



SUCKER

for Dumb

DEE ELLIS

SUCKER
Punch
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Sucker Punch by Dee Ellis

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Chapter One

Tiffani

Jab. Jab. Retreat. Jab. Jab and hook. Knockout.

Flickering images play in my head, a vision of the fight yet to come. I always visualize a fight before it happens. I watch it the way football players view tape. I focus on my faults, my mistakes, and what I can learn from my opponent as I watch the fight play out.

When I first started fighting, I would go in blind, hoping for the best. It was a terrible strategy that rarely worked for me. I had no idea who I was facing, no clue about their style or their habits. Still, I won. I beat every single fighter they put in front of me, and I did it without finesse or style. I was a cold fighter who went in, fought, and left the octagon.

Those fights earned me the name Ice Princess.

“No, no,” a voice bellows, making me bristle, “too much repetition. Carmichael will see it coming. Mix it up, Frost.”

Groaning as I turn back to the heavy bag, I plant my feet and start do as I am told. I land a chaotic assortment of blows on the bag. The hits become more aggressive when I visualize again. This time, it is not the heavy bag I am pummeling, it is my adversary. *My enemy*. The current champion.

“There, there, good,” Walt shouts, chomping on his cigar, the end glowing as he sucks the toxins into his lungs.

“Stop smoking those things while I train. They stink, Walt,” I mumble around my mouth guard, hitting the heavy bag with a few kicks as he tries to keep it from swaying too much.

Chuckling, he chomps down on the cigar, winking at me from his spot behind the heavy bag. Rolling my eyes, I let out a half smirk before I focus. I work on the heavy bag for almost thirty minutes before I let up. Once I finish there, I jump rope for a while and then work with a sparring partner for the rest of the day.

Training is to me what shopping is to my sister Sumner. Then again, we are opposites in every possible way. She is warm and outgoing. I am reserved and introverted. Sumner is mouthy and will talk your ear off while I am quiet. When I am in the ring, I let my fists talk for me. I never used smack talk or provocation during a fight or even in the weeks leading up to one.

Sumner might be the mouth, but I have always been the muscle. Growing up, we always stuck together. Sumner would get us in trouble, and I would get us out of it. That is what big sisters are for, I suppose. These days I am the one who gets in trouble—if you call beating other women in the squared circle trouble.

“Good, good,” Walt encourages as I catch my sparring partner with a good left hook.

I am weak on my left. She knows it, but she does not know that I always work on my weaknesses. It is still a weaker hit than I can land with my right, but it has her retreating. I grin and counter her, swinging my arms, moving my feet, staying away from the fence as my eyes stay trained on her.

“Little soft on that one, Ice,” my spar partner, Greta, taunts me.

“Doing you a favor, Greta,” my sister shouts, making me grin behind my mask.

Leave it to my sister to mouth off for me. Sumner claims pissing off the other fighters is strategy. She might not like that sort of strategy if she was the one facing them after she pisses them off. That girl is always running her mouth to someone, and I am the one who has to back it up.

“Shut your mouth, Sumner,” Greta spits out, along with some blood, glaring at my sister as she stands in my corner.

“What did you just say?” I whisper, too low for her to hear or be able to answer.

Fury makes my vision hazy, and I forget that we are sparring. I forget to save my energy for the real fight. I forget just about everything Walt has taught me. All I care about is hurting someone who just tried to hurt my sister. Even if it was just with some catty words. I do not let that shit fly.

Jab, uppercut, jab, spinning back fist. I grapple and take her to the ground, wrapping my arm around her throat as I slide my body behind hers. I hear her gasping for air. I feel her body going limp. I keep squeezing. Her hands tap at my arm frantically, and still I squeeze. I do not let go until dark spots fill my eyes and I realize people are there, pulling her away from me.

Blinking, I spit out my mouthpiece as I fall back in retreat. Seated back against the cage, I throw my hands up. Sweat pours down my face so I swipe it away, pulling at my gloves. I stay seated until they get Greta out of the ring to be sure no one thinks I am going after her again.

“They know better,” I rasp, shaking my head as I turn to look at my sister. Our eyes lock, hers sad before they swing away shamefully.

It is not her fault I lost my temper. Not her fault, I lost control. That is all on me. If I can’t take someone talking shit in the ring, I shouldn’t be in one. They can say whatever they want to me or about me. Call me whatever they want or threaten to make our fight my last fight.

Once they talk about the one person I care about, I lose it.

“Frost,” Walt shouts, making me wince when I hear the disappointment in his scratchy voice. “Get out of my ring. Shower and get gone. Do not come back tomorrow.”

Nodding, I don't bother with apologies. He knows I would mean the apologies, but he also realizes for a moment, I *did* want to hurt Greta. We do not train to hurt fighters in the ring, just to best them. My temper is my own demon. I fight it in the ring, but sometimes I lose even if I win the match.

Pushing up from my crouch on the floor, I glance over to see the medic checking on Greta. One side of her face is bloody and bruised and I hate that I did that. During a match, sure. Not when we were just sparring. I ought to go over to apologize, but she will run her mouth about Sumner being there. Things will escalate and if I keep hurting fighters, I could lose my title shot.

"I did not mean to set that off," Sumner rushes her words out, not that she ever talks slow, "I was just talking stuff. Figured she would laugh it off. I did not think you would get upset," her voice trembles as her hand flutters at her neck, fussing with the diamond boxing glove hanging from her neck.

Out of habit, I reach for my own even though I know it won't be there. I never wear it when I am training. It was the first nice thing I got for us after my first win. It was a hard match I had trained for almost a year for, my first one on the circuit and it opened the doors for me.

At the time, we were living week to week at a hotel near the gym so I could train. Our parents had bailed on us a hundred times before we decided to turn the tables. We left home when I was fifteen and Sumner was just ten. Saved up every penny we had from washing cars, toting old ladies' groceries home, and cleaning our neighbors' apartments. They knew we wanted out of that stinking town so once we had enough saved, we took the first bus out of town.

We traveled for three days on four busses to get to Silver Shores. It was the biggest city on the bus route, and I figured I could get jobs washing dishes or even waitressing. I had figured wrong. Our first months in the port town were spent sleeping under the pier, stealing food, and dodging the cops.

When I got caught stealing some clothes for my sister, the cops handed me over to Walt Warner. He was in the court room waiting for me when I faced the judge. I was horrified they just gave me over to some old man who stunk of cigars and fried chicken.

How could I know that man would save my life?

That stinking old man took me to his gym, where he promised to teach me responsibility and discipline. He told me working at his gym would take care of the community service they slapped me with. If I followed his demands, he said he might even pay me one day.

“You do not fight outside of this gym. Not at school, because yes, you’re going to school, Princess,” he wagged that stogie at me, *“both of you go to school.”*

Walt arranged the room for us at the hotel and even made sure we were fed and had clothes. It was the first sense of stability we had ever known. Working at the gym opened a whole new world to me. We were surrounded by fighters, both men and women, who became our dysfunctional family.

Going to school was a chore for me. I had a bad attitude and a short fuse and being the new girl in town meant all eyes were on me. I *tried* to behave. I *tried* to keep my head down and get through high school without trouble. But trouble follows me—she looks like me and her name is Sumner.

If someone picked on my sister, or upset her, I stepped in to take care of it. That meant fights that went against Walt’s rules. I was waiting for him to put us on the street, but he didn’t. Instead, he told me I could fight all I wanted—in the ring where he would train me to work out my anger.

Walt saved my life for the second time when he put me in the ring.

Training to fight was the best thing to ever happen to me. At first, I took it as a form of punishment. Grueling workouts and exhaustive coaching meant to teach me a lesson. What I got from it was much more than an attitude adjustment. Training taught me patience, focus, and resilience. It provided an outlet for my anger as well as giving me something to strive for.

“Was she hurt bad?” I mumble, smelling his tell-tale smoky sweet scent.

“Broken nose. Nothing she ain’t had before. Nothing *you* ain’t given her before,” Walt grumbles before I hear him chomping on his cigar.

“I never mean it,” I whisper, turning to glance at him as I unwrap my hands. They hurt and are speckled with blood, making my stomach turn.

“She knows that. We all do. But you still do it. You need to cage that anger for the real fight, Tiffani,” he murmurs, softening his voice the way he does when he talks to me like a father. He is the closest thing to a father we ever knew, and I immediately sag with guilt because I know I let him down.

“I am sorry. I will make it up to her,” I swear. I *always* make it up to them when I hurt them. I cover their rent or let Sumner take them shopping. I once even took a fighter and her wife out for dinner but declined her offer to join them in the bedroom. I do have my limits for making amends.

Walt comes over and finishes unwrapping my hands, checking for injuries. My knuckles are swollen, and a few nails are busted but I am fine otherwise. When he draws me closer gently, patting the back of my neck as he tells me it is ok, tears burn my eyes. I know it is *not* ok. It was cruel to hurt her over a few words, but him saying it always makes me feel better.

“Go home. Rest. No training tomorrow,” he tells me what I was afraid of. Not training is the punishment I hate most. I nod, not wanting to argue because I earned it.

He goes to check on Greta and I start towards the showers. A half dozen other fighters, men and women, fill the gym, training for their own fights. Sometimes, I just come and watch other people. I learn from seeing how others move, how they turn their bodies with a hit, or the way a tilt of their shoulder gives away their next strike.

“Do you always apologize for doing what you were meant to do?”

Swallowing, I turn at the sound of that deep, rough voice. No. Oh, no, no, I just am not seeing what I know I am seeing. Not *him*. *He* grins at me and my stomach flutters strangely. Nope. Not today, Satan. I am not swooning over Tate Woods after I broke a friend’s face. No sir, not today.

“I was not meant to hurt people.”

“Is that *all* you did there?” He hums with a grin that could melt panties. If I were wearing any, mine would melt.

Tate, a former MMA darling, is too pretty, too proud, and too damn dangerous for me to entertain. That means one thing—he is the enemy and will be treated as such. “Get fucked, Woods.”

“Oh, Princess, I can sure dream, can’t I?”

Chapter Two

Tate

Watching people hurt one another is always a good time.

Our amusement at the hands of gladiators putting their bodies on the line dates back centuries. We gathered in huge numbers in colosseums and battlefields to watch men battle it out for the greater good—whatever it was at the time. Now we pay a hefty ticket price to watch men *and* women go at one another in the pursuit of becoming the best.

Fighting is more than being a gladiator. It is not about hurting people. It is about imposing your will, using both your power and your mental strength to beat an opponent. Two people go in a ring determined to be the one that comes out victorious. Fighters put their bodies through hell to win a belt or a title that at the end of the day, means nothing.

I ought to know how little it means more than most. I wrestled in high school and college, but that took me nowhere. I started training in mixed martial arts and taking fights to pay the bills. It was never about winning for me at first, it was just about doing what I knew I was good at to get by.

Once I won, once I got a taste of how sweet that was, I got hooked. It was the first time I knew I was good at something and being better than dozens of other fighters, good enough to win titles, it felt good. I had never had anything to feel good about before I started fighting.

“I wish I had given you away.”

Those words, spoken by my mother while she was high, were the catalyst for my life. I was about eight when she stopped hiding the marks on her arms or sneaking men in and out of the house. Men who financed her addiction by using her however they saw fit.

To my mother I was nothing more than a paycheck. A paycheck not big enough to feed us *and* get her fix. Rarely did a day go by without her telling me how she resented me and how she wished she could keep getting that little check without putting up with me. All that hate that rage, it made me an angry kid hell-bent on proving myself.

Sometimes I think I should have thanked her for being such a shit show of a mother. It turned me into a hungry, driven bastard and that got me a full ride to college because of my wrestling. Going away to college was the best thing that could have happened. I left home, never looking back.

Still, those words haunted me. They chased me in my dreams and drove me to be a brutal fighter. I was good at wrestling, but I wanted to do more. I wanted to be the best, and I wanted something more challenging. Above it all, I wanted to make a living doing what I loved to do, what I was good at, so I trained in every form of fighting I could. I wanted to become the best.

Winning felt good, sure, but the purse we won for a fight felt even better. I blew through the first few big wins I had within weeks of winning them. After that, my real addiction began. It was not about the money or the fame that came with being a winner. It was the glory. The chance to show to the entire world, even if really, I wanted to show my mother, that I was not just good—I was better than most.

Turns out I was just as much of an addict as my mother.

“He won’t mind us training here, Tate?” Mina wonders as she laces up her boots. That timid question and the familiar smell of cigars pulls me from the past. Blinking, I struggle to focus on the small woman before me.

When I do, I almost laugh. Mina wants to train to fight but it is hard to take her seriously. In her pink and purple boots and the pink shorts, she looks a little silly. No one will laugh once I get done with her—I will train her to be the best.

That is not entirely true, I muse to myself. Glancing over her towards the ring, I smile. That title has been claimed by one by Tiffani Frost. They call her the Ice Princess. Cold and cruel in the ring, the gossips claim. I watch for a moment, seeing just why she earned that moniker.

Tiffani's blue eyes stay laser focused on her opponent. Her stoic face gives nothing away. Until out of nowhere, it does. A flush of emotion fills her eyes and I stop what I am doing to watch it. Because no one else seems to see it, but I don't miss it when it hits her: *Rage*. Pure and vitriol.

“Ah, hell. Go hit the bag, Mina,” I say dismissively, drawn to the action going on in the ring.

Brushing past her, I move towards the ring, wanting to get a better look. I came to this gym for two reasons. One, because I love Walt and he will let me train my fighters however I choose. Two, for the chance to meet the icy princess that I cannot take my eyes off.

