

ALWAYS CREW

THIRD IN THE CREW SERIES

NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TIJAN

ALWAYS
CREW

TIJAN

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To everyone who has loved Bren, Cross, Jordan, and
Zellman!

I hope you enjoy the conclusion of the Crew series.

PROLOGUE

BREN

“Dad?”

This couldn't—no.

How?

I glanced at Channing. His jaw was clenching. His eyes fierce, and he was glaring a hole in our dad's head.

“What?” I moved forward a step. “*How?*”

“Honey.” His voice was choked up. “Bren.”

It was night, but the full moon was out. A few streetlights shone over us so I could see him good enough. He seemed taller. Was he? More thin. But he was more refined. Or maybe I wasn't remembering him right? He looked good. I mean, good for coming from prison.

Wait.

Prison.

My head was spinning. I turned to my brother. “Chan?”

He reached out, closing his eyes as he placed a hand on my shoulder. He visibly shook himself, so when he turned to me, he'd gone through a complete transformation. The tension wasn't reflected anymore and his hand trembled from the effort it took to contain his reaction.

But his eyes were gentle on me. “The dirty cop from Fallen Crest. You remember?”

I nodded. It'd been a big deal.

“He had a part in Dad's case.”

Our dad stepped forward, his voice coming out rushed, “I want to be the one to tell her.”

Channing ignored him, his hand tightening just a little on me. “Well, some of Dad’s—”

“No! That’s for me to explain, Channing.”

Channing stopped, skewering him with a look before he turned back to me. A vein stuck out from his neck and there was a tic there. He kept on as if Derrick hadn’t spoken a word. “—new associates have some good lawyers. They got it overturned.”

He didn’t say anything after that.

Neither did I. I was confused.

“So? What? What does that mean?”

“Bren—”

Channing spoke over our father, “They threw the case out.” A beat. “They threw it out. They don’t want to deal with the scandal if it got retried, or spend the money to fight against Dad’s new lawyers, so it’s done. He’s out.”

Retrial.

Case was thrown out.

New lawyers.

Dirty cop.

All those phrases were bouncing around in my head.

I heard my brother speaking. I knew he was explaining it, but nothing was making sense. I couldn’t connect all of the dots together, and because of that, I just stared. I stared at Channing. I stared at my dad.

“Bren?”

I looked behind me in the direction of a new voice.

I stared at Cross, who’d come down the sidewalk behind us.

“Cross—” Channing started, his hand leaving my shoulder and holding it toward Cross. His voice was a reproach. He was going to tell Cross to leave us alone.

Cross heard it before it was said and cursed. “Like hell, Channing. I’m here.” He came forward, stepping to the side, and as he saw my dad, his hand slipped into mine.

His body tensed.

He had the same look on his face that Channing did. And I noticed that almost belatedly, as if it were an afterthought, but I don’t know what it was an afterthought for? What thought I had before it, I didn’t know.

“Bren.”

That was him.

My father.

The guy who took the knife that I used to stab the guy who assaulted me. The same guy who then stepped forward, knelt down, and sliced his throat. That guy was standing in front of me, saying my name, and nothing was making sense.

I heard Channing murmur from a distance, “She’s in shock.”

Cross cursed again, moving his arm to wrap around me. He pulled me into his side.

My dad was supposed to get out when he was sixty, but that didn’t happen. He got out after three years, and he was standing right in front of me.

And I had no idea how I felt about that. Not one bit.

CHAPTER ONE

BREN

Two months later

I was standing outside a bowling alley with a red neon sign that said *Cougar Lanes*. Cougar Lanes. The first *A* wasn't lit up, just blacked out.

Okay, then.

Cougar Lanes.

Channing: 4 pm. Cougar Lanes. Ask for Brock or Hawk. Steer clear of Shetland. Watch his hands.

As I stood there, a truck careened toward the front door, stopping right in front. Doors quickly opened and two guys exited and walked inside, dressed in full bounty hunting gear. Bulletproof vests. Handcuffs in their back pocket. Radio on the side. Gun holsters. Stun guns on the hip. Their badges hung over their chests on a chain that went around their necks.

I sighed. I had the right place.

Channing said he was going to hook me up for a job since my first one didn't take. To say I'd been floundering the last two months would be an understatement. I was up a creek with no paddle. But if anyone asked how I was doing, totally fine, all good, all set, all smiles (said with a straight face) and yeah, totally lying through my gritted teeth.

I wasn't fine.

I was so far from fine, but I didn't know what to do about anything right now.

This was foreign territory for me.

I used to think I'd never leave Roussou. It's where I grew up. I laughed, loved, cried, bled, suffered, and persevered through so much there. A future outside of Roussou was not something in my wheelhouse of possibilities, but then everything shifted, and somehow here I was. I was living in a house with Cross, Zellman, and Jordan. All of them were attending Cain University and seemingly loving it.

Which I hated. Don't call me bitter. Just call me the friend that feared was getting left behind. It was a lonely club, a table of one.

But it was what it was.

Zellman was the one who took to college like a fish in water. I think that surprised everyone because Zellman was never known as the academic one, but he loved classes. He loved the parties. He loved the football games. He *really* loved the college girls since he was officially not dating anyone. Now, don't ask me how he was doing in those classes because I had a feeling that was a whole different story.

Jordan and Cross seemed fine, but there were other issues going on with both of them. The most dramatic was Jordan's breakup with Tabatha.

She'd come to Cain for him. He ended things a week after classes started and the shit hath hitteth the faneth.

Tab went back to Bitch Tab and that meant she became friends real quick with a sorority at Cain U, and guess whom they all hated? My crew. Our house. Jordan was banned from attending any sorority and fraternity party on campus. At first, she tried to ban all of us, and I have to include Cross and myself because we went to a few parties, but they weren't really our thing, but it was really only Zellman who had an issue with her ban.

We had a sit-down with Tab, reminded her of our crew roots.

She then amended her ban to exclude *only* Jordan, which I didn't think Jordan cared about. Lately he'd been making friends with other girls, the non-sorority type. That was the

best way to explain them because they didn't really look different than the sorority girls, or act differently, but they were just not *in* sororities.

But again, Zellman was a lover of all parties and any parties.

It still seemed weird when he'd go to a party without any of us, but I was guessing it was growing pains? We were in a new place, a new school (or they were), and a new stage in our lives. We were growing, but to me that just meant we were all going our own ways, which sucked. Majorly. But it was inevitable.

So yeah, seeing as I was the only one not in college, I tried to go the mature route. I even took a course so I could get certified and work in a hospital. The job was boring, and I took attitude from some nurses. Some were cool. Some were snobs. Some were alcoholics. And some were like drill sergeants.

That job just hadn't been for me, that is, until I met some bounty hunters who came in with a knife wound.

There was a conversation between us and now I was standing outside this bowling alley that needed a paint job badly. The trim was faded. The paint was stripped off in most places. The sign needed a tune-up.

It was four in the afternoon, and there were six cars in the parking lot.

I had no clue if that was good business or not.

The front door was painted red, half of the color was gone.

Add that to the missing *A* lighted letter neon sign, and I was sensing a whole theme. Desperation and apathy.

I headed inside, hearing the squeak that mimicked the sound of a screeching cat. Heading inside was like night and day. The sun was blinding outside. Inside, hot and dark. They had no air-conditioning, hence the six cars, because I was seeing there were only two people bowling. A guy and a girl, on what looked like an awkward date. Stiff shoulders and all.

The guy seemed like he had to adjust his hard-on when the girl bent over to bowl. In an un-air-conditioned bowling alley.

Extremely awkward date.

She came back, a shy grin on her face as he stood, his dick adjusted in a move she didn't take note of but should've because it was hard not to be obvious about it. The lanes were all lit up, the same red neon lighting as the theme that mirrored the exterior, yet this ran the length of the place. Walls. Booths. Tables. The shelves for the bowling balls. All lit up with that red color. There was a snack bar in one section. The other section was filled with pool tables, air hockey, and other arcade games.

Behind the register, which was a combination bar, a girl was reading over something on a piece of paper. Girl, or maybe a woman? She looked young, but there were some age lines under her eyes, as if she'd seen too much in the world. Hell, maybe seen too much in this place. Her face was striking, almost gaunt angles and oval-shaped. Wide-set dark eyes. Her eyebrows looked threaded, like they were braided, which matched her hair. I'd never seen eyebrows like that, but I was actually surprised. I would've thought they'd look stupid. They didn't. They looked artistic, but like I said before, they matched her hair. She had an almost Viking hairstyle, with her hair shaved on the sides with a thick French braid crossing around and over the shaved sides...on both sides. And she had another at the top of her hair, mingling with the rest that was loose. Slicked back, even.

I started toward her and she glanced over.

I faltered, seeing her makeup. Dark, smoky eyes and a matte-color red over her lips, making her look somewhat like a modern-day warrior. It was badass, that's what it was. And I wasn't someone who was ever impressed with other chicks.

I lifted my chin in a greeting, my hands sliding into my back pockets. "My brother told me to ask for Hawk or Brock?" Was this Brock?

Her eyes cooled. She turned to face me, a halter strap, black tank top that showed off two round tribal tattoos going

around her biceps. “Who’s your brother?”

“Channing Monroe.”

Surprise flared before a more welcoming tone came from her. The chilly effect was gone. “Oh. Sorry about that. I’m Hawk.”

Really? She was Hawk? I expected a guy, but okay. It fit her look.

She held her hand out, and I crossed the last few steps, giving hers a shake.

There I go. More adulting. I’d graduated onto actual handshakes now.

“Bren Monroe.”

“Yeah.” She motioned for me to follow her and moved down the bar. She said as we went, “You met Gramps and Bonnie, right? At the ER?”

I nodded.

She lifted up a counter and I moved past her, then she moved into a back room. She walked and talked, going down a hallway. “They said they met a girl who worked there. Don’t remember how they said the conversation went, but found out you were related to Channing Monroe. Your brother’s big in our world. He’s new but making waves, and people have started to reach out to him.” She paused outside a door, eyeing me, studying me. “Helps with your dad’s connections, too.”

I didn’t blink, or move, or show any reaction, but inside, my lungs wailed. I felt like an invisible bat had been swung and got me smack in the chest. It was a dull hit, though. Not painful, but shocking. But all she saw was me, my mask always in place, and a faint nod back to her. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

I waited, studying her back as she was still observing me.

Her eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch, and then she chuckled softly to herself. “Right. Heard about his release. Gotta be something to celebrate, right?”

My tone was dry. “Right.” I followed her inside the room.

It was a small office, one that reminded me of Heather's at Manny's. There were a few filing cabinets in the corner, but mostly paper everywhere. The entire office was messy, and she grabbed a file off a chair, dusted off a few specks of dirt, and lifted the handcuffs that had been hanging over the back. Both items were dropped on her desk as she sat in a rolling chair. She nodded to the emptied chair. "Have a seat."

I did, taking everything in.

There were plaques and framed photographs all over the wall, from floor to ceiling. I recognized the two I already met at the hospital, Gramps and Bonnie. They introduced themselves as a married couple, both in their sixties, but both who kept in shape. They'd been tanned and weathered, telling me they spent most of their time outside. Bonnie's hair had been loose, but there was curl in it that I guessed had been from overnight curlers. A smattering of white hair showed me she needed a new dye job, but it was enough that also told me she didn't really care about doing the dye job. The white had looked nice on her, made her almost elegant.

Gramps had silver white hair, a hairy mustache, too. Neither was combed through.

Thinking back to our conversation in the ER, both were cracking jokes the entire time Gramps was there to have a stab wound looked at. They had even caused me to break my typical Bren protocol. They caught me smiling at them, an actual genuine smile after one joke where Bonnie laid her hand and head on her man's arm.

I had that with Cross, and I hoped to always have that, but I felt my mom around me at that moment. I missed my mom right then, something fierce.

Bonnie asked my name, asked my last name, and when they told me they were bounty hunters, I mentioned I knew a few. The conversation happened at light speed after that. I left work that night thinking I needed to find another job. It was a good job, but it just wasn't me, and when I opened my phone, Channing had left a text. Gramps and Bonnie had gotten in

touch after they were released from the ER, and he said they had a job offer for me.

Hence me being here.

“So, you’re technically an intern.”

Well, fuck. I needed to get paid.

Hawk’s mouth curved up. She held a hand up. “But don’t worry. That’s only the name of your position, but it is paid, and you’ll transition into an office assistant almost right away.” She had a pile of papers in her hand and her eyes narrowed, tracking my every emotion. Or would’ve if I had been showing any. I knew I wasn’t. I’d been professionally locked down since my mother died.

So, I waited.

See...I get that I wasn’t being normal.

I’m young. I’m new to this world, and this town, and I was still just starting out on the exploratory trek of finding what the hell I wanted to do in the world, but the usual roles that I should be portraying, the ones that spoke of my background and upbringing, I wasn’t. I wasn’t new, or innocent, or eager. I wasn’t ambitious. I wasn’t hopeful.

I was jaded.

I was tired.

Give me a fight to break up and I’d wade in without a second thought; that was the world I was comfortable in. If she was hoping to get a new recruit, someone ready to ask how high when told to jump—I needed to make sure she was disappointed from the very start. That was me. That was who I was. Doing my thing.

“You don’t say much.”

I cracked a grin at that. “My brother’s the charming one.”

She leaned back in her chair slowly. The papers were pushed back, and she moved her chair to face me more fully. The way she was looking at me, I had a feeling she was about

to lay some ground-moving shit out there. Or it would be in her opinion.

I wasn't holding my breath for it.

She raised her chin up, just slightly. "Can you type?"

"Graduated school."

She didn't miss a beat. "Can you keep shit quiet?"

"Only telling you my name because I have to."

Her mouth flattened a second. She pushed forward, resting her elbows on her knees. That same surveying look didn't waver. "Can you fight?"

"Yes."

"You in school?"

"No."

"You want to go to school?"

"I'm here first."

Her eyes narrowed. "What does that even mean?"

I tipped my chin up this time, my tone a little cooler. I'd just been rock steady before. "Means that's my personal business and not yours." The truth is that I didn't know what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. But who was she for me to explain all of that to? I took a breath. "My brother wouldn't want me to come in here and be disrespectful, I have to add on, 'no offense.'" I turned up one corner of my own mouth, letting it fall the next beat. "You want to know about me? I'm a fighter. I ain't no bounty hunter. Never shot a gun, wore a vest, used a Taser, and honestly, never wanted to do or use any of those. But your people found me in a job that I didn't like being in, and I'm here for the next four years, at least. I need to do something. I need to make money. Somehow my brother thought this would work for me. If you know my brother, people tend to trust him. I guess this is me trusting him."

Her eyes inched closed the more and more I spoke.

At the end, she held her head up, straightening back as if she thought I was a snake about to strike. “I don’t know your brother, but I’ve heard his reputation. I’m trying to assess if you’re going to be a gigantic pain in my ass or not.”

“No.”

She didn’t flinch. “Then I’m also trying to determine if you’ll be a danger to my people or not.”

I flinched on the inside. “No.”

I had a bit more bite in my tone.

Her eyes opened wider, just a centimeter. She heard that, too. “You didn’t like that, huh?”

I didn’t respond.

She didn’t look like she thought I was going to respond and, chewing on the inside of her cheek for a moment, she let out a sigh. Reaching behind her, she grabbed the papers and handed them to me. “Fill those out. Come back tomorrow at five, dress in all black.”

I grabbed the papers and stood. “Five in the afternoon?”

She shook her head, a smile starting. “Nope.” She was almost beaming when I turned to go. “Hey, Bren.”

I looked back.

The smile was gone. In its place was something dark, so dark that her face didn’t show it. I only knew it was there because I felt it deep inside of me. “No matter the job description on paper, you’ll be going on ride-alongs. If you remain here, you’ll progress. You might even want to take the test in the future. Either way, you’ll be in dangerous situations alongside *my* people. If you do anything stupid to put them in danger, you’re out. I don’t give a rat’s ass about what connections you might be bringing to *my* family. You got me?”

I didn’t respond. I got her, and she saw that I got her. No words needed.

I opened the door, papers in hand, and I left.



FROM: Brenners

TO: Tazsters

SUBJECT:

Typing this as I'm waiting for your brother. Tell me what's new with you?

FROM: Tazsters

TO: Brenners

SUBJECT: OMG!!!!

OMG! HOW ARE YOU? I'VE MISSED YOU GUYS SO MUCH!

Things are good here. I'm LOVING my roommate, but I think she's got a thing for Race. She told me she like boxers A LOT and then looked right at Race. It got uncomfortable as fuck, and I'm not down with it.

I miss you guys so much.

Have you seen Blaise much? I talk to him.

Okay. I have a late class so I have to go.

LOVE YOU SO MUCH!

—The Best Twin

CHAPTER TWO

BREN

I was sitting in my truck, parked outside Cain University's gymnasium. The windows were down. A slight breeze wafting through, mixing with a slight mingling smell of someone's bonfire, sweat, and garbage. I glanced over. The dumpster in the corner of the lot was overflowing. My guess, it hadn't been picked up on last week's rotation. Or maybe over the last month. Either that or there'd been a party in the parking lot over the weekend.

Option two was more viable, now that I thought about it. Knowing the students on this campus and what they were capable of, definitely option two.

"What's up, Brennie Bren?"

I had not even one second to swear, raise the window, or just simply have a knife ready and poised. Not that I needed it, but I wanted it, solely on the principle that Zeke Allen was annoying AF and also, that he snuck up on me. Dammit.

I had to settle with looking over at him, and hoping my glare of death suddenly had Reaper magic.

It didn't.

His asshole smirk was still there.

I shifted in the seat, moving an inch away, again on the principle of it alone. "Still as repulsive as ever, Allen." And he was. A professional douchebag, fraternity brother by career, and loaded up the ass with privilege and wealth. Unfortunately, we were stuck with him because he was also Cross' brother's best friend.

See. We were all doomed.

I added before he said anything else that would make me want to vomit, “I heard that we came close to not having you grace our presence at Cain.” And he continuously looked like he was enjoying himself. I said further, “That’s too bad. For real. Way. Way. *Way*. Too bad.”

He moved in, positioning to rest a hand on my door, over the opened window, and he laughed. “There you go, being funny. And no one said Bren Monroe has a funny personality. Personality, yes. You know the kind...dull, gloomy, dark, death, but comedic, I never would’ve believed if I hadn’t heard it with my own ears. Tell me the truth, Bren. You lie at night thinking of ways to brighten my day, don’t you? Don’t be shy. You can share your feelings for me. I know you have dirty thoughts about me when you’re in the shower.”

I was gritting my teeth, and I hated to admit this, but he was starting to boil my blood.

In the murdering way.

I shot back, “You know what’s *actually* funny? You don’t say any of this shit when your boy’s standing in front of you.”

That smirk immediately vanished.

Got you.

He didn’t like me talking about his best friend. Then, point taken, that’s all I was going to talk about. I positioned myself a bit more, facing him, tilting my head to the side. “You’re nice and quiet whenever Blaise is around. Why is that? Hmm? Oh, and I didn’t just hear about how you might not have come to Cain, that your daddy got mad at you.” I waited a beat. He didn’t like knowing that I knew any of these things. I had to add, “And guess who told us all that information?”

“There you go, trying to be a comedian. I lied before.” He snapped forward, baring his teeth. “You ain’t no comedian.” His eyes widened and he leaned back. “Wait a minute. What do you do? I was going to say don’t quit your day job, but you don’t have one of those anymore. You ain’t a college student. You got no career. I’m at a loss. I mean, how do I even know

how to insult you if you aren't doing anything productive with yourself?"

"Zeke!" A bark came from just in front of the truck.

We both turned.

Zeke cursed under his breath, stepping back.

Like two marauding golden twins, Blaise and Cross were heading right for us. Blaise had his soccer bag in one hand, still dressed in his uniform. He must've had a game. Cross was eyeing him from the side, angling his body so it looked as if he hadn't come with Blaise, more like both of them converging on the truck at the same time. Cross had been working out, lifting weights with Jordan, but I didn't see our other crew member coming with him.

Blaise and Cross weren't actual twins. The twins were Cross and Tasmin, his sister, and she was going to college about four hours away from us at Grant West University. But even though none of them knew about the other growing up, the results were the same. Cross and Blaise, though different moms, looked eerily similar.

They were coming in both hot and ready to handle whatever was going on.

I knew Blaise was coming in to back his boy up.

Cross was coming to either back me up or make sure I hadn't murdered Zeke. Judging by how he gave Zeke a once-over, then eased back, it was the latter. His eyes met mine, those tawny, gorgeous, and smoldering eyes, and I caught a flash of amusement.

I scowled at him.

He thought this was funny?

His mouth only twitched again.

Oh yeah. He thought this was funny.

Then again, anytime I came across Zeke Allen, Cross enjoyed watching me at work. He told me later that seeing me do my thing was 'fucking hot when you tear him down.'

Those were his words, not mine. But now that I was thinking about it, that's all I wanted to do: tear Zeke down.

“The fuck?” Blaise was there in an eyeblink, and he was moving between us, pushing Zeke backwards, but looking over his shoulder at me and frowning. Cross had decided he wasn't needed. He tossed his workout bag in the back and got in next to me. He leaned over, kissing me and saying, “You okay?” His words were so quiet, and they gave me a thrill like always. Or maybe that was the kiss, or how he ran his hand down the side of my face before leaning back, giving me a closer and more intimate look. Whatever he saw must've reassured him that everything was definitely okay. He nodded and pulled back, his thumb tweaking over my bottom lip in a flirtatious touch.

Hiding a small grin, he angled his body, turning toward me. One elbow rested on the dashboard and he spoke to Zeke, sounding almost bored, “I get that you're obsessed with my brother, but do you have to be obsessed with my woman, too? Get one of your own.”

Blaise paused, sending his brother a chilling glare.

Yeah. Those two had so not walked out together, side by side.

Blaise must've come from the soccer field. It was just past the gym.

“Okay. Let's all shut the fuck up.” Blaise sent everyone a cold look before turning to his best friend. He began pushing him back even farther.

Zeke wasn't moving. Well, he was, but not willingly. Blaise was mostly pushing him without making it look like he was shoving him.

Zeke kept glaring at me over Blaise's shoulder.

I smiled and leaned out my window, raising my voice. “I don't know why you have such a hard-on for me, but it's time to let those feelings go.” I nodded to Cross. “Let it go for our boys, hmmm?”

Cross leaned back in his seat, his hand coming to my leg. “Blaise will keep him under wraps.”

I watched them go, saw how Blaise’s head ducked down and he was keeping a hand at Zeke’s chest, as he continued to walk him across the lot.

Yeah. I hadn’t wanted to talk to Allen, but I had to admit that I got a rise whenever some of my own insults pierced him. Reaching over, turning the engine on, I raised my window.

Cross did his at the same time. “We gotta hold up. Jordan was getting a girl’s number. He should be out in a few minutes.”

With that, all thoughts of Blaise and Zeke Allen were gone.

I shook my head. “The amount of girls he has coming through the house is setting records. I don’t know what records, but there must be some form of record he’s breaking. He had two girls at the house last night. One left just before midnight, and the other one showed up after one. He drove her home at five. I know all of this because I was up.”

Cross grinned at me before looking, and both of us saw the gym’s door open. Jordan came out, a bag over one shoulder and a girl walking on his other side.

I said, “She’s pretty.”

Cross snorted. “They’re all pretty.”

I shot him a look. “Really? Tell me more.”

He shot me a look right back. “You know what I’m saying.”

I laughed. I did. Jordan wouldn’t give them the time of day if they weren’t.

I nodded at them. “Ten bucks says she spends the night tonight.”

Cross groaned, shaking his head. “I can’t take that bet. I know he has a study group coming to the house, and there’s a

girl there he's interested in, so this one won't be his flavor for the night."

"Why wouldn't you take that bet? Easy money for you."

"Because you would've found out I knew, and you would've kicked my ass later."

All true.

My man knew me.

Just then, Jordan gave the girl a hug before heading our way. She lingered, waving, and he glanced back over his shoulder. When he turned to us, a cocky smirk was on his face. He flashed us a grin, tossing his bag in the back. "I promised some people food. Can we stop at the grocery store quick?"

He didn't wait for a response because he knew the answer, jumping into the back, and then we were off the next second.

This was what we did for each other.

Rides. Helped with food. I mean, those were the easy things we did for each other, but there was more. Ride or die. It's how we always had been, and driving through Cain, easing into the grocery store parking lot and parking, I took a beat to appreciate them. Jordan headed in first.

Cross was right behind him, giving me a look.

I gave him a nod, indicating he should go ahead, and with a small frown, he did, but I knew he'd ask what was up with me later.

And there was something up with me, but it was nothing bad. It was just the opposite.

My biggest plight in life was finding my place. With all the bad that had happened in my life, my mom dying, getting assaulted, my dad going to prison, and so many other things, this, being here with them, was the easiest to handle of them all. It was also the most uncomfortable.

What I said to Hawk hadn't been a lie. I meant every word.

I was a fighter. That's what I did in life. It's who I became. It's who I was. It's just how I was. I fought and I survived. The

girl whom Jordan just got a number from, or the girl waiting at the house for him, those were normal girls.

Since he had broken up with Tabatha, since those girls started showing up, I hadn't judged. I hadn't been unfriendly. They mostly stayed away, knowing I was one of Jordan's 'family,' that's how he introduced all of us, and when they saw I was with Cross, I either got looks of envy or looks of relief. But my point is that I listened to them. I heard how they spoke, the words they used, what their hopes were, what their concerns were. Getting good grades. Passing a class. Losing ten or twenty pounds. Getting invited to certain parties, depending on who threw it, and the reasons for why hadn't they been invited and others had, etc.

They liked makeup, dressing sexy.

A few girls came over who cared about getting a good job one day. They knew the hours of the library versus how some knew the best hour to show up at a fraternity party. Jordan wasn't being picky, but even with the more studious girls, I still felt it.

It was just there.

A feeling. An underlying dynamic that bristled against me. It was like an allergy, working against me, and that no matter what, I wasn't like those girls. But Hawk. The girl with the warrior braids, smoky-eye makeup, who sat in a room and talked to me about not being a liability to her family, that girl...she was like me.

