turn her around so that she’s against the wall.

“Is this how you celebrate all your wins?” she asks, tilting her head back.

I take the access to her neck she’s given me. Burying my head under her chin, I lick and suck before biting.

When her legs lock around my waist and her heels dig into my lower back, I groan loudly. I use my chest to keep her still while I use my hands to push my sweat pants and boxer briefs down. She hands me the plastic package. Putting the condom in my mouth, I rip into the wrapper before sheathing my hard cock.

Pushing her panties to the side, I thrust into her body. Capturing her mouth, I swallow her moans of pleasure, trying to keep what we’re doing between us. Withdrawing and sinking back in, I set a punishing rhythm.

My chest presses against hers, my nipples catching on the lace of her bra, pulling them more taut as they slide against one another.

“Fuck,” I groan into her mouth before yanking our lips apart. “The way you try to suck me back in as I retreat — shit, Bella, there’s never been anyone else who loves me like you do.”

I have to shut my mouth. If I keep talking I’m going to tell her everything I’ve lived with for the past few years. How most women just wanted to say they were with Shadows Sampson, how many of them didn’t just took it, instead of participating? They faked it and then went back to their friends with the best story they could come up with.

Not Bella. Bella enjoys the process. She lives in the moment.

“I’ve never wanted anyone as much as I want you,” she breathes loudly against my chest, burying her head in my neck. “Nobody has ever given it to me like you do.”

“Yeah, darlin’.” I reach down, pulling her bra out of the way before dipping my head. With the tip of my tongue, I lick her firm nipple. “I *do* know how to give it to you. Don’t I?”

She doesn’t answer, so I reach up, grasping her hair in my fist. “Don’t I?”

“Yes,” she breathes out on a long, drawn-out breath.

“Are you gonna come for me?” I push up against her, pulling her hair a little harder.

She nods, keeping that bottom lip sucked in.

“Can you keep quiet, baby?”

She shakes her head. “No, no I can’t. God, no.”

I cut her off with a palm over mouth as she convulses against me, riding out her climax. She grips me so hard that I have to let go of my control, filling the tip of the condom, coming more when she bites into the palm of my hand.

When it’s over, the two of us are here, me standing with her legs wrapped around my waist.

“Don’t leave,” I whisper into her ear. “Please don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” she promises. “Tomorrow morning when you wake up, I’ll still be right here, and I wanna meet Gray.”

“If that’s your wish, then that’s what will happen.”

CHAPTER 33

“THIS IS YOUR CHOICE,” Seth whispers as he snakes his arm around my neck the next morning. “But I really want for you to meet him.”

“That’s what I want too, if he’s a part of you, then he’s a part of me too.”

He grins. “I worried I wouldn’t ever have this with anyone both before Gray, or after him. Not that I’d had a ton of dreams before Gray, but there were a few. Once he was left on my doorstep, I wasn’t sure what I would do, but I realized a few things. Life doesn’t stop, and we’ve got to keep going. No matter how hard it is, you’ve got to put one foot in front of the other. If you don’t, you might as well step in quicksand and let yourself sink.”

“That’s a hell of an analogy.”

He shrugs. “It’s what gets me through the day.”

He gets up and walks into another room. I’m assuming his sister has him, and this is their normal routine. Looking around his room doesn’t give me any kind of insight to the man I’ve found myself caring about more than I should, and before I can get up to start being nosy, he walks back in. Seth carries him over to me. I’m nervous. More nervous than I thought I would be for this. After his phone call, I knew I wanted to officially meet the baby who caused so much friction between Seth and I.

“So,” he blows out a breath when he comes to a stop in front of me. “I don’t know how to do this, I haven’t introduced

him to anyone, or felt the need to explain myself to anyone either. You're the first one, Bella. It's important to me, what you think of him; what you think of me. I want you to meet the little guy who has my heart. He's the one I get up for every single day, the one I go to work for, and who I want to make myself better for. Other than you, he's the only one who's shown me unconditional love. Let me introduce you to Grayson, my son."