Some men might think a toned, muscled, fierce woman is not sexy—they could not be more wrong. Watching that badass woman take charge in the ring, putting it all out there, that is sexy as shit. Or maybe to me it is being as I find Tiffani Frost the sexiest woman on the planet.

Five months ago, I saw her fight and I was dazed. Not just because she is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen—but because watching her fight is watching someone do what they were born to do. Like watching an eagle soar across the skies or a shark hunting its prey. She was magic in that ring and when I found out Walt was her trainer—the same man who got me my first big match almost a decade ago—I knew I had to meet her.

It may be my first night back here to train—but it is not my first time here to watch her. You might say I am a bit obsessed with the Ice Princess. Watching her go to work on her partner, I smirk. My dick gets hard just watching her sweat and throw jabs. *Fuck*, she is something else.

Watching her get the other girl in a clutch, it is obvious she has lost her focus but is still in control. Her rage has taken the lead and yet she has not given an inch. Her arm closes tight around her opponent's neck and a quick strike down as the girl sputters sends a gush of blood pouring from her face.

"That is a broken nose," I mutter as I watch the other girl hit the mat after the unmistakable crunch of breaking bone.

Tiffani backs off, backing against the wire fencing, putting her hands up as her head hangs. A pain hits my chest as a wave of sadness washes over me. It was an accident. There was rage in her eyes, and behind her blows, but she never meant to hurt that girl. Now that she has, she is weighed down with guilt and sadness.

All I can think of is going to her corner to console her. I want her to put those pretty eyes on me while I take that guilt and sadness. Her soft voice mutters something to the blonde outside of the ring, clearly her sister who seems to enjoy the spotlight much more than she does. A tiny smile passes between the two before Tiffani pushes to her feet.

"Frost," Walt shouts, startling me from staring at his best fighter. "Get out of my ring. Shower and get gone. Do not come back tomorrow."

"You prick." He is right to correct her mistake, but banning a fighter from training is torture for most of us.

When I got hurt two years ago, I figured I would never get inside a ring again. At first, I did not care. I never made it to the title shot I wanted for one reason or another, but I stayed high on plenty of success. Like a true addict, I was back to training within a few months, even if I knew I would never fight another match.

Watching Tiffani slink across the gym towards the lockers, I start to follow. I want to talk to her. I want to tell her how good she is. How special it feels to watch her talent. I also want to tell her how badly I want to see her shake off that Ice Princess bullshit and get hot for me.

Before I can get too close, Walt shuffles over to her, his plume of cigar smoke following him like always. To my surprise, I watch him soften as they talk, something I have never seen him do before. Whatever they talk about, whatever it is he says to her, I can see by the look on her face that it counts.

“I am sorry.” I will make it up to her,” her voice breaks as Walt turns to check on the other fighter after he consoles her.

Standing back, I watch the sadness in her posture lessen. Not enough. It is still there, and I still want to chase away any guilt or despair. Fighters get hurt. That is just the tradeoff we make when we get in a ring. Anything can happen when two warriors face one another down, including broken bones and battered bodies.

Watching her ass sway in her tiny shorts, I grunt. I respect her as an athlete. I respect her as a woman. And I respect that she is a helluva lot more than a hot piece of ass in spandex. But my dick does not care about respect. All *he* wants is to strip off anything stopping him being buried ten inches deep inside of her.

“Do you always apologize for doing what you were meant to do?”

Tiffani’s lithe body goes still, her retreat to the showers halting. Twisting at the waist, her beautiful face twists in a scowl. Those pretty lips of hers twitch when she sees me, recognition lighting her icy blue eyes. Good, she knows who I am. Even better, she seems wholly unimpressed with who I am. Grinning, I saunter closer, drawn to her like a moth to a flickering flame.

“I was not meant to hurt people.”

“Is that *all* you did there?” I ask, jerking my head towards the ring. Sure, she did hurt that girl. Something set her off. That happens in the ring. If your adversary runs their mouth or gets a cheap shot, you can lose focus. Which we all just witnessed. What we also saw, at least I did, was her get a hold of herself before it got any worse. Because it could have been a lot worse.

Turning to face me, she eyes me with those cold eyes of hers. Only as they stare at me, they look hot as fuck. They trace my entire body slowly, her face flushing pink when they settle briefly below the waist. Yeah, I am still hard, hell even harder with those eyes on me and with me close enough to smell her citrus and flowers scent.

“Get fucked, Woods,” she spits, that sexy pout of hers twitching when I just grin at her.

“Oh, Princess, I can sure dream, can’t I?” I taunt as I move closer, pinning her against the lockers, hiding both of us from the rest of the gym.

“To be honest, I would rather you *not* dream of me,” she says coolly, tipping her head back to aim a glare at me.

Lowering my mouth close to her ear, I tell her the truth. “Too late for that, Frost. Had a few dreams starring yours truly—trust me, you were *no* Ice Princess in my dreams, babe,” I rasp, pressing my lips to her jaw just beneath her ear.

Tiffani might be called an Ice Princess for how she deals with the press or the public. There is nothing cold about her right now. Her breath pants against my throat, her soft body hot as I press mine against it. The soft swell of her tits presses against my chest, her hands at my abdomen. I expect her to push me back, but when she tugs at my shorts, my dick jerks between us.

“Cute. Very cute. Most the girls you talk to that way,” she pulls back, pushing me with a hard shove, “probably cannot break your jaw. I can.”

“Babe, break whatever you want,” I tease, grabbing her hand to press it over my heart. “But be careful with this here. Lot more fragile than my jaw.”

Those intense eyes stare up at me before she gives me a grin, her eyes rolling. Good, she is not immune to my flirting. That means those rumors she hates men are bullshit. I smirk, winking down at her as I pull back, wanting to see her beautiful face when I say what I say next.

“Walt said you cannot come here tomorrow,” I start, watching her eyes narrow. “He never said no training. Meet me here at eight tomorrow, I think I can show you another way to work off that anger, Princess.”

Tiffani crosses her arms, letting out a bored sigh. But she chews the bottom of her lip as she stares up at me. I don't need her to answer me, because I can see the flicker of interest in her eyes. She will be here.

I will get my chance to see how hot this Ice Princess will get for me.

Chapter Three

Tiffani

Romance never seemed real to me.

My sister loves Hallmark movies and dates dozens of different types because she fully believes romance is something tangible. I do not blame her for wanting to believe in love, I just gave up on that shit a long time ago. I never felt a spark of interest in a man before.

Plenty of the fighters at the gym are attractive. I mean, *of course* they are—they work out daily and live on strict diets. The men and women at the gym look like fitness models. Hell, some of them *are* fitness models. I am surrounded by good looking men all the time.

But just one good looking man has made me blush.

When Tate came up to me at the gym to flirt, I was taken aback. He is so handsome, a former star of the circuit who just missed his shot at being a champion. Walt let me know he would be coming to the gym, but I had hoped to never run into him. Because that spark I never felt sure did spark hot the first time I laid eyes on Tate Woods.

None of the other fighters at the gym even come close to his perfection. He is tall, wide, and muscular, with powerful thighs he used to choke his opponents out. His thick arms and half of his toned torso are covered in dark tattoos that show off the defined cut of his beautiful body. If I were a basic bitch, that would be enough to get my panties in a twist.

There is more to that spark than him being prettier than the others. Yes, he is beautiful, even with a slightly crooked nose from his time fighting, and a scar that runs through his eyebrow. Hell, that scar makes him sexier somehow. There is something in his eyes that struck me from the first time I saw him. His eyes have a sadness in them that seems to call to my own.

When I saw him for the first time, I avoided him. He had come to one of my fights, and I had done all I but hide to stay away. Because that spark hit me like a freight train, and I had no idea how to handle it. But him flirting with me, asking me to meet him today, set that spark on fire.

“Do you like him?” Sumner asks as I tie my shoes and heave out a sigh.

“I don’t know him. I am just curious. He was a top-rated fighter, if I can learn something....” I trail off, straightening to glare at her when she giggles and lets out a snort.

“Lie to someone else, Tiff. You are going to meet one of the sexiest men alive, looking that way,” she flails a hand at my workout gear, “with *mascara on*, because you want to talk about fighting? Stop it.”

Flushing, I smooth my hand over the cute shorts and tank set I am wearing. It is a flattering aquamarine color and I love how it makes my skin look. Glancing down at my shoes, my flush heats my face. I am wearing my fancier white sneakers, not running shoes or the battered ones I wear to train in.

I am doing my most to look good for Tate.

“You stop it,” I throw back at her, shaking my head. “He talked about training. And what if he flirted a little—most men do, don’t they?”

Dismissing her snorting laughs, I grab my keys and head out. Later she will want a full rundown of all that happens. I am shocked when I realize I do not want to tell her because I want it for myself. I tell my sister everything. For some reason, I want whatever happens with Tate to be just for me.

Bright sunshine floods the blue skies as I jog down the steps leading from our condo. Last year I won a few big fights and the first thing I did was buy us property. I got the two condos side by side, one for myself and one for Sumner. They are in the nicer suburbs of Silver Shores, surrounded by big sprawling houses and upscale shopping.

Sumner loves it here, but she never forgets we came from nothing. Sure, she shops those fancy stores and wears designer duds, but she also works her ass off as my publicist—since I hate dealing with the press myself—and put together a scholarship for kids wanting to train at Walt’s gym. We give back as often as we can because once upon a time, we had nothing and no one.

Jogging the few blocks to the gym, I wonder what Tate has in mind today. Closer to the gym, my pace slows as I grow anxious. I want to see him again. I even think I want him to flirt again the way he did yesterday. I have no idea how to be coy or cute with a man. I have never tried before.

“Why would a man want to flirt with me?” I mutter to myself as I round the corner, coming up short when the gym comes into view.

Tate leans casually against the brick façade of the building, head back as he watches the clear skies overhead. He is beautiful in the sun, his arms bare and toned, crossed at his broad chest. I swallow hard, trying to back away. This was a bad idea. I am losing focus because of some pretty boy with a bad reputation, and I can’t risk that. If I lose focus, I can lose everything I worked so hard for.

Just as I think I can duck and hide from him, he spots me. A grin overtakes his handsome face, warm and bright, and I stop moving. He comes to me, eating up the distance between us in a few strides. In a tank top and loose shorts—both crisp white and showcasing golden skin—he is the picture of physical perfection.

“There she is,” his voice is rough and warm as he approaches, grinning down at me. “Thought you might not show. I would have just come to find you, don’t think you were getting out of this.”

Narrowing my gaze, I frown. “And what is *this*, exactly, Woods?”

“Me getting you all to myself without anyone at the gym there to distract us.”

Blinking, my heartbeat kicks as I stumble back a step. His eyes darken slightly, and his grin widens. There is heat in that hazel gaze as it slides over me and I feel the look as if he touched me. And then he does touch me. He reaches out, grasping me by the waist to haul me closer to him.

“What do you mean? You want me to yourself?”

“I mean just what you think I mean,” he murmurs as he lowers his mouth close to my ear, the same move he pulled yesterday. It is a move I have no defense for. His lips brush my ear, and his breath is warm, sending a shiver up my spine. “I have had my eye on you for a long time, Princess.”

“Be-because of my fighting?” I stammer, my hands pressing to his chest. His heart thuds and realize he is as excited as I am right now.

“No, babe, *not* for your fighting. You might be the most skilled fighter I have ever seen, but that is not what interests me most.”

“What interests you?” I breathe, my head pulling back so I can see his eyes.

“*You* do, Tiffani. I saw you fight once, and it was beautiful how you use that rage inside of you. *You* are beautiful,” he husks, his knuckles brushing over my cheek gently. “They call you the Ice Princess, but babe...I see fire when I look at you. I see your pain and rage. But I don’t see an Ice Princess.”

Staring up at him, I can barely breathe. All anyone says about me, the media, the fight commentators, and even opponents, is how cold I am. How shut off I am when I fight. But the truth is, I come alive when I am in that ring. I let go in a way I can't anywhere else. I feel free when I am fighting, when I am training, and he saw that. And he thinks it is beautiful.

“Why did you want me to come here today?”

“Because I wanted to see you. And I wanted a chance to show you how to burn the way you do without being in the ring. Will you trust me today?”

Something shimmers in his eyes and my heart flips.

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good girl,” he says with a grin, his praise making my sex pulse between my legs. *Oh man. Am I that girl?*

From the sexy grin on his face and the flash in his eyes, I think he believes I am *that* girl. The type who welcomes praise. At least, his praise. Thinking about him telling me I am a good girl while I do very bad things has me clenching my thighs as wetness floods between my thighs.

Taking my hand, he leads me away from the gym towards Coin Park. It is Silver Shore's own Central Park, with walking paths, beautiful foliage, and a huge fountain at its center. Folks toss coins in to make wishes, and it is one of the oldest spots in town. I tossed a few coins in myself, wishing for wins.

“This park is my favorite place in town,” he tells me as he keeps our fingers linked between us, his big palm warm against my own. I hide my smile as the tingle burns up my arm from the casual touch. It does not feel very casual to be holding hands with the hottest man in town.

“How long have you been in Silver Shores?” I ask, playing with his rough fingers, loving how they feel against my skin.

“After college, Walt found me fighting in Sunset Springs for peanuts and promised me some real fights that paid real money. I owe him for the career I had,” he trails off and I stop, hearing the sadness in his voice.

“I saw you fight a few times,” I admit shyly, refusing to meet his gaze. “You were...you were so good, Tate. I am sorry you...”

“Don’t be sorry, Princess,” he stops me, voice gentle as he turns to face me. “I was pissed when got hurt so I was sorry enough for both of us. Sometimes what we want is just not what is meant for us. I was no longer meant to fight. Now I train fighters, so I am still doing what I love.”