She gave me heat, but I shot it back, but even then, I knew that I was like her.

We defied society rules. We fought and survived in the darkness, and somehow, we thrived among it.

Watching Jordan, how he was handling life at college, watching Zellman, even watching Cross—they were happy. And I wasn't saying that I was unhappy, but I was lost. We were crew, and because of that, they'd been in the darkness with me. We formed out of necessity, and then that bond strengthened into a vow of family. There was no crew system

anymore, here or in Roussou. It'd been disbanded. The administration had won, so what did that make us?

We weren't fighting anymore. That seemed childish, but that world of violence, it was in me.

I was realizing that a part of me needed it. Maybe that's why Channing sent me to Cougar Lanes. He knew exactly what I would be needing?

Yet, I didn't know, and stepping inside the grocery store, I didn't think I'd have it figured it out by tonight.

Coming up behind Jordan and Cross, who were both in the meat section, I skimmed the cart. There was a box of tampons. The brand and size I used.

"B. You want chicken or steak tonight?" Jordan was the one who asked.

Cross was watching me, a bit more intently than normal. He knew I had deep thoughts flowing around in my head, but I replied, "Chicken."

He grabbed four packages, hefting them into the cart. "You're low, right?" He was indicating the tampons. I gauged him, but he wasn't being sarcastic or teasing. It was as if he asked if I wanted to get bread. No big deal.

I had to smile. "Yeah. I'm getting low."

Cross met my grin with one of his.

Jordan didn't notice. He was looking at a list. "Okay. I want to do kabobs for the group tonight. So we'll need skewers and vegetables. Got the meat already."

I indicated behind us. "I'll grab the skewers. Vegetables are over there."

"Got it." He took off, pushing the cart in front of him.

"You okay with us doing dinner for Jordan's study group?" Cross had stayed behind.

I shook my head, stepping closer to him. Our hands grazed against each other.

“No. I’m good. As long as there’s no problems, I like having people at the house.” I moved my hand, my pinkie entwining with his. “I got used to it at the end with all of Channing’s friends coming over.”

“Yeah.” Cross fell silent.

This was one thing.

I had said Channing’s name. Channing was linked to my father. The same father who was now out of prison and whom I hadn’t spoken about since he left the same night he showed up.

Cross asked that night, but I shook my head and told him I needed space. I didn’t want to talk, to process yet. I didn’t even know what I felt about that situation in order *to* process.

He’d been giving me space. All the guys had, but his eyes sharpened, and I knew that space was about to end really fast.

I was waiting, almost holding my breath until he let out a sigh. His hand came to my arm, and he drew me against him, tucking his chin on top of my head. “You need to open up one of these days.”

I raised my arm, sliding it around his back. “I know.”

I didn’t say another word. Neither did he.

He was doing exactly what I’d asked of him...giving me more space.

Then I had to laugh. “Was it Jordan’s idea for the tampons?”

He eased back, the corners of his mouth lifted. “Yeah. Just walked by and grabbed the box. He didn’t even say a word to me about it.”

Yeah. Family. Even during the awkward things.

CHAPTER THREE

BREN

Cross was studying in our bedroom when I decided to join the party downstairs.

The music was blaring, but no one was in the living room. A few girls were at the kitchen table, books spread out, notebooks, computers all over. Plastic cups littered almost every corner, too, along with bags of chips and some cookies one of the girls brought over. They looked up and froze at the sight of me. One nudged the other, saying something under her breath, and the other one brightened up. “Oh! Hi. You’re Jordan’s roommate.”

I’d been here when they came in. There’d been quick introductions, but the food was quickly dispensed, so her saying that was more of a nicety. Everyone went outside to eat since Jordan and Zellman had the grill going. That was four hours ago, and leaning forward, I sniffed one of their cups. “Is that the trick to studying? Getting drunk at the same time.”

The girl who had nudged her friend started giggling. Clamping hands over her mouth, she started laughing even harder.

The one who spoke to me shot her friend a look, clearing her throat. “Uh. Sorry. She had an edible two hours ago.”

The third girl hadn’t said much or done much. She remained quiet, leaning over her computer, but she pushed it back and sat back in her chair. “I’m so screwed for our test on Thursday.”

“Yeah. No kidding.”

“You’ll totally kill this test. You always do, Miss I Like to Set the Curve.”

The girl who’d been mostly quiet snorted. “Yeah, right. That is most certainly not me.”

All three fell silent, sharing a look.

Then one said, dropping her voice low, “Oh, from what you said earlier, are you talking about that one girl?”

“Hmmm.”

The Giggler wasn’t giggling anymore. She bit out, “The one dating Blaise DeVroe?”

“The soccer player?”

Giggler nodded, her head high and her eyes bright. “She’s dating him. It’s disgusting, if you ask me.”

They were talking about Aspen Monson, someone I learned over the summer had been the girl who saved our asses one night. Or saved my ass. If the cops had caught us at a party, I would’ve automatically gone back into juvie. Partying on parole and running from the cops was frowned upon. She was also kind and not a girl for girls to be bitching about, and someone I cared about.

She was also dating Cross’ brother, and the two were so opposite that they were perfect.

Go figure that one out.

“How’d someone like that get someone like him? I mean, she’s pretty, but he could do so much better.”

One snickered. “No doubt. Such a cow.”

The screen door opened then. Jordan came in first, a few guys following him inside. He saw me and gave me a chin jerk. “Hey, Bren. Where’s our boy?”

“Studying upstairs.”

Zellman flashed me a grin, the last one to walk in. They were bringing in the rest of the food that must’ve been outside.

The girls were sharing looks, and I turned to Jordan. “So, this girl,” I pointed at Giggler, “thinks it’s disgusting that Aspen is dating Blaise.”

All three gasped.

I pointed to the one who said it. “And that one thinks Blaise could do better than Aspen.”

Then I turned to the last. “And this one thinks Aspen is a cow.”

Giggler’s face turned bright red. She hissed, glaring, “What the hell?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what you just said?”

Jordan had stilled, hearing me.

Zellman let out a small growl, coming to stand next to me. “You say that?”

Giggler had opened her mouth, but shut it with an audible snap, her eyes shooting between him and myself, then to Jordan. Her gaze lingered the longest on him before she gave me a dark look. “Snitch.”

“I’m sorry. You a cop?” I moved in a flash, slapping my hands down. One on the table next to her, and the other on the back of her chair. My face was down. I was in her space, and I wasn’t moving an inch.

“What the hell?!” One of her friends stood up.

“Jordan, she’s psycho,” the third friend offered.

Giggler had stilled. Fear flashed in her eyes, and she didn’t hide it. She didn’t quench it either. There was no mask. The girl had no clue how to handle me.

I said, making sure I was speaking clearly and succinctly, “I didn’t walk down here to start a fight, but when you start talking trash about someone I care about, I don’t like it. Not one bit.”

One of the girls whispered, “Jordan!”

Giggler's eyes were wide. She was looking from me to over my shoulder. I was assuming right at Jordan.

I moved, countering to block him from view, but I heard him speak from behind me, "We know Aspen." His tone was cold.

The girl's eyes got even bigger. She seemed to shrink into her chair right in front of me.

Jordan added, "And something you should learn about me, you don't talk shit about anyone I call family. Bren. Zellman. Cross. They're family." Then, he added, and I could hear the smile in his voice, "Bren's being nice right now. A year ago, she'd have a knife out ready to spill blood."

My gut shifted, and a bitter taste filled my throat.

I didn't need to do what I just did.

These girls were idiots. Well, they were normal. Girls talked shit about other girls. Guys did it, too. It's what made the world go 'round, but my reaction to her—it wasn't necessary. I was throwing my weight around. I was making a stand.

I was being Roussou just now.

I wasn't one of the college girls, and my own self-defense tactic.

I was feeling self-conscious because I felt like I was losing my guys, and I forced an issue where Jordan would back me. Zellman, too. These girls, though, it was good that they learned their lesson about talking shit about Aspen, and about coming in this house and showing respect to someone who lived here, but I could've handled it differently. I didn't need to be Roussou on them. A few words shared with Jordan once they all left would've been sufficient, and cursing under my breath, I straightened and shared a look with him.

His eyes were knowing.

Zellman had a question in his gaze, but he wouldn't say anything. That was Zellman.

"What's going on?"

Cross had come downstairs and was standing in the kitchen doorway, his face locked. A mask in place.

I heard one of the girls suck in her breath. I was assuming it was the same girl who'd been blushing every time he walked through the room earlier when we were eating. She couldn't take her eyes off of him before.

I stepped back. "It's my bad. I might have overreacted a bit."

"Might have?" The quiet girl snorted.

The other two laughed, relaxing a little bit.

"Get out."

They went tense once again.

Jordan had been the one to issue that order, and he stepped forward, looming over the girls. "Bren just did you a solid, and you're too stupid to notice." A chilled disdain emanated from him. "You're privileged, and spoiled. This is *her* house. She lives here. You started talking shit about someone we all care about. Bren was just the first to make an issue about it, then she stepped back, saying she overreacted. That was an opening for you guys. What you should've done was show her some goddamn respect and say, 'Nah. Our bad. We shouldn't have talked bad about your friend. It's cool. We won't anymore.' And then you should've gotten up and offered Bren a fucking drink because you three proclaimed yourself the bartenders tonight. But you didn't do any of those things and this is *me* telling *you* to get out."

One of the guys laughed, his voice hitching up. "I think we're good for studying tonight. Maybe we should pack up, head back to the dorms?"

The girls rose, grabbing their things.

They couldn't grab their stuff fast enough.

No one else said another word. We waited for all of them to pack up and head out. One of the guys held back. "Sorry about them." He gave me a nod, cringing as he looked around the kitchen. "We're leaving this place a mess, too."

Jordan lifted a fist. “Don’t worry about it. Part of hosting. You know the drill.”

The guy laughed, meeting his fist to Jordan’s. “No doubt. Study session at my house next Monday, but we’re hosting a whole-day event before the game on Saturday.”

Cross asked, “What game?”

The guy turned his way. “The soccer game. You in?”

Cross looked at me before he said, “Yeah. We’re in.”

None of us were surprised about the party invite before the game. Soccer was becoming a favored event for the college. We’d gone to a couple of Blaise’s games before, and the crowd was larger each time. He told Cross that he got in because of his soccer skills, but we hadn’t realized that he’d been downplaying them. I didn’t go to Cain, and even I knew he was a big deal.

“We’ll be at the campus grill before Friday’s football game, but yeah. Saturday is all about soccer. Couple of my roommates know some of the players. They’re chill guys.” He headed for the door, his bag over his shoulder. “See you all later. Peace, Jordan.”

“See you tomorrow in sociology.”

The door shut behind him.

Red lights flashed us from their car, and a second later, it faded.

As one, Jordan, Cross, and Zellman all turned my way.

Cross sighed, taking the lead. “You going to fill us in on whatever was up your ass at the grocery store?”

See. Knew he’d be bringing that up again.

CHAPTER FOUR

BREN

Cross said, holding my gaze, “Crew meeting.”

I was the one who didn’t move right away.

Both Jordan and Zellman broke into action. Zellman grabbed a chair, flipping it around and setting it right in front of me. Both he and Jordan moved to take the couch. Cross moved so he was standing on the other side of the living room, his arms folded over each other. When I didn’t move from the kitchen, he nodded to the chair. “It’s all yours.”

I sighed. “Empty chair, huh?”

Jordan leaned forward. “Fuck that.” His elbows rested on his knees. “What’s going on with you?”

Zellman threw an arm up on the back of the couch, lounging back, but his gaze was focused solely on me. “Yeah. Enough time has passed. You ain’t saying shit to Cross, and I’m tired of waiting. What’s going on with your dad?”

Cross frowned at him.

Jordan shot him a look. “Dude.”

Zellman ignored both, staring at me pointedly. “Spill, Bren. That shit’s big. You need to talk.”

I was trying not to bristle, but I couldn’t contain it. “Really?”

“Really.” He lifted his chin, not blinking once.

I ignored the chair, stepping farther into the living room. “My dad being released from prison isn’t that big of a deal. And I’ve been dealing with my shit. I went to juvie, had

parole, and I did counseling. I did the whole nine yards, and now I've been rehabilitated as much as I can be. What's your excuse?"

"Me?" His eyebrows shot up. I nodded at him, then to Jordan. "Both of you have shit going on that neither of you has talked about. Your ex is having a kid, Z. And Jordan, what the fuck happened with Tabatha? Said you were in love with her, and then she's gone a week into coming to school." I skimmed a look at Cross. He also had stuff he was still holding in, but I'd picked my targets. In the crew world, there were no favorites.

That didn't extend to our bedroom, where both he and I very much had favorites.

"Aw, hell." Zellman slumped down in the couch.

Jordan's jaw clenched. "That's—"

I spoke over him, "If you say that's none of our business, you ain't in our crew."

He shot me a dark look but didn't retort.

Now I felt like I could sit, so I did, and I enjoyed it. Deflection, successful. Though, I knew I wouldn't be able to do that in bed tonight. Cross had a look. He was determined, and I knew I couldn't be a hypocrite. I'd be spilling my guts to the other two later.

Zellman and Jordan shared a look.

"You first, dude. Your shit is more recent. Not much to say about mine except dealing with my stupid 'feelings.'" Jordan glared at him. "Thanks."

Zellman smirked. "No problem. Always here for you."

Still glaring, Jordan sighed. His head lowered even farther. "Fine."

This was momentous. This was big. This had never been done before. Jordan actually letting us in concerning him and Tabatha. It wasn't that he meant to not share. It was more that Jordan usually didn't realize what he was feeling himself until later, and even then, half the time he was surprised. So, him

feeling things and him sharing those feelings was huge. I shared a look with Cross. We both knew this was a moment to respect.

He shifted back, propping a shoulder against the wall by the door, facing toward Jordan. His arms lowered, one hand going into his pocket. His head lowered a little. All eyes were on Jordan, waiting.

“Okay.” His eyes closed a second. “She cheated on me.”

A bomb was dropped.

“What?” I couldn’t—really?

“You fucking with us?” Zellman shot to his feet.

Jordan shook his head, looking around the room. Pain was etched over his face. “Yeah. There was a frat party the night after our documentary thing. And she cheated.”

“Who told you?” Unlike Zellman and me, Cross’ tone was quiet. Calm. Eerily calm.

Jordan snorted, leaning back against the chair. His hand came up in a helpless motion. “Allen.”

I had to groan inwardly at that. Zeke Allen. Again.

“You sure?”

Jordan nodded slowly. “Yeah. Allen told me he saw Tabatha hooking up with a guy there, I guess he’s in Zeke’s fraternity. I asked Blaise about it. He said he was there, and he saw it, too. Said it definitely happened earlier in the night because he took off halfway through the party.”

Blaise was known for being honest, brutally honest. He wouldn’t lie. Especially not about that.

“I’m sorry, Jordan.”

He looked at me, nodding again. The pain flared brighter. “Yeah. I confronted her about it, said I had two people backing it up, and she rolled over. Started crying. Then said it was my fault. All of it was my fault because she feels you guys don’t like her.”

Okay. *Now* I was pissed.

I'd been feeling bad for Jordan, but I hadn't moved to the default reaction I used to have. Now I was. I wanted to rip her head off.

Zellman got there before me. "I'll show her *exactly* what she can blame us for."

Cross straightened from the wall, his eyes on Jordan. "What do you want from us?"

We fell silent, waiting.

Jordan shook his head, standing, too. "Nothing. I broke up with her immediately, and trust me, I've been having my revenge. I'm fucking every girl she knows. Just haven't started on her sorority house...yet."

I winced.

If Cross broke up with me, then banged a whole list of girls I knew, yeah. That'd be torture. I was feeling tortured just thinking about it. No matter if she messed up, Tabatha still loved Jordan. She'd first been my enemy the beginning of last year, and they still started dating. Both had fallen for the other. So this didn't make sense.

"Why?"

All heads turned my way.

I added, "Why would she cheat? I don't believe what she said."

"If you don't, then she wouldn't say why she cheated. She wasn't drunk. Allen and Blaise both said she looked sober."

Well, that didn't answer my question.

I didn't understand cheating. It was a shallow and selfish move that only satisfied you for a temporary basis. Why risk the long run on a short glitch? I could only understand cheating if it served a purpose, like deliberately pushing the other person away because you saw a future together with the new person.

"Wait." I held up a hand. "Who's the guy?"

“Allen wouldn’t tell me.”

I scowled. “You deserve to know.”

He scowled right back. “If I find out, I’ll rip his head off. I don’t know if I couldn’t *not* do that.”

Nodding, I got that, but I still had to ask. “Is anything going on in Tabatha’s life right now? Besides the breakup with you.”

Cross’ eyebrows pinched together. “What are you thinking?”

I opened my mouth to explain but shot Jordan a look. His were fixed on me with an almost hopeful look, and my gut shifted to the side. I couldn’t. If I was wrong, I couldn’t give him that hope and then take it away. So, I lied, shrugging. “Just thinking of more ways to hurt her, that’s all.”

Zellman bought it.

Jordan was in too much agony to see through me.

Not Cross. His gaze was heated on mine, and I knew he was calling me a liar.

Later. I tried to convey that to him.

It worked. The heat faded and he nodded, just slightly.

But no matter what, I’d be taking a couple of trips tonight. Then I remembered my five A.M. job start. Damn.

I amended my previous plan.

I’d be taking a couple trips *tomorrow*.



“You’re thinking Tabatha did it on purpose?”

Cross waited until after we both heard Jordan and Zellman head to their own rooms. Zellman’s bedroom was upstairs. Jordan’s was downstairs. Cross’ was on the main floor, and I kept one across the hallway from Zellman’s upstairs. Some

nights we were in Cross' and some nights we were in mine. All the guys thought it was important that I had my own room.

We were in Cross' tonight.

We heard Zellman's footsteps on the stairs, and the basement door shut.

I came out of the bathroom, brushing my teeth. I stared at him a second, then he moved into the closet. A few minutes later, we both moved to the bed and I crawled in, but I scooted to the headboard, pulling my knees up against my chest.

Cross sat on the end, facing me. His eyes were hooded. His face a stoic mask, but I only knew that was because he was bracing for whatever I was about to say.

"I'm wondering. Cheating doesn't make sense to me, not unless something happened in her life recently and she's pushing Jordan away."

"Why couldn't she just break up with him?"

"Not if something is going on with her. He would push, you know that. She was at our house the night before, at our documentary thing. They were both happy that night."

He considered it, his shoulders rounding and falling forward. But then he sighed, looking at me again. "And what if she did *just* cheat? If there's no deeper reason for it?"

"I don't know."

"She's turned into a royal bitch again, that's for sure."

"I know." But Tabatha wasn't careless. I couldn't see her cheating on a spur-of-the-moment decision, especially if she wasn't drunk. So none of this made sense.

"You going to talk about what's been going on with you today?"

I flashed him a grin. "I was being stupid. That's all."

He was studying me. "You still being stupid?"

I shook my head. "No. Just finding my footing here."

“I love you.” His head lowered, his eyes pinning me in place.

My breath was taken, just like that.

We’d been through so much, and my love for him swelled up in my chest, threatening the tears to spill. I blinked them away, but my voice was raspy. “I know.”

This wasn’t a time when I *had* to say it back. He wanted me to know, to be reminded, and I was. I reached over, grabbed his hand, and tugged him into bed with me. I didn’t say the words back this time, but I showed him instead.

It was afterwards, when he was holding me against him, as he was curled around my back. His breath moved against my neck, his arms under my breasts. “Take backup with you when you confront Tabatha.”

I had to smile, even though it was only to the darkened room. He knew he and Zellman couldn’t help me with the girls. We might’ve been able to get away with breaking that rule last year, in Roussou, in our high school, but that was only on a few exceptions. That wouldn’t fly here, and it shouldn’t. Everything had been different in Roussou.

I didn’t have any female friends here, but ... “I will.”

I had one person I could ask, someone I knew could handle herself.

His arms tightened around me, and I felt him moving my hair aside. His breath was on my neck before I felt his lips there. “Good.” Then his hand moved down, down, down between my legs and pleasure was rolling through my body within seconds as he slid a finger inside of me.

CHAPTER FIVE

BREN

“You want me to do what?”

In a perfect world, I would’ve waited. At least a week. I didn’t have a week. But I did wait until later in the morning. It’d been an early morning, a *seriously* early morning, but I’d been jazzed for it. And when I showed up at Cougar Lanes for my first day, they had not disappointed.

I met the whole group.

Hawk was there, her mouth pressed tight as I handed over the paperwork she needed from me.

Gramps and Bonnie were there, both dressed in black clothing. Everyone had been wearing black clothing, but they’d also been dressed in their vests, Taser guns on the side, their badges hanging over their chests from a chain. The only two people who had actual guns were Hawk and another guy, the Brock guy that I thought Hawk had been.

Brock was a guy, and he had classic handsome features. A square face, with an almost square-like jaw. Intense blue eyes. His hair was a strawberry blonde, a small amount of curl, but he kept it trimmed. If he’d let it grow longer, his whole head would’ve been covered in curls. He had the beginning of a dark beard, or maybe he just hadn’t shaved. Maybe six-three, he had a linebacker’s body frame. Lean build, but muscular shoulders, and his legs were ripped. He looked like he could tear through someone at a second’s notice and not break a sweat. There was an intensity to him, a look given to him from how his eyebrows almost overshadowed his eyes. Pretty eyes, but the strong forehead made him look like he was plotting

someone's murder, when he was more than likely thinking he wanted to get a donut. It was his own sort of resting bitch face.

Shetland was the other guy, besides Gramps, in the group and he was almost opposite Brock in every way.

Tall. Gangly. He had a bowl-cut haircut. Straight up. I had to laugh because it looked like someone had literally put a bowl over his head and cut around it. But he had the same hair color as Brock, so I wasn't sure if they were brothers or not. Same blue eyes, too, but a different face. Shetland's face was long and angular. His cheekbones were washed out, almost flat. His mouth tiny, like a bird's. His nose was too big for his face, and he had the same forehead as Brock's, but it didn't work for Shetland. It made him look deranged and moody at the same time. His one redeeming feature was his smile. When he grinned, it was infectious and caused everyone to grin.

I even found myself lightening up, and as soon as he saw that, it was 'Bren this,' 'Bren that.' He was firing off lame, pick-up-line jokes and they were too ridiculous not to laugh at.

"Bren, is that a mirror in your pocket?" He leaned in, not giving me time to shoot him down. "Because if so, I can see myself in your pants."

"Shet, stop talking." Brock walked past, not breaking stride, and his palm came up the backside of Shetland's head. He continued to their truck, checking his gun. "Channing Monroe is her brother."

Shetland drew up at the mention of my brother.

The pick-up jokes stopped after that.

They had two other guys on their team, but both were big and quiet. They looked like Samoan enforcers. I was never introduced to them, but I heard one was called Big. The other was called Burly. Go figure.

Bonnie told me in the truck on the way to their first 'round-up' that they had another member of their team I hadn't met. Bonbon—Bonnie's daughter—and it was later when Hawk pulled me aside, saying, "Don't ever be alone with Bonbon. She's insane. Trust me."

And that's when I asked my request.

Hawk stared at me, long and hard.

We'd just come back from grabbing the first bond jump. It'd been anticlimactic, but I didn't know what I had been expecting. I was told to stay in the truck, so I did. They went into a house. I heard shouting, but a second later, Big and Burly came out, pushing a guy in handcuffs. He was loaded into one of the other trucks. Paperwork was filled out, and Brock walked the guy to the jail thirty minutes later.

I'd remained in the truck the whole time.

We were now at a gas station. Everyone was filling up with snacks and coffee. I was grabbing my own when Hawk told me about Bonbon.

I replied, "I have to do something. I need a female to help out, and I only know one other girl here, and she's not a fighter type. She'd more likely ask to read all their books than know how to back me up if things got dicey."

Hawk's mouth turned down, thinning. "I do not waste my time with sorority catfights."

"How'd you know?"

Her eyes got big. "I was joking. Are you kidding me?"

I shook my head. "Are you sure?"

She swore. "No."

"Okay, then." Looks like I'd be going in alone.

Maybe I'd have Zellman sit in the vehicle, just in case.

Brock walked over, filling his own coffee. "Let's go. We have a full day ahead of us."

Hawk seared me with another look before turning and taking her items to the register. Brock was there, waiting, as everyone got their items rang up. When I waited, he had the clerk tally up what I was holding.

When they were done, he motioned for me. "Head on outside."

I was learning that even though Gramps and Bonnie owned the business, Brock was the unofficial leader. When he said move, everyone moved. When he said breathe, everyone took in air. When he said to stand outside a door, no one moved an inch.

They weren't scared of him. There was no argument. There was no flash of where someone wanted to protest. Everyone fell in line, listening to him with ease. They respected him. Even Shetland, who winked at me as I headed outside and veered toward Bonnie and Gramps' truck.

The bell above the door rang behind me, and I heard Brock's voice a second later. "No, Bren. You're with me this time."

I stopped, skimming over the group.

That's when I saw Hawk already heading for Gramps' truck as she gave me a big grin and a wave.

I faltered.

That wasn't a good big grin.

Brock walked past me, nodding to the side of his truck.

Shetland was in the back, and as I got in, he was rifling through some paper.

Brock got in behind the wheel, putting his coffee in the middle compartment. He plucked out another emptied cup and tossed it into the trash. "There you go."

I glanced at Shetland's coffee, which he was holding in one hand.

Brock spoke, "He's got a thing back there to put his coffee in."

Alrighty then.

I climbed in, shutting my door and grabbing my seatbelt.

We took off and Brock said after we traveled a block, "So...Bren."

Uh-oh.

The realization settled in my chest.

Hawk gave me an initial grill and everything had gone smoothly after that. Until this. Until I learned that Brock was the real leader of this group and so, of course, they'd all been waiting for his moment.

I prepared myself, having a faint assumption what was coming my way.

He started with, "I read your file last night."

Lovely.