It's not the first time I've seen him, but this is the first time I'll be meeting him, and it's important. One of the most important things I've done, because this is being done on Seth's time table. He's coming to me when he wants to, not because someone forced him to. "He looks exactly like you," I whisper, when he hands him over. "Same eyes, mouth, curve of your nose."

"Mine's slightly crooked where it's been broken a few times," he jokes. "Wouldn't necessarily go by that feature."

I giggle, sitting down on his bed. The one where we made love not long ago. "What is it you want for him?" I ask, glancing up so I can look him in the eyes.

"To be better than me," he answers almost immediately. "To not have to live in an apartment like this, to have enough food in his fridge, to be able to have what he needs without sacrificing his values."

"He will," I grin when he grabs hold of my thumb. "Because you've lived the life you don't want him to live. You're going to make this work."

"How?" he asks. "So far I haven't been able to give him shit."

"He's not even a year old yet, Seth. You have time before he remembers what his life is like. You can change everything, or nothing. It's your decision."

Seth seems to understand what I'm saying, before my eyes he appears to make a decision. "He won't live like this."

"No," I shake my head. "He won't. We'll provide him with a great life."

“We?” He questions, his eyebrow raising.

“Yeah, I’m not the type of person who will do anything halfway,” I reach down and run my finger along Gray’s chin. “If I’m in this, I’m in it, and he’s part of you. So he’ll be part of me, too.”

“That’s more than I ever could’ve asked for, Bella.”

I blow out a breath. “That’s the very least you expect from the person who says they love you, Seth. One day I’ll make you see yourself the way I see you.”

He drops a kiss to my forehead. “And I’ll do the same for you.”

CHAPTER 34

ISABELLA

GRADUATION DAY

“Isabella Winters.”

Hearing my name come over the loudspeaker is one of the most satisfying things I’ve ever heard. It’s the culmination of not only the last four years, but what I’ve had to deal with when it came to the piece on Seth. Granted, it brought us together, but it nearly tore us apart, too. Tears stream down my face as I accept my degree.

“Congratulations, Bella!”

I would know that voice anywhere. Seth is screaming loud enough to be heard in outer space, and I’ve never loved him more than I do at this moment. I hold my degree up, over my head, pumping my arms.

His joy at what I’ve accomplished is palpable. He’s the only one, besides Liv who knows how hard these last few months have been for me. He knows how much it took for me to stand up to Pete, and find my own voice. None of this has been easy, but it’s absolutely been worth it.

I sit through the rest of the graduation, dying to see my two guys. The ones I’ve come to live for. My mind wanders back to last night.

“HE’S NOT GOING TO SLEEP,” *Seth sighs.*

“It’s because he’s teething,” I remind him. “If you had bones pushing through your gums, you’d be unhappy too,” I coo at Gray, holding him tightly. He’s screaming his head off, and although I thought this part of being with Seth would get on my nerves, it hasn’t. I’ve found a maternal instinct I didn’t know I had, with Gray. If anyone were to hurt him, I would undoubtedly hurt them back and not think twice about it. Since Seth and I have made it official, I haven’t spent much time in my dorm, and we have only slept apart a handful of nights.

“We can’t listen to him cry for hours,” he argues.

“You wanna take him for a ride?”

“Yeah,” he grins. “Let’s go for a ride.”

Quickly we get him packed into his car seat and out the door. I buckle the seat into the back of my car while Seth gets behind the wheel. We’ve taken this drive more times than I can count. The one thing that’s guaranteed to put Gray to sleep are wheels beneath him.

“Are we getting ice cream tonight?” I smile over at him.

“We shouldn’t,” he laughs. “But it’s a tradition now.”

Five minutes into the drive, and Gray is out. Right about the time Seth pulls into one of our local ice cream drive-thrus. “Are we splitting, like normal?”

“Of course, you don’t keep these abs by eating ice cream,” he lifts his shirt in a show of arrogance that he can only do with me.

“Stop,” I smack him on the shoulder.