Staring up at him, I am amazed at how honest his words ring. He means it. He was a damn good fighter, a few fights away from a huge title shot. I would be devastated if I never got my real shot. I am on the same road he was to the title and if I lost it...I wonder if I would be as ok with it as he is.

“You don’t miss it?” I ask, pressing closer, drawn to him.

“I do, sure. I do not miss devoting my entire life to it. I sure don’t miss the diets and the drain it put on my body. At one time, it was all I had. It *is not* all *you* have, babe,” his voice drops as his head lowers, his mouth close to mine. I close my eyes as he goes on, his voice hypnotizing. “You have your sister. Your charities. You...you could have me, if you wanted me.”

Heat races through me at his words and before I know it, I am kissing him. I lift on my toes and slam my mouth to his, unable to hold back. I moan when he licks my lips, pushing his tongue into my mouth. He tastes like cinnamon and something sweet. His thick arms close around me, lifting me against him as the kiss goes on.

We pull apart, breathless, and I realize people are watching us. I don't care and I don't want to stop kissing him. It feels too good. I have never felt this close to someone so fast. It ought to scare me, but few things scare me. And if something does scare me, I tend to run right at it.

"God, I wanted to kiss you the first time I saw you. You beat me to it."

"Why didn't you?" I wonder, staring at his lips because I want another taste of them.

"It was at a fight. When you fought Conn. You were... *you are* the first woman to ever intimidate me. Figured I could train my fighters at Walt's and maybe get a chance to see you."

Flushing when he mentions a fight from several months ago, I hide my face in his chest. He sighs and draws me tighter against him, my lungs filling with his soap and sunshine scent. When I tip my head back, his eyes are dark, his gaze intense. I close my eyes and when his mouth covers mine, I press closer, opening my mouth to his stroking tongue.

Kisses before this one were dull. There was never a spark or a sizzle like romance tales said there should be. But now, I am all sparks. I am all sizzle as I kiss him deeper, indulging in the buzz of the spark arcing between the two of us. Kissing him is exciting, it is fire and frenzy, and I don't think I ever want to stop.

"I knew you would burn hot for me," he murmurs against my lips, brushing his tongue across them.

Burn for him sounds right. I am on fire in the cool spring day, pressing against his hard body, wanting to feel his hands on my skin as our kiss goes on and on. But he pulls back, brushing kisses over my face, my jaw, my throat. When he suckles gently beneath my ear, I moan and rub against him shamelessly, my body on fire.

"Come on, Princess, I brought you here to show you something. You trust me, yeah?" His eyes search my face as I nod.

“Yeah. I trust you.” Without hesitation, I follow him off the walking path, into the dense woods surrounding the park. I have no idea where he is leading me, but I don’t care.

Wherever he is leading me, I know I want to go.

Chapter Four

Tate

Gaining Tiffani's trust will take more than a mind-blowing kiss.

As I lead her through the dense growth of wildflowers and conifer shrubs, all I am thinking about is that kiss. How sweet she tasted, how greedily she suckled at my tongue as it stroked hers, how her soft tits pressed against my chest, her hands tangled in my hair. The caveman in me wants to drag her to the ground right here and claim her as mine.

Tiffani started that kiss. There is nothing cold or icy about her. Not when she is with me. We laugh and she cuddles close to me, stealing a few more kisses, as I lead her to my favorite spot here at Coin Park. With me, she is open, warm, and willing to take a chance on whatever I am up to. That means she wants to trust me, she wants to let me in, even if she is not sure why.

"When I first got to Silver Shores, all that water made me anxious. It seemed too vast, you know? I came from a small town cut off from rivers or mountains. After I trained, I would come here to find some quiet."

Coming out of the thick bush and brush, I nod my head at the rock formations at the edge of the park. They edge the entire length of the park on this end before sloping hills fill the horizon. It is a peaceful place where you can smell the ocean and hear the streams or wildlife but be completely alone, surrounded by brush and stone. There is something spiritual about this place, so I wanted to share it with her.

"Oh wow," she breathes as I help her up on a huge boulder. It is flat on top and gives a perfect view of the sprawling park and beyond. "This is so beautiful," she sighs, turning slowly to take it all in.

Watching her smile in the warm sunlight, I nod my head. Yeah, it is beautiful here. She is so beautiful I cannot take my eyes off her. Going to her, I grasp her wrists, drawing them up to loop her arms at my neck. Her creamy skin flushes at her cheeks, her blue eyes shimmering in the sun. I bring her close, wrapping my arms around her waist to pull her against my chest.

“It *is* beautiful here,” I whisper, touching my nose to hers. “I wanted you to see it. I am coming on strong, I know, but I can’t help it. I was mesmerized the first time I saw you fight, Princess. Not because of how good you are. But because you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I did not think something so perfect could exist. But there you were. And here you are.”

Brushing my lips over her jaw, her cheek, her nose, I sigh. Between us the air seems to sizzle even in the cool spring afternoon. Her heart pounds against her chest, matching mine beat for thudding beat. I am addicted to the softness of her skin, the sweet smell of her, and those cherry red lips that taste like honey.

We sway together just slightly in the gentle breeze, heads bent close, mouths almost touching. It feels like finding peace. The quiet after raging a raucous war. I am connected to her in a way I have never been with anyone else, and I have not even gotten inside her yet. And once I do...there will be no stopping what she does to me. No stopping what this will become.

“Is this a...is this *a date*?” she murmurs, brushing her lips across mine as she lets out a little sigh.

My hands slide over her slowly, learning the curves and dips of her as I bring her closer. I nod once, closing my eyes as I drink her down, lost in how perfect she feels, how right this moment is. “It is our *first date*, yes. I will feed you later, as is customary for a date. Then I will walk you home and kiss you goodnight, unless we decide we do not want the night to end,” I whisper, smiling against her cheek as I kiss her there, her peaches and cream scent intoxicating me.

“What else is customary on a date, Woods? Never been on a real one,” she teases with a bounce of a shoulder, fingers combing through my hair.

“Food. Flowers. Maybe we get to second base, if we feel bold enough. I told you I dreamt of you, and I meant it. In my dreams I got to third base with you right here,” I admit, pulling back to grin at her.

Quirking a brow, Tiffani scrunches her nose up, glancing at our surroundings. “Do you bring all the girls you want to bang here?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “No, babe, I do not. This place is just for me—and now for you. Don’t get me wrong, I *want to* bang you,” I tease with a swat at her ass before I grab a handful of it. Her laugh makes my chest swell as I watch her eyes light up. There is no sign of the Ice Princess the rest of the world thinks she is. All I see is fire in her eyes.

“What is...I mean, *what is* third base?” she wonders, tilting her head.

“Can I show you?” I whisper, my hands cupping her jaw as I gaze down at her. Her eyes flicker with fire, with need, and she nods.

Lowering my head, I brush my mouth over hers, savoring her sweetness and the soft moan she gives me. Moving backwards, I lift her up, setting her down on a grassy slope. I angle my body over hers, pressing as close as our clothes allow us. Another sigh falls from her lips when I fit between her thighs, my cock hard and heavy against her.

“Is that...is that for me?” she murmurs, her eyes hot, a striking silvery blue as they gaze up at me.

“Yeah, baby, that is all for you,” I husk, twisting my hips a few times to let her feel what she does to me.

Her head falls back and her mouth parts. It’s sexy as hell seeing her get turned on because I am hard for her. This woman could own me if she wanted to. She has no idea the power she could have over me. The power she does have over me. I have wanted her for months, and now that I am getting a

chance to have her, there will be no going back for either of us.

Dipping my head, I nuzzle the soft curves of her neck, breathing in her sweet scent. My mouth peppers kisses at her velvety skin as my hands grip her hips beneath me. My fingers tug at her shorts, and she gasps against my mouth but lifts her hips, letting me pull them to her thighs. My dick jerks in my own shorts because I can smell how turned on she is.

Moving back until I am knelt between her thighs, I grit my teeth as I see her bare pussy. It's pink and wet, a small strip of blond curls just above the cleft. Ducking close, I nuzzle my nose there, licking at her creaminess as I spread her open with my tongue. God, she tastes better than candy. Better than sweet cream. I suckle at her until she wriggles beneath me.

“Oh, Tate, don't...” Her voice is broken, her hips twisting.

“Stop...” I murmur, smirking against her sticky folds. Her cry of protest lets me know better than to stop.

Gripping her thighs, I tug them on either side of my head as I show her just what third base is. I suck at her clit and her sounds as she circles her hips make my dick so hard it hurts. Her hands come to the back of my head, fisting my hair as she rubs against my tongue greedily. I love it. I love how wild she becomes as I slip my tongue inside her, fucking her with it as I rub at her clit with rough fingers.

“Oh no... yes, yes,” she chants as her thighs tighten around my head. These thighs choke people out on the regular. I would never tap out like her opponents do. I will gladly die between these thighs, mouth full of the sweetest pussy I have ever tasted.

“You taste so good,” I grunt, teeth scraping across her pearled bundle of nerves. “Let me taste you, baby. Come in my mouth. I want to see how sweet you come for me.”

Tiffani arches from the smooth, sloped rock, shouting towards the skies as she comes. I eat up every drop of her. If I thought I was addicted to her before, I am in *real* trouble now.

As her orgasm washes over her, our eyes meet and hold. I am completely hers from this moment, even if she doesn't want to be completely mine.

Gently kissing at her thighs, I fix her shorts, patting gently at her pussy as I put it away. To my surprise, she laughs. A soft, warm, bubble of a laugh that hits me right in the chest. Oh yeah, I am done for. Her eyes swing away before they come back to mine and they are so light, so warm, I cannot look away from her. I was smitten before I even spoke to her and now, I have kissed her, tasted her, I've made her come for me and I am down bad for her.

Something darkens her eyes and I suspect she is putting up a defense. Getting ready to protect herself from me. The way I suspect she has always with anyone before me. It won't be easy to get her to let down her guard, to let me in enough to prove she doesn't need protection from me. Others may have hurt her before, but not only will I never hurt her.

I won't ever let someone else hurt her on my watch.

Chapter Five

Tiffani

Dating is an entirely new fight for me.

For the past two weeks, Tate has taken me on half a dozen dates. First that day in the park. I had never let a man touch me the way he did, but my defenses were weak when it came to him. He made me feel safe, even when I felt myself pulling guard whenever he tried to get too close.

That same night, he took me to dinner just as he had promised. The next morning, I woke up to flowers waiting on my steps—and not just any flowers but dahlias, a bright blue bouquet of the most stunning flowers I had ever seen. Not roses or even lilies, but strange and unique blooms that took my breath away. After training, he was waiting outside for me and agreed to go on the five-mile run I do before I call it a night.

We ran to the pier and he chased me beneath the boardwalk. He made me laugh like no one else, and when we wound up in the sand, it was me who started kissing him. Me who slid my hands beneath his shirt to feel his skin as he stroked my tongue with his, me who rubbed against the thickness in his sweats. For the second time in two days, he made me come so hard I saw stars.

He was addictive, a distraction I had no time for.

And yet, I made time for him anytime he asked me to. When he showed up one night with cheese pizza and beer—both of which I had no business having while I was training—I let him in to my place. He stayed the night, undressing us both before bed. We climbed in my big bed together and made out for hours, but he never pushed for more or tried to rush me.

Just thinking of how good he has been to me, how patient and sweet, it puts me on edge. I do not know what his angle is. Does he want me that way? Or is it just fun, this thing we're doing? Is he trying to throw me off my game? Because if he wants that, he is succeeding in grand style.

"Keep your goddamn chin down. What the hell are you doing?" Walt's irritation vibrates through his words but I can barely hear them over the ringing in my ear.

Greta hits me with a powerful uppercut, and I stumble back. Her smirk should piss me off. Any other time, her goading me would turn me brutal but not today. Because she caught me with that hit after I noticed Tate. He saunters through the gym, going to work with his fighter. Like he has since his first day here, he stops to watch me spar until he decides to start training.

Him watching me distracts me. I wonder how my form is, if I he likes how my hair is pinned back in braids today, and if my soft pink gear looks silly. He smirks as he comes up behind Walt as I spit out some blood. He gives the slightest jerk of his head at me, and I hide my smile behind my gloves, giving my own nod of recognition back.

"Tell her to breathe and count her breaths," his voice is barely a whisper, just loud enough for me to hear. I glance his way and he nods at me, as if he knows I will do what he suggests without hesitation.

And I do. I start taking deep breaths, clearing my head of him, the ring, of Walt, and even Greta. I am not facing her or anyone. I am battling myself. *My will. My focus and determination.* I close my eyes for just a beat and when I open them, the sounds of the gym, the beating of my heart, all of the noise goes quiet. All I can hear is my breathing.

"There you go, Princess," Tate's voice hums and I realize he is closer to the ring.

Nodding at my opponent, we touch gloves and get back to it. I am focused on her movements, on how she circles right then canters back left. I swing out with my left, my weak hand, and catch her in the ribs. Again. And again. Her wheezing breathing makes me smile. I hit her two more times, in the chest, in the gut, and then I back off. No need to hurt her again.

“Good. Good, that is what I want to see,” Walt praises me, but it is Tate I look at when we break for a moment.

He grins at me, winking at me with a proud jerk of his head. I flush and hide another smile behind my gloves. I try to look away. I try to ignore him. I try and fail because my eyes swing back to him, finding him watching me as he talks with his fighter. His hands rub her shoulders, her biceps, and down her forearms.