His voice was smooth, too smooth. "Your mother died when you were young. Your dad went to prison. Your brother is fast making a reputation for himself in our circles. Saw the first episode of that documentary, too." He was turning right, but glanced at me from the corner of his eye. See. Smooth. He knew exactly what he was doing. "I reached out to a friend of mine. Know her from school. She teaches in Roussou now."

I glanced at him, surprised.

He gave me a knowing grin. "Small world, right?" He looked back to the street. "I called my friend up last night and she gave me a bit of history about that school, the crew system. Your crew. You. She knows your brother, because the only one of us who has actually met your brother is Gramps. The rest of us only know of Monroe. My friend told me that to her knowledge, a Bren Monroe was never planning on attending college."

What the fuck?

I kept a mask on my face, but I was frowning. I was frowning a whole bunch on the inside. I was scowling, actually.

"So, here I am. I'm the one who makes sure everything and everyone runs smoothly in our group. I take into account weaknesses, strengths, personalities. I don't like having outliers or someone going off-book. You know what that means?"

This guy was starting to get on my nerves.

I answered, “I told my spiel to Hawk--”

“Yeah. She told me.”

And he didn’t sound happy by my response.

Too bad.

I kept on, “The teacher I stabbed came at me and put his hands on my friend. But I did my time, and I’m rehabilitated.”

“You also have an extensive history of violence, which you just referenced.”

Well, crap.

“I can handle myself.”

“We ain’t the cops. We don’t have the authority they have, and even then, they get mouthed back. People don’t like getting hauled in to jail by us. If they miss a court date, there’s a reason. They’re avoiding going back, and they’re either stupid and running or they’re stupid and thinking they’ll fall through the cracks. We pick them up and they don’t roll out the red carpet for us. I need to know that if a guy says the wrong thing to you you’re not going to go maverick on us. Put a knife in someone as payback.”

Shit. *That* was my reputation?

I fought back if I was attacked, or if someone went after my loved ones. That was my rule.

Right?

But I was embarrassed.

I was shriveling up inside.

I spoke, making sure I was saying it clearly and strong, “Rules are different in the real world. I don’t know this world, but I know it’s not the same as Roussou High School. There aren’t crews like we had back there. You don’t have to worry about me going rogue.”

He was driving, but glancing over, weighing my words.

It still stung. That’s what he thought of me, that I was some hothead who just went off on people, and it stung even

more because ... was I? Had I done that before? I always thought it was because someone was coming at me first, but had I been wrong?

“We know the Red Demons.”

And no.

I wasn't talking about them. I wasn't talking about my dad. This conversation was done. I didn't care if I was the new girl or not.

He was still watching me, and he said softly a second later, “But you don't want to talk about them, huh?”

I looked at him, knowing my eyes were dead. “My father is not up for discussion. Give me crap all you want about how shitty a person I used to be, but don't pimp me for information about my dad. I've had nothing to do with him since he went to prison, and I've had nothing to do with him, or his new group of friends since he was released. I'm the wrong person for you to be talking to about them.”

His eyes narrowed before turning back to the road, slowing outside a run-down house. Its shudders were off. The roof needed reshingling. The attached garage door had the windows shattered. Tape and cardboard blocked out the windows on the house, keeping the light out. The front porch had holes all over it. I could almost visualize the cockroaches scurrying inside.

This was a meth house.

Pulling in and turning off his engine, Brock didn't move. “Stay here. There's a Taser in the glove compartment if you need it.”

He got out, followed by Shetland getting out of his own door. I watched as they moved in on the house. There was no discussion. They all knew exactly where to go, what position to take, and a beat later, they were kicking in the door.

CHAPTER SIX

CROSS

I was waiting for Blaise outside the soccer facilities. We all had psych together, so I knew he'd be heading across campus soon. When he pushed open the door, his backpack on and a phone to his ear, he paused only briefly.

“See you in a bit.”

There was no play here. My brother and I had a tense truce, but it was still a truce. We were both trying, but as I always did whenever I saw my brother, I locked down. Blaise, on the other hand, he went the other way. He took stock, knew I was tensing, and his grin turned a bit wild. That's how he was. He liked riling me up, getting a reaction from me. And he was usually successful at it.

No one pushed my buttons like he could. I didn't know why, and even knowing he could do it, I still let him have that power over me. It pissed me off, each and every fucking time I reacted to him. Anyone else, I was cold as ice. Not with Blaise.

“Brother,” he drawled, shoving his phone in his pocket. He let out a small sigh and took me in again. A smirk came next. “I'm guessing your boy finally spilled the beans. You're here to double-check with me, see if I noticed anything else about your boy's ex-girl cheating on him. Am I right? Can't think of any other reason you'd be out here waiting for me.”

My brother was smart. Had I mentioned that?

It pissed me off, too.

The urge to push his head into the pavement was rising in me, but no. I stopped it, and could feel every muscle in my face locking in place. “Why are you such a dick sometimes?”

His laugh was low and smooth. “Only for you, brother. Only for you.” He jerked his head toward campus. “Can we walk and do this at the same time? We all have psych together, remember?”

I fell in step, noting the attention we were already getting.

Blaise and I looked alike. A lot.

That got under my skin, too. My real twin was at a school four hours away, and she was of the female gender. But *no*. Blaise, who grew up in New York, a secret to all of us, even our father, looked more like me than anyone else.

There were good qualities in him, but mostly he couldn’t stand me, and I couldn’t stand him. We were locked together no matter how much friction was between us.

Blaise ignored the attention. That also seemed something that came more natural to him, yet another thing about him that pissed me off, and I had no idea why. He said, “I took off somewhat early that night. Aspen showed up, but before that, I noticed Jordan’s girl in the kitchen. She was sitting in a guy’s lap, macking with him.” He glanced over, his eyes narrowing before his smirk only deepened. “God. It’s really pissing you off that you have to even ask me, isn’t it?” Another low chuckle from him. “I love it.”

My teeth ground on each other. I bit out, “Just fucking tell me everything so I don’t have to come back and push for more answers. No matter what you’re acting like, I know you hate this as much as I do.”

Blaise’s smirk remained, but his eyes darkened, flashing.

Oh yeah. The prick wanted to fight just as much as I did. Sometimes I think he wanted to fight *more* than I did. I was known for holding my own back in Roussou, my entire crew was, but the one time Blaise and I did trade blows, he held his own. The fucker could punch. My ribs hurt for two weeks, and

I hadn't gotten a good swing in on his ribs. I aimed mostly for his face, though I was a lot prettier.

He paused, facing me. The smirk was gone.

I rallied, not knowing what to expect. If he would throw a punch or drop the act, either way, I needed to be ready. Then he said, "The guy's name is Tim Harper. He's one of Zeke's brothers, so you'll never get his name out of Zeke. Me, I'm not in their fraternity, and I happen to think Harper's one of the biggest sleazes around. Why your boy's ex was macking with him, I have no clue. I'm not over there much, but when I am, I've not heard any talk."

"Did Zeke say how long Tabatha was with the guy that night? Did she sleep with him?"

Blaise was quiet.

"Blaise."

"Don't," he snapped, his eyes flaring. "Zeke is my best friend. I know you guys have an opinion about him, and I can see why you do, but he's unconditionally my best friend. He's at my side when no one has been, so I'm not sure how the fuck to walk this line."

He was shutting down. He was picking his side. And it most definitely wasn't mine.

"So she did sleep with him, and," and I was still gauging my brother's silence and what he wasn't telling me, "Zeke knew. He didn't say she slept with him, just that she was making out with him."

Blaise's eyes got hard. "Do not put my best friend in the middle of this shit. You do, and there's war again. I will pick him over you any fucking day of the week. Got it?"

My blood cooled. Yeah. I got it.

"Now I know, huh?"

Images of shoving him in the pavement were still fresh, still rallying in me.

I was starting to forget why I couldn't do that.

“Now you know.” His jaw clenched. “I’m surprised you haven’t rounded him up, to be frank. I’m loyal to Zeke, not to that piece of shit Harper.” He gave me another pointed glare before walking ahead, and I had to stop.

I had to think.

Blaise was strong in his opinion of this Harper. I looked after him, frowning, and he glanced back over his shoulder. He paused, half-turned to me, and stared right back. He stared hard.

He was trying to send me a message without the words.

Blaise *wanted* us to go after this guy. That hadn’t been on the agenda, but maybe it should be? Tabatha cheated on Jordan, not that guy. Still, okay then.

My brother didn’t form opinions lightly about people. He didn’t like most people, but he didn’t have this strong of a reaction unless there was a good reason. I grimaced, remembering the last time I got enlightened as to why Blaise had some full-out hatred of the guy who raised him.

I pulled out my phone and typed a text.

Me: Something is going on. You need to talk to Tabatha about the guy she cheated on Jordan with.

Bren: Why?

Me: I’ll tell you later. Need to loop Zellman in 2.

Bren: Okay.

Me: How’s your day?

Bren: I’ll fill you in on that later.

Me: K. Love you.

Bren: Love you.

And then, I went to psychology. When I got inside, Blaise went left. I went right.

Seemed fitting.



FROM: Tazsters

TO: Cross

SUBJECT: CALL ME LOSER

I love you. Race says hi too.

The Best Twin

CHAPTER SEVEN

BREN

We rounded up six bail jumps that day.

I asked Gramps if that was a normal day, and it wasn't.

"Nah, nah. We have to meet our quota, so this was round-up day."

I had no clue what any of that meant, but I guess it was round-up day.

"Yo, girl."

I paused, heading out for my truck. My phone was in hand and I was about to shoot Cross a text. Glancing back, Hawk was heading out of the Cougar Lanes behind me, her sunglasses in hand and her purse's strap across her body. She was still in our black uniform, but her vest was off. So were the rest of her weapons.

"Are you heading to do what you asked for help with before?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

She stopped in front of me, staring. There was a lot of staring with this group. Then, her lips pursed together, she seemed to come to a decision. "I'll help."

"Yeah?" I raised my eyebrows.

One nod from her. "But I drive, and you will tell me what Brock said to you today because I know he did. It's why he wanted you in the vehicle with him."

I needed someone with me. Tabatha would be on another level, one I wasn't looking forward to dealing with, because

unlike last night when I had been eager to ‘handle’ her, I wasn’t anymore. I was tired. Not being involved at all in the action from today, but watching each step of the process had taken a toll.

I shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

She pointed to a black Jeep behind me, and we both got inside.

“You mind if the top is down?”

“That’s fine.”

It was one of the Jeeps where the sides and top could either be up or lowered down. I had to admit that it was nice to be driving with the breeze after sitting inside a vehicle all day, and after a couple stoplights, after I pulled up the address for Tabatha’s house and got the GPS ready to go, she asked, “So. Fill me in. What’d he say to you?”

I didn’t want to ask why she wanted to know. That was politics I didn’t want to deal with, so I filled her in.

I waited a full thirty seconds for her to respond.

When she didn’t say anything, neither did I.

It wasn’t until we pulled up outside of Tabatha’s sorority house before she spoke again. She turned the engine off. “If he asks you again about the Red Demons, let me know.” He already did, but I frowned. “There something I need to know?”

She shook her head. “No, but I have to ask you this question, and it’s for your safety. Okay? I want you to know that.”

My gut tightened. “What is it?”

“Do you know anything about the Red Demons?”

My gut tightened even more. “No.” I was getting pissed that I was getting questioned about them in the same day, much less at all. “I know nothing about them.”

“Okay.” She blew out a breath, nodding. “Good. Just keep it like that and you’ll be fine.”

That wasn't totally true, but it wasn't anyone else's business.

Her gaze trailed past me, and she cursed under her breath. "Jesus. You weren't kidding about the sorority house."

I grinned. "Why did you think I needed backup? Not for my safety, for my mental health. These girls make me want to go apeshit."

"I'm thinking I should've kept my Taser on me."

I paused. "Is it here?"

She motioned to the back. "In my bag."

That didn't even need consideration. "Grab it." And then I added for good measure, "Wear your badge, too."

Hawk was grinning as she clipped it in place, following me up to the house. A burst of warmth hit me in the chest, and I didn't know how to handle that feeling, so I tried to roll my eyes. I couldn't. Instead, I grinned back as I knocked on the door.

There was a sound of footsteps running to the door before it opened. A girl stood there, barefoot, hair up in one hand, shorts low on her hips, and a tank top that was barely covering her breasts. It'd been pushed up, and sitting there, right on her bare stomach was a handprint. A white handprint, tan all around it.

The girl frowned. "What? Who are you?" She saw Hawk's badge, then her Taser, and her eyes got even bigger. "I thought you were my tan girl."

I didn't ask. I pushed in, ignoring her and saying as Hawk followed me, "Where's Tabatha?"

"Wha—hey!" She tried to get in front of us, blocking us from the house. Too late. We were already inside, and as her shoulders fell, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Just tell me where she is."

"No." Her hand let go of her hair and it came tumbling down, falling past her shoulders. "We have an event tonight

and you need to leave, whoever you are. I'll let Tabatha know she had two people asking for her, but she's not here—”

“Who’s at the door...” Tabatha’s voice rang out from the second floor, alerting us before she appeared, standing at the bannister. Her voice trailed off, seeing us. “Oh.”

Oh?

That’s not what I expected to hear.

I moved past the girl, heading for the stairs.

“Hey! No. You can’t go up there.”

Tabatha wasn’t saying anything.

The door girl was trying to get in front of me again, in front of Hawk, too, since she was behind me. “Tabatha, get to your room. You two, stop!”

Tabatha sighed. “Just let ’em up. I should’ve gone to see her anyway.”

That really wasn’t the response I expected from Tabatha.

Door Girl paused, frowning up. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Tabatha waved toward me as I was nearing the top of the stairs. “She’s Jordan’s family.”

“Oh.” Door Girl stepped to the side, all the fight leaving her. A flash of remorse filled her eyes instead, and she bit down on her bottom lip. Adjusting her top so it was firmly bunched under her breasts, the doorbell rang at that moment and she looked back to it. “I—that’s for me.”

“Go.” Tabatha nodded, her tone gentle. “I’ve got this.”

“You sure?” The girl hadn’t moved from her step. Her concern was clear.

“Yeah.” Tabatha’s voice was more firm. “I’m good. Promise.”

Door Girl gave her a look, widening her eyes. “Call if you need anything, anything. I mean it.”

“I will.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Go. Fix your tan line.”

The girl groaned before hurrying back down the stairs. “That’s what I get for crashing after a full night of studying. And we have the Zeta Kappa Mingle tonight, too.” Right before the door, she snapped back, pointing at Tabatha. “Don’t forget the green dress for tonight.”

“Got it.”

The door opened and we heard voices below, but I tuned them out. Tabatha was staring at me now, a sadness so strong that I started to feel it. She said quietly, “What Jordan told you wasn’t the total truth.” Her eyes flicked to Hawk, lingered, narrowing, and her head moved back an inch. “You brought backup for me?” She was fully taking in all of Hawk now. “A Taser gun? You a cop?”

Hawk snorted, stepping closer to me. “I’m thinking you don’t need the restraining you thought you did.”

Yeah. I was getting that vibe, too.

I gave her a small nod. “I can call for a ride. You can take off if you want.”

She nodded back, giving Tabatha a long look. “Not what I thought I was getting myself into this afternoon. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Five again?”

Please, God, no.

She started for the stairs, but flashed me a grin. “Eight this time. You’re in charge of coffees. I’ll text you the list in the morning.”

Coffees. I could do that.

Then I thought about it. I was their intern girl. I was the rookie. My mouth twitched. A part of me enjoyed that, for some reason. It felt... normal?

I’d never felt normal.

It was nice.

Tabatha started down the hallway and turned back at a door. Seeing me still standing by the stairs, she motioned with her head in a room. “You coming?”

I followed.

Her room was large, and sunny. Her windows went up and folded back, becoming half skylights. She had two, facing out over another large house next to them. A dresser was set between the two windows. A closet with sliding doors was on one side. Her desk was against her wall, just beyond the door when it was opened. In the middle of the room, facing the windows, was her bed. Two nightstands on either side of it.

As I stepped farther inside, she closed the door and disappeared into a door behind it.

It was a small bathroom. She looked like she had just enough space to stand inside.

Her voice called from inside, “I’m surprised it took you this long to come over.”

I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

She came back into the room, a hair curler in hand. She was rolling up the cord. “Because I cheated on Jordan. I hurt one of ‘yours.’” Her tone was biting. “I kept expecting to wake up with a knife to my throat.”

She moved to her desk, putting the hair curler there and sitting down. She swung around to face me, just waiting.

Waiting for what, I wasn’t sure.

I wasn’t sure myself.

I sat on the end of her bed. “You’re not a cheater.”

She reacted before catching herself. Her head snapped to the side as if I’d slapped her, but drawing in a harsh breath, she froze. I waited, watching as her chest slowly deflated. Then she swallowed before she closed her eyes, her head folding downward. “I didn’t expect this response either.” She raised back up, her eyes almost haunted. Her cheeks looked

more gaunt. She lost color, as if I were a ghost she just saw. “You were supposed to hate me, Bren. Why aren’t you hating me?”

I leaned forward, my elbows to my knees. “Instead of wasting that emotion, why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

Cross hadn’t waited to fill me in at the house tonight. He called right after his class, left me a message on the vibe he was picking up from his brother. He was right. There was more going on.

Tabatha didn’t respond.

I tried with a different question. “My brother is a bounty hunter. You know that, right?”

She laughed, and even that sounded hollow. “Everyone knows from Roussou. Channing Monroe takes care of our town. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because he hooked me up with a local team here. I’m going to be working with them.” Well, technically... “I mean, I am working with them.”

“So?”

“So, I have access to find out shit. Like who the fuck Tim Harper is and why someone we know thinks he’s a sleaze.”

She froze again, and then slowly, as if she were letting one muscle at a time unlock, a different look came to her. Hope? Fear? Caution? I couldn’t place it, but it was a mix of all of them and more. So much more.

She whispered, “Who said that to you?”

I didn’t think Blaise would care I dropped his name, he could handle himself, but it was the principle of not outing someone that kept me from saying his name. I shrugged. “Just someone.”

She stared at me, long and hard. “Blaise DeVroe.”

Her eyes closed a brief moment and she nodded to herself. Her hands raised up, raking through her hair before dropping

back to her knees. “That makes sense. He wouldn’t give a shit about Harper either. Zeke would. Zeke would get in trouble, and that’s why you’re not confirming it came from Blaise.” She was talking to herself, studying the wall by her door. “What do I do here? What do I do?” Another anguished whisper choked out as she closed her eyes, “I have no idea what to do here.”

I lost patience. “Just tell me what is going on! Let’s start there.”

“You don’t get it. You don’t—”

“Tabatha—” I had no idea what I was about to say, but then the words were just coming out. I was shocking myself right alongside Tabatha. “You told me that I didn’t know how to have friends. You’re right. You were right. With me, it was either family or not. But you became a friend. I have no clue how that happened. Sometimes I want to wring your neck because you’re a snob. You’re stuck-up. You can be a colossal bitch.”

“Look who’s talking!”

I spoke, ignoring her, “But Jordan fell in love with you, and somewhere along the line, I started liking you, too.” We had our hiccups, but there it was. I did like Tabatha. “I didn’t know what I was going to do when I came here today. Jordan didn’t tell us why you guys broke up until last night.”

“What?” Her lips parted. “Are you serious?”

I nodded. “We’ve been in this weird—anyway. It doesn’t matter. When I went to bed, I wanted to come here and rip you apart. I brought Hawk—”

“Her name is Hawk? Are you serious about that?” She was trying to keep from laughing.

I scowled. “I can call her back, if you’d like. You can laugh at her name right to her face. See how that goes for you.”

Her laughter vanished. She coughed, straightening up in her chair. “Right. Back to, uh, me and Jordan.”

“Blaise never said anything, but,” I had to relent something, “there was a look he gave Cross.”

“A look?” A look. Got Cross thinking, going over what Blaise hadn’t said, so he technically never said a thing.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her spark was gone again, the dull, dead look washing back in its place. She seemed to go pale before my eyes. “I can’t say anything. This is pointless.”

“Hey!” I didn’t like that. “I’m here. *I’m* not pointless.”

Tabatha’s eyebrows pinched together. Her forehead wrinkled. Her mouth turned down. “There’s nothing you can do. This has nothing to do with any of this and everything to do with my parents. It’s that type of shit.”

“Like what?” What could possibly be that bad for her to make out with a guy and end it with Jordan? “What? Does your dad owe Harper’s dad or something—”

No...

I clocked her reaction. She full-on twitched, jerking in her chair. If she’d been pale before, she was a ghost this time.

Oh no.

“Are you serious?” My mind was spinning. This was bad, so bad. “I was just throwing out guesses. I never—” Damn. Damn! “Holy shit, Tabatha.”

She jerked to her feet, coming to me fast. “You can’t say anything. My dad has no idea that I know. He has no idea about Tim.”

“But, wait. Okay. I know enough to know that I need to know all of it. Tell me everything.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, looking torn.

“Everything, Tab!”

“Oh, God.” She turned in a tight circle, starting to pace in front of me. Her hands went to her hair and she began pulling on her strands. “I can’t. I mean. Oh my God. I’m starting to hyperventilate. I can’t breathe, Bren. I can’t—” Turning back

to me, tears rolling down her face, her mouth was trembling. “It’s bad. It’s really bad.”

I was getting that. Stepping toward her, I softened my tone. “You have to tell me. Just tell me, Tabatha. Please.”

She stopped, her entire body now shaking. “I’m so scared to say anything. I know you. If I tell you, you will do something. I can’t let you do anything. You’re Jordan’s family. If you got arrested, you’d go to prison this time. Jordan couldn’t handle that. I can’t be the cause of him watching his sister go to jail. I can’t, I mean, I won’t tell you.”

“FUCKING TELL ME!”

My patience was gone.

She jumped again, slamming into her desk, but she didn’t seem to even notice. She half-perched there, and her shoulders lifted, held, and fell. I saw the defeat on her face. Her entire body, as well as her mind, seemed to give up, shrinking in front of me.

Then, she told me everything.



FROM: Tazsters

TO: Brenners

SUBJECT: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CAIN?

Wtf?! Tab called, completely losing it. And full disclosure, I’m somewhat being a bad friend. She had a ‘moment’ like a week ago and I forgot about it. School is good here. I’m loving it, but missing everyone there. Worried about Tab, to be honest. She was just crying and I couldn’t make out a lot of what she was saying. Something about a Zach?

Do we know a Zach? I feel out of the loop.

The Best Twin

CHAPTER EIGHT

CROSS

I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing, but then again... why not? Crazy things had happened in our life. Bren called as soon as she was done at the sorority, and she asked to meet up, just the two of us. We found an outside café off the grid, and it was there that she explained everything.

I already felt a pounding headache forming. "You serious about all of this?"

Bren nodded, taking me in, and I saw the shadow forming. "What are you thinking about doing?"

I snorted. "Not tell Jordan. He'll fucking flip out. He'll kill Harper and won't think twice about it."

"Which one?"

Another snort from me. "Does it matter?"

Seriously. I was tired. College was supposed to be different, more normal for us all. Yeah, I knew Bren was restless. She was feeling out of sorts from the group, but that was a stage. She'd find her niche. We'd find ours, and no matter what, no one was moving forward without the others. Four years. I wanted four years of being a student, no major brawls, no drug dealers fucking up my sister, no moments where I almost commit murder, and certainly no administration and crooked fucking cops arresting Bren. And that was all just the tip of the iceberg of our stuff.

Now this shit?

When would it be over? When would we be steady again? Even though I hadn't had her at that time, a part of me missed

the early days of just boozing it up with Jordan and Zellman, maybe taking the edge off with a girl—any girl—before I went in search of Bren. It was always Bren. I needed those girls, because if I hadn't, I would've needed Bren too much. They took off the edge for what I felt for her.

We moved at the right time for her, and that was my place. I always went by her timetable, about what she was ready for or what she wasn't. I knew when to push, when to hold back, when to launch forward, when to pick at her, when to piss her off, when to tickle her, when to love her, and when to make her melt. I knew Bren more than I knew myself, and staring at her, I already knew there was no way we weren't wading into this thing, neck fucking deep.

“Why?”

That shadow faded and a spark replaced it.

Oh yeah. She was lighting up for me already.

She wanted this fight. This was how Bren made sense of the world, where she was comfortable. This was her world and hell, her brother knew what he was doing when he sent those bounty hunters her way. Because they hadn't just happened to be in Cain's hospital the same time as Bren's shift. The guy got his wound in another town over, one that had a better hospital. Channing sent them there. He probably knew Bren would suffocate slowly at the job she had.

Fucker. He was smart.

And why hadn't I thought about it?

Honestly? Was I jealous because he thought ahead for her and I hadn't?

Pathetic. Me.

But she hadn't answered me. I scowled. “Answer me, Bren.”

“What?”

“Why do you want to get involved with this? What are we supposed to even do?”

She shifted on her seat, irritation tightening her features before she softened for whatever reason. That's what Bren did. She got mad, and then she either hardened herself or she melted. When she was with me, it was the latter. Every time. And I found myself grinning because fuck, I loved her.

I knew no matter what that I would do whatever she wanted me to do. She might've been floundering a little, but she didn't know how much she was my anchor. She was my North Star. I needed her or I'd be lost. I'd go off the rails.

Bren wanted justice in the world, and I knew that's where we were going. Me, I just wanted her.

"It's Tabatha." She shrugged, looking away from me as she answered.

That reply didn't sit right.

I frowned. "What do you mean, 'it's Tabatha?'"

"I don't know. She's, she's just, she's Tabatha."

That made no sense to me. "She's Jordan's cheating ex."

"She's my friend." She looked back to the table, starting to pick at some of the paint that had chipped off.

Understanding then dawned. "You care about Tabatha."

"Don't you?"

"Not really."

She frowned, going back to the paint, but this time with more determination.

I reached over, catching her hand before she got a splinter, and pulled her around to my side. She resisted at first, then I tugged her all the way over. We were in a back corner. People could still see us, but I didn't care. We weren't normally a PDA couple, except for the occasion neither of us gave a damn what others thought. And this was one of those moments for me.