He laughs. “What are we getting tonight?”

We pull up to the menu - it changes weekly. “Ohhh they have chocolate-covered strawberry,” my mouth waters with the option. “Let’s get that.”

“Agreed,” he pulls forward. “Can I get a medium cup of the chocolate-covered strawberry and a bottle of water?”

Those nights are normal for us now, and I wouldn’t change it for anything.

Eventually the graduation is over and I get to the throw my hat up in the air. Surprisingly it comes back to me, and then I'm on my way to go see my friends and family. When I see Seth, I break into a run before throwing myself at him. He catches me easily, twirling me around.

"I'm so fuckin' proud of you," Seth whispers in my ear, holding Gray carefully. "Gray and I are lucky to have you in our lives."

"Thank you," I lean back, giving him a kiss. "I love you too."

I'm enveloped by friends and family all congratulating me, but knowing my two boys are here, is the best graduation present anyone could have ever given me.

EPILOGUE

ISABELLA

“I CAN’T,” I tsk at my editor. “It’s Halloween; I have to be home for my boys.” All three of them.

“Can you cover the board meeting in the morning then? I’ll get one of the single guys to postpone their Halloween date to take care of the City Council?”

It’ll be a super early morning, but it’ll also mean I’ll get to make these memories with my family. “Done. What time does it start?”

“Seven. I need you to be there at six to get your media credentials and a good seat. They might be ousting the college president.”

“With pleasure,” I answer, a smirk on my face. Just so happens that that president? It’s Pete, and if I were to see his downfall live and in color, it would make my day. “I gotta get going, but you can guarantee I’ll be there with bells on.”

“Have a good one Isabella.”

“Will do.” I rush out, not stopping until I get to the driver’s side of my SUV. If they can’t catch me, then they can’t stop me. My phone buzzes. As it always does, my heart beats faster and my stomach gets warmer when I see the name at the top of the message.

Hubby.

H: I have both the boys with me at the gym. Grabbed your costume. It’s in the locker room. All you gotta do is get here.

I: Thank you so much!

H: Anything to make it easier, and be safe with that lead foot. We don't start until you get here, even if that's later than you wanted to be. Love you.

I: Love you, too.

If anyone had told me this would be my life five years after Seth's last fight, I would've told them they were crazy. It's been a whirlwind, honestly.

We were married six months later, made a brother for Gray a year after that, and we just closed on our first home. It's not been without its struggles. We've had a lot of those. Especially saving to buy our house. There were a lot of sacrifices, and as the kids get older there'll be more.

At least once a year when there's an unexpected expense, Seth talks about doing another fight. So far we've been able to make it work so that he hasn't had to.

Traffic is slower than I wish it was as I make my way across town.

When I finally see the gym, my heart starts beating wildly against my chest. I still get excited when I'm about to see my husband. I pray that never changes. Parking, I turn the SUV off and get out.

Seth is walking toward me, a pair of shorts and tank top showing off all the hard muscles he works on.

"Hey." I grin as I head toward him.

"Hey babe." He envelopes me in his arms, holding me tightly to him. "Missed you today."

"Miss you everyday," I argue.

"Always gotta outdo me, huh?" He leans down, kissing my cheek. "Maddox has the boys getting into their costumes."

"I can't wait to see them. Did Gray decide if he wanted to go as a fighter?" Our fingers entwine as we walk into the gym.

It looks exactly like it did the first time I walked in, ready to take on the assignment of getting into Shadow's world. Never thought I would still be there today.

“Of course he did. I mean, he wants to be like his dad, right?” He nods over to where Maddox is putting his hands in gloves. “He’s loving it.”

“Cage,” I call our youngest over. He’s four, and going to be a fucking handful.

“Mama,” he runs over at me, going full throttle.

“You ready to go trick or treating?” I question, lifting him onto my hip.

“Gray said we get candy?”

“Yes you do! Let’s go back here and get your costume. You still good to go as a dirt bike rider?”

He nods. “All I want is candy.”