I am startled to feel jealousy burning through me, hot and heavy. I want to go knock his fighter on her ass and get his hands on me. They belong on me, no one else. I turn away from the sight, hating how sick seeing him touch someone else makes me feel. I am not that girl. I am not a needy, jealous, petty girlfriend. Hell, I am not even a *girlfriend* as far as I know.

“Go run that bad attitude off,” Walt barks at me, jerking his head to the track that makes up the second floor of the gym.

“Yes, sir,” I grumble, knowing full well I earned the run by being so distracted today.

Climbing from the ring, I mutter an apology to Walt which he brushes off as I breeze past him. I head for the stairs, cursing myself for allowing the distractions. I am better than this. Better than flirting with some hot guy who has taken me on some dates and made me orgasm a few times. I am angry as I jog up the stairs, and I figure that is why I don't notice him.

“Don’t blame an off day on you and me, princess,” his voice is right behind me, and I jump, spinning on the stairs to face him.

Tate is there and he shocks me, lifting me to pin me to the wall, forcing my legs to wrap around him. I struggle for a minute, just because I want him to be as frustrated as I am. But soon enough, I am settled against his chest, letting my arms drape over his broad shoulders as I sigh and nod my head.

“I am just not as focused as I ought to be. I can’t.... Tate, this is not a good time...”

Before I can tell him this is no time to start dating, his mouth slams against mine. I forget my argument entirely. I forget why I was frustrated. All I can think of is his mouth on mine, how sweet he tastes, and how I love the heavy press of him against me, pinning me to the wall. My thighs tighten around him, his fingers slipping beneath my top. I gasp when his rough palm cups my breast, his thumb swiping back and forth across the stiff nipple.

“We can’t do this here. We can’t...I cannot date you,” I spit out, my words shaking as he pulls back.

“Too late, babe. We’re dating. You’re mine,” he growls, his hips twisting to rub his hard cock against my sensitive center. “And I am yours.”

Pleasure hits me, spreading from the connection between my legs, through every part of me. Is it from the hard press of him there? Or is it his words that tell me it is too late? There is no going back for either of us.

“Tate...” I moan his name when he bows his head, sucking at my nipple through my top. It soaks the shirt and sends need zipping to my pussy.

“Let me hear you say it,” he grunts, hips twisting again, the long, thick length of him sliding between my thighs and making me so wet I will have to change my bottoms.

“Say what?” I taunt him, excited by the possessive gleam in his dark eyes.

“Say that you know you own me,” he stuns me with the emotion in his voice, “just like I own you, baby.” His eyes flash as they catch mine and I cannot look away. How can I lie when he is looking at me as if my answer means more than any championship belt?

“I...I...” I start to say the words but steps on the stairs startle us.

“Walt said to tell you he better see....oh. Oh, shit, Tif, I didn’t know!”

Blinking down at my sister as she smacks her blue bubblegum, her eyes huge as they stare at the scene she finds me in, I jump back. Not because I think she would tell Walt. Or because Walt would not approve. I move because she has never seen me with a man before. I am more bothered that she might think less of me or see this thing—whatever *this thing* is—as some sort of weakness. Or worse—she could see it as me leaving her alone.

“I am going,” I cut the words out, angry at myself for getting caught this way and angrier that I am making everything worse. “Tell him I do not need him to send someone to babysit me all the fucking time.”

I snap the words and turn, pulling away from Tate and turning my back on my sister. I stomp up the stairs like a petulant child. When I reach the track, I am relieved to find it empty. The last thing I want is more eyes on me. I cannot handle people seeing me this way, seeing me flushing and flirting with a pretty boy who only brings me distraction and distress.

“Hey, Princess,” I stop when I hear Tate’s voice booming after me. “This chat of ours *is not* over.”

I turn back but he is gone and so is Sumner. Running shaking hands over my face, I let out a string of curses. What am I thinking? I am not in a position to just start dating. To get involved with someone. I have too much going on in my life. Too much on the line. I have a fight in five weeks with a purse big enough to retire off. I would never have to step in the ring again.

Taking a moment to stretch, I shake off my nerves. I shake off my troubled thoughts. Rolling my neck, I stretch my quads and bounce on the balls of my feet. Wasting no more time, I hit the track, going at a slow, even pace. Breathing in, breathing out. Closing my eyes, I let my legs pump and my arms work as I round the track again and again.

I stop when my lungs ache and my thighs burn. I have no idea how many miles I ran or for how long. When I peer over the ledge overlooking the gym below, I see just a few lights on. I do not hear jump ropes swinging or punches landing. All I hear is soft jazz, which means just Walt is here.

“Fuck all that run did for my attitude,” I say to myself, not brave enough to tell my trainer, my father figure, that I am in the same funk I was before.

Because as I ran, all I thought about was what Tate had said on the stairs. What he wants me to give him. *Ownership*. Do people really want that from one another? How can I ever give him that sort of power? I have trusted just one man in my life, and he is downstairs, smoking a cigar I beg him to stop smoking and listening to jazz while he drinks too much bourbon.

Tate tells me he wants to be with me. That he *wants* me. He makes promises when we are together, when we are alone, promises I never let men get close enough to make before. Ones I am too afraid he will break. Because if I believe them the way I want to and he breaks them, I am not sure how I will recover from it.

Jogging downstairs, I slink past Walt's office for a quick shower. When I am changed into a hoodie and jeans, I head for his office. I have penance to pay. He knows me better than anyone besides my sister. Even if I thought I was keeping this thing between Tate and I from him, I bet he knew before either of us had a clue.

"About today.... well, about the last few weeks," I start as I step into the dark office, the room full of cherry smelling smoke.

"Know what pisses me off? Today...*he* spoke, and you listened. Ten years I still need to tell you the same thing a few times before you listen. But today he said *one thing* and your posture changed, your breathing changed. And it scared the hell out of me, Tiffani."

Taken aback by his confession, I stare at him for a few moments before I go sit beside him on the battered leather couch in the corner. I sit close and breathe in the leather and smoke, my eyes falling closed as fondness deluges me. We have sat here together and laughed and gotten drunk more times than I can count.

Hearing him sound defeated, the man I consider untouchable, stuns me. I take the bourbon from him to down a good swig, relishing the burn as it floods my system. I don't drink when I train—hell, I rarely drink these days at all after a few benders proved I could not handle my liquor.

But tonight, I do not care about training or fights or purses. I don't care about my addict parents who drove us to the streets or whether I made up for all they cost Sumner. Tonight, I just care about sitting with a cigar chomping old man who gave me the world without strings attached. I care that for one moment of one day, he thought someone else counted more than he does.

"Nothing to fear Walt. Just a momentary distraction. I am still focused. Still working for the win. Nothing gets in the way of winning."

Beside me, he snorts and snatches the bottle back. But he gives me a nod as he pours himself two fingers and downs it quickly. I down another huge swallow of the amber liquid, loving how light it makes my body feel. After a few drinks we start talking strategy for the coming fight. Somehow that becomes us talking about the best fights ever and then we're giggling at each other's grandiose tales.

"Go home," he mutters between loud belly laughs, "Let me call a cab."

"No, no, you go to bed old man, I can get myself home. No one will mug *The Ice Princess*."

Making a face at the stupid name, I tuck him in on the battered couch, pulling his cigar from his mouth with a shuddering cringe. He pops open one eye to glare at me but he's half asleep. I laugh and bend to press a fond kiss to his forehead, brushing his gray mop of hair off his forehead.

"Night Walt," I whisper, smiling down at him fondly.

Outside in the cool night, I am hit with a wave of dizziness that almost puts me on my ass. I sit down on the bench outside the gym to catch my breath. Sadness overwhelms me the longer I sit there in the dark. I feel so alone. All I want is to see Tate and feel the way I feel when he's with me. When he pays attention to me and shows me affection I now crave.

Pulling out my phone, I make a bad decision. I call up the distraction I just promised Walt *was not* a distraction.

"Hell..oo?"

"Tiffani? Is that you baby?" his voice is deep and warm, and I smile, curling up on the bench.

"I like when you call me that. I am *that girl*. I thought I wasn't but I am."

"What girl *are* you, Princess?" he hums, sounding as if he is smiling.

“A jealous girlfriend,” I answer, tears stinging my eyes as I remember him touching that other fighter today. “*Am I your girlfriend?*”

“Oh, baby, you’re drunk? Hell yes, you’re mine, so I’m coming to get you.”

“At the gym. I am drunk. I miss you,” my voice breaks, and I swipe angry hands at my tears. “I didn’t know you were my boyfriend.”

“Well, I am. Wait there, I will be there in five minutes.”

“I will wait for you, boyfriend.”

“That’s my good girl.”

Oh yes, I *am definitely* that girl.

Chapter Six

Tate

“I will wait for you, boyfriend.”

I do not think sweeter words have ever been spoken. Tiffani is mine and now that we've said it at last, there is no going back for us. I figured she was unsure what we were, but I knew from the start. I was hers the day I set sights on her and there was never any other option for me. I was crazy about her before I ever knew her. Now that I do know her, I am certified.

Her calling me up drunk was the last thing I expected. Earlier we had a little unfinished business that I was not about to leave unfinished. Walt got pissed when she listened to me about her breathing. He punished her for it which I plan to have a chat with him about.

Me being there is new for her, she was distracted. He cannot punish her for being human. For having feelings for me. Which we all know—her sister Sumner included—she does. After Sumner caught us on the stairs in a compromising position, she and I had a chat. A very enlightening one.

Pulling up in front of the gym, I let out a string of curses. My girl sits at the bench beneath the glowing neon sign, singing loudly as she plays some impressive air guitar. True she could knock out anyone who tried to hurt her, but I promised myself I would never let her get hurt again.

“Come on, babe,” I call as I approach her, bending down so she sees me enjoying her little show. “You are beautiful even when you are sauced. Do you always get drunk and put on a concert? Or is this just for my benefit?”

“Just for you, boyfriend. No, I am mad at you,” her voice booms, and she shoots to her feet, indignant. “You put your hands all over that fighter. You distract me. I think you should train somewhere else. I don’t want you here,” her words tremble, as she falls against me, rubbing her face in my chest.

“Can’t do that, baby,” I say gently, brushing her hair back. “There is no way I could train somewhere else with you here. I couldn’t stand it. Do you want me somewhere else where you can’t see me all day?”

“No! You can’t go somewhere else. I miss you when you’re right there.”

Smiling in satisfaction, I nod my head, kissing her brow gently. I draw her close and hold her tight, noting how cold she is. We sway there under the neon light before I sigh and pull back, walking her to my car. Loading her inside, I kiss her forehead again. Humming, she tips her head back, tapping at her mouth to ask for a kiss.

“Never need to ask me twice,” I tell her with a grin, kissing her softly.

Tiffani moans and opens her mouth, licking at mine hungrily. I almost get lost in her before I remember she is drunk. I can taste the bourbon on her tongue. I pull back, my heart aching when I see her pout. I kiss her once more before I close the door, catching my breath as I round the front of the car.

When I slide behind the wheel, she is turned towards me, head on the head rest, eyes heavy. Grasping her hand, I bring it to my lips to brush a kiss over her knuckles.

“Rest, baby, I am here.”

Sighing heavily, as if relieved I am here, she smiles and closes her eyes. I consider taking her to my place but think better of it. We’ve been to her place a few times since we started seeing one another so I want her to be somewhere she feels comfortable.

“You’re my boyfriend?” she mumbles as I pull from the curb and head for her place.

Chuckling because she seems so stunned by this revelation, I nod. “Yeah, Princess, you can call me that. I happen to think it’s a bit more serious than that, but we’ll continue this chat when you’re good and sober.”

Another sigh fills the space between us, but she relents. Before we get to her place, she passes out. Knowing the code for her garage, I pull in because I know she never locks the door to the house. Mostly because she is forgetful but also because, who would be dumb enough to break into the Ice Princess’ place and risk getting beat by her?

Once I let us inside, I head for the stairs leading to her bedroom. I’ve spent a few nights here with her, but we’ve behaved ourselves. That is just to say I haven’t torn her clothes off and lost myself inside her the way I want to. I know she is new to dating, new to trusting a man, new to letting someone in her life. We will get there when we need to get there.

In the meantime, I have had the fortitude of a goddamn saint. My girl is clingy as hell, loves making out, and lets me eat her sweetness whenever I want. Which is often. She also won’t let me sleep in more than boxers—she is not just clingy, she is handsy too, but I would never complain about her wanting to get her hands on me.

“Take my clothes off,” she murmurs as I lay her down, my knee on the bed as I peel off her sneakers. She would kick my ass if she knew I left both our shoes on. Tiffani has a touch of compulsive behavior. No shoes past the doors, her closet is color coordinated, and her cabinets and fridge stay stocked and faced better than Whole Foods.

“Don’t tell me what to do babe,” I tease gently, kissing the bottom of each foot as I rub them gently.

“Please,” her voice breaks as she sits up, staring up at me with something shimmering in her eyes. “I have never been anyone’s girlfriend. Show me how, Tate. Please, I want to be a good girlfriend.”

Stunned, I drop her leg as she crawls to the edge of the bed. Winding her arms at my chest, she lifts herself with her powerful thighs, pulling me to her. I brace myself with my fists at her hips as we fall back together. Her mouth is on mine, her bourbon sweet tongue licking at my mouth. With a low moan, she tugs at my lip, whispering a soft plea that puts me on my knees.

“Baby, you know just how be a good girl for me,” I whisper against her mouth, pulling at her clothes, ripping her tiny shorts off.