I needed to touch her, reassure her.

Keeping her hand in mine, I refrained from hauling her onto my lap, shifting to face her a bit better. “I’m not important in this scenario. You are. I want to hear what you want to do.” I nudged her on the leg. “Talk to me.”

She flashed me a look.

Yeah, yeah.

I know. I didn’t open up about my brother either. There was a reason for that. One, he was a dick. Two, he was a dick. Three, he was still a dick, but I knew I couldn’t walk away from him and I also couldn’t stand to be around him. See my dilemma. Once I had the words, I would share them. I just didn’t have them at this moment in time.

“Tabatha. You care about her.”

She flicked her eyes up, but went with it. “I don’t have friends. It’s you, Jordan, and Zellman. I inherited your sister from you, but Tabatha is different. I hated her at first, couldn’t stand her. We had some issues, but I don’t know. I like her. And I’m pissed that we didn’t push Jordan or her about what happened before this. Two months, Cross. Two months. She’s been doing what she’s been doing for two months, and we could’ve helped it. We could’ve stopped it, even.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t know. She didn’t come to us. He didn’t either. We were—”

“We weren’t in each other’s businesses because of me. It’s my fault. All of this is my fault because you guys have been tiptoeing around me like I’m made of glass. And I get it. I don’t know how I feel about my dad being out of prison, but it doesn’t matter—”

“It matters.”

“—he’s not even here. He’s back in Roussou, so I’m here. I’m doing my life here.”

She faltered, and fuck me...I knew what she was struggling with.

She was feeling guilty about being here for me, for the guys, for herself, when he was out and alone. He killed for her;

that's how Bren thought about it, and she was here. Not there. She wasn't taking care of him. Instead, focusing on us. Her crew.

Fuck. Me.

I hadn't known. I hadn't seen it.

I saw it now, and no, no, no.

I wasn't going to let that happen, but that was so not a conversation we could have now. She wasn't ready for it, but dammit, when we did have it, I had to go hard. Super fucking hard. I was not going to lose her, lose us, because she felt guilty about her dad.

"Hey." I tipped her head up, my finger under her chin. "Tabatha is a big girl. So's Jordan. He didn't come to us earlier, and you know, he may never have until you pushed back. So, it happened. People made decisions for themselves and you didn't know because maybe you weren't supposed to know."

"What?" She half-laughed that question, while half-frowning at the same time.

I shrugged, keeping my finger under her chin. "I don't know. It sounded good. I don't care about Tabatha. I'm sorry. I don't. I care about Jordan, and I care about you. That's where my loyalty is, but you care about Tabatha, and if you want to be her friend, then we'll step in and help." I tugged her over, saying right as her mouth was an inch away. "Because guess what? We all give a damn about you." My hand slid to cup the side of her face, my fingers spreading out, anchoring her. "You know that, right? You're the glue."

She blinked, her face twitching in my hand, and then I swept in.

My lips touched hers, and it was right. It was always right when I kissed Bren.

Always right. Always perfect. Always home.

I angled my head, deepening the kiss, and I didn't give a fuck who was watching.

I was behind Bren's truck, both of us sitting at a stoplight. Her taillights were flooding my vision when my phone rang.

Glancing down, *Blaise calling*. I cursed and then hit accept.

"What?"

He cursed on his end. "In a mood? About to fuck your woman?"

Another curse and I was trying to strangle my steering wheel. "Not the time, dickhead."

He laughed from his end. "It's always the time to piss you off."

"You want to go? Another round?"

His response was instant. "Yeah!" And I should've known.

Blaise was the one who liked inciting me, not the other way around. He followed up what he said. I hadn't known my brother to bluff, but then again, I'd only known him a short time.

The light turned green and Bren's taillights switched. She eased forward. I followed behind.

"We're almost home. What do you want?"

"Zeke called. He's pissed. Your girl talked to Tabatha?"

"Zeke's got no right to be pissed, and also, why the fuck do I care about that dick?"

"I'm not saying you should. Stop putting your issues on me. We all have our own different battles. Pissing Zeke off is no skin off my nose. I'm happy to send him your way. I'll bring the popcorn."

An ugly laugh ripped from me, deep in my throat. "Yeah. And you and I both know that if your best friend actually went

against us, you would wade into the fight. You'd take over the fight for him. You know it. I know it. Zeke knows it."

"Yeah. Maybe. But I'd still have fun getting everyone riled up in the process."

Another laugh, this one not as ugly because he *would* enjoy it.

"Bren covered for you. She said you actually never said anything."

"Meh. It's fine. I didn't, but I still sent you guys there. That is on me, but I don't care. I'm not actually calling to rip you a new one for doing what I wanted. I'm calling because I want to know when you're moving on Harper."

Bren pulled into the driveway. Jordan's and Zellman's trucks were already there, so I pulled up to the curb. Turning the ignition off, I sat there, my phone in hand. "Why do you have a hard-on for Harper?"

"Because he's a dick, and he did something to Aspen." His voice dropped, becoming low and dangerous. He was my own brother, and a tension ran through me. I found myself gripping the phone tighter as he added, "For that, the fucker's going to bleed."

Shit. My brother was scary.

I said, "You want the first hit."

"Fuck yeah."

I frowned. "Why now? Why use us to get at him?"

He was quiet a moment. "I've got my reasons, but know this. I've been jonesing for the right time to go at him. This is the right time. I'm in."

"And Zeke?"

"Zeke's *my* best friend."

I raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that? This guy is in his fraternity. They're called brothers for a reason."

"Shut up."

“No—”

“Shut up, for you. You’re showing your ignorance right now, but don’t worry. You’ll get it one of these days.” He didn’t sound pissed, just amused.

I cursed again, shaking my head. “You *are* annoying.”

“You know we’ll have to kill each other one of these days. There’s only supposed to be one of us.”

“What?”

He laughed. “Just kidding.” He hung up after that.

He didn’t sound like he was kidding.

And with that unsettling thought, I headed inside.

Jordan was going to go apeshit.

CHAPTER NINE

BREN

Jordan went apeshit.

He threw the recliner into the kitchen.

That wasn't enough. He went for the other recliner.

That recliner went into the hallway.

The couch was flipped over.

“She—” He was red in the face, bending because he wasn't content with the couch how it was. He flipped it upright, but shoved it toward the kitchen. I had no idea where he was going with it. “She—” grunt “—thought—” more grunting, shoving. The couch was now past the dining room table. “—she could whore herself out? For WHAT? FOR WHO?” There was roaring as he climbed over the couch and kicked open the back door.

Zellman, Cross, and I stood in a straight line. I think we were all of the same mindset, simply waiting for him to tire himself out.

Jordan went back to grunting and cursing, and soon the couch was through the door and out onto the patio. That couch wasn't ours. If we damaged it, who was I kidding? If we were able to stay here for all four years, the couch was going to be replaced. Probably multiple times.

“Her father fucked up.”

He was kicking the couch over to the lawn as he talked.

“So he took a bad loan out from Harper, Sr.”

Another kick. A shove. More grunting and cursing.

“And fucking Harper, Sr. is going to cash it in, I don’t know what the fuck that means, but Tabatha being Tabatha—” one last heave and Jordan throws one end of the couch over the other and it tumbles all the way to the street. And we’re also on a slight hill. “—being fucking Tabatha, decides to whore herself out to Harper, Jr. to get the Dad Douchebag off her own douchebag father’s back, and for who?” He stalked to the street, lining up on the other side of the couch as he bent down. “For her mother! All this shit is for her own mother. Not for her dad, not for herself, not for either Harper Fucktwit, but for her mom. She doesn’t want her mom getting sick from worrying, from the shame? That’s the catalyst for all of this.” With a roar, he picked up the couch and began walking back to the house. With the couch. Over his shoulder and over his bent back.

As if we were one person moving in tandem, Zellman, Cross, and I shifted, stepping back.

Jordan went past, still with the couch on his back.

He dropped it, straightening.

The guy wasn’t even fazed.

I glanced at Cross. What the hell did they do in the gym all those hours? Could he do that, too?

As if sensing my thoughts, Cross shot me a look, his eyes darkening. *Not now.*

I grinned back, but he was right. Back to Jordan.

Instead of starting to toss it, because that’s what I’d been expecting, he righted it back up and dropped down onto it. Burying his head into his hands, he leaned over and yelled, “FUUUUUUCK!” Looking up, his face was stricken. “Did she sleep with him? Why?” His voice hitched. “Why didn’t she come to me? To us?”

Zellman coughed. “Uh, I’m not trying to disagree with you or set you off so you’re all Hulk again, but what could we have done? What could we do? None of us have parents who have connections.”

Well...

Jordan glanced at me, his eyes sliding to Cross.

I followed his look and yeah. That wasn't technically true.

Cross noticed and backed up a step. "What?"

Jordan stood, but he did it slowly. He was being smart, though his words came out hurriedly. "Bren's connections are to a motorcycle club and bounty hunters. Zellman—Zellman's connections are to us. And my parents own a small construction company, emphasis on the small part. You, though. Your dad works—"

"But he doesn't. He took a new position this year. He's got no connections anymore."

"But—"

"But nothing, Jordan," Cross raised his voice. "None of us have the connections to handle a bad loan."

"Eh..."

I was getting sick of the ...

This one came from Zellman, and his eyes were pinned to me. "Do we *really* not have those connections? Bad loan, right? That's something in Bren's circles, if you ask me."

A growl emanated from Cross' throat and he stepped in front of me. "That's bad business."

"Bad loan. The one guy's daughter felt like she needed to whore herself out—"

"I don't like the whore word." My two cents.

"—or heavily kiss the guy to appease the son, whom she was hoping could appease the dad to lay off trying to get his money back from the bad loan. I mean," Zellman took all of us in before swallowing, "that doesn't seem like it's in the up-and-up business world, if you know what I mean."

His gaze came to me.

Jordan's gaze was on me, too.

Cross was rigid, standing in front of me. "No."

Jordan noted, his tone softening, “She could call her brother, talk it out with him. He might have ideas.”

“I said no!”

Jordan sighed. He shifted forward, his foot sounding on the pavement, a rock scraping over it. “Bren was arrested last semester and you lost your shit. You had to be carried out of the police station.”

I sucked in my breath, and held a hand out, touching Cross’ back. It was so tense. He was solid, almost like pavement.

“Guys.” Jordan’s anguish was so deep, so raw.

I stepped around Cross, hearing him draw in a sharp breath, straightening as if my touch had kept him in place. His hand came to my arm, sliding to my wrist. He held me there, keeping me to his side.

Jordan choked out, “A phone call. One call.” He looked at Cross. “What could it hurt?”

As he spoke, Cross’ tension just doubled.

I moved forward, my hand lifting, and I laid my hand on his chest. With my palm against his shirt, I held it in place, speaking to Jordan. “One call to Channing. We’ll see what he thinks.”

Zellman spoke up, “Tabatha has to be there.”

“Z...” From Jordan, a whisper.

Zellman shook his head, his jaw firm. “She has to be there. She has to know. This is going to affect her and her family. She has to know.” He focused only on Jordan. “You’re going to have to apologize for all that pussy you ran through, thinking she cheated on you willingly.” His mouth twitched. “That’s going to suuuuck. But on the bright side, at least you didn’t get to her sorority girls yet.”

Jordan expelled some air, shaking his head and massaging his jaw. “You’re a dick.”

“Nah.” Zellman pounded him in the shoulder before stepping back quickly. “Just family.” He began backing toward the house, his hands in the air. “*My* two cents, we should do this as soon as possible.” His eyes fell to the couch. “And that thing should go in the garage. We can drink beer out here on it.”

Jordan frowned, but he was also trying not to grin at the same time. “We need a couch inside.”

“Yeah,” Zellman called out from inside the garage, opening the door to the house. “We can con Blaise into buying one. He’s rich and bad at cards. He’ll cough up two grand easily.”

That had merit. I asked Cross, “Does your brother play cards?”

Cross shrugged. “Who the fuck knows. He’ll give you the money. Just tell him he can hit Harper first.”

“No!” Jordan barked out, his eyes heated again. “Harper’s mine.”

Cross got quiet. “Harper did something to Aspen.”

The heated look only got worse. “Then he can think he’s getting first crack, but the reality is that I’ll get first crack.”

Cross was quiet, then nodded. “I’m good with that.”

Zellman yelled from the house, “Can we get back to our crew meeting? We didn’t finish it from last night, and I have curse words to say about Sunday having Bren’s ex’s baby. It’s my turn in the chair.”

I grimaced. “When he says it like that, it just sounds God-awful.”

Jordan chuckled. “Good thing that documentary is already done, huh? Can you imagine if they got this shit on there?”

No. I *didn’t* want to imagine that.

We went inside and Zellman got his turn to spew.



FROM: Tazsters

TO: Brenners

SUBJECT: holy fuckers fucking around

I just got off the phone with Tab. I'm coming there. I'm packing my bags now. We're going to bust him open. Wide open. I'm heated, Bren. Seriously fucking heated. Please tell me you guys are going all-crew on him? Or maybe not.

That'd be evidence, wouldn't it?

Never mind.

Code words now.

When I want you to beat someone up, I'll use the word 'hug.' I really really really want you to fucking hug the fuck out of the Zach guy.

Wait.

Zeke, right?

I'm still confused on who we're hating, but I need to know because I'm seriously hating. I'm looking him up. I can cyber stalk his ass. I'll find everything there is to know about him, so you can, you know—hug him. For me. Extra hard.

Race is in too.

—Still The Best Twin

CHAPTER TEN

BREN

Two days later and we had everyone in our living room, my phone sitting in the middle of the coffee table.

“This is a nice couch.”

No one groaned hearing Blaise’s smug comment, but I knew everyone wanted to. He’d been rubbing it in since he showed up, and Zellman hadn’t been able to talk him into losing a game of cards. Turns out that Cross’ brother wasn’t a big gambler when it came to cards. He mentioned something about ‘reforming himself’ so he couldn’t do cards, but when Blaise pushed for the reason behind the invitation, Cross told him. Grudgingly.

This morning, a new couch was delivered to our front door, no cards were ever dealt.

“Shut up,” Jordan sniped at him, throwing Tabatha a glare, too. “No one fucking asked for your charity.”

Blaise snorted, leaning back on the couch, throwing his arm up on the back. “Right. Instead, you were hoping to con it out of me.” Leaning forward, elbows to his knees, he gave Jordan a hard look. The smugness was gone. “And it’s not charity. I now own something in your house. Do you not get how much pleasure that brings me? I can rub it in your faces anytime I want.”

Jordan’s eyes narrowed. He was standing against the back wall and he readjusted, crossing his arms over his chest. “We can take a knife to it, throw it out. Problem solved.”

“Good thing I took insurance out on it. I’ll just send another one.”

Jordan’s head looked ready to explode. His problem wasn’t really Cross’ brother being here. It was Tabatha, who hadn’t said a word since she entered the house. She was standing in a corner by herself, with a similar posture as Jordan, her arms hugging herself.

“Blaise.” A welcomed interruption. Aspen, Blaise’s girlfriend, had come with him. While Blaise was a jackass of most proportions, she was the opposite. Quiet. Long legs that she told me once had put her in a few modeling jobs. She was a natural beauty with willowy blonde hair and green eyes. I was also convinced she was made of magic, because while I didn’t totally understand it myself, I’d become fiercely protective of her. It seemed she had the same spell over Blaise. He was a kitten around her. And her slight admonishment worked.

Blaise eased back, throwing her a regretful look.

She patted his arm before he whipped it around her, pulling her onto his lap.

She gasped in shock, but then was shaking in silent laughter. Blaise had his head buried in her neck, whispering things to her that no one wanted to know.

Tabatha was eyeing them, a keen look of her own regret tightening her face. Her mouth pressed in and she seemed to suck in some air and held onto it. As she expelled it, her gaze went to Jordan before flicking away, her head folding down.

“Okay.” Cross took charge, sitting on the recliner beside the coffee table. He gave his brother a dark look. “Can you stop?”

Blaise grinned over the top of Aspen’s head. “Feeling sick, brother? Too much drinking last night?”

“If I’m sick, it’s because—” He rolled his eyes, turning to me. “You ready?”

I nodded, my eyes moving to Tabatha one more time. She’d been told Jordan’s reaction and had agreed to come, but

when she didn't move forward from her corner, I took in how her hands were trembling. She stuffed them farther around herself, her own arms now covering them.

Hiding.

Pain sliced through me because there'd been a time when I had done the same. The problem was that what you were hiding from never went away. It just grew in size and power. I said to Cross, my eyes on her, "It's time."

My own stomach was tied in a knot as I took the seat beside Blaise.

Aspen was still on his lap, but she had shifted so it seemed she was more just lounging, and he happened to be the chair she picked. Both were waiting, watching me.

Reaching forward, I took my phone and dialed Channing's number.

I put him on speaker when he answered. "Yo! What's up, little B?"

There was a loud whooshing sound on his end, but he sounded happy. Cheerful. Some of the tension in the room lifted just hearing his voice.

I leaned forward. "Where are you?"

"Why are you echoing?"

"You're on speaker."

"Okay. Why?" We could hear his confusion. "What's going on? You sound like trouble."

More of my tension lifted. There was only the small knot in my stomach. I flattened my hands over my legs. "I'm not in trouble."

He grumbled, "Yeah. Let me be the judge. What's going on? Who else is there?"

Cross spoke up, "Cross and our whole group, plus a few others."

We heard the whooshing sound before Channing's voice came back, "Who are 'a few others'?"

We were all expecting a sarcastic response from Blaise, but when Cross sent him a warning look, he only held his hands up. Aspen leaned forward, saying, "Hi, Bren's brother. This is Aspen. You remember me?"

"Oh yeah. You're jackass' girlfriend. Hi."

She laughed, leaning back against Blaise's chest and relaxing. His hands came to her hips as he tipped them both forward. "Aspen said I had to be nice to her brother's friends. So this is me being nice." He flashed Aspen a grin before pressing a kiss to one of her temples, brushing a strand of her hair back. The entire gesture was loving, tender.

Tabatha made a sound, her eyes wide. Her mouth parted in a surprised grunt. "How many brothers and sisters are there in this group? This is becoming ridiculous."

Blaise's eyes narrowed.

Aspen covered his hand, speaking before he could, "Channing is Bren's brother. Blaise is Cross' brother. And Channing is friends with my brother. It's not that difficult to follow."

"Who is your brother?" Tabatha shot back. "Please tell me his name doesn't start with a B or a C. Can we get some more Ts in the mix?"

Aspen frowned. "My brother's name is Nate."

Channing called from the phone, "Is this call about Nate?"

Aspen looked to me. Cross looked to me. Everyone looked to me. Well, except Blaise. He was only focused on Aspen, drawing a circle on the back of her neck and ignoring the rest of the noise.

Okay, then. Seemed I was in charge.

I started, "We're calling because we need to run something by you, see if you might have an idea how to handle it."

“Okay, but first who’s the other chick? The bitchy sounding one.”

Zellman snorted, his head looking firmly toward the floor.

Jordan even laughed at that.

Blaise was ignoring us.

A choked sound rippled from Tabatha, and that seemed to get her free from the corner. She came forward a few steps, and her hands loosened, falling down but still holding onto the other wrist. She was half-hugging herself. “My name is Tabatha Sweets and I’m the reason for this call.”

Silence.

Channing said, “Okay? Look. I’ve got a bounty in my truck trying to kick out the windows and piss on my men. I’ve stepped away from them while they’re being railed by the bounty’s fucked-up family. Get to the point or I’m ending this call and calling my sister later to talk to her alone. Got it?”

Tabatha didn’t respond right away.

Channing wasn’t down with that. “Start talking. Now!”

She jumped forward. “My father is Henry Sweets.” She stammered to a stop.

A part of me was appreciating this moment because I’d seen Tabatha say a lot of things, but rarely when she was flustered about how to respond. Pissed. Happy. Feisty. Scared. But this, when she seemed just flummoxed, and yes, I was preening that I had used both of those words just now, but that’s what she was. She was flustered by my brother.

I was loving it.

“I know your dad. Is that why I’m still standing here waiting to hear the reason for this call?”

I was really loving this.

Tabatha blinked rapidly. Her hands came undone and she wiped them down her face. “Uh—yes. Yes, sir.”

Channing groaned. “Do not let my sister hear you call me sir. I will never hear the end of that.”

I chirped up, grinning, “Too late.” A pause. “*Sir.*”

He cursed into the phone. “Bren, you start with that and you don’t want to hear what I’ll start calling you back.”

Yep. I loved my brother. A lot.

I just laughed. “Just hear her out and stop trying to scare her. She’s had a hard time.”

“Why don’t you summarize it for her, hmm? I’m not lying about my guys and my bounty right now. I really don’t have the time.”

I raised my eyebrows at Tabatha and she nodded, stepping back into the corner, her shoulders falling down again. She looked almost relieved.

“Tabatha’s dad took out a bad loan to a guy named—”

Blaise spoke for this one, “Timothy Harper, Senior. He owns some restaurants in LA, but also some—”

Channing cut in, “Strip clubs. Yeah. I know of him. He has a strip club that’s on the outskirts between Roussou and Frisco. He’s got some illegal connections. Bren, what the fuck?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re mixed up in this?”

Oh. “Tab is a friend. The issue we have is that—”

Tabatha remained in her corner, but spoke up, her voice shaking, “I overheard my dad on the phone. I ran home one day. It was a quick trip. He didn’t know I was coming home and he was yelling at someone on the phone. My mom was gone, but I needed—”

“It’s okay.” Channing was more soothing now. “You don’t have to explain what you went there for. Just tell me the bullet points.”

She closed her eyes, both sides of her mouth turning down. Whatever she’d endured over the last two months had taken a

toll. I noticed that she had lost weight, but I hadn't really took note of it. I hadn't given it any thought, but seeing her now, really seeing her, she looked as if two gusts of wind could blow her over. That was not the Tabatha Sweets I knew from school.

Regret and pain speared me, going right through my sternum.

I should've been a better friend.

Hell. I should've been a friend.

I'd been lost in my own world, the one where I was not thinking about my dad.

Tab yelled at me months ago for not being a good friend. She was right.

She was talking, "...He threatened my dad."

"You heard it?"

She was nodding, but said for Channing, "Yes. He said, 'Pay up or we'll hurt your wife and kid.'"

Thud!

All of us whipped around. Jordan was leaving the room, a hole in the wall where he'd been standing.

Aspen's mouth turned into an O. Blaise shifted her to the couch, easing out from under her. He shot Cross a look before heading after Jordan.

Now that was interesting, but Cross stayed put. So did Zellman.

"I don't want to know what that was, and since I'm not hearing any screams, let's move on. Sweets, what exactly were the words used?"

She was still looking in the direction Jordan had gone, out through the kitchen and into the backyard. "Um." She was blinking again, shaking her head. "Oh. He said what I said, but when my dad started to get upset, he said, 'If you don't pay, we'll put your wife in the hospital.'" That was it. My dad got quiet after that, and I left the room. My mom's been sick this

summer. They've been running tests on her to find out what's going on, but she can't take any more stress. And I don't know what he meant by it, but nothing can happen to my mom." Her voice started rising, shaking.

I shifted on my feet, feeling a pull to go to her, but Aspen was on her feet, heading for Tabatha before I got there. She didn't know Tab, but it didn't seem to matter. She stood next to her, taking Tabatha's hand in hers and it seemed to help. Tabatha nodded, her eyes closed, and she spoke again, her voice more firm, "I'd met Tim Harper, Junior, a few times. I knew he liked me, and I knew that his dad doted on him, so I thought I could date Tim, get him to call his dad off of mine." Guilt flooded her face and she looked to where Jordan was outside. He was standing there, Blaise not far from him. The two looked like they were talking, or Blaise was talking and Jordan was listening, his hands in fists at his side. "I think it worked, but now the group knows and," she couldn't finish, her eyes finding mine. There was a deep plea in them, one I felt deep down, and was answering the pull before I even knew it. I was crossing the room, standing next to her. I didn't hold her hand. That wasn't the type of person I was, but I was there. I was at her side, and I spoke for her now, "There's a room of guys in here who want to beat the shit out of Junior."

Aspen said, "Blaise already beat him up once."

Cross frowned, his eyebrows dipping. "Blaise asked to have first crack at Harper."

Aspen's mouth turned inwards. "Yeah. I think he really enjoyed it. He'd like to justify a second go."

Channing chuckled from his end. "Jesus, that kid. Okay. Listen to me again. This isn't the first time I've dealt with shit like this. Girl, stop putting yourself in the path. You're just messing yourself up and hurting people who care about you. Harper, Sr. might have held off because of his kid, but I think you know that it's not a long-term solution. I guarantee he's probably waiting until at least Thanksgiving before delivering another threat anyway."

Cross asked, "How can you guess that?"

“He’s using weaknesses. Thanksgiving is the next time his kid will be home. My guess is he’ll threaten Tabatha the week before, say he needs the money or he’ll have something happen to the girl. The wife threat will still be there, obviously, but he’ll just double down.”

“Oh, God.” Tabatha reached out, grabbing onto my arm. She just held onto me.

I turned, locking eyes with her. “He won’t touch you.”

“No.” Channing’s voice filled the room, firm and assertive. “He won’t. I’ve got guys and I’ve got connections. We’ll send teams out to start watching Harper’s goons. There’s only one team of guys he uses for jobs like this. We won’t let anything happen to you or your mom. You can hang up there, do whatever college kids do, and don’t get my sister in trouble. You hear me, Cross? That last one is for you. Bren doesn’t get arrested. It’s my rule. She goes to jail and I’m hunting your head.”

Cross flashed me a grin. “I got it.”

“Good. Okay. Bren, I’ll call later. You all just steer clear of Harper and wait until I let you know what’s happening on the adult end. Got me?”

Zellman asked, “Can we still hurt Junior?”

Cross shot him a look.

Zellman shrugged. “You know Jordan will go at him anyway.”

“I’m going to pretend I wasn’t asked that because I can never condone violence, not if I’m going to continue being an upstanding moral leader for my sister, *who I don’t want arrested ever again.*”

“Yeah, yeah.” Cross leaned forward to my phone, picking it up. “We got you.” He ended the call and looked at me. “We’re going to find Harper tonight. Put an end to that shit from our end.”