“You don’t get to eat all of it tonight,” I warn him. “You’ll have to pace yourself.”

“What does that mean?” He scrunches his face like I’ve seen myself do so many times.

“You’ll figure it out over the next few days,” Seth chuckles. “Go get dressed with your mom. We’ll be out here waiting on you.”

“Aren’t you getting dressed?” I question my husband.

“Baby, this is me every single day. If Gray’s gonna be a fighter, then so am I.”

“Looks like I’m the one who’s gonna be fighting.” I give him a wink. “Fighting all the ladies off of you.”

He throws his head back laughing. “Trust me, I’m not watching anyone other than you.”

Blowing him a kiss, I head back to the locker room, thinking about the first time I did. How back then I had absolutely no idea how my life would change thanks to the story that almost ruined me.

But I guess it’s true what they say.

Your shadows also show you your own light. And without my Shadows, I wouldn’t have the light I do now. The brightest

I ever could've imagined.

[Sign up here to get an extended Shadows Epilogue on May 1st!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laramie Briscoe is the USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author of over 30 books.

Since self-publishing her first book in May of 2013, Laramie has appeared on the Top 100 Bestselling E-books Lists on Amazon Kindle, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo. Her books have been known to make readers laugh and cry. They are guaranteed to be emotional, steamy reads.

When she's not writing alpha males who seriously love their women, she loves spending time with friends, reading, and marathoning shows on Netflix. Married to her high school sweetheart, Laramie lives in Bowling Green, KY with her husband (the Travel Coordinator) and a sometimes crazy cat named Beau.



RENEGADE

Want more first responders from Laramie?

Read on!

When you fall in love with the most unexpected person, at the most unexpected time...

Ryan “Renegade” Kepler

I’m the type of man who knows what I want. I make up my mind and stay in my lane, never veering off the course I set for myself.

Going into the military? Did it. Youngest member of the Moonshine Task Force? That’s me. Get my best friend’s older sister in bed? It was my pleasure.

Age means nothing to me. I’ve seen and done things men twice my age never will. What I want more than anything is someone to share my life with, and that person is my best friend’s older sister, Whitney.

Whitney Trumbolt

Ryan may be ten years my junior, but damn, my first time being a cougar will never be forgotten. Now I’m struggling with wanting things to either go back to the way they were or spend every night in his arms.

Make my wedding planning company the best in the south? Did it. Ignore the way my body trembles when I see Ryan? Epic fail. Freak out when I see a positive pregnancy test staring back at me? Complete with mascara running down my face and clutching my pearls.

Looks like things will never be the same. There's a man in my life who doesn't take no for an answer. He's the one who makes my blood run hot, cheeks turn red, and heart beat wildly within my chest. His name is Renegade.

CHAPTER 1

WHITNEY

LATE MARCH

“Ryan, I’m tellin’ you, I need my hair pulled, a red handprint across my ass, someone licking my nipples, a dick in my treasure cove. I need it all.”

Drunk. I am drunk. Like way past the legal limit – otherwise I wouldn’t be sitting here spilling all my secrets to my baby brother’s best friend. The baby brother who had been totally unplanned by my parents. Ten years my junior, baby brother. He and Ryan are the same age; twenty-five to my thirty-five. Makes me feel so much older just thinking about it. Not only by age, but by life experience, too, although they’ve probably got me beat. They’re cops and have served overseas in the military. Dear Lord, I think I sound like Julia Sugarbaker from *Designing Women*. I’m three sheets to the wind, and nobody stopped me.

I see him try to suppress a grin as he brings his beer up to his lips, taking a nice long pull off the wide mouth. I am mesmerized by the way his throat muscles move when he swallows, pushing the liquid down his throat. No denying he’s all man. None of the boyhood shyness he always had with me is anywhere near us tonight. The palm of his hand completely covers the label, the one drink he takes drains half the bottle. For a second he focuses on my face, squinting as he watches me. “How many of those have you had to drink?” He points the neck of his beer to the wine glass in my hand.