Tiffani falls back, her hands in my hair, her chest rising and falling as she breathes heavily. My lips press to her hip, her taut stomach, and her ribs where an intricate tattoo of flowers with her and her sisters’ name entwined. I push at her sports bra, glancing up to watch her pert tits bounce. I love her tits, so I bury my face there, breathing in her clean soap and soft strawberry scent in. Turning my head, ear pressed over her pounding heart, I flick my tongue at her nipple, and she cries out, her thighs closing tight at my ribs.

I suck at her left nipple, my hand moving between her thighs. I push past her panties, grunting when I find her soaked. I rub her pussy open, smiling smugly when she whimpers my name as her hips lift to my touch. I want to pound my cock into her and leave no doubt she belongs to me, but all I can do with her drunk is let her get off.

“No, no,” she protests, pushing at my chest, “I don’t want to *play*. I don’t want touches or kisses. *I want you*. I want you inside me, I want...you say I belong to you so prove it.”

Pulling back, I gaze down at her in the darkness, shocked by the anguish in her voice. Tears slip down her cheeks as she stares up at me, panting as she lies there bare and beautiful. Drawing her hands to my chest, I move them both over my thundering heart. Lowering close so she cannot miss a word I say, I take a breath before I speak.

“Fucking you won’t prove you belong to me baby. Earlier tonight, you listening to me over a man you adore, you getting jealous of another woman when I never take my eyes off you, and you calling me when you needed someone, that proves it. Do you feel my heart now,” I rasp, watching her eyes narrow then go wide. A slow nod makes my heart skip. “It beats for you and you alone. I don’t need to fuck you to know you own me. I just know because this is what you do to me, without me touching you, without me eating your pussy, without me getting ten inches deep inside you,” my words rush out and she wriggles beneath me, rubbing herself against my hard cock.

“But you will.... we will...” she trails off as I rock my hips, letting her feel how big and thick I am because of her.

“Yeah, baby, we will. Tomorrow and every single day after if you want. Ten times a fucking day if you can take it. I want you,” I pant the words against her mouth because her soft, bare body keeps rubbing against mine. “Want you so bad I ache with it. We won’t do it with you drunk. Not the first time—I want you to remember each slide of my cock inside you, how perfect your pussy fits me, how I bottom out I want to get so deep I get lost, how hard I pound against you because I know you can take it.”

“Tate,” she moans, her tits crushed against my chest, hips rocking so she can rub her wet pussy against my hard shaft. Her eyes go wide, her mouth pops open, and she arches against me. “I’m....I’m coming!”

Grinning, I take her mouth in a hungry kiss, feeling her shake as she comes for me. Her nails score down my bare back and I love the pain as she whimpers into our kiss. Her hips still twist as she chases the high we get together as my own orgasm building. I pull back just enough to put some space between us.

“Give me one more,” I purr, pulling my thick shaft out to pump it a few times, “show me you need me as badly as I need you. Don’t you see it, baby? God, don’t you see how bad I need you? How much I want you...” I grunt as I trail off, pumping my cock as it sits tucked between her thighs, rubbing at her slick cunt.

“Yes, yes,” she answers, her hands palming her tits, “I do need you. I do, Tate. God, I need you so bad,” her voice breaks as I rub the head of my swollen shaft against her clit.

“That’s my good girl,” I hum softly, knowing how she loves praise. She loves to be a good girl for me. I fucking love how it is just for me. No one else has ever seen this side of her—and no one else ever fucking will.

Pumping a few more times, I jerk thick, hot ropes of cum on her pussy, loving the sight of my mark on her skin. I almost blow again when she reaches down, rubbing it over her lips and shoving some inside her. It takes every ounce of willpower in me not to shove right inside that tight little cunt.

I meant what I said before—I do not need to fuck her to own her.

We cling to one another, skin to skin, kissing and touching one another in the aftermath of our shared pleasure. I leave her just long enough to wash up. When I come back with a washcloth, she pouts that I am washing the cum off her and I cannot help but laugh.

God, I think I am in love with this woman. “Trust me baby, there will be a hell of a lot more of that. Going to mark this entire body as mine.”

Tiffani laughs and pulls me down atop her, rolling me in an expert wrestling move to pin me beneath her. Her thighs pin my arms down and with just the right tilt of my head, I'd have a mouth full of her pussy. Instead, I flip us again, pinning her soft little body so I can take her mouth in a kiss.

“Stop tempting the beast, baby,” I warn her, swatting her ass gently.

“That is what I do, lover,” she hums, eyes closed, head tilted back, her body lax from the release. “I tempt the beasts. And then I beat them. How else would we survive?”

Before I have time to process what she said, she passes out. I draw her closer, pulling the comforter up over us both. Sleep doesn't come for hours. I lay there holding her and wondering what she meant. What demons she has not yet shared with me, and who *we* could be.

Dawn starts to break before my thoughts stop racing. Before I can let myself give up the fear that there is someone else. It doesn't matter if there is. I told her tonight and I will tell her again tomorrow.

Tiffani does not have to fight her beasts alone—not now that I am here.

Chapter Seven

Tiffani

Tate Woods is the most delicious man I have ever laid eyes on.

He might in fact be the most delicious man who ever existed. I cannot be sure, I have not seen them all. And I have seen none of them naked. I smile against his skin as I walk my fingers up and down the defined muscles of his chest and abdomen, inching closer to the one-eyed monster looking at me.

Last night I wanted us to get it over with. To sleep together so I knew what it was like. Perhaps to feel more secure about that this thing. He was right to refuse me. Last night I wanted to sleep with him to prove something, to gain something over him.

Now I want to sleep with him because I *ache* for him.

“Don’t just look at him,” Tate’s sleepy voice rumbles, startling me, “tell him good morning.”

Smirking, I twist my head to glance up at him. His light eyes are beautiful in the morning light as they stare down at me. And as I stare back, I see it. The hunger. The heat. It stirs there in his eyes as they watch me, and I realize that look has always been there. From the moment he came up to flirt with me at the gym.

Tate has meant everything he has said—he *wants me*.

Not just the MMA’s Ice Princess. Not just some dumb blonde with a nice rack and sweet ass. What can I say—I know my strengths. He does not want me just to be tied to the new hot fighter on the circuit. Tate is not looking to gain something from me by being with me. He just wants *me*.

Feeling wanted, desired, it makes me feel so powerful I forget all my inhibitions.

Our eyes hold as I bend down, licking the tip of his hardness. He hisses out a breath and nods his head, encouraging me. I close my eyes and repeat the lick, this time licking up his entire shaft. His hands fist at his sides. His thighs tense. As I lick lower, swirling my tongue, his hand comes to the back of my head. I take his guidance, lifting my head enough to close my mouth around him.

“That’s it,” he hums, his voice sexy and hot as I take him in my mouth. “That’s a good girl. Ah, fuck your mouth is hot,” he grunts, his hand tangling in my hair. “Just like that, baby. That’s *so good*. Fuck you look beautiful with that pretty mouth wrapped around my cock.”

His filthy words do nothing but turn me on. I ache between my thighs, which are damp from my need. Watching him lose the control he always seems to have of himself is a turn on. I swirl my tongue as if savoring an ice cream and his eyes roll back. As I start to bob my head, he groans, his hand gripping my hair tighter to push and pull me on his thick length.

“Ahh, hell baby,” his voice growls when I try to take him even deeper, my hand joining in to circle what I can’t take inside my mouth. “Don’t you make me come. I want to come inside you the first time I fuck you,” he tells me, making my pussy throb as if it wants the same thing.

He pulls me off him with a pop, sitting up to kiss me hard. I open my mouth to his seeking tongue, moaning as his hands slide down to my backside, lifting me over him. He tears his mouth away, spreading kisses down my throat, across my collarbone, then down. I gasp when his mouth closes around a nipple as his hand cups my other breast.

It is sensation overload as he suckles at my sensitive nipple, rubbing at the other with his hand. He is thick and hard between my legs, my bare sex rubbing against him. I like how it feels so I rub against it greedily, knowing he won't deny me. Knowing he will let me do whatever feels good.

"That's it," his voice rasps against my breast, his eyes shooting up to meet mine. "Take what you want, baby. You want to make yourself come? Rub that needy little kitty on my big cock. Need to get that pretty pussy ready to take me, don't we? Because I can't promise to be gentle. But you don't need it gentle, do you baby? I can be rough with my good girl, can't I?"

"Yessss," I moan as my head falls back, his dirty talk and the press of him between my thighs making me shudder.

"That's my girl," he grunts, his hands digging into my skin to help me rock against his cock.

I am greedy for my orgasm. It sizzles between my thighs, shattering through me like a firecracker waiting to go off. I am so slick I glide against him with a delicious slide before the tip of his swollen cock hits my clit and I see stars behind my eyes.

"Tate," I shout, clutching the back of his neck as I come hard, "Oh my god.... I love it.... it's.... oh...oh no! *Yes!*" I scream as he sits up, lifts me up before he slams me down on his waiting cock.

"Ah, fuck. Couldn't wait another second to get inside you. You run this, baby, take me how you want. I want to sit back and watch you fuck me."

Tate grins up at me with the most delicious grin I have ever seen. I nod my head as I plant my hands on his chest. I have never been with a man this way. Years of fighting means I've had more than a busted lip. His hips lift as he goes as deep as he can, but there is no pain, just the sweet sensation of being filled.

“It’s...its...Tate, I can’t,” I mumble, my head falling forward, my vision blurry as I become overwhelmed with emotion.

Once I look into his eyes, the woman I was before this moment, whoever I was without him, she is gone. I am more than just his, but right now, all I care about is being his. And him being mine. He asked me for ownership once and I thought that sounded impossible. Now I know it’s not.

“Can’t does not exist between us. Fuck me,” he murmurs as he grasps my ass in his hands, smacking each cheek hard.

The sting burns so I start to move. I twist my hips, lifting and dropping on him. His thumb presses to my clit. As if a switch has been hit, I move faster, taking him inside me again and again. I am bouncing now, my thighs doing most the work as I fuck him, any hesitance or timidness gone.

“That’s it, fuck, that’s my good girl,” he hisses, watching me as I fuck him harder, faster, panting for breath as I take him deeper and deeper. “Good girl, fuck me like you own me. Because you know you do. Always have, and you always fucking will. Jesus you’re so beautiful, baby. Come on my cock like my good little girl. Soak my dick with your cum, I want to drown in it.”

Mumbling nonsense, I shudder as the powerful orgasm overwhelms me, my thighs shaking before they give out. I collapse against him, whimpering his name as wave after wave of pleasure floods me. I am drowning but it’s the sweetest death. His mouth is at my ear, talking gently, a hand at the back of my head. But his words are not sweet or gentle at all.

“Christ, that cunt is choking me. My greedy fucking girl. Want every single drop of me, don’t you baby? Don’t worry, it’s all for you, I promise.”

Bracing one arm over my back, he pins me to his chest as he takes over. Powerful thrusts, rhythmic and deep, shake the entire bed. I pant into his neck, licking the path of his pulse, tasting his saltiness. Clawing at his chest, I cry out as he pounds up into me faster, harder, the room echoing with the sounds we're making together.

“Ah hell, I'm going to come,” he mutters, sounding displeased. “I can't hold back, baby. I can't... *fuck*, I'm coming inside you. There won't ever be anything between us. I'm filling this little cunt up every chance I get.”

A thrill shoots up my spine as he rolls us over to pin me beneath him. I never gave much thought to condoms or birth control when this thing started. I guess neither of us cared. He knows I have never been with a man, and he told me it's been a few years for him. Fighters who come to Walt's Gym get tested every five months. Him talking about finishing inside me should make me panic—I do have a fight in a few weeks—but it doesn't. Not even close.

“Yes. Come inside me,” I pant, my thighs closing tight around his waist. “Baby, come inside me, I want to feel it. I want it inside me, I want it to make me sticky,” I ramble, so turned on by him coming inside me that a fresh orgasm crests inside me.

“That's my good girl,” he hums against my lips as he rolls his forehead against mine. “Greedy to get my cum deep inside you?”

00. Don't worry baby, I will fill you up.”

My skin feels as if it is sizzling beneath him as he thrusts again and again. I grip his shoulders, my nails piercing his skin, as the loud, crude sounds of his body meeting mine fill the room. I chant his name, on the precipice of another explosive climax. He slams deep once more, his mouth brushing against mine as he whispers my name almost like uttering a prayer.

“God, Tiffani....baby it’s so good,” he mutters before he goes still, a soft, low growl tearing from his mouth as he comes.

I come again, set off by the feeling of him pulsing inside me. I start to close my eyes I am so overwhelmed, but I don’t. I keep them open, cradling his face in my hands as our eyes stay locked. It is the most intense moment I have ever shared with someone.

When he crushes his mouth to mine, whispering my name, my chest explodes with emotions. I am in so deep. Maybe too deep. It is new and scary to feel what this man makes me feel. I am not someone who runs from things that scare me. I always run at them instead.

We lie there together for a long time, the sunshine pouring in above us warming our skin. He presses kisses over my face, my throat, and my collar. As he does, he tells me how sweet I smell, how pretty I am in the sunlight, and how good I feel against him. I am a purring kitten by the time he pulls away.

“Wait here. I will get a bath going for us. I told you I have dreamt about you, yes,” he teases, and I nod, laughing. “Definitely had dreams about that body wet and soapy in a bath with me.” Winking at me, he smacks my ass hard, but I don’t mind the sting.

I lie there until he comes back and scoops me up, the two of us laughing as he carries me to the tub. He climbs in and brings me down to sit with my back to his chest, our legs tangled together. I can’t help but smile when I see he dumped in some of my bubble bath, something I rarely take time to use.