I could feel Tabatha trembling, still holding onto me, and a darkness was moving inside of me.

It was the old Bren. The one I stuffed down, the one I thought had gone away. She was still there, but it was as if she'd been sleeping all this time. Now she was waking, and she was smiling, stretching.

She was getting ready.

I smiled at my boyfriend. "Sounds good to me."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BREN

I was sitting outside at the patio table, alone.

Everyone left. Jordan took Tabatha for a drive, but I was assuming both would be back to stay the night here. Zellman got a call from someone and took off for their house. He was now resorting to quick text updates with a random name like this last one.

Zellman: Headed to Biff's. Back later.

Me: Who the hell is Biff?

Zellman never answered. Neither did Jordan, because Zellman's text was to the whole crew. The back door opened a minute later. Cross came out, carrying his phone in one hand and a drink in the other. He paused as the door closed behind him and looked up from his phone and then at me.

“Who's Biff?”

I sighed, slumping down in my chair. “Fuck's sake. How are we supposed to go and get him if we don't know who Biff is?”

Cross shrugged, coming over to put his drink down. His phone went into his back pocket. “You want a drink?”

Did I? “God, yes.” I was suddenly parched.

“Be right back.”

“Where's your brother?”

He didn't look back, just motioned toward the street. “He and Aspen took off when you came out here.”

Huh.

My phone rang.

Channing calling.

I hit accept. “Hey.”

“Do I need to be worried about you over there in Cain?”

There would’ve been a time I would’ve hated hearing those words from him, would’ve felt he hadn’t earned that right to be worried about me. Now I accepted them, welcomed them, cherished them. Warmth spread through me, and I smiled. “I’m good.”

He was silent a second. “Fuck. I’m still going to worry.” He groaned on his end. “Anyway, I am assuming one of those dipshits is going to move on Harper’s kid. Don’t confirm or deny. I don’t want to know, but I’m letting you know that I’m assuming it. We’ll plan for it.”

He was doing what he did, taking care of people. It wasn’t a role Channing asked for, but somehow he took it on, and now it was just his to own. Everyone in Roussou knew it, too.

He sighed into the phone. “We’re going to watch Harper here as much as we can, so get the word out to our usual people. If he dispatches his team and they’re heading to Cain, you might need to owe a favor to your team there.” He kept going, “I don’t know your team that well up there. Brock has a good rep. He’s solid. Was military. Hawk’s known, too. Gramps and Bonnie have been around forever, so their rep is nationally known.”

Right. Not my usual crew, but my *job* crew.

He continued, “They’re known as tight-knit. Mostly a family group. Gramps and Bonnie hooked up later in their lives, but still, they’ve been together probably twenty years. Bonbon is nuts, so stay away from her if you can. She’s Bonnie’s daughter, and rumor is that she’s obsessed with Shetland. You’re staying away from Shetland, right?”

“As much as I can.” He and I hadn’t discussed any of them, not to this length, at least.

The door opened again, and Cross came out. Blaise was behind him, a cocky smirk on his face, as usual.

Cross frowned at the phone, but placed my drink in front of me, taking the seat next to me. Blaise pulled out the chair on the far side, sitting down and immediately lounging back, throwing one arm over the back corner of his chair.

I noticed he didn't have a drink, and there was a restless edge to him. He was staring at the phone, too.

'Taking stock.' That's what Cross said his brother did, and I was seeing it now. The cocky smirk was a mask, but there was a serious air to him. His eyes flashed to mine, and for a second, he looked like he knew he was caught. Then his smirk came on full force and he didn't move. He didn't say a word, but I sensed him transforming. He was pulling back, the mask being pulled more firm, more set, and then it was only mask.

Huh.

"—they're a family-type unit, but I'll call Gramps. I need to come up, meet Brock face to face. He's their leader. They can step in if we need it." A beat passes. "Bren? You still there?"

"Yeah. Cross and his brother joined a minute ago."

Another beat of silence, this one more pregnant. "Okay. I'll call once I know more. Love you."

"Love you." I reached forward. Channing ended the call, but I tucked my phone into my pocket and lifted my chin toward Blaise. "Thought you left?"

"I did. Took Aspen home. Now I'm back." He made a show of looking around. "It's just the two of you?"

Cross narrowed his eyes, watching his brother with me.

Blaise's gaze skirted between us before glancing to the driveway. "I'm noting a certain someone's truck is gone."

Cross and I shared a look.

Blaise was here for a reason.

Cross indicated him with his glass. “I wasn’t lying when I said I’d call you when we went to get Harper.”

“Bullshit.” It came out low and smooth, and Blaise didn’t lose an inch of his smirk. But he was calling his brother out.

Cross didn’t move. He was just like his brother, both were tense, both watching the other warily, as if waiting for a mortal adversary to make the first move before launching the all-out attack. The air started sweltering around us. My own chest felt like it was deflating from the pressure.

Blaise moved, but only to sweep a hand around the area. “Your boy is gone. Your other boy is gone, too. I highly doubt both are off doing their own thing.”

“You’re insulting us.”

“And your boys aren’t including you because they don’t want me in the mix.”

“Jordan and Tabatha—”

“I got a call, too. Sweets was dropped off at her sorority house ten minutes ago—”

We jumped up.

Curses were said.

Keys were grabbed.

Yeah. We knew what that meant.

Jordan and Zellman were going after Harper without us, and they were probably doing it to ‘protect’ us.

“Fuck!” Cross only said that much as we were both running for his truck.

“No.” Blaise was right with us. “My Wagon is faster.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, because he was right. His *was* faster.

Cursing, Cross darted in front of me.

Blaise went to the driver’s side. Cross was in the front passenger seat. I climbed into the back. We were peeling out of there in the next second. Blaise was grim, pushing buttons

on his dashboard, and a second later, ringing sounded through the vehicle.

“Yo! My dude! Tell me you’re coming over. We’ve got some—”

Blaise swung a tight left.

I had to throw a hand out, catching myself.

Cross didn’t move a muscle.

“Zeke,” Blaise cut his best friend off.

“What?” The party mood was gone in an instant. There was sound on his end, conversations, laughter, music and it was fading fast. He was moving away from it. “What’s going on?”

Blaise took another right, this time his side wheels going over the pavement. But watching him, he was calm, deadly calm. So was his voice. “You need to tell me where Harper is, and you need to not tell anyone else that you told me. You hear me?”

Zeke was quiet a second, then cursed. “You shitting me?”

“Zeke.”

“He’s here.”

I waited, expecting Allen to ask why his best friend was asking for Harper’s whereabouts. He didn’t.

He did ask, “You need me to get him somewhere?”

It was slow, and I couldn’t see the full transformation from my seat, but I saw Blaise smile, and it was calculating, mixed with a certain amount of pride. “Yes, I do.”

“Zeke,” Cross spoke up.

“What the fuck?! Your fucking brother is there with you?” A pause. “Who else? His bitch, too?”

“Hey!” I surged forward.

Cross was ahead of me, clipping out, “You goddamn say one more word about Bren like that and you will find me standing over you in bed one night. It won’t be now. It won’t

be tomorrow, but one night when you're having a good time, when you've forgotten about this threat, you'll go to sleep. You'll wake up to go piss and I'll be there. And I will make it so that you'll be peeing through a bag for an entire month, if not longer."

Shit.

A shiver went down my spine.

Cross leaned forward, closer to the dashboard, his voice dropping low. "Do you hear me?"

I loved my man, a whole lot right about now.

But Blaise was half-watching the road, half-watching his brother from the side of his eye, too. His hands were steady, hanging loosely on the steering wheel. I had a feeling he wasn't loose at all. That's when I knew that one day Blaise and I would have words. Cross was protecting me from Zeke. I would be protecting Cross from his brother.

As if sensing my thoughts, he stopped the car at a stoplight and glanced to where I was sitting. Seeing me studying him, he did a double take, then realization slid over him, and his eyes narrowed on me.

This whole thing was tricky. This thing being the different alliances, loyalties, relationships, those forced and those earned. Yeah. Tricky.

"Blaise." From Zeke.

The light was still red, so Blaise's eyes were still on me. "Yeah?"

"What. The. Fuck?"

Blaise's eyes remained narrowed. "Pitts and Greenly are heading your way. My guess is that they'll use Tabatha's phone to get Harper out of there. Don't let him leave."

"What am I supposed to do? He hates me because of you."

"Zeke!" Blaise whipped back to the front. The light turned green and he shot forward. "You will want us to get to Harper first, not them. Trust *me*."

There was another beat of quiet before the call dropped.

Cross said, "He won't help us."

Blaise almost sounded bored, saying, "He'll help us." He flipped his turn signal on and took another sharp turn. He was driving fast, but not reckless. He was safe, and he was also driving roads I didn't know about. Cross didn't say anything, but he seemed in tune with his brother's driving. Not me. I was holding on to keep from falling or slamming into the door.

Cross and Blaise sat almost like one person.

It would've been unsettling if I hadn't been more amazed at it, but then we were going down a back alley. I recognized Zeke's fraternity house. It was lit up. There was a fence, but you could see people walking around the backyard. The second floor had lights strung around the bannister. Almost every room was lit up as well, but when Blaise parked next to a back shed, he said, "Ironically, this is their study night."

Then he was crossing the alley and going to an opening in the fence.

Cross stayed back, turning to me. "You stay here."
"What?"

He touched my stomach, holding me back. "I mean it. I'll be safer going in with Blaise."

"You're drunk. That's why you're saying this."

"No. If Jordan and Zellman show up, tell them to hang back."

"You know they'll be pissed, knowing we figured out they came here without us."

"Cross!" A hiss from just inside the fence.

He began backing away from me, heading for Blaise. "Tell them. We'll deal with that later."

This wasn't the first or second or even sixth time that I'd been kept out of the action lately. I was starting to get annoyed. The old Bren was getting annoyed, too, and that wasn't good for *anyone*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CROSS

“I swear to God, Blaise. If you—”

He glanced back, hissing. “Shut up.” A savage wave with the back of his hand and he was leading the way. He moved by the back of the fence, making his way to the house as if he’d done this a few times. He was keeping low and remaining cautious, but still moving at a good pace.

I’d forgotten how big their backyard was. For a frat, it was huge.

No one was back here.

Blaise stepped up on the back porch, but he didn’t go for the main door. He headed, instead, in the opposite direction. Suddenly, a big window popped open and Blaise hauled himself inside. I climbed through, noting afterwards that it was their back bathroom.

The door was open leading to another room, and I heard more hissing.

“This is not cool. You...I’ll do this shit for you. Your brother, no way. No the fuck way.”

“Calm down.” Blaise was placating Zeke.

“I mean it, Blaise.”

“Dude. You knew this night would come. What’s your issue?”

“My issue is that this flew with the house once and you had them by the balls. This time, it ain’t the same. Nothing’s the same. You’re going to ruin this for me.”

“Harper’s ruining this for you.”

“Me or him. Choose.”

I froze, just in the bathroom.

Blaise laughed that off. “You or Harper? That’s not even a question.”

There was movement, then more movement. I heard clothes being ruffled and a low, almost panting hoarse sound from Zeke, “You know who I’m talking about. Me or your brother.”

“Don’t.”

I held still.

The argument turned serious in the other room.

My brother continued in the same tense voice, “You put that shit on me. Fuck you. You’re choosing him over me. That’s the real fight here. You knew. You knew, Zeke! I told you this night would come. You asked me about it.”

“That was a month ago.”

“Tough shit. Who cares? This guy is bad for your entire house.”

“He’s a legacy. His dad. His grandfather. His uncles. Some cousins. I can’t kick him out.”

“Then you’re choosing. Me, I have no problem doing this alone. Look the other way, Zeke. Better yet, take off. Spend the night with some chick. She can vouch for you, say you were there all night.”

I waited.

There was no response.

A floor creaked.

The door opened silently, and in the dark, I could just make out my brother’s eyes.

Zeke was behind him, his head down, his hands on his hips.

He looked up, saw me, and cursed. His entire face twisted. “Fine. Fuck. Fuuuck, man.” He was cursing, but he was being quiet about it.

“Go. I know what room he’s in.”

Another glare at me, then Zeke grabbed his keys, wallet, phone, and he shouldered past me. He slipped out exactly how we’d come in. Blaise nodded toward the door. “We need to wait a little. You think Bren can hold off the other two while we’re in here?”

Of course, he heard me.

I wasn’t even pretending otherwise by now. I nodded. “Yeah. She’ll hold them off.” I eyed him. “You’ve done this before?”

I caught a flash of his teeth in the room. “Let’s just say I really hate this guy. And I’m hoping this permanently scars him.”

Another alarm sounded through me.

My brother was one scary guy. I was starting to wonder if I was better off as his brother, or worse off? Time would tell.

“Come on.” He started for the door, but it swung open.

“Zeke? You said—” A guy walked in.

He took two steps inside, his entire face squished up in annoyance, saw Blaise, saw me, and he visibly jerked to a halt. He went white as a ghost at the same time he turned to yell, but my brother was on him. He grabbed the guy’s shoulder, thrust the meaty side of his arm into his mouth, and moved, catching the door with his foot so it wouldn’t slam shut.

That all happened in two seconds.

It took me a second to realize this was Harper.

The next second I was moving. I grabbed a towel from the hanger. Blaise took his arm out at the same time I stuffed the towel into his mouth, and then I was holding Harper against the wall. Blaise moved back, easing the door shut so it clicked softly. Then we both pushed Harper over.

He wasn't fighting.

That registered on the third second.

His eyes never moved from Blaise, and he was trembling.

This guy? This was the dirty pervert whom Tabatha had forced herself to kiss for her dad? He looked like a terrified five-year-old. He was muscular, with blond hair that was combed back. He was wearing khaki shorts and an actual pink polo. Fucking pink. I didn't think guys like this existed.

I looked down. Yep. Loafers. They looked like velvet, but I couldn't be sure in the dark without feeling them. I was only working off the moonlight streaming through the window.

Blaise took one look at him, rolling his eyes. "Jesus, Harper. I thought you'd have more fight this time around."

I took the towel out and Harper said, not even giving me the time of day, "Right. 'Cause that helped last time."

Blaise shrugged. "Yeah. Well, this time you should be happy it was me here and not Zeke." He bent, grabbing something from Harper's pockets. He pulled his phone out and it was lighting up. *Tabatha calling* was on the screen.

He answered, "Pitts or Greenly?"

I cursed, grabbing the phone from him. "Hey."

A moment of silence, and then Jordan was cursing. "You fucking kidding me? You took him with that piece of shit?"

Blaise smirked.

Harper's eyes were wide again, his mouth falling down a bit.

Jordan wanted this guy. That meant Jordan was going to get this guy. I looked right at my brother, because he wasn't the only one who could choose. "There's a panel in the fence that's loose. Bren saw us come in. She can show you."

Blaise swore under his breath, turning away.

I added into the phone, "Go the opposite way of the back door. We'll be at a big bathroom window."

“I could yell, you know.”

Both Blaise and I turned to him.

He seemed to lose all the blood from his face again, and he staggered a step. The back of his head hit against the wall, knocking a picture down. Blaise shut his eyes, sighing. “Seriously?”

We had to move.

I took Harper by the arm, moving him to the bathroom.

Again, I expected a fight. Again, there was no fight. If I were this guy, I would’ve been throwing punches. I would’ve had the door torn down by now, maybe have the window shattered. I’d be damned sure to wake the entire house up.

I would not be *walking* out. That’s what I wouldn’t be doing.

“Let’s go.” Blaise followed us into the bathroom, shutting the door.

Harper was now focused on me. “Shit. You guys do look alike. I didn’t believe the hype.”

Blaise laughed. “We’re all in psych together.”

Harper twisted his head around. “I’m not in your psych class.”

“You sure as shit are, when you bother to show up.”

Harper looked back at me. “Damn.”

Then we heard soft footsteps on the porch and two figures showed at the window.

Harper tensed, moving back into me. He started to resist me. “No. No way, dude.”

Now he came to his senses?

Jordan wasn’t having it. A hard glint in his eyes, he reached through the window, took hold of Harper’s polo and yanked the guy through the window. His head and torso cleared it. The tops of his legs banged into the window frame, but Zellman was there. He knelt, scooping the bottom half of

Harper, and as I climbed out, the two of them were halfway across the yard.

Blaise hopped out after me. He grabbed my shirt at the same time he reached back inside, pulling the window shut again. He released me, moving around me. "Can't be too trustful." He was hurrying after the guys.

I darted after, both of us nearing them just as they got to the fence.

Bren was there, holding the loose board open. Her mouth was set, her eyes almost as hard as Jordan's. She was not happy.

Blaise noted it, too, whistling under his breath. "Fight sex, brother. You're going to have fun tonight."

"Shut up." Bren pinned him with a dark look.

Blaise still grinned, but he kept quiet. Then he stopped, because now he figured out his mistake.

Jordan and Zellman were carrying Harper to Jordan's truck.

And guess where Bren and I were both going?

He had his keys out, but he paused in the middle of the alley. "Fuck."

Bren moved around him, taunting him, "Can't leave your Wagon here. People will see it."

I moved around the other side. "And you know we won't let you follow us."

Yeah. He had messed up.

"Cross." Jordan was digging into his pockets. He tossed me keys. He and Zellman put Harper in the back, climbing in right after him.

I asked Bren, "You want to drive?"

Her scowl was instant. "Don't think that's going to appease me."

My brother laughed behind me. "Fight. Sex."

Ignoring Blaise, I followed Bren's cue. She went to the passenger side, so I got behind the wheel. Starting the engine, I kept the lights off, using the alley lights as I backed us up. Once I got to the road, I reversed, turned the lights on, and headed off.

Jordan opened the window so we could talk, but as I drove out of town, no one said a word.

Not even Harper.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BREN

We'd been here before.

Different night. Different town. Different guy.

Same situation.

A guy hurt someone Jordan loved. The last guy had hurt his sister. This guy touched his girl. It didn't matter if Tabatha chose to do it. She felt put in a situation where she had to, or her mom was in danger. To Jordan that meant this guy took advantage of Tabatha, i.e., he hurt her.

The last time all the guys took hits. This time, at the end of an abandoned dead end, Jordan pushed the guy away and began circling him.

“What's going on? Why'd you ditch DeVroe?” The guy was looking at us, edging backwards. He was skittish, jumping as Jordan kept moving around him.

“You touched Tabatha Sweets.”

Jordan's head was down. He kept going, swinging his arms at his side, a gentle sway, as if he were slowly warming up. What he was doing was the opposite. He was fighting for control, but there was no mistaking the seriousness in his tone. The danger rippling from him, even as he towered over Harper by a few inches.

The guy's massive throat moved as he swallowed. “Wha—you know Tabatha?”

“Did you know she was only with you because of her father and the threats to her mother?”

Harper didn't answer, jumping to the left as Jordan circled on the right. He jumped the other way as Jordan completed his move, and so on. They kept dancing around, except one was prowling and the other wanted to hide.

“Wha—what are you talking about?”

“Answer the goddamn question.” Jordan lunged. He was in Harper's face.

Harper cowered, his legs trembling. The front of his khaki shorts darkened. Liquid moved down his leg.

Jordan saw it, his eyes skimming down.

No one mentioned it.

“Did you know Tabatha was whoring herself to get your dad off her dad's back?”

The guy looked frozen in place, unable to answer.

“DID YOU KNOW?!”

“Yes! Yes.” Harper's eyes closed. He gritted his teeth, flinching, then he looked at the ground. “Yes. I knew. I knew that's why she was with me.”

That's all Jordan needed.

His eyes were still hard, looking dead as he skimmed over us. He wanted to do more than hurt him. His gaze fell to me, then to Cross. It stayed on Cross, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was remembering a time we had to plead with him also. Hurting was fine. Permanently hurting was a whole different ballgame. And beyond that, never go there.

I moved forward, my voice low. “No, Jordan.”

He swung away, but I saw the stricken look there. It mingled with something so cold that it seared me. It brought me back to my room, a night when I was a little girl and heard my drunk father bring home some friends. The same night that had been the last night I slept in *her* house.

“Don't, Jordan.”

“He’s not fighting me.” He stepped toward Harper again. “You touched her knowing she didn’t want to touch you?”

The guy nodded, not even fighting anymore. Tears were streaming down his face.

A look of such utter contempt and disgust flared over Jordan’s face, tightening his features until I barely recognized him. He could do it, what I knew a part of him wanted to do right now. He wanted it. He yearned for it. I saw the look, and the old Bren was stirring.

She felt it in the air.

She was wakening.

The firefly was there. I felt its presence. It was lingering on the sidelines, waiting to come into the frame, but no. I shook her off.

We were better.

We had been better.

I thought...

“Just hurt him, Jordan.” I was the only one pleading, and I looked over my shoulder. Both Cross and Zellman had hard expressions on their faces.

Cross met my gaze. “If it were you?”

Zellman’s eyes narrowed. “If it were Sunday?”

Jordan shook his head, stopping, closing his eyes. He let his head fall back, his hand gripping the back of his neck. “It already was Tabatha. And he’ll do it again. Another girl. Another situation. Maybe that time he’ll go farther? What do you want me to do?”

If Jordan started, he wouldn’t be able to stop. *That’s* what I was fighting against here.

I stepped forward, my foot moving over the dirt. “Not what you want to do.” I couldn’t believe we were back here. Risking the loss of Cross had been enough. Jordan had been with me. He’d been helping me fight to reason with Cross. Now we were here again?

I got that we went dark, but not this dark. There were lines.
There had to be lines. Boundaries.

“We cannot cross this line. Hurt him, but that’s it.”

Jordan turned on me, roaring, “HE WON’T FIGHT BACK!”

Fine. My teeth ground against each other. We’d make him fight back.

I strode forward, my fist ready, and I swung first. I got him on a downward swing, and he stumbled a few feet, shaking his head. I was a girl, but I knew how to hit.

I taunted him, “Fight, fucker. You’re not going to get away from us scar free. Fight.” I kicked out this time, taking out his knee. He crumbled, and then I swung down again. He fell to the ground and I almost spat on him, needing him to get this through his head. “GET UP! You want to touch women you know don’t want to touch you? You get off on that shit? Be a man. Fight back. Take your hits. Right? Is that what you’d say to me? A woman? A girl?” And because he wasn’t standing, I swung again.

And again.

Again.

I kept hitting until he wasn’t moving.

My knuckles were split open, bleeding.

Still, he didn’t fight back.

He wasn’t unconscious. I knew my strength. I knew my limit. I wasn’t crossing that.

He was going to be bruised. He’d be sore. He might have trouble walking for a day or two, but I wasn’t doing the damage he was acting that I was giving him.

I screamed at him, “You don’t deserve to get off with just this! STAND UP!”

An arm came around my stomach and I was lifted off him. I was carried back, and I was crying. I hadn’t known I was

until I saw Zellman and Cross staring at me, both with haunted eyes.

It was Jordan.

Jordan pulled me off of him, and I started kicking, struggling to get free. “No! He hurt her. She’s my friend, too, Jordan. Let me go.”

His other arm moved around me, and he held me.

We stood there. Him holding me. Him bent over me, and I felt his breath on my shoulder. I couldn’t stop staring at the guy. He was in the dirt, blood caked all over him.

A guttural scream erupted from me. It was primal, and I tried shoving away from Jordan again.

He only tightened his hold. “Stop.”

“He doesn’t get to get off this easy. A beatdown? That’s it.”

“Please, Bren,” Jordan whispered.

I sagged, hearing his plea.

If I didn’t stop, he’d start. I had to stop. I had to stop for him.

“We have to go. It’s done.” That was Cross, but he was the leader speaking now. “Get her in the truck.”

Jordan carried me over. Zellman hopped up and Jordan lifted me to him. I could’ve climbed up myself, but there was something about my crew doing this for me. Handling me. They needed to do this, and a part of me needed to let them.

I glanced back as Jordan was climbing up, coming behind us.

Cross was bent over Harper. He was talking to him. A second later, he pulled his phone out, punching some numbers. Then the phone was back in his pocket, and he was coming for the truck. His eyes held mine for a brief moment before he got behind the wheel.

Cross drove us back as Zellman and Jordan huddled on both sides of me.

My hands were still bleeding, but no one moved to cover them.

That felt fitting, for some reason.

Just let me bleed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BREN

I went dark last night.

Correction.

I went dark five hours ago. Same day.

I was lying in bed, not wanting to look at the time, and I could feel her. The old me. The firefly was there, too, on the sidelines, waiting to emerge to keep her company again.

I drew in a shuddering breath, feeling all that old numbness, and emptiness, and anger. So much anger. The old me hadn't been healthy. She hadn't been right.

I was not her. I could not go back to being her.

"Bren." Cross moved in bed, sitting up. He moved over, leaning over me.

Take note, he did not ask me what was wrong. He did not ask me what I was thinking about. He did not ask any of those questions, because he knew and his soft sigh on my name told me so.

I closed my eyes.

I would not cry either.

They were damming up, ready to spill, but no. I would not let myself go there either.

"Bren." Cross moved into me, his hand coming to my stomach. He held it there, waiting.

I drew in another gaping breath.

The ugly shit in me, the turmoil, it was back inside and breaking through all the barriers I'd erected.

I let her in when I moved on Harper.

"Cross," I choked out.

"Oh, Bren."

That was enough. I could see him watching me. His eyes held mine.

He was looking. He was judging. He was trying to read what I needed, and then his gaze darkened. Those eyes, they were smoldering, and my heart sped up in response. My body warmed. Trails of pleasure coursed through me, coating my insides.

It was working. Just the look, the promise, and he was pushing her back out.

The cold, the numbness, it was all fading. I was warming. I was feeling, and then I was throbbing.

"Babe," he whispered, lying over me gently.

Everything about him was tender, careful.

His body was over mine, on mine, and he skimmed a hand up my side, under my shirt. He pushed it up, his hand closing over my breast at the same time his lips found mine.

A gentle kiss. Soft. Grazing.

He lit the fire. A soft nip. He came back. A longer graze.