His voice is as smooth as the red liquid I swirl in my glass. I tilt my head to the side, realizing the whole room goes right

along with it. Counting back, I try to think how many I had before he took the seat next to mine, and I can't remember. "Five or six?" I ask him, like he should know. "What's it to you, Ren-e-gade," I sound out his name by syllables. My words sound slightly slurred to my own ears. "Renegade," I grin. "Anybody ever tell you, you little boys and your nicknames are cute? Just like playing cops and robbers...you with your Renegade, Trevor with his Tank," I'm giggling for real now. "Pew, pew!" I fake shoot him with my finger gun, thinking how pissed off my brother would be if he were here right now. Not Ryan, though, he's patient. God bless him.

"You think maybe it's time you quit for the night?" He gently moves to take what I have left away from me.

His fingers are soft as they try to pry mine from around the stem, but I resist his attempts and pull it closer to my chest. The liquid sloshes and I inhale deeply, hoping not to lose any of it. I'm like a two-year-old with my blankie. This glass of wine is my security and at this moment I'll protect it with everything I have. Once the security is gone, I'm left with nothing. I can't be transparent tonight, I need something shielding me from my reality. I'm a woman on the prowl, and a woman on the prowl is confident in her abilities.

"Quit?" I ask, running my tongue over my dry lips, trying to moisten them so I can form words more easily. "Quitting is not something I do. That's what my ex-husband did. My mama did. That's what my former boss did," I shake my head and try to stand on four-inch stilettos. He reaches out and grabs my elbow, steadying me, being a rock when I haven't had one in a very long time. "Whitney Trumbolt is not a fuckin' quitter." I make my voice as strong and as clear as possible, I fear though that it comes out a slurred mess.

I can see Ryan try again to keep the smile from his face. The corners of his lips twitch, and it pisses me off. Not because I'm mad, but because he thinks it's funny. He thinks this is a joke, and it's not. It's my life. The life I've been trying so desperately to get out from under or save. I'm not sure which yet. All I know is I haven't been living and I'm damn sick of the in-between.

“You think this is funny?” I take another drink from my wine glass. It’s a big one this time, I drain it. There’s not one drop left when I set it back down on the bar, slapping my lips together with a satisfied pop.

“No, Whit, I think you’re having a bad night.” His tone is one someone would use with a kindergartner, talking them down from a temper tantrum. It pisses me off too.

A bad night? Try a bad decade. If I could do anything, it would go back to the night I turned twenty-five and be the age that Ryan is again. I would do so many things differently, I would change so much about the choices I made back then. “You know nothing about me, other than the fact that I’m Tank’s older sister.”

He grabs me by the wrist, locking his hand around the flesh. I feel his fingers lightly touch the skin and bone. It’s more of a caress than a warning. I never realized until this moment how much bigger he is than me. Never really paid any kind of attention to it – oh I’ve paid attention to him off and on through-out the years, but never like this.

Ryan “Renegade” Kepler rises to his full height, towering over me as I do my best to keep my footing and ignore the way my skin tingles where he grips my wrist. He leans in close – so close I can feel his breath on my skin.

“I know a lot of things about you that you don’t think I know.”

His voice is hard and soft at the same time. I close my eyes to savor it, to try and figure out how he’s able to do both. Maybe it’s my drunken mind, but he’s magic to me in this instant. The deep timbre rushes over me as I try to understand his words, but I’m having a hard time. This is the closest I’ve been to a man in a very long time. My body is at attention, as is my libido. I press my thighs together as I dig my heels in deeper, not because I don’t want him to move me, because I ache. It’s an ache that’s never been fulfilled, if I’m honest.

“I know that you love your mama’s fried chicken, your grandmother’s homemade mac and cheese, Alabama football, and Dale Earnhardt Jr. I know that you have a soft heart.

Hallmark movies make you cry, you pick up strays on the side of the road, and you always buy that homeless man near the Starbucks a morning coffee,” he lulls me into a sense of security. Making me want to believe there is someone out there who listens when I talk, someone who looks at me and sees a brain behind my blonde hair.