We sit in the warm water, talking about fights and our favorite pastas. He promises to make me his famous carbonara and I promise to eat it. When we talk about my coming fight, he mentions how I upset Walt the other day.

“He is my family,” I tell him gently, “my sister and Walt is all I had. I did everything...I do everything I do for them. To make him proud, to take care of my sister. I stopped *wanting* to fight a long time ago.”

As if he knows how hard that was for me to admit, his thick arms tighten around me. I lie my head back on his shoulder as I start to consider my choices. For a long time, I made most of my choice for others. Running away, becoming a thief, and even starting to fight, I did to take care of my sister. I kept fighting because I had a lot of anger, and I didn't want to take it out on my sister or Walt. I continue to fight because it makes Walt proud.

For the first time in my life, I don't care about anyone else.

Right now, all I care about is what I want. And I want to be with Tate. I want the things he has been promising me for weeks. I want to go to bed with him and wake up still wrapped up in his arms. I want to laugh with him and eat his pasta carbonara. All I want to do is be selfish for once and take the thing I want most.

Now it's not a belt or a purse I can retire off of that I want most.

“Would you care if I never fought again?” I whisper the words, closing my eyes tight as I wait for his answer.

“Not in the slightest,” he murmurs gently at my ear, “Whatever you want, baby that is what I want for you. Fight until you turn fifty or quit tomorrow. Doesn't change a thing about us. I plan to be here either way.”

Hearing him make another promise I am terrified could be broken, it seals the deal for me. I still have a big fight ahead of me, but it could be my last one. With him in my life, with my sister taken care of, and with Walt proud of me, maybe all my fighting can be over.

For the first time I don't care about winning or losing—because right now it feels as if maybe I already won.

Chapter Eight

Tate

My girl has a bad temper and I know better than to tempt it.

The very first day I was at Walt's gym I watched her bust a woman's nose for talking trash to her little sister. Days later, she was furious when she saw me touching my fighter during warmups. While I love that she feels things the way she does, I hate to ever see her upset.

And this...*this* is going to piss her off like nothing I have seen yet.

"Care to fucking explain?" Walt's raspy voice and cloud of smoke assault me the moment I step foot in the gym.

Behind him, Sumner stands with the posture of a guard. Brows drawn, arms crossed, lips twisted up. There is disgust in her eyes and impatience in the air. Protecting her sister, I am sure. And I hate that they think they need to protect her from me.

I am in love with her, it would gut me to ever hurt her.

"Not that I need to explain to either of you," I start, seeing immediately that is the wrong way to start this conversation. "Because you both matter to her, I will tell you anything you want to know."

Walt waves the newspaper in my face again and I sigh. Of course, this photo surfaces now, when things could not be better in my life. I take the paper, sighing as I see what has them both so upset. It would have me upset and asking the same question if roles were reversed.

"You some sort of a plant? You come here to mess with our girls' head just to get the upper fucking hand?" Walt spits

this all at me with a plume of smoke as he chomps on his cigar.

He is right to ask. These photos, taken almost two years ago, make me seem like a bad guy. There I am in bright Technicolor with the very woman Walt is training my girl to beat in a few short weeks. I would not call Paige Turner her arch nemesis, but for all intents and purposes, she is the enemy.

If she is an enemy of Tiffani's, that makes her an enemy of mine.

"Looking awful cozy there, asshole," Sumner barks, never one to mince words.

"Well, we would since we were both there for our sponsors. What that photo does not show is how upset that spoiled brat was that I had never heard of her. Or how the sponsor demanded we make nice for the cameras. It was part of my job, the same way it is part of her job sometimes."

"Just seems awful coincidental that you show up here, put in work to get her to notice you when she never fucking notices anyone else, somehow get her to listen to you over her trainer of ten years, and we see this two weeks before she is going to face this woman?"

"Because someone knows about us dating," I answer Sumner, narrowing a glare at her. "Someone found out so they figured they could use my past to hurt her somehow. Who would want to hurt her?"

"Do you want to hurt Tiffani?" Sumner asks in an accusatory tone.

"Who wants to hurt me?" Tiffani's laughing voice should not fill me with dread. Her sister still holds the offending newspaper showing me posed beside Tiffani's next opponent.

"Trying to figure that out," Walt grumbles, puffing hard at his cigar. We talked about me being a distraction, about him wondering what my intent was, so I figured we had worked this out. I guess I figured it wrong.

“What the hell is that?” Tiffani wonders, reaching past me to snatch the tabloid out of her sister’s hand.

There have been times in my life when things have slowed down. My very first win in the octagon. My very first loss. Signing an endorsement deal that would pay me enough to never fight again. Getting hurt during a fight and knowing it was bad enough I would never get to fight again.

This moment feels frozen in time as her eyes swing to mine. Her eyes flick back to the photo she clutches in her hands. My heart stops when I see confusion turn to pain in her icy blue eyes. I reach for the paper, but she snatches it back, stumbling backwards to get away from me.

“You...you know her? Y-you know Paige? How...how do you know her? Why have you never told me? Are you... you fucking friends with my enemy? Because you know this one, it’s not just another fight. It was never just another fight. The title is on the line. Paige has talked shit about me, about my sister, about this gym. It was always more than a fight with us.”

“That photo is not recent,” I start, hands up as I approach her slowly. “We were both sponsored by....” my words trail off as a wail echoes off the walls of the gym. It takes me a moment to realize it came from Tiffani.

“Bullshit. You knew her before me. You came here for me, you said it yourself a dozen times. You did not come here to train at Walt’s. For me. You dirty rotten sonofabitch. You came here for me! To distract me! To get me off my game so your little *princess* had a shot,” her voice gets louder and louder as she storms towards me, backing me against the door. A few fighters watch us, but I don’t give a shit about the show we’re putting on for them. All I care about is setting things right. I cannot let her think this was a ploy.

“Oh, baby, no. *You* are my Princess,” I whisper, my head swimming that she could ever doubt me. That she could so quickly believe I could ever hurt her. “I came here for you, yes. I wanted you the minute I laid eyes on you, Tiffani. I go

after what I want—and all I have wanted for over a year was you,” my voice is calm, patient, but I am anything but. I am more afraid than the night my fibula shattered and ended my career.

“How could I ever trust you? You lied to me Tate! I told you...you were the one person who knew I wanted to be done. That I was going to be done.”

Ignoring the obvious shock the others show at her admission, I yank the paper from her hands to ball it up and toss it in the trash. Because that is all that is on that front page—some trash. “I never lied to you. This was *always* about you and me. Hurting you would wreck me. Princess...I love you.”

An eerie quiet fills the gym and my words seem to echo back at me.

“Get out. Get out of here,” Tiffani shouts, making all of us jump. “Go and do not come back. All your bullshit did was piss me off—something she will find out when I take the title. Go tell her whatever the hell you want to, Tate. Start by letting her know you fucking failed.”

Tiffani shoves me aside and pushes out the door, ignoring calls from all three of us. Muttering a string of curses, I chase after her, slowing to a stop as I watch her climb into a taxi. Turning to rush back to my truck, I let out a fresh tangent of expletives when I see her sister beat me to it.

“Tiffani won’t appreciate this, but I figure you deserve it. Better call AA sweetheart,” her voice sings the words as if she didn’t just maliciously slash all four of my tires, rendering my truck useless.

“Jesus, Sumner what the hell? I need to go after her. I am not going away because of a photo or some flat tires.”

“Oh, no? So, prove it, Tate,” she taunts me, a quick flick of her wrist closing her pink knife. “My sister is worth a fight. Tiffani has fought her entire life. Fought our parents, fought me, and fought for us. No one has ever fought for her, not even me. I got too comfortable letting her put in all the work. I love

her enough to keep you the fuck away if I think you won't put the work in for her."

"I came here for her, Sumner. To be near her, so I could get the nerve to talk to her. I am not nearly as slick as this whole thing makes me seem. I saw her fight a year ago and I have been completely enchanted by her ever since. Have you all noticed how little attention I pay to my own fighter? When I am here, I watch her. Watch to be sure she is training hard for this fight but also giving herself grace. Because you heard her—she does not want to fight anymore. If that is what she wants, then I want her to be able to give it up."

Sumner crosses her arms as she stands glaring at me, as if considering my words. We never had the type of talk I had with Walt. The one where I profess how crazy I am about her favorite person. How hurting her would be the same as hurting myself. It would be worse, in fact.

"Sumner, I love her. I am in love with her. Tiffani is it for me. This is just a roadblock put in our way by someone who wants to hurt her. Who would do this to her? Who would want to hurt her badly enough to do something so personal?"

"When I saw that photo, I wondered the same thing." She sighs, her angry posture relenting as she falls back against my truck. "It seemed too personal you know? Not just the trash talking they do in the ring—which my sister *never* does. I do all that for her," she says with a chuckle.

"Well, we need to figure it out. Who knows what they might do to hurt her before the fight. First, I have to get four new tires, you little jerk," I taunt her, smiling when she flushes.

"Yeah, I went a little far, I guess. What can I say, I hate seeing her hurt. Our parents they.... man, they did a number on both of us, but Tiffani got the worst. And taking care of me was a burden too. Walt is...he is the closest thing we know to a father, but he expects so much from her. I was not that surprised to hear her say she wanted this to be her last fight."

Nodding, I glance up at the slowly darkening skies. “You were never a burden. Your sister loved taking care of you—but you don’t need her the way you once did. Walt is as proud of her as a father could ever get. All that anger she felt for so long has faded. There’s no reason for her to fight now.”

“Well, there *was* no reason,” Sumner corrects me with a shove. “My sister thinks you did her dirty. I guess we did too. We just...she might be the fighter, but we protect her, Tate. People call her the Ice Princess. We both know she is warm and bright. That is what she is to them, not us.”

Sighing with her, I nod once again. There is nothing cold about my girl. Except those eyes she aimed at me earlier. How could she ever think this was fake? How could she ever doubt how I feel about her?

For months I have been all about her. If I am not at the gym watching her train—and all but ignoring my own fighter—I am with her. At her place where we eat together and watch movies while we talk about anything but fighting.

We talk about taking road trips together through the Appalachian Mountains where we can camp for a week. I promised to take her to Canada where I toured on a circuit once. She admitted she wanted a puppy because she had never had a pet. What we talked about most was life after the ring.

Whatever it takes, I will show Tiffani I meant every promise I made her—chiefly that she doesn’t have to fight to be worth something.

Two hours later, and a call to AA just as Sumner teased, my truck is on four brand new tires. I promise not to hold a grudge against my girl’s favorite sister. More importantly, I promise to fix things with Tiffani. That’s more for myself than my future sister-in-law, but I let her hear it, nonetheless.

Pulling up in front of Tiffani’s condo, I am the most nervous I have ever been. Losing her would be worse than losing a title shot. Worse than losing the fighting career I

loved. Nothing and no one has meant to me what she does. Whatever it takes to set things right, I will do it.

Noticing the light is on in her garage, I let out a heavy sigh. Since she does not drive or even own a car, she converted the garage to a small gym with a ring. That means since she stormed out earlier, she has been here, likely working herself too hard out of anger and frustration.

Before I even punch in the code, I hear her. The bounce of her feet on the mat, her breathing pattern, the distinctive thud of her hitting a heavy bag. I take a deep breath to brace myself for her wrath as the garage door opens.

“Go away. I am not talking about him or her tonight,” her voice shouts sharply as I duck beneath the door then hit the button to shut it again.

“Well, I can do all the talking, Princess,” I call back as I watch her land a spin kick on the bag, sending it swinging.

Tiffani turns at the waist, sending a scathing look my way. A lesser man might be scared off by the coldness in those pretty eyes, but not me. That coldness is for her protection. She has had to shut herself off for so long just to survive, she wears that coolness like a cloak. A shroud to chase off people not willing to work to get past it.

Like I said to her sister, I will work for this, I will work for her. Because she is worth it and I want her to know that.

“We can step in the ring so you can get a few shots off on me, babe,” I tell her as I get close enough to circle her and the bag. I grasp the swing bag, as I stare down at her to gauge how upset she is. Her mouth twitches just enough to give me hope. Jerking her head towards the ring, she nods.

Well, I guess I am going toe-to-toe with the Ice Princess.

Chapter Nine

Tiffani

Anger has consumed me for most of my life.

First it was anger at my parents for never being there, for never loving us when that was all we wanted. Then I was angry at the world for leaving us to struggle, forcing us to steal and dodge the law to survive. For a long time, I held that anger inside of me, letting it burn in my gut as a driving flame that kept me fighting, kept me winning, and kept me safe.

Now after letting someone else in my life, I realize all that anger was driven by fear. Fear of going hungry, fear of being homeless, fear of my sister getting hurt, fear of letting Walt down...all of it has forced me to stay angry. To stay ice cold and cut off from my own emotions.

Tate makes me feel so much I can no longer shut it off.

“Get on some gear,” I bark at him now as I climb into the small ring set up in my garage.

Earlier tonight I told him to get lost and stay lost. To stay out of the gym so he could go back to his princess. Even when I said it, I knew it was wrong. He is the first man I ever trusted so deeply and seeing him with another woman—a woman whose face I plan to break—hit me hard.

After I stormed out, I went for a drink. I was two shots of tequila in when I thought I ought to do some research. Tate has been good to me since we met. He has never given me a reason to doubt his intentions. Were he up to something nefarious, there is no way he pulled off his evil plans by being with me almost every moment.

“That was a joke,” Tate argues as he steps in the ring, ducking his head to fit under the caged walls of the octagonal ring. I shake my head at him, nodding at the corner opposite mine. Black gloves and headgear sit, waiting for him. I may have told him to get gone but I knew he would not listen.