Again.

And again.

Longer. Harder.

The fire was building, thawing me out, then inflaming me.

I gasped, and it felt as if I were gasping alive, and I sought him out. I needed him, needed more. Our mouths fused together. Harder. Demanding.

I moved my legs, wrapped them around his waist, and he groaned, skimming his hand down my side, wrapping around

one of my legs. He smoothed it back up, feeling me, pushing my sleeping shorts up. He moved them aside, and I felt him touching me there.

I needed him there.

I was aching now. Dripping.

He pushed in a finger, and my entire body arched up, clamping around him. My arms around his shoulders, his back. My legs moved higher around his waist, my ankles locking behind his back.

The kisses were more desperate. Rough.

My entire body was frenzied. I just needed more and more and more.

This wasn't enough. Nothing was enough. Touching him, feeling his weight on mine, his finger (now two) inside of me, thrusting, going deep. I wanted it harder, punishing even.

That's what she deserved.

I allowed *her* to wake. I couldn't let her wake, but Cross was loving me. He was reminding me, and he was pushing her back down. Every touch of his worked. Every kiss. Every caress. Every thrust of his fingers, and then I growled. I wanted him. Only him.

I grabbed for his boxers and I pushed at them, shoving them down, and he moved, lifting until they were gone. He reared up, his eyes dilated from his own need. My clothes were hauled off and then he was back. He was poised, and he slid inside, and we both gasped from the connection.

He and I. Cross and Bren.

All I needed. All I wanted.

And then, his hands cupping under my ass, lifting me for him, he began to move.



The first time was rough, almost desperate.

The second time was slow, loving. Cross worshiped every inch of my body, taking me with his mouth first, and then moving inside of me after.

We heard footsteps outside during our third time, but we didn't pause.

My alarm went off just as I was exploding, and Cross growled, hauling us both out of bed. He carried me, my legs around him, into the shower, and then he went to his knees for a fourth time for me. I tried reaching for him when he spun me around, pressing me into the shower tiles, but he knocked my hand aside.

I was lifted, poised, and he slid inside again.

We were both gasping as the water poured down on us, and afterwards, I couldn't stand.

Cross eased me back down, but my legs gave up.

He caught me, holding me against the wall as he washed me. My hair. My body. He covered me with tender kisses, and when we were both cleaned, he carried me to the counter in the bathroom.

I was dried.

He wrapped a towel around my hair.

When he was done, he stepped back, his hands on both sides of me at the counter. A small, teasing smile lurked over his mouth. "You want me to dress you, too?"

I reached for him, everything in me feeling boneless, but content. Hella content. I was almost purring by now. I grabbed for his neck, but Cross waited for my response.

I shook my head. "But you can pull some clothes out and put them on the bed for me?"

He nodded, his eyes shuddering closed. He bent, one more kiss, and whispered against them, "I love you."

I drank that in, inhaling him and his touch. "I love you, too."

He pressed another kiss to the corner of my mouth before straightening, walking naked back out to the bedroom.

It was after I had dressed and was ready to head for Cougar Lanes that I realized the full effects of what Cross had done. He erased every moment of last night for me. There was no more darkness in me. He pushed it out, bringing in his love, his care, and with it was his goodness.

I went to work, going after the bad guys, and the old Bren was so far down, I didn't feel her at all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CROSS

Bren took off for work and I headed to the kitchen.

I should've been tired, but after the last couple hours with Bren, I was jazzed. Hyped. The adrenaline would leave me this afternoon. I knew I'd be drained, but before then, I just had a couple of classes to hit up. Smelling the coffee had already been brewed, I was surprised to see Jordan at the table. A cup in hand, resting on the table. A plate with toast and two eggs untouched in front of him.

"You're not going to class?"

He'd been staring outside but swung his head my way with effort. He grimaced, heavy bags under his eyes. His hair was also messed up. He looked like shit.

He shook his head. "It's a skip day for me."

I poured myself some coffee and went to sit in a chair across from him. "Z went in?"

He nodded, not saying a word.

He went back to staring out the window and I reached over, sliding his plate in front of me. I eyed his fork, but I didn't need it. The eggs were piled on the toast, and I made a nice egg sandwich. They'd been fried, too. Damn fucking good.

He looked back, his eyes unfocused. "How's Bren doing?"

Swallowing, I wiped my mouth and sat back. "She's fine. Woke up hard, but she walked out of here easy." I wasn't explaining any more than that, so I was hoping he was getting

what I was saying. I wasn't about to tell him I fucked the bad out of her, because that's, in essence, what I did. The nice words would've said more like I loved out the cold or some shit like that, but after this morning and last night, I wasn't in a big sharing mood.

He nodded, rubbing at his jaw. He needed a shave. I was betting he wasn't going to get to that today.

He murmured, distracted, "That's good. I was worried about her last night."

"You and Tab talk last night when you took her home?"

He shook his head, that unfocused look just increasing as he looked outside once more. "I don't have a clue what to say."

I frowned, lowering the sandwich back to my plate.

I tried to put myself in his place.

If Bren had done that? Cheated on me to end things so she could force herself to touch another guy to help save her mom? I couldn't. Bren would never do that. She'd knife the guy, opting to go to prison instead. That was more Bren. Whoring herself? That wasn't Bren, but if she'd been in a position where she had to do that?

I felt filleted right then and there. A knife taken to my stomach, one deep clean line from left to right and all my insides were spilling out. Add to that sensation a shit ton of murderous urges—gutting the guy wouldn't have cut it. Nothing would take that poison out of me. Cancer. That's exactly what Jordan has inside of him now.

I got it. I did. I see why Bren moved on the guy. If she hadn't, Jordan would've killed him.

I grimaced, just remembering last night and seeing the unhinged plea in her eyes as she took in what was about to happen.

"Bren went dark last night."

He swung his head back, blinking at seeing me, as if he forgot I was there.

I didn't scowl. I didn't glare. Or frown. None of that, but I said, clearly so he understood, what I was saying, "Don't make that worthless."

His face shuttered, and he actually flinched. "Never. I know what she did, but me and Tab. There's nothing that can be said or done to erase it. Not that, not what she did. I want to kill the guy, feel his blood on my hands, but B did that for me. She did it because she knew she could stop when I wouldn't have been able to until he was finished. I know what she did. I know we have to watch her, make sure she doesn't slip back again."

"Bren's good. I got her." I leaned forward, lowering my face, but making sure he was still looking me straight in the eyes. "You figure out what you need. I mean that. Do that for Bren. That's why she did what she did last night. Any of us, I don't think any of us would've stopped. She did that not just for you or for Tab, but for all of us."

He nodded. "I know."

We sat there in silence.

I finished the sandwich. He held his mug, not even drinking his coffee.

I didn't know the hell he was locked in right now. Jordan wasn't sharing, but I'd never seen Jordan like this.

"I love her," he grated out. "Loved her. I don't know if I love her anymore. I'm a piece of shit for that, aren't I? I should love her. Right? I should want to touch her, hold her, tell her everything will be all right, but... I can't, man. She went to him. Him. She let him touch her. She didn't give me the option of figuring this shit out."

"She felt like she was between a rock and a hard place."

"Is that on us?"

His wall fell, and the anguish looking back in my direction was burned inside of me. I'd never forget it. I'd never share it either. Zellman and Bren would never hear about this. They shouldn't carry that either.

His words rasped out, “Bren went at her last year. Me too. I was right there. Crew or non-crew. Tab wasn’t crew, but I fell for her. Then she ratted, or was going to rat, and why do I feel dirty? I shouldn’t feel dirty. Jesus. He did that to the girl I love, loved? I’m a dick of epic proportions. I should go to her, hug her, make her feel better. I should do what you did for Bren, because I know that’s what you did. You did what you had to do so she could walk out of here without fifty fucking anchors pulling her down. I heard her. She sounded good. I know you did that. Old Bren, not a chance. She’d be halfway gone from us. We’d lose her, but we ain’t. You fix her. I should fix Tab... but I’m not. I’m here, not there, and I’m the one feeling dirty.”

“You’re not feeling that. That’s her. You love her. You take on what you love, and you love her. You’re feeling what she’s feeling.”

“You think so?”

But he was barely moving. A statue. The fifty fucking anchors he put on Bren was what he was feeling. He was being held down, and I was sure. “Your sister’s in your head, and now Tab, too. You’re feeling what they felt, what Tab is feeling. I’d bet anything on that.”

He nodded, his shoulders falling. “Maybe.”

Another minute we sat there. Silence.


And then from him, “Then why can’t I make myself get up and go to her? I can’t bring myself to do it, and I’m ashamed of that. That’s not a man. That’s a coward. I’m a coward, Cross.”

I didn’t have the words. Not anymore. I had shared the ones I did have, but I had one last thing to give him.

“You’re not a coward, Jordan. I’d bet my life on that.”

His eyes were so pained as he stared at me, like I was a life preserver, then he blinked and it was gone. He turned, his focus returning to the backyard.

Yep. He was gone.



Blaise was pissed. That was obvious as soon as I headed inside psych. I ignored him. He didn't get to saddle up and get on his high horse about Harper. Whatever he did, he already did it. It was our turn last night. Zeke was actually in class today, sitting next to Blaise. I glanced down their row. Aspen was on Blaise's other side, but Zeke's fraternity brothers stretched out in the row from Zeke onward.

No Harper.

I hadn't fully trusted any of them, so I called 9-1-1 from Harper's own phone, knowing it'd take them a beat before they got to his location. We were long gone by the time we saw squads lighting up the sky. They hadn't even gone past us, we were already turning for a north road toward the house. Harper would or could still be in the hospital. I told him to keep his mouth shut, that we had someone on his dad, but entitled dicks tended to do what was best for them. Sometimes they didn't enjoy eating bitter feelings. Egos and pride sometimes got involved, too.

So, we would see what happened.

"Hey." Zellman slid into the seat by me.

I'd picked the far back and left for a reason. We were well and truly isolated from the class.

Zellman dropped his bag between his legs on the floor and looked around. "No Jordan?"

"Would *you* have showed up?"

He considered my question and didn't respond. Yeah. He got it.

But he glanced over, seeing the attention we were getting. It wasn't just Blaise glaring, but the rest of the frat guys were all glaring, too. "That's interesting."

Yeah.

Zellman added, "They know it was us."

Also, yeah.

“That’s not good.”

A third yeah from me.

Zeke was the only one not looking at us, but he was throwing furtive looks at his frat brothers, then also sending Blaise dark looks right after.

“Your brother is pissed because we cut him out from the beatdown. The guys sitting two seats from him and stretching out are all pissed because we beat down their boy. Note the irony of their seating arrangements.”

I shot Zellman a grin. “Thank you, Professor Greenly.”

He puffed up his chest. “No problem.” Then added after pulling out his notebook, “Your brother doesn’t care he’s putting his best friend in a spot, huh?”

That was the basic gist I overheard last night. “Whatever Harper did, it was bad enough that Blaise wants him out from Zeke’s house.”

“You think?”

I nodded. “I don’t know my brother that well, but I have picked up that if he hates you, he really hates you.”

Zellman grunted. “Huh. Still shitty he’s not backing off, even enough to have Zeke’s back.”

“Nah. He’ll have it. The problem is that he’s not getting that Zeke needs to let him have his back, not just doing it when the guy doesn’t know you’re doing it. That’s not entering my brother’s head.”

Zellman glanced at me, giving me a pointed look. “Maybe you need to educate him.”

I shot him a look back. “You educate him.”

He grinned.

I scowled.

Then the professor came in, and it wasn’t worth being discussed anymore.



FROM: Tazsters

TO: Cross

SUBJECT: I need an update. Pronto.

If you don't tell me what is going on, I'm calling Blaise.

Bombs primed and ready, brother buddy of mine.

I'm very violent in these emails, I've noticed lately.

I'm liking it.

LOVE YOU SO MUCH BECAUSE WE SHARED A WOMB
TOGETHER!

I'M TYPING THAT TO HALF ANNOY YOU, BUT ALSO TO MAKE
YOU SMILE AND I KNOW I DID BECAUSE I CAN FEEL IT SINCE
WE'RE TWINS!

Love you, for real.

THE BEST TWIN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BREN

I stopped to pick up motorcycle gloves on the way to work.

My knuckles were sore and cracked, but this would have to do. I didn't want to get reprimanded at my job for shit they didn't understand. I was just hoping no one would comment on it. If we were in the field, I didn't think they would. All day in the office, though, was a whole different story.

As it was, I walked in and Shetland was behind the bowling register. He waved me over, sliding a piece of paper to me. "Go out and get those coffees. You're going to spend the rest of the day manning the bowling lanes, and we'll bring out a list for lunch. You can clock out at six."

That's all he said.

I stood there, staring at the list, but I wasn't really seeing it.

They didn't want me in the field or in the office all day. I was trying to quell my instant alarm because it shouldn't be about me, right? If it was, then that meant Harper had talked last night, and they'd already been looped in?

But no.

Well.

Yes.

They would've kept me out of the office all day, keeping me close, but not in, and then I'd be fodder for when the cops came to arrest me. A trickle of alarm and sweat went down my spine at the same time. Maybe I should call Channing? He

wouldn't turn me in. He'd rip me a new one, but he wouldn't send the cops after me.

“What are you doing? Go get the coffee. We were up till three tracking a bounty across state lines. We need our caffeine.”

“Right.” Coffee first, then figure out if I was being paranoid or not.



My phone rang when I was coming back from getting their lunch.

The morning had been slow at the bowling alley. After handing off the cartons of coffee when I first arrived, the door had closed and I'd been left alone behind the bar and register. That part of the job was easy. A few large groups had come in. One was a family with three little kids. The most help they needed was laying down the gutter ball stoppers. The other group was a bunch of retired ladies, all wearing tutus and crowns. One threw glitter on me and said, “You're now a sparkly princess.”

She thought that was cute. I didn't think it was.

Seeing it was Channing calling now, I hit the speakerphone when I was in the truck. “What's up?”

“What's happening there?”

No greeting. Just the abrupt question, and hearing my brother's no-nonsense tone, everything went on alert in me now.

I shoved down a knot forming in my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

“Dad called, said there was a big bust by you. You know anything about that?”

Relief hit me hard and I almost swooned, I was so lightheaded. He wasn't asking about Harper, or my maybe

impending police arrest. He was talking about my job job.

“Oh.” I laughed, my voice hitching. “I have no idea.” I frowned, the alarm being moved over, but an unsettling sensation taking its place. “They kept me handling the bowling lanes today.”

Silence.

I was getting sick of these damn silences.

“They didn’t let you in?”

“What?”

“Their offices. Did you go in at all?”

Okay. Now my stomach was starting to roll. It was never a good sign when it began to roll.

“No. They kept me out all day.” *Dad*. “What’s going on?”

Was Dad involved?

“Shit.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry. Stay in schoo—”

“Channing!” But he’d already hung up. I stared at the phone and growled. “I’m not in school, you asshole.”

I was being kept out of the action *again*. I was getting really, really, super really sick of it.

I could...

No. I couldn’t.

But ...

No. No. No.

A super-duper bad idea, and I couldn’t believe I just thought the words super-duper.

So not a good idea.

But ...

He did give me his phone number, so that meant he had a cell phone. And I bet he would tell me? Wouldn't he?

Would he?

Gah. Now I didn't know.

Dark Bren. What would she do?

Did I really want to think like her again? After how many orgasms Cross gave me to push the dark Bren down...did I really want to awaken her? Oh, man. She'd call. She wouldn't give a fuck. Then she'd probably go off and skewer someone who looked at her wrong. Then she'd end up in jail, so yeah, I was kinda in the same place as last night since any minute now I was expecting the cops to roll up.

I pushed down the nerves, ignored how my arms were shaking, and dialed his number.

It rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Then he picked up. "Bren?"

My mouth was suddenly dry, and my throat cracked.
"Dad?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BREN

There was a raid on a Red Demons' warehouse.

That's what my dad explained. He wasn't involved, but a lot of the Red Demons were, and there were thirty warrants out for their arrest. Thirty. Only four had been captured in the raid, and two were big wigs in their entire network. One was my dad's friend, the President of the Red Demons, Maxwell Raith, and their Vice President, Ghost. I was assuming that wasn't his real name, but it's what my dad said. Max and Ghost. They were the important ones and the ones who every cop and every bounty hunter in the tri-state area were all gunning for.

"Dad, I thought they were by Roussou? In Frisco."

"Nah, honey. They're growing fast. They're all over. Was just in Texas, last I heard, but now I'm guessing they're back." He paused, then saying, almost shy, "Your brother tells me that he got a job for you at a bounty hunting business in Cain. That's real good. I think you'll fit right in there."

I had stopped breathing when he said that to me.

My dad.

I never saw him when he was in prison. I didn't talk to him during the trial, not that there was much of a trial. He fought against one of the charges, but plead guilty to the majority of them. The trial had been on his time served.

He thought I'd fit in at a bounty hunting office.

That meant, well, I didn't know what that meant to me, but I was feeling something. I must've because I had a big ball of

emotion in my throat and I couldn't talk for a full thirty seconds

"Honey? Bren?"

A call was coming in from Shetland.

I coughed, clearing my throat. "I gotta go, Dad. Bye."

"Bye, honey. I lo—"

I ended the call, switching over to the other one. "Shet—" I couldn't talk. Dammit.

"Where are you?"

"Lunch," I said. I was still in my truck.

"That better be code for you're getting our lunch? Right? Because it's one-thirty and we're all hungry."

"Yeah." Cough. "Yeah. I'm here, just coming in now."

"Good."

I could imagine his scowl. I didn't care.

I just talked to my dad on the phone. My dad. On the phone. Not in prison, through the prison phones, or in their visitation room. On the phone like he was out and about, like a normal person, and he was. I could've driven three hours back and gone to see him. Face to face. In person.

Tears were rolling down my face. I didn't know why. Shit. I couldn't have that.

Cursing, shoving thoughts of my dad out of my head, I put the car in gear and gunned the engine. If I was late, Shetland would be up my ass. Once the lame pick-up lines stopped, he had turned into a domineering jackass.

But, driving over, my dad ...

I talked to my dad.

When I got out of my truck, I didn't allow myself to think about how I could've been talking to him for the last two months. Nope. I didn't let myself go there. Not yet.

I wasn't ready.

I walked in carrying their bags of food with a forced grin, and Shetland gave me a double take. I must've looked stupid enough that he just grabbed the food, gave me a glare, and stalked into the office. The door slammed behind him.

I didn't care about that either.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CROSS

My brother was pissed at me. No one cared.

Zeke was pissed at my brother. Everyone cared, or so I was told. It was all over campus by the end of the day. And in other news, Harper never said a word.

We kept waiting, expecting, but three days passed and nothing. The weekend came and went. Monday. Tuesday. We were all the way to next Thursday, and nothing extraordinary had happened.

Bren said her work was still cutting her out. She filled us in on everything happening there, including the phone call to her dad. She didn't inform the guys how she felt about the call, but we all got it. She had a little spark in her eyes when she mentioned the call, but then it faded. So now we were coming up on another weekend (Thursday nights were counted as the first night of the weekend in college land) and nothing had gone down yet, especially when we thought all sorts of shit would've gone down by now.

"Have you talked to Tab at all?" The question came from Bren after we sat down for tacos. It was just the four of us. Zellman had plans to head out, but Jordan had stayed in every night since that night.

He paused now, in mid-reach for a beer. "No." He stared at his plate. "Am I the bad guy? Since I didn't reach out?"

The question wasn't directed only to Bren. She glanced at all of us, clear indecision on her face. I opened my mouth. I wanted to step in, make it right, but I didn't know the answer. I closed my mouth, sat back. Bren's face tightened. Her hands

balled into fists, resting on the table by her plate, and she looked at them. Her shoulders went rigid, but Zellman said it first.

“Tab cheated on you.”

“Zellman.” Bren frowned.

He shrugged, slumping down in his chair. One hand went into his pocket. The other reached for his beer. “What? It’s true. She overheard something and thought, ‘Hey, I’ll use my body in this situation and I’m not even going to break up with my boyfriend. I’m just going to cheat and let him find out.’ I’m sorry. I can’t understand Tabatha’s side where I feel bad for her in this scenario, and I’m sure I’m missing something and I should, but I can’t. She cheated. She should’ve given Jordan a heads-up. Shoot him a text, at least, not do it cold like she did.”

We didn’t have these conversations often. Ones that dealt with sexual shit, girls, their points of view. Bren didn’t speak up, and most times, she thought like we did, so we were in uncharted waters here. I wished I had something to say. I felt like I should have something to say, but I didn’t. If it had happened to Bren, or my sister, and I already went down that rabbit hole when Taz was just hurt, I still had no clue what I would’ve said or done.

It was messed up. That’s all I kept coming back to.

Bren had reached out to Tabatha. She went to her house the next day after work, but Tab wasn’t there. The sorority girls were adamant that Tabatha had taken off for the weekend. Bren was fine with that, opting instead to send a few texts. She called her, too. No response from Tabatha.

Monday happened. Nothing.

Tuesday. Same.

Bren tried getting in touch with her again last night, and I only knew about it because I walked in as she was leaving a message. Her eyes found mine over the table, and I was reading the sorrow there. She was asking herself the same

question that Jordan had asked himself over and over again... had she done enough?

“If Tab wanted to talk, she would contact you. You guys are in the same position as she was when she decided to do something to help her dad. Wrong decision made, but it had been hers. She owned it.”

“And now?” Jordan asked me. The guy had been a walking corpse all week. He was staring into the void like he was half-dead. “Now that we know? I took her phone back to her the next day. Handed it over to one of her sorority sisters. I don’t even know if she got it.”

Bren frowned at him. “I went to the house, too. They turned me away.”

He looked at her, staring. He didn’t respond.

Zellman rolled his eyes. “Fuck this.” He shoved his chair back, grabbing his own phone out of his pocket. A number was dialed, and he put it on speaker as a female’s voice came over the other end.

“Zellman?”

We all paused.

Then Zellman said, “Sunday, where’s Tabatha?”

“What?”

It was Sunday. Zellman’s ex on-again, off-again, and one of those times when they were off-again, she hooked up with Bren’s ex and was now pregnant with his kid. *That* ex. Tabatha was high school friends with both Tasmin and Sunday, and that had me wondering if my own sister had heard from Tabatha?

Sunday chose to remain in Roussou to have her kid, while my sister and her boyfriend went to Grant West, a college four hours away.

Zellman was standing like a statue, listening to his ex, but at her ‘what?’ he snapped into action. He whisked his phone in the air, almost punching it with words, “You know where she is! Where is she? Is she there? Is she hiding?”

“What? What are you talking about?” But her voice was straining. She was obviously nervous.

“You’re lying to me. I can tell because you’re being nice. Normal Sunday would be pissed that I’m calling. You would’ve already bitched about two things by now, and you haven’t bitched about anything. Where is she?!” Zellman was yelling into the phone.

There was silence. Then a ruffling sound. Footsteps. A door opened.

A second later, a quieter and much more subdued voice spoke, “Is Jordan there?”

A pin could’ve dropped.

I didn’t think anyone expected Tabatha to come on the line.

Another beat passed.

“Jordan?”

Suddenly, he shoved back his chair. Two long strides around the table, he plucked the phone out of Zellman’s hand and he shoved his way outside. All three of us shared one look, then our chairs were pushed out of the way. We went to the window, and we weren’t trying to look pressed against it, eyes bugging out, but we were. We couldn’t help it.

Jordan didn’t spare us a look.

His hand was in his hair, like he wanted to rip it out and he was barking into the phone. He was pacing.

He was pissed. Tense.

Then he stopped.

He dropped to one of the chairs. The phone was on the table and his forehead was by it. He remained like that the rest of the convo. His legs were bouncing, restless, and he had his hands in fists, bouncing right alongside his legs.

“She was there the whole time.” Zellman was glaring out the window. “I should’ve known. I should’ve just known. I mean, I couldn’t have known, but I should’ve. She and Sunday

got close at the end. They were both our girls. I mean, besides Bren and Tasmin, but it's different with both of them. Those two got close." He drew in a breath, his voice bleak. "We should've known."

Yeah.

We should've.

But we didn't.

Bren sighed. "We know now."



It was midnight when Jordan came back inside. He'd been out there for hours, only taking a break to come in, piss, grab a new beer, get a phone charger, and head back out. The phone was always in his hand. He left it on the table when he went to the bathroom, but swooped it back up as soon as he went to the backyard.

He looked like shit when he was out there, even before he was out there. Now he looked like a wrecking ball came at him and targeted him for a direct hit. He tossed the phone to Zellman. "You need to charge it."

Zellman caught it, didn't say a word, moved from his seat, and slid it into his pocket. He never took his eyes off of Jordan.

None of us did.

"She quit school."

Fuck.

Bren's hand found mine on the couch. Her pinkie wrapped tightly around mine and she squeezed hard.

Jordan's voice came out sounding strangled. "Said this thing with Harper hit her harder than she thought. She went to Roussou Friday night and she's been there the whole time. She

took a leave of absence, but she's probably done. So yeah, she quit school. Gonna stay there, help Sunday with the kid."

Zellman swore under his breath. "Sunday's due soon, too."

Jordan nodded, both his hands going to his hair. His eyes were wild, crazy. He found me. "I need a party. I need girls. I need loud music. I need booze. I need to not think right now, and a party will help me really not think. Does your brother know of a party happening right now?"

My brother had a soccer game tomorrow, so he was probably in bed.

But I said, "I can text him."

Zellman snorted. "The guy doesn't party unless it's with Allen."

"Fuck!" Jordan threw his head back, starting to pace. It was just like outside, only worse now because he knew everything.

Bren leaned forward. "We can go to Cougar Lanes? My job."

"Isn't that closed?"

She shook her head. "It's a bar, but it's a bowling alley. It stays open till two. The guys won't care. Promise."

Jordan blew out a ragged puff of air, his hands coming out of his hair. "Yeah. Okay. That's enough. Can we sneak in booze?"

"Yes, but we cannot get caught. I might not drink."

Zellman stood up, shooting Bren a grin. "Pretty sure the only person drinking tonight is Jordan."