I’m wrapped up in his voice, in the things he does know about me. Things I never knew he paid attention to. I’m swaying, but it’s because his voice is doing weird things to my equilibrium. His other hand cups my hip and I can feel the heat of his body through the material of my skirt. My thighs burn as they’re pressed against his where we stand.

“I know that your ex-husband was a piece of shit. I know that your ex-boss didn’t know what the hell to do with the creative genius that is your mind, and I know that your mama will never forgive you for giving up pageants, but she’ll never forgive herself for pushing you that damn hard,” he stops and pulls back, giving me his eyes and face to stare at.

Our eyes meet – his brown to my blue – and I realize with clarity that I’m breathing hard, hard enough that it feels as if I’ve run a marathon. The loss of his strong body against mine makes me want to cry. I want to grasp at his clothing, pull him back in, and let him heat up parts of me that have been cold for so long.

“You wanna know what else I know?” The question is asked in a way that says he’s not sure if he wants an answer. The way his face closes off and he withdraws slightly into himself make me think this is a secret he’s not shared with anyone. Tonight, I want him to share it with me; I want to be the person he confides in. He knows so much about me, I want to know everything about him too. There’s a string of awareness stretched between us, and it’s pulling me closer.

I’m captivated by the way the dim lights of the bar make his brown eyes darker, I’m enthralled by the fact that it looks like it’s been a few days since he shaved, and I’m even more fascinated by the cut he has on his cheek. He and Tank went out on a call last night, and I can’t help but wonder if that cut is the result of a dangerous night doing a dangerous job.

I shake my head and then nod, because I'm conflicted in my drunkenness, but I do want to find out what else he knows. I step forward, put my arms around his neck, and lean up so that now I'm the one in his ear. The truth of the matter is I need to feel close to him, I want the heat back he's taken away from me. I'm cold without it, and I'm sick to death of being cold. "Tell me what else you know."

I see him look around the bar, checking to make sure that we're not being paid any attention to. He bends with his knees and grips my ass cheeks in the palms of his hands, bringing us flush together so our bodies touch. His voice is dark as he all but growls. "I know I'm the one who can put my dick in that treasure cove. I know I'm the one that can pull that hair, I can pull on those nipples, and I can smack this ass," he squeezes my flesh like he owns it, where his hands rest. "The question is – will you let me?"

It's not a question I can say *no* to. The way the air crackles between us, the alcohol I've consumed, and the sudden fascination I have with his heat. There's not any way that I can say no nor is there any desire on my part to deny it. I've denied myself a lot of things in this life and this right here is not something that I want to brush off. This is God giving me what I want on a silver platter, a sacrificial offering for the shit I've gone through the past few years. This is my Cinderella moment and my SEC Championship all tied together into one great big bow. Over six feet and two hundred pounds of bow. If I say no, Lord, never offer me anything else because I'm gonna be a nun for the rest of my life.

"You're what?" He asks, a glimmer of surprise and playfulness in his eyes.

I said that out loud? Never mind, I can fix this.

"Yes," I breathe out, adding on a "please."

"Oh baby, you don't have to beg. I'll do whatever you need me to," Ryan says as I find my hand in his and stumble to keep up as he pulls us out of the bar. We pass people we've known our whole lives, clients I've helped to the altar, and I'm pretty sure we just passed the Deacon of the church. No one

stops us as we hit the front door. I gulp in the fresh air, sure as the world my senses are going to come to me.

Guess what? They don't. I'm in for whatever this full moon-lit night is going to bring us. Safe Whitney is not putting the brakes on a ride crazier than a lap at Talladega. No, Wild Whitney has taken her place. Funny how both are four letter words, yet they couldn't be further apart.

In mere minutes I'm in his truck, and we're headed towards my house. I will myself not to pass out, because for the first time in years, I want to be here and present for this experience that's about to happen. I want to remember every damn detail. If it's only going to be for this one night, I don't want to miss a thing.

Renegade