Grinning at him, I jerk my head at the gear. “Wear it.”

Huffing a sigh, he nods and goes to his corner to grab the gloves. I go over, snatching his forearm to bring it against my chest. He shoves his fist into the glove as the air flickers with heat. With my fingers free in my own gloves, I tightly lace up the first one. His fingers flex, rubbing at my left nipple which pebbles beneath the light touch.

We repeat this with his other hand, the tips of his fingers rubbing at my right nipple. I do not miss the crooked smirk on his face. He loves that he can make my body respond even if I am upset with him. Not that I mind exactly.

“You told me to take a few shots,” I back up, knowing he wants anything but space between us right now. He has to earn it now. “Told you once those other girls might like that shit you talk. I am not other girls.”

“No, Princess, you are not like any other woman I have ever known.”

Winking at him, I back up a few more steps, watching his body relax. His form is good still, I noticed that a few weeks ago at the gym. He has gotten in the ring a few times to work with Mina, the young girl he has been training. I see potential in her, but he said it best earlier—he has hardly paid the poor girl any attention since we started dating.

“We really doing this, babe?” he mutters as I relax my own body into my fighting stance. I jerk my head at him, and he puts his hands up, facing off with me.

We circle one another for a few moments, taking stock. During his last fight he was dealt a bad break on his left leg. He favors that side now, protecting the leg by keeping it

behind him. Since he is right-handed, this makes his stance unnatural for him, a change from what he was used to.

I am weak on my left, a fact everyone knows. We are mirror images here in the ring. I favor my left side but since that session with Greta, and seeing him in the ring training, I have put in work to level the playing field. My left is still my weak side but compared to other fighters, my weak is not the same as theirs.

My left hand shoots out fast, jab, jab, a powerful hook to his midsection. I smirk triumphantly when the air whooshes out of his lungs as I make contact. He doubles over, clutching his ribs as he sucks in a lungful of air. As soon as he is back in form, I crack him twice in the face with two rapid jabs.

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters as I see crimson bloom on his jaw, his lip splitting. “Whoever said your left was weak was a fucking liar.”

“It was weak, baby. Formerly. I saw you favoring your left, Greta knew to come at me on the left. I figured I would keep everyone guessing,” I say.

“I love you,” he replies with a grin, his bright teeth pink with blood. I grin back because hearing him say it again makes my chest explode with emotions. He said it earlier when we were fighting but I couldn’t hear it. All I could hear was the doubt, the fear, and the anger raging inside of me.

“I love you too,” I spit back before I surprise him with three lightning fast leg strikes to his thigh. They put him on his ass, and I laugh as he grunts, grasping where I suspect he a bruise is forming already.

“What did you just say, Princess?” he mutters from his sprawl on the ground.

Now is when I would take my enemy out. I would grapple, either take their back and choke them out, get in a beautiful arm bar that would make them tap, or ground and pound them until the lights go out for them. I do take full

mount, pinning him to the canvas with my thigh trapping his thick arms.

“Didn’t catch that did you? Let me say it again,” I murmur playfully, grabbing his wrists to slam them down over his head. I have him pinned but this is not a match he wants to win. He wants me to win. “I love you, Tate.”

“I know you do,” he whispers back as I bend close, my mouth against his as he speaks again. “I knew you did the day you listened to me at the gym. You trusted me then. You did not trust me earlier,” he grumbles.

“Maybe I didn’t. But just for a minute. Just long enough to let myself get hurt. To let them get just what they wanted,” I say on a sigh as I lie against his chest, letting his hands go as we settle into an embrace.

“You figure out who was behind it?” he wonders, his hands coming up to brush my hair back, tangling the loose braid around his fist.

“It did take me a few shots and sad songs at a bar to figure it out, but yeah, I know who was behind getting those photos on the front page.”

Sitting at that bar, I tried to make sense of things. Tried to let reason lead me for once in my life. Instead of fear or anger. What I decided was Tate meant all the promises he has made to me. He does want me. And I believe he does love me. I see it shining in his eyes now as he looks up at me.

“Greta. Her fuck you to me for breaking her face a few times. Hurting her was an accident, one she provoked anytime she ran her fucking mouth about my sister or Walt. At the gym, she sees us together, and she sees you for what I *thought* you would be: a weakness, a distraction.”

“*Am* I a weakness?” he murmurs even as his hands slide up my back slowly, his fingers untying the string that hold my sports bra together. I smile and let him, shaking my head. Yeah, he might be a distraction and maybe he could be a weakness for me, but I do not see it that way.

“Not in the way she thought. When I saw the photos again because yes, I bought a copy of the paper to torture myself while I got drunk, I noticed something I missed before. Paige’s hair was red and black. It was her signature look for a while a few years back. Once I became her target, the woman standing between her and a title belt, she changed it up. It’s been blue and black—my colors—for over a year now. Those photos were old.”

Sitting up to pull at my gloves and toss them behind me, I do the same for him. His fingers grasp the pretty bra I put on knowing he would show up, yanking it off. His growl as my tits bounce out makes my thighs clench. He sits up, to bury his face between them. Pressing teasing kisses to the sensitive nipples, he smiles up at me with soft eyes.

“I will *never* hurt you, princess,” he swears huskily, his hand cradling my jaw to force my eyes to his. “Or let someone else hurt you. You don’t have to fight alone, baby. I love you. Knowing they tried to use me to hurt you...” he trails off, his voice strangled, and I can feel how upset he truly is.

“Too bad all it did was fire me up for the fight. My *last* fight,” I whisper against his mouth. I kiss him fleetingly, licking his sweet mouth and savoring the groan he lets out. His big hands cup my backside, thumbs hooked in my shorts to tug at them.

“Your last fight,” he says softly, gazing up at me with those eyes of his.

He has told me a hundred times he loves my eyes. How pretty they are, how blue and clear. Before him people told me they were cold. Empty. Maybe before him they were empty. Because before him I felt a little empty. Now, I feel full and complete. Full of joy, full of peace, full of him.

Tate has eyes that are warm and always full of mirth. For being a former fighter, he has a very tame temper. Earlier when they had him cornered when I showed up, he was the angriest I have ever seen. And it was not because he was caught, it was because they believed he had tried to hurt me.

“It will be it for me. All the anger I felt for so long is gone. I am more than a fighter. More than rage or fury. I am a *woman* who can finally let myself feel like one. I can feel sexy and possessive with you. I can feel beautiful and wanted. And you...you make me feel safe for the first time.”

Rough hands yank at my shorts, and I laugh as he pushes at them impatiently. I reach between us to shove at his sweats, laughing again when his cock springs out eagerly. We move together quickly, laughing and grunting as we tear at each other’s clothes. I sit astride him, thighs supporting me as I wrap my hand around his shaft, slowly pumping.

Gazes locked, he lifts me up as I push up on my knees. I slowly drop down, moaning as he thrusts up to fill me. Him being inside me is a spiritual thing. This connection is more than sexual and deeper than our bodies. I circle my hips, rubbing my clit against his pelvis, shooting sparks of pleasure through my entire body.

“Be a good girl,” he hums beneath me, swatting my ass, “ride my cock like the princess you are, baby. Make yourself come on my cock.”

His praise ignites a fire inside me the way it always does. I love being his girl—but I adore being his good girl. When he talks dirty to me while he pounds into me or whispers filthy when I am on my knees taking him down my throat, I could come from that alone. I bounce slowly, savoring the slide of him stroking in and out of me.

“Yes,” I moan, my cries echoing back at me. “Yes. I need it. I need it, I want to come baby. I need more...please, Tate...” I pant, rocking faster, circling my hips, and boldly dropping a hand to rub at my throbbing clit.

“Come here baby, I will give you more. I will give you what you need, Princess,” he promises, a hand coming up to wrap around my throat. I moan and let him drag me down against him. Skin on skin we move together. One of his hands stays wrapped around my throat, closing tighter and tighter. His other spans my left cheek, the sound cracking again and again.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I whimper, loving the sting of pain mixing with pleasure.

“You don’t need it gentle,” he rasps as he sits up so he’s cradling me in his lap, his thighs working as he pistons into me.

And he is right, I love it when he does not hold back. When he is not gentle or slow. I love it slow too, when it is all gentle touches and our eyes lock as we take pleasure from one another. But sometimes I need a little more. Sometimes I need it to hurt, I want bruises and marks at my skin that prove how much we need each other, how greedy we can be with one another.

Tate uses a wrestling move to take over, pinning me to the mat beneath him. Both his hands wrap around my throat, closing tight. I can breathe, but there is a tingling sensation that excites me as his fingers close off my air. Knelt between my thighs, he pumps into me, the loud sound of our bodies meeting over and over echoing lewdly.

“Yes, please, baby. Don’t stop, I want it,” I cry as pleasure rains down on me as he fucks me harder, my body rocking against the mat.

“That’s my good girl. Taking me like you were meant to. Fuck it’s so pretty, Princess. Watching that little pussy choke my big dick. God, I love watching how greedy this cunt gets for me. Look how tight you grip me, how you drip down my cock.”

He stuns me when he takes one hand off my throat, swatting at my swollen pussy. It sends shockwaves through me

and I arch off the mat, crying out as an orgasm builds inside me. His hand smacks down again, the rough fingers stinging my skin before they rub roughly at my clit.

“Oh God! Don’t....yes, that’s so good. I’m coming. Don’t stop, don’t stop baby,” I pant, my thighs trembling as he does it again.

“Good girl. Come for me, Princess. Come on my cock and show me how much you want my cum. Does that greedy cunt need filled up, baby”

Nodding, I tighten my thighs at his hips, tilting my own hips up to take him. His thrusts turn brutal, but I savor every slide of him pushing deep inside me. Owing me. Completing me. Clawing at his chest, I shout his name as I come hard, a burst of brilliant stars filling my vision as my body bows to the please.

“Ah, fuck, there it is Princess. That’s my good girl, come on my cock. Now take my cum, baby. Going to fill this greedy pussy up. Want you full of me. Want you marked by my cum so there is no doubt you belong to me.”

Tate comes closer, kissing at my throat, my jaw, and then my lips. I loop my arms around his broad shoulders to drag him even closer. I open to his hungry tongue, moaning into his kiss as he comes, jerking inside me. I feel my walls contract, drawing every drop out of him.

As he cradles me close, I get a flash of the future. Of me pregnant with his baby, a pretty ring on my finger to match the band on his. Him at my side when I give up the title I am about to take in a few weeks. Him there long after I stop fighting, making a home with me, making me happier than I ever believed I could be.

“I love you Princess,” he murmurs as we stay locked in an embrace, our pleasure vibrating through us both.

“I love you most,” I tell him with a playful smirk.

His grin, one that lights up his eyes, makes my heart thud against my ribcage. Tate makes me feel all the things I never

thought I'd get a chance to feel. What he does that I never expected anyone would be able to do, is make me feel at peace. All my life chaos and pain forced me to fight, to battle the world that felt like the enemy.

Tate coming into my life provided me more than a friend or boyfriend. More than a lover. He became the first person I viewed not as someone I had to protect or make proud. He is the one person I can be myself with, let my guards down for, and turn to as an ally. I need him in my corner not when I am in the ring, but when I am hurting or confused, when I want to laugh or cry out of frustration.

Tate is what I need to win not in the ring, but in my life.

"Impossible," he shoots back as his eyes soften. "I loved you first so I love you the most."

"Want to go again?" I nod at the gloves we tossed off earlier.

"Oh, Princess, I am *always* ready to go."

Chapter Ten

Tate

Watching the woman I love knock someone out is hot.

Violence has an edge of sexiness to it if you ask me. Watching her walk to the ring, fists wrapped up, her ice blue shorts and top showcasing thick thighs and soft curves, she is the sexiest thing I have ever seen. Sitting in her corner with Walt and Sumner as they shout coaching—well Walt is coaching, Sumner is shit talking her opponent—for her fills me with a sense of pride.

After that story tried to sabotage our relationship came out, Tiffani trained harder than she ever has. Pushing herself to her limits, she vowed to beat Paige and win the title. And I never doubted her for a moment. No one else knows this will be her last fight.

“Even if I win the title, I want to be done,” Tiffani swore just before we walked out here earlier, when the two of us were alone in the tunnel.

When I went to her place to plead my case after she saw that photo, she demanded we spar. I earned a bit of an ass beating, so we suited up. Because I could never hurt her, I took a few shots from her before she let me off the hook.

We spent hours in that ring, but we fought for just a few minutes. After some of the best make up sex of my life, we talked it all out. The way adults who love one another do. Neither of us knew how to navigate being in a relationship at first, but I think we’ve got it figured out now.

My girl gets pissed off fast and frequently. I let her get pissed, I make her come, and sometimes I let her get a few shots on me. It’s hot as shit watching her in the ring so being in the ring is a new level of hotness.

We fuck for hours whenever we train together. I've pinned her to the mat, she's fucked me against the cage, and I've bent her over the weight bench. Every morning we run a few miles together. More than a few times, our run ends up being her on her knees, swallowing me down her throat. Or me pinning her to the closest surface and railing her until we can barely stand.

Tiffani has the endurance to go all ten rounds to win the title.

"That's my girl," I shout a bit louder than Walt and Sumner. "That's it, Princess. Work on her weak side. That's it baby!"

Tiffani connects with a powerful hook to her jaw, sending her opponent reeling backwards. With no hesitation, she charges forward, grappling with Paige to take her to the ground. In full mount, she hits her with a few good elbows. Paige struggles beneath her, blocking the blows weakly. She is no match for Tiffani despite bragging for months that she would win this fight.