Bren nodded. "I'll call and make sure there's a lane open. It can get busy Thursday nights, or so I've heard. I've not worked the evening shift there."

"It's kinda hot that you work in a bowling place."

We all stopped.

I shot Zellman a glare, then because there was nothing to say to that, I clipped him in the back of his head.

“Hey!” He gave me a look.

“The fuck you say shit like that?”

“What? I like bowling.” He was looking at us, wide-eyed. Not getting it. “Have I never told you guys that?”

“No.”

Jordan wasn't talking. His hands were pushed in his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward. He looked ready to topple a mountain, and also ready to be blown over by a gust of wind. The dichotomy was real tonight.

Bren held her hands up. “I'm pretty sure we've been over this before. You're not supposed to use the word 'hot' and me in the same sentence. Ever.”

Zellman frowned as Bren was grabbing her stuff, ready to go.

I only needed my keys and wallet, which were by the door.

“I think we have, actually.” He gave her a crooked grin. “Sorry.”

Bren was headed out the door. “Stop talking. Just...stop talking.”

Zellman followed. “I really am sorry. I don't even mean it that way. I use 'hot' for everything lately—”

“STOP talking! Just stop. Now.”

Their voices carried across the distance, and I remained in place, glancing over at Jordan.

He was looking at me, not holding anything back. He had aged ten years in the last four hours. He blew out another breath, shaking his head. “She quit school, man. Was that my fault?”

I shook my head. “No. It's hers, all hers. Zellman's right. She chose. I know you probably reached out.”

“I did. A few times. I kept getting forwarded to Sunday.”

Then she had got the messages. Bren's too.

“You can only follow your gut, but mine is saying that Tabatha needs to work this out on her own.”

“So what do I do while she does?”

Zellman hollered from outside, “Let's go! I'm not lying about bowling. I really do like it. I'm going to wipe the floor with all of you losers.”

I grinned, pointing outside. “Apparently, we bowl.”



FROM: Tazsters

TO: Cain Group

SUBJECT: grrrrr

No one is checking their emails tonight. What the hell? I'm in Grant West. Hello. I need hourly updates, none of this whenever you get to it crap. I'm a part of the Wolf Crew. I mean, I'm not, but you guys know what I mean. I'm blood. I can feel Cross's emotions sometimes. That makes me half him, and that sounds weird.

Fine.

Signing off.

Love everyone.

Did you guys know that band Sustain used to play here a lot? So cool!

Race says you guys suck. Wait. Never mind. He was saying that about his cell reception.

Keep. Me. Updated!

THE BEST TWIN

Also, I'm not liking that I'm not in the 'Cain group' email list. So not cool.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BREN

I'd forgotten it was Halloween this weekend.

That's something I should've remembered, or I felt like I should've. We walked into Cougar Lanes and it was full of witches, goblins, angels, even some dressed up as politicians. There was a guy who'd made himself into a condom stand. Another person was dressed up as a giant wiener dog.

"Whoa." Zellman drew up short.

Neon orange lights were everywhere. Lining the bowling lanes, under every shelf that the bowling balls were on, under all of the counters. There was so much orange that no other lights were needed. I'd been in here just today and hadn't noticed the decorations, but now there was a giant witch hanging over the lanes. A huge squid looked like it was coming down from the ceiling, set above the cash register. There were spider webs all over. A small claw machine game was filled to the brim with candy bars.

A guy was behind the register, someone I'd never seen before. He hadn't seen me either. There was no recognition when we stepped up and asked for a lane. I had called ahead, but the line was busy.

The guy frowned at me. "We won't have an opening for another hour."

Zellman frowned. "Fuck that. There's two open right now." He gestured to the far end.

"They're reserve—"

“Let them have one.” Brock was coming down from the direction of the offices. He was behind the counter and he nodded at me. “This is Monroe. She works the day hours.”

The guy blinked, staring at me. “Whoa. Hey! You’re Bren Bren?”

“Uh...”

Zellman started laughing. “Bren Bren! Classic. Good thing you’re behind that counter. You’ll still have your head attached.”

I hit his chest. “Zellman.”

He didn’t react, just moved out of the way and put some cash on the counter. “For the lane. Thank you, sir.”

The guy shrugged, taking the cash. He filled out shoe orders and moved down the counter to help a couple of ladies from *The View*. I was assuming the girl in dreadlocks was Whoopi.

“These are your friends, Bren?”

Brock hadn’t moved away. He was eyeing Cross, who was standing behind me, with interest. Jordan was following Zellman looking for their bowling balls. Or I should correct that Zellman was looking, taking out a ball, testing it, giving it to Jordan. Jordan stood there, holding the ball. I had a feeling Jordan didn’t know where he was or what he was doing.

“Yeah,” Cross was saying over my shoulder, his chest touching my back. “We live together.”

Cross’ tone was noticeably cold.

I turned, frowning. His gaze was locked on Brock.

Brock was nodding. He was dressed more normal, in a Henley shirt and jeans. He said to me, jerking his head, “It was nice to meet your friends. I’m at the end of the bar if you need anything.” He gestured to the worker. “That’s Trundle. His first name is Justin, but just call him Trundle.”

Trundle was coming back to us, a little grin on his face. He was a bigger guy, in a black t-shirt that had an orange ghost on

it, and khaki pants.

Pretty sure the weed smell was coming from him.

That, and his dilated eyes.

“Heya there. Sorry I didn’t put two and two together. My sister is Hawk.”

“Really?” Hawk hadn’t mentioned her family.

He nodded, his hand resting on the counter and starting to beat out a rhythm. “Older. She’s mentioned you and I should’ve known. Said you were hella hot, a tough bitch. Her words. That’s a compliment from my sis. If she mentions you, she either hates your guts or likes you.”

“Older sister?”

He nodded, his head and neck were so relaxed, it was like he was bouncing it up and down or like one of those bobble head toys. “Yeah, and hey, I don’t know if you guys are legal, but on the down-low, I can give you a soda with an extra kick.” He winked on the last word, his eyes jerking toward Brock. “Just don’t let Brock know. Bounty hunters and all, he looks down on that shit, but if Hawkie likes you, I figure you’re good people.”

Cross’ hand came to my hip. “Thank you.” He guided me away and moved behind me.

It was after we chose our balls and were on our lane when Cross sank down next to me. “That Brock guy was scoping us out. Should we be aware of something?”

I paused in the middle of tying my bowling shoes. “Huh?”

Cross nodded at him, his arm brushing against mine. “He’s watching us now.”

I straightened, seeing what he was talking about.

Brock was at the end of the bar, a pile of papers in front of him, but he was staring at us. At my own look, he didn’t turn away. A drink was in front of him, his phone on the counter. He had a faraway expression on his face.

I'd told the guys about my coworkers. Cross knew that Brock was more or less the leader of the entire team. I'd yet to meet Bonbon, thankfully. According to Bonnie, her daughter had decided to move to Florida. No one knew why, but there'd been a lot of cursing that morning, and a few cheers from others. But back to what the guys knew about my co-workers. They knew everything.

Zellman and Jordan joined us, shoes on, and walked to put their balls on the ball holder.

Zellman came back, dropping into the scorekeeper seat. "This is kinda a cool place to work. Their offices are on the other side, I'm assuming?" He glanced over his shoulder, stilling. "And, dude, why's your boss staring at us?"

Jordan was just sitting on the seats opposite us when he heard Zellman's question. He went rigid looking, too. "What the fuck?"

Cross stood up, the first to bowl. "Has he asked you about your dad?"

I shook my head. "Not after the first day."

"What the fuck?" From Jordan again.

"That's messed up." Zellman stood up.

All the guys were standing, all staring at Brock with varying expressions. Jordan looked ready to rip his head off. Zellman was frowning. Cross was staring back steadily, calm-like. Noting the other guys' reactions, Cross was the first to break. He went to bowl, leaving one pin standing.

Zellman groaned, sitting back down. "Are you kidding me? Of *course*, Cross is an ace bowler."

He put in the score, waiting as Cross cleared the last pin. Another growl from Zellman.

Jordan eased back his attitude, shooting Zellman a grin and going up. He was next in line. He got seven, and only hit one of the three pins on his next roll. It was my turn after that. I had a weird wrist action, so I got six and picked up three of my last four.

Zellman got a gutter ball in the first try.

Both Cross and Jordan snorted, heads hanging down.

Zellman shook his head. “Not a fucking word, assholes.” He grabbed his ball as soon as it cleared the holder and got five pins on the second attempt. More grumbling as he went back to his seat.

As bowling went, I was guessing we were fairly lame.

We bowled. We sat. We joked.

Contrary to how much Zellman liked bowling, he was horrible at it. Cross and Jordan were tied. I was behind them, but a good distance better than Zellman’s score. He was really, really bad. But after the first few throws, Zellman headed back out to the vehicle. He came in with beverages, handing them to each of us. The initial plan had been that only Jordan would drink. It was his night. We’d watch over him, but spend our time bowling and having fun. Even through the griping, Zellman was having a great time, so Cross said he’d be sober cab and the rest of us could indulge.

So we did. I hadn’t intended to drink, but changed my mind.

After our second game, most people had left. Trundle came over and he started to bowl with us. When Zellman sniffed his drink, Trundle winked at him. “Don’t tell the boss.”

Jordan scowled at him. “You’re not driving, are you? That shit’s not funny.”

His head came up, the wink gone. “Uh, no. I’m not bad, but Brock’ll give me a ride.”

Brock. We were back to him.

We’d forgotten about him.

Jordan was the one who looked. “He’s gone.”

Trundle said, “He’s in the back. He stays while most of the customers are here, in case anything pops off, but you guys are the last ones left, so he headed back in. He does paperwork.”

Cross asked, “Does he work every night?”

“Most, but Gramps covers some of the other nights. Bonbon used to be in charge of the evening shifts, since she’s too nuts for the day stuff and all. She took off, though, so Brock’s been covering for her.”

Zellman grunted. “Guy’s a workaholic.”

“Well, he’s the owner.”

“Wait. What?” From me.

Trundle nodded at me, picking up his ball. We all had one last turn to go, and he stepped toward the lane. “Yeah. He’s the owner.”

“I thought Gramps and Bonnie owned it all?”

He shook his head, coming back after his turn. He hit four, then got the rest of his pins. “Nah. I mean, Hawk said something how they used to be the owners. Brock took over a few years back.”

“Does he have a hard-on for Bren or something?” Jordan was looking behind us.

Brock had come back out, heading for us. He stopped, his hand raised. “Finish up! It’s time to go.”

I stood for my last turn, and yeah, I was buzzed. Nicely buzzed.

I grinned at Cross, who saw my look and instantly started laughing. “Bren’s drunk.”

Zellman and Jordan shared a look.

Zellman thrust a fist in the air. “Yes.” He turned to Trundle. “Bren never drinks.”

“It’s because it’s Halloween and I’m pretending to be a college student.”

Trundle snickered. “I’m off to finish up. It was nice meeting you guys. Don’t be strangers.” He waved, taking off for a back door.

Jordan was frowning at the scoreboard. “Who won?”

Cross went next, got a strike. Second strike. Third strike. “I did.”

Jordan growled. “Not cool, but fitting. You’re the DD.”

Zellman picked up his ball. “I’m hungry.”

Cross was putting his and my ball away. He went up, waiting for us by the tables that we needed to pass for the door. “Is there a place open twenty-four-seven?”

“There’s a diner not far. It’s a college hangout. PubTown.” The answer came from behind the register.

Cross frowned at Brock, but skimmed over the rest.

Zellman and Jordan were trailing behind me.

“You guys want to eat there? Head home?”

“Uh.” Zellman tossed our emptied soda bottles in the garbage, then held up a hand. “Since I’m single, I say hell yes for the diner. There’s gotta be chicks there.” He clamped a hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “Remember, he requested girls for a distraction tonight.”

Jordan’s smile was a little wobbly, just like mine.

It was then I realized Cross had a hold on the back of my jeans. He tugged me back into him, a small smile just for me. I loved when he gave me one of those. A little tingle raced through me, and even though I was either buzzed or drunk, I was still feeling it.

Cross tugged me farther back, his one arm going around my shoulder and curling around to rest over the front of me. I reached up, entwining our hands. He spoke over my head, “Then it’s settled.” He angled us out the door, adding behind me now, “Thank you for letting us stay late.”

“Yeah...Bren!”

Cross swung me around. I blinked a few times, focusing because Brock now had two heads. Both were swimming around his body. “Yes?”

“You can have tomorrow off if you work Saturday.”

I knew what that meant. Saturday was bail-bonds day. It was always one of their busiest nights. “Yes! Can I go in the field?”

He chuckled, closing the register. “Maybe. We’ll see.” He dipped his head down again. “Have a good night.”

I felt Cross lift his arm, but then we were moving back out and headed for Jordan’s truck. I asked as soon as we were inside, “Why do we always drive Jordan’s truck? Why not mine? Or yours?”

Jordan slid open the window between us. “Because my truck is the biggest.”

Zellman added, “And because he’s got a setup back here with sleeping bags, cushions, and blankets. It’s like we’ve got our own couch.”

Jordan snorted. “A couch that’s strapped down.”

“Well, yeah.”

Cross started the engine, putting the gear into reverse. “Your boss watched you almost the whole night.”

Aaaand there went my buzz.

I felt it leaving me with a big ol’ thud.

“What? Really?”

Cross nodded, his face getting all somber. “I swiped Trundle’s keys to the building.” He hit the turn signal, glancing at me before easing onto the street. “I think we should find a time no one will be there, help ourselves inside, and take a look at what they’re keeping you away from.”

My stomach did another dip, but I wasn’t sure if I was excited or nervous. But I did say, “Sounds good to me.” But, “I don’t want to wait.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

It was decided.

PubTown turned out to be busy, and Zellman recognized a few people, so he and Jordan were happy. After dropping them

off, we headed to the house for a change of clothes, then went back to Cougar Lanes.



FROM: Cross

TO: Tazsters

SUBJECT: Bren is drunk. It's hilarious.

—I'm always the best twin

FROM: Tazsters

TO: Cross

SUBJECT: blank on purpose

Type your message HERE.

Not in the subject line.

—The Best Twin

CHAPTER TWENTY

CROSS

Bren was drunk.

She was the type of drunk where she wasn't registering she was still drunk, but she was. She was also damn cute about it. She kept flicking her hand over her nose. She'd scrunch up her face afterward and make a little pffting sound. She was as loud as a tiny kitten. Seriously fucking adorable.

I'd been watching her boss the whole time we were bowling. He was older twenties or younger thirties, but the way he was staring at Bren, a boyfriend would start wondering if he had a hard-on for her, too.

He didn't. I put my arm around her and he hadn't cared.

He was more interested in scoping out the rest of us.

Bren said he read her file and he made a call to Roussou. So it made sense he'd want to know about us. We were her crew. That shit didn't stop in high school, not for us.

But all the other stuff she mentioned. Yeah. It was making me worried.

I scoped out a security system while we were there, so we had ski masks on, pulling them down as we left the truck, and darted to the back door. We didn't do this. We never had, but there were times at Roussou we needed to go somewhere that we probably weren't welcome. That was the closest we had to breaking and entering. This was a whole new graduation level, but I'd been watching Bren's boss all night. I'd been scanning the entire building, and I knew we needed more than just Trundle's key to get in.

Once he sobered up, he would report it missing the next day.

Brock was smart. I saw that, so he'd change everything as soon as possible, not wanting to risk anyone getting in to see whatever they were working on. That meant we had to move fast. We needed to get in and out even before they thought someone would get in and out, and that Brock guy would be watching Bren. We were the last people seen with Trundle. They were hiding something from Bren. We'd be on the short list of who took Trundle's keys.

So yeah, tonight was our only night as far as I was concerned, but Bren, I had to make sure she didn't touch anything. I moved into her, my lips to her ears. "We can't talk in there."

She nodded, knowing they could have recordings or video rolling.

I pulled her back one last time. "Go to the office door and wait for me. Follow my lead."

Another nod. Her eyes were wide and staring at me, but she flinched, her hand flicking her nose.

I suppressed a smile, remembering the mask hid my mouth and smiled anyway.

I loved my girl. A seriously cute drunk.

Then we were in.

The back door opened easy enough, but it was the second door I was worried about.

Bren headed for it, waiting to the side as I darted behind the front desk. I watched. Brock used a code to get in so I plugged that in. And I also remembered when he took his papers to the back.

I lifted up the tray and there was a key inside.

I took it, hurrying to the office doors, and inserted it.

It turned.

Now, inside I wasn't sure what we were walking into, but Bren did.

She bypassed me, going to an alarm system. She coded in a number. The system's alarm turned green. We were good to go.

The bowling lanes still had their orange neon strips showing with enough light, so we didn't need extra lighting. The office was different, though. I reached into my pocket, handing Bren a flashlight, and then we were both moving through the rooms.

Bren went inside the first one. She was sweeping over the desk, so I moved to the larger room, and I didn't need to go anywhere else. I stepped inside the room, my light catching the image of someone on the wall, and I stopped in my tracks.

I hadn't wanted this to happen, but here we were.

There were three walls set up around the desks, and smack on the left wall was a picture of Bren's father. Derrick Monroe. He'd lived a hard life. The fights with Channing, Bren's mom's cancer, then the drinking. The drinking had been a constant. He looked like a different man when he came to Cain. Softer. Humble. Beat down. But he was a member of the Red Demons now, so how long he could keep that up was anyone's guess? I'd done my research, just like I always did.

Red Demons came to Roussou, started messing with Channing, and I knew there could be spillage over to us. There had been, but not enough to be too concerned. Then her dad joined up, and my alarms had been going nuts ever since. It'd been a matter of time before this happened, where Bren's world would cross paths with them. Now I just wanted to know if she'd been hired with the idea of using her to get to her dad, or they brought her in anyway, and were keeping her out of the shitstorm for her own good? How'd that work with Channing reaching out?

I couldn't tell, but under Derrick Monroe's picture were Bren's and Channing's. His kids.

Jesus.

This. Right here.

This was why they didn't want Bren inside.

Her picture was on the fucking wall.

So were the rest of us.

Bren would've lost it seeing any of our images up there.

They had strings connecting us to Bren. All of Channing's guys were under his. His woman's picture. Her brother's. There were stickies put up with information about each of us. If we were affiliated or not. All of us were not Red Demon affiliated, but we were crew affiliated. Wolf Crew. WC was put on Bren's, mine, Zellman, and Jordan's stickies. Channing's guys had New Kings, NK, written next to their names. They even made note of who was also bounty hunters for Channing. And the long string that attached Bren's dad led to Maxwell Raith.

I knew about Raith.

He was the Red Demons' President. Smart. Ruthless. Dangerous. But he told Channing that he owed his life to Bren and Channing's father. Beyond that and that their MC was growing fast, I didn't know much about him. Maxwell's picture was center in the middle wall. There were pictures and pictures of men underneath, ones I didn't know.

I took my phone out, starting to snap pictures when Bren came in.

I had to move fast.

I stopped my phone and moved toward her, blocking her flashlight as I did. I grabbed her arm, my mouth to her ear. "You need to trust me. Let me cover this room. Take as many pictures as you can from the other rooms and go to the truck."

She tried to pull her arm away. She couldn't say anything. Neither of us knew if her voice would be recorded and recognized, but she growled under her breath, so slight I hoped it wasn't caught.

"Please."

She ripped her arm away but left.

And I could breathe easy again.

I couldn't waste time. I took as many pictures as possible, getting everything on the board. I noted the guy's picture in the middle of the right wall, and all the images underneath. There were *a lot* of images under that guy, but after getting everything, I moved to the table.

Papers were picked up, pictures snapped of them, and put back down exactly as they were first placed.

It took me ten minutes, and I didn't even like that it was that long.

Bren was finishing in the first office. She came out when I did. I swept my light to the third office, but she shook her head. I didn't know what that meant, but when she headed for the exit, I went to make sure that office was covered. It was a hangout room. Magazines were left opened. A couple books. A camera. I picked up the camera, turning it on and scrolling through the pictures caught.

I didn't know who these people were, but I took pictures of them just to be safe and as thorough as I could.

I was leaving when I saw headlights sweep the place. Someone was pulling into the parking lot.

I couldn't think. I had to move.

The door was shut, so I hurried out, hitting and holding a big red button. I was hoping it was the one to man the alarm system. As it clicked on, I was moving through the door connecting to the offices just as I heard a truck's door open from the front.

I sprinted to the register, slipping the key back in.

The front door beeped open just as I shut the cash register. I dropped low to the ground.

Thankfully, whoever was coming in left the lights off. They moved through, knowing where they were going. I moved to the other side of the front desk, closer to the back

door—my destination—as I heard the cash register being opened.

For a second, I panicked. Had I put the key where it'd been?

I froze.

“There you are.” It was Brock. He grabbed the key, shut the register, and I straightened up from my crouch, seeing him going to the office. I moved to the back door but purposely dropped Trundle's key on the ground just as I moved outside, closing the door.

The lights were turned on in the office as I darted across the lot, merging with the shadows and following the tree line until the sidewalk. I continued, keeping off the sidewalk until I got to my truck. Moving inside, Bren's face was pale. “I didn't know if he caught you.”

Everything inside me was locked tight, but I couldn't talk, not yet. We needed out of there as soon as possible. Turning the truck on, keeping the lights off, I moved forward. Once I took a turn onto another block, I flicked the lights on and headed back to the house.

“Shit!” I could breathe easier now.

She stared at me. “They never gave me a key.”

“I know.” I reached over, taking her hand.

She slid her fingers alongside mine. “You think they'll look at the security cameras?”

I shook my head. A big fat fucking boulder was sitting in my gut, but I didn't have anything to make it all go away. “Let's hope not.”

“What about Justin's key card?”

“I dropped it on the ground. It'll look like it came off his shirt, or out of his pocket or something.”

She exhaled a deep breath, moving to face the front again, but her hand never let go of mine.

She held me tight the whole way back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BREN

Cross dropped me off, and I was showering as he went to pick up Zellman and Jordan.

I knew he had a bombshell to drop on me. It was late, and I'd been happily buzzed. I wasn't anymore.

The other rooms didn't have much. Anything important must have been put away in a filing cabinet, but there was obviously a reason they didn't want me in that second room. Had to be.

Why keep me on?

Why bring me on in the first place?

Was I being used?

After Brock brought up my dad the first day, no one had said anything again. I was the office intern, helping where they told me.

I hadn't called Channing or my dad again. A part of me wasn't ready, and I was glad neither had called me back. To an extent, I enjoyed sticking my head in the sand when it came to my dad. I wasn't surprised about Channing not reaching out. He didn't want me involved with anything concerning our dad, but a part of me had been waiting for his call telling me to stop working with Cougar Lanes, too.

On a whole, everything had been quiet regarding Tabatha and Harper, too.

It was a feeling, though. It was low, deep, and it was spreading.

Something was going to get blown up. I was figuring my job since we just broke into it.

I was finishing up in the shower when Cross pulled up. The headlights swept over the inside of our bathroom. I was toweling off and starting to dress when they came inside. A second later, Cross was coming into our bedroom.

He had pulled off the black sweatshirt, but he was still in the dark pants.

Seeing me, he tore his clothes off. He rasped out, "Where's your clothes?"

I pointed to the floor.

He grunted before disappearing into the closet. He came back out in sweats that were low on his hips, deliciously low, and he was pulling a gray Henley over his head, tugging the bottom down. I slept with him, had explored his body on many occasions, but seeing that V leading down to his groin, the one that disappeared under his sweatpants, and I was feeling all sorts of other sensations.

Warmth. Maybe that buzz was coming back? A throb was starting deep inside of me.

He ignored me, bent and grabbed my clothes. He carried them to the other side of the bed, stuffing my clothes and his clothes into a bag.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to burn these."

"What?" Alarm spiked me. "I think that's a little much, don't you think?"

He stopped just in front of the door and pinned me with a dark look. "We broke into a bounty hunting company. They work with law enforcement. They have confidential information on some big people. There's probably cameras with us on them. We need to get rid of evidence. I'm not messing around with this." He looked through the bag. "Where's the ski mask?"

"I took it off just inside the garage door."

He nodded.

It was then I saw the tiredness clinging to him.

“Hey.” I moved to him.

He paused.

I touched his arm, pulling him to me. Lifting a hand, I wiped my thumb over some tension lines around his mouth. “They won’t do anything.”

“You don’t know what they’re capable of.”

“True, but—”

“You didn’t see that second room. I did.”

He had me there.

He grabbed the doorknob, but looked back. “We’re crew. We don’t lie to each other, but what I saw in that room—I want to call your brother about it before I talk to you. Can I do that? I need your permission to do that.”

I opened my mouth, unsure what to say. The alarm spiking within me was about Cross and how he was acting, not even about what he saw. He was worried, and whatever they had in there, I’d deal. My dad would deal. This wasn’t the first time we were dealing with law enforcement agencies, and I knew that I hadn’t done anything wrong. Well, except for beating up Harper and breaking and entering my own place of employment, but besides those things, I was pretty clean.

When I didn’t answer, Cross rested his forehead to mine. “I need to talk to your brother. Trust me?”

He asked me to trust him.

“Okay.”

I was trusting him.

He reached up, cupping the side of my face for a moment, before he pulled himself away. The bag of clothes went with him. A few minutes later, now dressed, I headed out for the kitchen. The upstairs light was on, so I was guessing Zellman was up there. Jordan was staring through the back window, looking out over the yard with a bottle of water in hand.

He took a sip, asking a question as I passed him by for my own water, “Why’s Cross burning clothes?”

I grabbed a bottle and went to stand next to him.

The silhouette of Cross was clearly visible. He was feeding one piece of clothing into the bonfire after another. He looked calm and patient. There was also an air rippling off of him. An air that I felt inside of me, spreading through every inch of my body, setting my hairs upright, but not in fear. In awareness. That was our leader, the same guy who had stepped forward when we were about to face off against Alex Ryerson in the Roussou school’s parking lot and who needed an entire group of guys to wrestle him down at the police station when I was arrested. Seeing him incinerating those clothes was a sober enough moment that Jordan was picking up on it.