My heart pounds in my ears because I know how this is going to go down. I can visualize her win the same way I used to do with my own. Tiffani does not want Paige to tap out. She has made a career out of making her opponents submit but this time she wants to leave her mark.

"I would be in your corner for every fight, Princess," I told her earlier when she made the vow again that this would be her last fight.

"I know you would," her voice went soft, warm, the way it only does for me. Pressing close, she touched her brow to mine and took a deep breath. "I want our fight to be outside the ring now. We can fight for what we watch on TV or who makes dinner. We can fight over where we go for vacation or how much time you have to spend with my sister. I want to fight some happy fights with you, Tate. The kind of fights that matter. I love you, baby."

Hearing those words in my head now, my vision blurs. I am so goddamn in love with Tiffani Frost. Claims that she was cold or calculating are only half true. In the ring, yes, she is a cold, calculating adversary. Her goal is to win without mercy. Once she steps out of that ring, she is a different person.

There is nothing cold about the way she loves and protects her sister. There is nothing she would not do for her. Walt was always more than a trainer to her, he is a man she respects and dotes on like a daughter. And when it comes to me...well, there is nothing cold about how she is with me.

Tiffani is the warmest, most loving, giving woman I have ever known. I am lucky to be the man she wants to be that person with. The man she can show softness to, knowing I will not think that makes her weak. And if she were weak, I would be strong for her, because that is what you do for someone you love.

Tonight, she will win the title because she is going to beat Paige Turner to take the title. Winning this title, proving her mettle, it is the final battle she wants to wage. Capturing the title proves she is the best at what she does, that she beat all the others. But it is a title she will vacate as soon as they let her.

“Don’t let her go,” Walt hollers, surprised as Tiffani gives up a back guard that could have given her position to choke Paige out for the win.

“Do what you need to do, Princess!” I call, ignoring the glare and puff of cigar smoke Walt shoots my way.

Grinning as she faces us and a surprised Paige, my Ice Princess nods at me. Her gaze narrows and I know what is coming before it comes. Two powerful kicks to Paige’s ribs, then two more to her thigh, putting her on her knees. Tiffani lets her get her bearing before she lets go with three quick strikes. Her last blow hits the button on Paige’s jaw sending her down hard.

“That’s it! That’s it!” I shout, my heart pounding as if I were the one in the ring showing the world what winning looks like.

They call it and Tiffani falls to her knees. The entire place erupts as cameras and press start to swarm her. I throw open the gate to the octagon and rush inside to beat them to her. When I reach her, she opens her arms as tears stream down her beautiful face and I scoop her up.

“I did it, baby! I fucking did it. I love you. I love you, Tate.”

Her words are muffled against my mouth as I press my forehead to hers. I cradle her close, nodding my head as my own tears hit my cheeks. I am so fucking proud of her. Not just for winning, but for doing it her way. Not the way they all expected with a submission but the way she wanted to finish it.

“I love you, Princess. So goddamn proud of you, baby. You did it.”

“I finished it. I did what I wanted to do,” she weeps the words, clutching me close as a crowd surrounds us.

“Yeah you did, baby. My fucking champion.”

Her head tilts and she slides her mouth over mine. I gather her even closer, opening for her tongue, stroking it with my own. I do not care that cameras and photographers watch us. All I care about is how sweet she tastes. How good her soft curves feel pressed against me.

“Tiffani, can we get some answers?” Someone shouts behind us.

Before I let her talk to the press, I want my own answer. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the box I have carried for two weeks. I wanted to time it right to ask her. Standing here with her now, it feels like the best possible moment to ask her to give me an answer before she speaks with the press.

“Princess,” I whisper against her mouth, my words shaking with emotion. “I love you more than anything. I want to be in your corner for every fight you have. I want to be the one who pisses you off every single day for the rest of time. Hell, I will even put up with your mouthy sister. Before you talk to the press, before you give someone answers about your future in the ring, I want one answer from you first.”

“Tate?” she gasps as I drop to my knee, pulling the ring Sumner helped me choose up for her.

“Marry me, Princess? Give me one answer about your future—our future—right here, right now. Be my wife, Tiffani.”

Camera flashes go off and I hear her sister hoot behind her. Again the crowd erupts, and I realize my proposal is being aired for the world to see. Good. Then the entire world will see she belongs to me. If she says yes.

“Tate Woods,” she whispers, her words strangled as she nods her head before she throws herself at me. “Yes, I will be your wife!”

Laughing as we tumble backwards, the crowd surges to get shots of us. We lay there on the mat for a few seconds, dismissing the reporters, the crowd, even Walt and her team. All we care about is this moment, the two of us. Nothing else matters—not even her belt or her impending retirement.

We do end up giving the press some answers. They ask more questions about us than the fight, but Tiffani keeps those answers short. Tonight turned out to be about us but they are here for the fight so that’s what she addresses. After praising Paige for a good fight, posing for photos with her new belt, the commissioner, and her team, she tells the press she has had enough.

Back in her locker room, she surprises me by kicking Walt and Sumner out shortly after a celebratory drink of their favorite bourbon. Before I can ask why, she hops up on the dressing table and drags me between her thighs.

“Fuck me while your new fiancé is a champion.”

Grinning, I yank at her shorts as she pushes at my jeans with impatient hands. I slam my mouth to hers when her thick thighs wrap around me, pulling me in close. Pulling at her top, I ignore the sweat and blood that marks her skin. Only the sweat is hers.

“I fucking love you,” I tell her hotly as I push her back on the table, “And I am going to spend the rest of my life showing you how much. Spread those thighs baby. Show me that pretty pussy,” I growl, slapping her thighs as she spreads them while I kneel.

God, her pussy is pretty. It’s pink and puffy and the fairest line of curls tops it. I bury my face between the wet folds, suckling at her swollen clit. I shove my tongue inside her and she arches off the table, her hands cupping the back of my head. With my tongue stuffed inside her, she starts to rock, fucking my face. My teeth tug at her clit and she goes off, flooding my mouth with her cum.

“Oh fuck. Baby....I’m coming!”

“That’s my good girl. Let me drink that sugar, baby.”

“Tate, baby, I need you inside me. Please, I don’t want to come again without you.... oh God...yes...” she shouts as I stand and thrust balls deep in one deep thrust.

“Fuck I love how tight you wrap around me. I’m going to fuck this pretty little pussy every single day for the rest of forever. Going to put my babies in here, Princess. How many babies do we want?”

“Two. Oh, yes, don’t stop. I love when you.... yes, baby. Maybe four?”

Grinning down at her as I pump into her, I nod. Yeah, maybe four little ones. I don’t care if I have her. I drop a hand to rub at her clit and she whines, pulling me down to kiss me hard. When she strokes my tongue and pulls my hair, begging me to fuck her harder, I pull out of her.

Spinning her, I bend her over the table, bending her body back with a fistful of her hair. I slam into her from behind and she screams, hands pounding on the table. Bending over her, I pant into her ear how good her pussy feels, how good of a wife she will be, how good I am going to be to her. I feel her clenching on my cock and I pull out, smacking her ass hard.

“Did I tell you to come yet? Tell me you need my cock. Tell me you need it to come, that you need it inside that tight pussy so you can come.”

“Yes, please. Fuck me, I need you inside me, baby. I need it... oh fuck. Tate, please. I need to come, can I come?”

Bent over her again, my hands wrap around her throat as I pound into her harder, faster, shaking the table. I nod, muttering against her ear as my own orgasm races up my spine. “Yeah, Princess. Come for me. Come with me so I can get you pregnant. Want you tied to me. Tied to me forever.”

With a mutual shout, we come at the same time and I still deep inside her as I empty myself. I want it to get where it belongs. I want to own her in every way I can. Because she owns me in every way too. I will never want or need anything else the way I do her. I said she is it for me and I meant it.

Once we can move again, we shower together. Tiffani spends most the shower admiring the ring on her hand. Not going to lie, I fucking love seeing it there. I would brand this woman if I could. We don't talk about the fight or her new championship. We talk about what matters.

We talk about the fights we will have over what side of the closet I will get at her place. Fights about what colors to paint our bedroom or how many nights she can eat my carbonara. We might even fight about baby names and whether our kids will train to fight with us.

Love sucker punched us and while she is the champ, we both win.

Epilogue

Tiffani

One Year Later...

Jab. Jab. Retreat. Jab. Jab and hook. Knockout.

Watching the fighter dominate her opponent, I am filled with pride. All focus is on the win. On bettering her adversary while showcasing her skills at the highest level. Some of those moves were my best moves. And some were my husband's.

Grinning at him in the defender's corner, watching each step and each strike, it is clear to see he feels as proud as I do. Our fighter is in that ring, kicking ass and soon to be take names. Or giving them, I guess, since the world will want to know all about her soon.

Mina "The Monster" Gold is going to take the circuit by storm. I won't ever take credit for her hard work. Partially because her trainer, my husband, blew off their partnership when we started dating. I owed her all my efforts when she let us know she was serious about fighting.

Two months after my title win, I faced the world to let them know I was retiring. It would mean vacating the title I had spent most of my life fighting to win. Very few people understood and most of my former rivals were pissed to say the least. No chances for a rematch to prove themselves, and I had gotten the big win, the title we all strive for, but it was not enough for.

Tate and I got married two weeks after I won that title. Starting a life with him, that was the win I wanted. A title, a gilded belt and some cash was never going to be enough. I started fighting for the right reasons and I quit for the right reasons. For my family—to do what I knew best for my family.

“Always a proud coach,” I murmur to him softly as the round ends and Mina heads our way.

“Of course, I am,” he replies, his handsome face flushing slightly, “that girl wants to be just like you. See how hard she works on her left? Because it is her weakness, same as you. And those hooks? All you, Princess.”

Laughing, we get to work cleaning her up, icing her cheek where she got clipped good, and cleaning up a cut over her eye. While we do this, we both offer words of encouragement and advice. Being in her corner, or any fighter’s corner since we train several together now, feels like home to me.

When I announced I would retire, my husband threw me a party at the gym with my sister, Walt, and the fighters that had been my family since I started fighting there. He asked me there in front of everyone if I would be his partner. Walt wanted us to take over the gym together. It was the second easiest yes I had ever given him.

The first, of course, being the night he asked me to be his wife.

He did that in front of a crowd as well.

“I could not do this without you two,” Mina mumbles around her mouthpiece, looking up at us with soft eyes and a crooked smile, blood still dripping from that cut over her eye.

“Sure, you could, sweetheart,” I tell her, “But you know you will never have to do it without us.”

A bell dings calling an end to the brief break, and Mina shoots to her feet. This girl is ready. Where I was cold going into fights, she is hot. There is an urgency about her in the ring that is amazing to watch. A fire that burns inside her, through her, warning her opponents to be careful if they don’t want to get burned. Mina is the polar opposite of me in the ring and I love it.

Two rounds later, she gets her opponent to tap out with a lethal looking arm bar. When she rolls to a kneel, tears on her face as she is hit with the reality that she just won her first circuit match, I am overwhelmed with emotion for her. I do not miss it, I never have the desire to fight again, to try to best someone to prove my worth.

Tate made me believe in my own worth. After we got married, he made good on the many promises he had made me. We went out and saw the world for a few months. He took me to places I had always dreamt of seeing. And he cooked his carbonara for me, let me pick all the shows we watched, while he made me forget I had ever felt alone before.

Mina is announced as the winner as we look on in pride. Tate pulls me close to tell me he loves me. Just as I start to say it back, several reporters with mics or cameras circle us. Tucking close to Tate, I let my husband answer all the questions they shoot us. Until the last one.

“What comes next for you two?”

“A baby,” I announce, grinning when Tate’s head whips round, a stunned look on his face. “We will start training for him or her now that our fighter got a win. Our little fighter will be here in about six months, so we better get to it, huh?”

Leaving the hounding press with that little morsel, I pull my husband from the ring. We follow Mina back to the locker room where her two sisters wait with Walt and Sumner. They swarm her to congratulate her. I am drawn back before I can join in, laughing when a big body pins me to the wall of an isolated alcove.

“We’re pregnant? I mean...you are? We’re having a baby, Princess?”

“Well, I do not know if it will be a baby princess or prince yet,” I tease him, loving that I gave him a dose of his own medicine. He proposed to me in front of the world and announced our partnership for them too. I figured why not let them know about our baby the same way.

“You little shit. God, I love you,” he murmurs, tilting his head to roll his forehead against mine. “You made me a husband and now a father. You were the best win of my life, Princess. No title, no win, no success I ever had is as big, as important to me as you. As our family will be. I love you so much.”

Tilting my head back, I sigh into the kiss I knew was coming. I let him lift me up as I wrap myself around him, my mouth opening to his tongue. I almost let it get out of hand when his dick jerks between us, demanding entry to the spot he has claimed as his. I laugh at my own thoughts and he sighs.

“Six months before it’s not just us. I better take good care of my Ice Princess now, huh? Happy wife, happy life, that is what they say, huh?”

“It is as far as I have heard. There is no risk of you failing at that, husband. You have given me everything I could ever want. Made me the happiest I have ever been. When I think there is nothing more you can give me, you find a way. I love you. I promise I love you the most.” Chuckling together, we agree to disagree.

Winning the championship was exciting but it felt nowhere near as good as being sucker punched by the love of my life and getting our happy ever after.

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About the Author

Born and raised in the Midwest, reading and writing have always been Dee's passion. Short stories became long stories that finally, became books.

While playing grownup during the day, meaning working a job, Dee wrote her first book. When not reading or writing, which leaves less time than she's proud of, Dee loves spending her time with her furbabies, her husband and lots of movie nights.

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