I didn’t answer.

Jordan slid his eyes sideways to me, tipping his bottle back for another drag. “That have something to do with where you and he went after you dropped us off? Why Cross had a ski mask in the seat next to him?”

Again. There was no answer.

But Jordan was my crew. I patted his shoulder and said what I could, “Let’s wait until he comes in. He has to make a call.”

Jordan watched me, and I was picking up the same vibes that Cross was giving out. Patience and calm. He nodded, going back to taking a drink from his water. “Okay, then.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CROSS

Channing picked up after the first ring. “Is Bren okay?”

All the clothes were burned. Maybe Bren was right and I was overreacting. I’d rather be safe than sorry, but I still needed to get this call over with. And I was tired. I was so tired. I turned for the house, going to the patio table and sat down. “Yes.”

He sighed on his end. I heard rustling sounds, something creaking. Channing yawned as he said, “I’m assuming I don’t want to hear what’s going to be said over this call. It’s almost four in the morning.”

“Probably not.”

“Fuck.”

I wasn’t one to waste time. “You haven’t called Bren this week. Why is that?”

“Say what?”

“You haven’t called all week, about the raid. Why haven’t you?”

Channing was quiet a second. “How’s that your business?”

Because Bren was my business. But I answered, “Bren wasn’t satisfied with your non-answers when you called her last week. So she called your father, instead.” He swore from his end. “Dammit.”

“He told her about the raid.”

“What else did he say?”

“Just that there was a raid and that law enforcement only got four out of the thirty arrest warrants. Bren said they were

keeping her out of the office all week, but I have to tell you that we went bowling there tonight.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and her boss was there. The Brock guy. He watched her the whole night.”

“What?” Channing’s tone was low, and tight.

“He was watching all of us, like we weren’t a surprise to him. He was studying us.”

“Studying you?”

“Yeah.”

Channing was quiet again. “They kept her out of the office all week?”

“They get money if they bring in any of those arrests, right?”

“Yeah. Fuck.” It was low and quiet again. It was getting tighter too. “You wouldn’t be the one calling me unless there’s more. Just tell me.”

I leaned forward in my chair. “Let’s say there’s a situation where we hypothetically stole one of the employee’s key card.”

“What? Wait. Bren didn’t have one?”

“They never gave her a card.”

“Shit. That’s weird.”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t matter because hypothetically maybe a few things aligned where I was able to find a room that had—”

“What did you do?” He bit out, “Was my sister there?”

I was silent.

He groaned. “Fuuuuck, Cross!”

More silence from me.

He growled. “Just tell me what you found. Hypothetically—”

“A room with your pictures on the wall.”

“*What?*”

“Your dad’s picture. Bren’s picture. My picture. Yours. Everyone in your life. Maxwell Raith on another wall. I’m

assuming pictures of other Red Demons.”

He was quiet again, then clipped out, “How many others?”

“There were three walls. Your dad. Maxwell Raith. Another guy’s.”

“Who was the other guy?”

“I don’t know, but I took pictures of the pictures.”

“Good. I want them. All of them.”

“They’re on my phone.”

“Get a computer. Download them into a password-protected drive, and email that to me. Not via text. I want the drive password protected. You can do that?”

“Sure.” That wasn’t a problem. “But I’ll only do that if you loop us in.”

More silence. From him. From his end.

“What?”

I stood. I hadn’t known I was going to take this stand, but here I was. Standing, literally, for Bren. I kept the phone pressed to my ear as I glanced at the house. The inside was all dark. A light from down the hall was lit up. Bren was in that room, waiting.

“You’ve benched your sister enough with this stuff.”

“She’s not old—”

“She’s here. She’s living with her boyfriend—”

“I’d *think* you’d want to *ingratiate* yourself with me on this one?”

“She’s taking a serious job and trying to figure her shit out. She’s not going to college. She’s not taking the extra four years to ‘find herself’ and figure out what theories and philosophers she thinks can blow smoke up someone’s ass. She’s in the work field. She’s figuring it out, and she’s doing that alone. Her job, people you sent her way, and yeah, only Bren thinks that that was all a coincidence, but a dumbass could see your move from a mile away—these people are icing her out. I don’t know why, but I know it’s affecting her. Staffing a bowling alley is decent

work if that's what she signed up for. She didn't sign up for that, and that's what they have her doing. You were updated from our end about Sweets. We've told you about Harper—"

"Not that you beat the shit out of him. *Yeah,*" he bit into the phone, his voice savage. "You didn't loop me in on that little detail."

Fine. I nodded, not that he could see me. "Just so you know, that was your sister's handiwork. She worked him over because she's the one who could stop before it went too far. The rest of us, fuck no."

"That kid—"

"That kid admitted that he knew Tabatha was touching him against her will. He knew the whole time. He did nothing about it except take advantage of the situation."

I waited, my pulse picking up. Even thinking about Harper, hearing his admission, and I was gripping the phone so tight I was surprised it hadn't shattered.

"He did?"

"He did. She went dark for us. She didn't want to, but she did. So have her back."

"I'm not—"

"I know, but we're not kids anymore. Your sister's certainly not. She's not been a kid in forever, and last semester when you took care of the cop and Drake, she chose that. She wanted you to handle that, so she didn't have to. She let you in, but she's at a point in her life where she needs to be looped in. It's what keeps her from going dark, man."

Quiet again.

Another beat, and then Channing sighed. It was long and drawn-out. "Having our dad back is going to mess her up. I was worried. I didn't think she was ready to deal with him."

"She's not, but she's letting us know when she's ready and when she isn't. I'm just saying, when it's coming to this new stuff going on around him, because it's affecting her job, you need to start thinking of her as an adult. It's the only way she's

going to be able to handle whatever storm that's coming. She has to see it first, then get prepared, so she can deal with the fallout."

"Yeah. *Yeah*. I hear you."

My hand flexed, almost dropping the phone. I caught it and rubbed a hand over my face.

That'd been intense.

Channing added, "Nothing's happening on the Harper front. The girl is here. The kid got worked over, but as far as we know, he's not said who did it. I don't even know if Harper, Sr. knows about it, so a heads-up, when the kid talks, you might have another kind of storm heading your way. It's not *if*, it's *when*. Always when. Plan for the when."

"Got it." *Shit*.

"I just heard Heather get up for the bathroom so I'm going to go. Take care of my sister, and thank you for the call. Do the email *immediately* tomorrow."

I nodded again, then forgot he couldn't see me. "Yeah. On it."

"Hey, Cross."

"Yeah?"

"Watch Bren more than you think you should. She's going to snap one of these days about our dad. It's coming. I just know it."

A burn started to spread through me, but he wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. Bren would snap, but Bren needed to snap. He wasn't getting that part.

"I will."

He hung up after that.

I let the phone drop. Catching it in my palm, I pocketed it. Man. Channing wasn't the only one tired. I felt as if a semi had sideswiped me, crushing my legs.

I checked on the fire and noted everything had burned, then headed inside.

Plan for the when, he said.

A storm was coming. We needed to plan for it.



FROM: Cross

TO: Tazsters

SUBJECT: Re: blank on purpose

Love you. Miss you. I'll call you later this weekend.

—I'm always the best twin

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BREN

Cross came to bed, but I didn't want to hear about any of it. Not then. Not yet.

I wanted to wait, hear it with the rest.

He came in, took one look at me, and knew what I needed. After washing up, he came to bed, rose above me and we didn't fall asleep until much later. I woke late in the morning, wrapped in his arms.

Jordan and Zellman were already gone for classes, and Cross headed in for his twelve-thirty class. I had the house to myself, but it seemed weird to be here alone, so instead, I went for a drive.

I grabbed food, coffee, and then it was like a need inside of me that I wasn't fully comprehending until somehow, I found myself parking at the top of a hill. I was on the outskirts of Cain. Trees spread out in front of me. I double-checked, but none of this was private property. I'd have to look through the records, but I was betting this was still city land waiting to be developed.

Packing my items in a bag, I started through the trees.

There were walking trails on the ridge, and going down one, I kept watch until I found an opening closer to the edge and moved in.

I hadn't known I was coming here, I wasn't even sure where exactly I was.

I moved along, off the walking trail now, and headed farther west.

I kept going until I came to a small clearing and looked out.

It overlooked a row of houses.

They were bigger than the ones in Roussou, much bigger. Each had a pool. A couple had pool houses, but I could see into their backyards. One of the houses had a woman and a group of young children playing, running, and jumping into the pool. There was

another young woman talking to the other, sitting at a back table, overlooking the kids, but mostly talking to each other. There was a whole spread of food and drinks on another table. Balloons. A cake. Presents. Party hats.

It was a birthday party.

Another house had a couple kids floating in their pool, tanning, and talking.

I could hear their conversation, but it was a low murmur. I could only pick out a word here and there. Another house had a woman, retired age working on the shrubbery by her house. Still another had an older lady relaxing, sitting at a table, and her head pointed upwards to the sun.

I sat, feeling something settling inside of me, and I just watched.

It was a minute later, maybe five, perhaps longer, until I moved to start eating. I'd fallen into some form of a trance, watching them, seeing their lives, their homes. The normalcy. They seemed content, almost every single one of them. I knew they weren't, though. They couldn't be. Lives were messy, lives weren't perfect.

There were always deeper emotions. Feelings, thoughts that were under the surface, sometimes acknowledged and most often ignored. But those feelings, those thoughts were there, and they directed what was on the surface. People crying and not knowing why. People hurting others and not understanding what they're doing. Words spoken, judgments passed. All of it was guided from what was sitting just under the surface, but observing these people, they were content.

On the surface.

And who knows, maybe that ran deep inside and they truly were in a good place.

But I was betting they weren't. Who was, really?

But these people. The big houses. Retired. Just starting to live. Just starting adulthood. From the outlook, it looked as if they had everything they wanted, but so many never really felt that way. They always wanted more.

I sighed.

I was here. Why?

I was watching these people. Why?

I thought I'd been getting better. I thought I felt normal for the first time in a long time, even when I couldn't remember the last time, but I was still here.

I was seeing a mom with children, wishing that were me. I was seeing a retired woman and wondering if she had kids. If she did, how many? Were her kids happy? Were they also content?

I still missed *her*.

I had to scoff at myself because I thought I was okay with it, not having my own mother. I missed her. I loved her, and I thought I had closure at losing her. Perhaps not? Was that why I was here again? Still looking for her, but knowing I couldn't, so I sought out a replacement? Is that what this was?

If I couldn't look for my own mother, then I was looking for other mothers?

Or maybe it was their homes?

I didn't know. I just knew that I came here with a feeling in the middle of my chest, and it grew, and grew, and grew until I found this clearing, and now the feeling was spreading through me.

I was still not normal.

That was depressing.

I sighed, letting the sound carry from me as I reached for my drink. Lifting the bottle, I saluted the families that I was watching and tipped my head back.

Then I waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ZELLMAN

When you get a text from Bren with coordinates, you don't question it. You show up.

I learned that lesson long ago, maybe in seventh grade. Bren was a chick who didn't waste words. She didn't need attention. She didn't do anything that was extra. She was not a normal chick, and I knew, I've always known that I'd never meet someone like her. Ever.

So here I was.

Pulling up by her truck, her coordinates farther up, and I was sloshing my way through these woods.

That's another thing about Bren. Trees. She liked 'em. Trees were her thing. That and spying on people. She and Cross didn't think we knew, but we did. We knew about her 'spot' back in Roussou. Doesn't take a fricking genius. It was overlooking her old house, and Bren was haunted by that. Like, literally. Ghost of her mom. Ghost of losing her brother, though, she got the righteous guy back, and then you know, the whole shit and caboodle thing with her dad. That's a brain exploder if I ever heard of one, so I guess I wasn't too surprised to find my crew member sitting in a ball, her knees pulled to her chest, her gaze staring out over some rich folks' houses.

And they were rich.

Pools, shiite.

One day I was hoping to get a house like that. It'd be better than the trailer I grew up in, though I couldn't gripe too much about it. My grandma and my older sister kept it cleaned. Outside the trailer might look like crap, but inside was nothing but class. Then again, that's how my women folk rolled, Bren too.

"Yo." I plopped down, settling in. The grass was lumpy, but I got comfy and glanced over.

Bren was watching me, the side of her head resting on her knees and she had a half-smile.

I looked in those eyes. Yeah. Haunted, but happy too. Happily haunted. It was a step up from the old Bren, and I nodded to myself, grunting. “I need to worry you’re going to break into one of those backyards and pick up all the pool toys?”

She froze a second, her eyes big, and then she started laughing. “You know about that?”

Another grunt. See. So much we knew that she didn’t think we knew. “I have my ways.”

“That’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t sweat it. I love the inner criminal saint you have inside of you.”

Her cheeks were getting red.

I made Bren blush. I felt like a fucking superhero for that feat.

Then, I asked, “What am I doing here, Bren?”

Her shoulders lifted, held, and lowered. Didn’t know why she needed to settle herself, but she did that often. She always seemed worried about someone or something. That would’ve exhausted me, but I wasn’t Bren. I cared about my grandma, my sister, Jordan, Cross, Bren, and Sunday. I didn’t give a fuck about anyone else. Not Bren. She cared about the world while she was denying to herself that she did.

“I wanted to ask about Sunday.”

Left curve.

I didn’t see that one coming.

“I dunno. She’s okay, I guess. Haven’t heard about the baby.” And because I knew Bren, I added, “But that’s not really why you asked me out here.” I nudged her with my arm. Lightly. “Come on. Spill. What’s going on in *our* head?”

She shot me another grin that was half a frown. Another look only Bren seemed to have perfected. Didn’t know how she did it, but I loved her for it. “Cross and I went back to Cougar Lanes. We broke in. He wouldn’t let me in a room, said I shouldn’t see it, and when we came back last night, he called Channing about it.”

I waited, but she didn’t continue.

Okay.

Bren was saying things, giving me crumbs, but she couldn't bring herself to really say what she needed to know or hear or be reassured about. I had to put my thinking hat on for this one.

She told me what they did. Coolio. Breaking and entering was always a good time.

Cross called her brother about it, so yeah, he found something out that would upset B. That's a no-brainer and made sense with everything else happening. And here she was, finding a spot to watch over a bunch of homes like she used to, and I was the one she called.

Why the fuck was I the one she called?

I was thinking I needed to run down what she would've gotten from the other two...

Jordan was Mr. Cut Off right now. He was in a dark place. Bren was usually in a darker place, so maybe she didn't want to go to an even darker than normal place? And with Cross... yeah. I was thinking it would've been the same. The two of them were tight, but they were tense. Cross didn't fuck around. He got to the point of shit, no matter the consequences, and then I could assume the two would move to the rabbit part of their relationship, because that was another thing J and I knew. B and C loved fucking. A lot. But cheers to them. Each person should get their rocks off as many times as they could.

I felt it was a worthy mission for the world's population.

So. Me. I was back to me. I wasn't as intense and dark as the other two. I could get there, mostly when I wanted to bust heads, but sneaking a peek at Brennie Bren, I wasn't getting that vibe either.

She didn't want dark.

That was it.

That's why I got called, and then I grinned, knowing instantly what she needed.

I threw an arm around my girl and yanked her into my side.

"Zellman!" She laughed.

I ignored that 'cause I was just giving Bren what she wanted. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to smile, but she also didn't want to avoid it anymore. That wasn't her style either.

That I could do, no problemo.

“Okay. Let’s break this down.”

She stiffened.

“Your dad did something for you, something you say you were going to do, but I don’t buy it. I think you did what you did, and it was done.”

She tensed now.

Yep. I went all the way back, to the night her pops was arrested. Bren stabbed the guy, thought she’d do more, but I didn’t think she would. Her dad did, and so here we were.

“Your pops, he decided to go the extra mile. Not you. You’re letting your own blame train rail you, if you get what I’m saying.”

A whole lot more tense.

I kept going, “Your dad went to the pen. That’s where people go who did what he did. Then he made some powerful friends, and their lawyers mixed with a bad cop and your dad got sprung. Whoop-de-doo, right? Right. Because no matter how you slice it, your dad’s free, but Brennie Bren.” I patted her far shoulder, bouncing her against my side. “I don’t know the details of your job stuff, but the arrest warrants were for your dad’s friends, not your dad. Your pops isn’t hiding. He’s doing what he’s doing back in Roussou, so I wouldn’t worry about it. You gotta trust some people, and one person I’d trust is your brother. If he calls and tells you to worry, he’ll call and tell you to worry. If he doesn’t, then I wouldn’t worry. You’re letting yourself get all eaten up inside about shit that I don’t think you should be.”

She was silent, still tense, but not as bad as before. She picked at a piece of grass, pulling apart the blade. Her voice came out quiet. “And if they try to use me to get whoever they want to get?”

Okay. I had to read between the lines again. She was talking about her job, or I was guessing.

I held her tight against me, lowering my head so my chin was almost grazing the top of her arm and shoulder. “If they try doing that, then they ain’t the ones you want to move forward with. Simple as that.”

She glanced sideways at me, peering a minute before her mouth twitched. “Why does it make so much sense when you say it?”

I chuckled with one last squeeze before I let her go. “It’s my curse. Making shit make sense without the doom and gloom.”

She laughed, but nudged my chest with her elbow. She did it softly, though. “Thanks for coming.” I nodded, all serious now. “For real, though, Bren. I don’t know what’s all going on, but I’d think your brother and father both wouldn’t want you worrying.”

She nodded, straightening and wrapping her arms around her knees. She pulled them to her chest, her head laid on the top of them, as she turned my way. “I think it’s a conscious decision I have to make, not to worry. You know?”

Yeah. I really knew.

Her gaze shifted, growing more alert, and she lifted her head once more. “Is that what you’re doing with Sunday?”

Nope. All my bullshit and hoopla, this was the reason Bren called me and not the others. Studying her, I don’t think she even knew it either.

Sunday.

There was also this damn pinching feeling, just behind my ribs. Didn’t know what it was. Thought a couple times about heading to the doc, but started to realize it only showed when I started thinking about Sunday. When she left my mind, so did the pinching. Now it was back, and I knew the source. That didn’t mean I liked it. It was still annoying.

“Sunday never wanted me full time, not really.”

Bren frowned. Concern darkened her gaze.

I looked away. The pinching just got worse when I saw the pity. I didn’t need to be pitied.

“I don’t know why, to be honest. Not sure if I just wasn’t good enough for her, or if it was something else. I always thought maybe she worried because she wasn’t in our crew, thought maybe why try going the distance if she couldn’t get all the way in? Tried to tell her once it wasn’t like that. I could have a girlfriend and she’d just have an automatic family, but nah. That was in school. She wanted to be popular, she told me later that she couldn’t fully be popular if she was dating me. She needed to date someone like Cross or Jordan.” I looked at her now, and the pinching tripled. Bren’s eyes were filled with concern. She was hurting for me. I added, my voice getting rough, “The leaders, ya know? The pretty boys, too.”

“Zellman,” she breathed out.

“I got it. I did. I’m not a leader, but damned sure if I’m not the guy they want backing them up.”

“Zellman.” She grabbed my arm and leaned in close, almost right in my face. “When did she tell you this?”

The pinching was now piercing me.

I shrugged. “Don’t remember.”

“When?”

I did remember. Just wished I didn’t. “April, I think. Early May.” May 3rd, to be exact.

“She was already pregnant.”

Wait. What?

I frowned at Bren.

She was trying to hold back a grin. Her hand tightened around my arm. “She already knew by then she was pregnant. Drake had broken up with her. She was trying to push you away.”

No...

Could...

Really?

I scooted back. I didn’t know why, but I needed space. Bren let me go, watching me. Her little smile faded, slowly.

“It was always on and off with us.”

“Yeah, because Sunday’s kind of a bitch, but she’s always cared about you. I know that for a fact.”

It hurt too much, thinking the other way. She was pregnant, man. Having another man’s kid, a guy who was also in the pen. A guy who was known to be a snitch, and we all knew it was only a matter of time how long he lasted in there.

That was Sunday’s baby daddy.

“Bren.” My voice broke. I shook my head. “I can’t—she can’t —”

“It’s okay, whatever you’re thinking in your head. You do what you want, what you need, but Sunday’s not with you because you’re not considered alpha enough. That’s ridiculous, and you are a pretty

boy, too. We can take a walk on your campus and I know you'll get five numbers without even trying. That doesn't happen to not-pretty boys, and you know it."

Well. Yeah. She had me there.

I never had a problem getting a girl.

I eyed her, half-grinning. "Did we just become best buds?"

Bren started laughing.

I added, "Cross and Jordan might have something to say about this. They won't be happy. It'll mess up the entire group's dynamic. Does this mean I get to bone you?"

Bren's laughter stopped and her fist flew out. She landed a good solid one across my jaw.

Too far. I rubbed at it, grinning at her. "There's that line you keep mentioning."

"You think?"

But she was smiling, and that was really the reason she called me.

I did my job.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CROSS

“Dickweed.”

I was leaving the library and sighed because, of course, we had psych together earlier and he ignored me. He’d been ignoring me since we cut him out of handling Harper, but now my brother was wanting attention.

I stopped. I considered it.

Fuck it. I kept going.

“Hey! I said DICKWEED!”

I whirled around. “Keep fucking insulting me, and we’re going round two.”

Blaise slowed to a stroll, that same damned fucking smirk there.

He did it again.

I wanted to deck him just for that.

“What do you want?” I snapped, knowing we were getting attention and knowing some of them were giggling girls and frat douchebags, because when I was around my brother, we were attention magnets. His soccer stardom had been growing since we started school, and half the guys around knew Blaise from Zeke. Another idiot that I couldn’t stand, which brought me back to—why the fuck was I standing here?

I turned, starting to leave.

“Okay, okay!” Blaise was laughing. He held a hand up. “Jesus. Peace, fucker.”

I growled. “Stop pissing me off, Blaise.”

“I’m *just* messing with you.”

“I’m *just* getting sick of it.”

“Okay, okay.” He drew up next to me, lowering his voice. “Zeke texted me. Harper’s back and called a house meeting. Zeke’s worried about what’s going to go down there.”

I drew up short. All kinds of alarms were starting to sound in my head. “I told him not to talk.”

“Guess he stopped caring?”

With everything going on with Bren and her job, Harper had somewhat slipped my mind.

Blaise asked, keeping his voice low, “Anything new from the dad front?”

I shook my head. “No, and if there was, Channing would’ve called.”

“So what are you thinking?”

What was I thinking? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I started walking forward.

“Hey.” Blaise darted to keep up with me. “Are you going to the frat house right now?”

I threw him a frown. “Why would I do that?”

“Why?” he scoffed at the same time a couple girls waved at him, saying hi. He ignored them. “Because your girl beat the shit out of him for your other friend because of his girl. Are you following the dots? You guys are involved.”

“We’re not involved.”

“How do you figure?”

I stopped and let out a breath. “He called a frat meeting. I have nothing to do with his fraternity. Zeke does, so that means you do. I draw the line there. I can barely stand you, but no fucking way am I wading in to help Zeke. No matter what bullshit loyalty he has to you or you have to him, he’s been a pain in my ass and Bren’s ass since before you arrived in town.

So, yeah. I don't give a shit. You go to the frat meeting and do whatever you want."

I took off, hearing him bite out a growl behind me.

I kept going. I meant what I said.

"I want him out of that house."

I didn't stop, saying over my shoulder, "I don't care!"

"He's going to be a problem for Zeke if he stays."

Aaand again, "I *really* don't care!"

"Agh! Fine! What do you want?"

I stopped walking, and turned back, my eyebrow cocked up. "Say again?"

"What do you want?"

"Want?"

"Yeah. What do you want?"

I frowned. "Why are you up my ass to do this? What do you think we can do to help with this?"

Blaise frowned at me, his head cocked to the side. He seemed to be thinking, then he held a finger up. "You're right. I'm thinking of this all in the wrong way. Thank you." He flashed me a smile before backing away. "Oh, hey. You coming to my soccer game?"

"You play today?"

He dipped his head down. "Seven."

This was another annoying fact about him. He was fun to watch. Even Bren enjoyed going to the games.

I growled, biting out, "We'll be there." His smile was blinding. So was how fucking smug he was. "Sit with Aspen, could you? Some of her friends are heading home for the weekend. They won't be there."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

He took off, and my phone started buzzing in my pocket, so I pulled it out.

An unknown number flashed over the screen.

“Hello?”

A voice said from the other end, “This is Bren’s boss. I believe you have something of mine.”



He was waiting by his truck when I pulled into the parking lot.

I didn’t know why he asked to meet here, outside PubTown, but I went. I was figuring not meeting in his parking lot was better odds for me? Either way, I wouldn’t be alone for long. I called everyone, giving Bren the option if she wanted to come and hear what he had to say, or head to the soccer game to sit with Aspen.

She hesitated, and that told me so much.

I wasn’t totally surprised when she said, “I don’t trust Jordan and Zellman with Aspen.”

She hung up and the dread that’d been building since seeing her dad’s face pinned on this guy’s wall just doubled. Bren was choosing to step back, something Bren rarely did. The last time she did it willingly was the night she told me she wanted to be a normal high school senior for a night, not chasing after her drug-dealer ex.

Bren didn’t step back because she was a coward. She stepped back because of the unnecessary pain it’d bring, and I took a look, a good long look, at this guy as I parked and got out of my own vehicle.

He was leaning his shoulder against his ride, arms crossed over his chest, and he was in full bounty hunting apparel. Vest on. All their weapons they wore. His badge hanging around his neck. He had sunglasses on but flipped them up as I came around the back of my truck.

He nodded to me. “I clocked you watching me the other night. Knew you were smart. The others,” he waved a hand in

the air, “they listen to you. All of them. You can tell, if you really watch. Bren, she relies on you. She smiles quicker, breathes easier when you’re near her. The others, they do the same. They’re a bit more guarded, then you come back and they all just relax. And you’re the leader. Noticed that, too, from the other night. Could tell because they all had to see you if they were wondering something. Joking. Telling stories. They don’t look at you in those moments, but the second another person or situation or a call came through and they were unsure, all of them checked in with you. A look. A question. Or a hand motion, like a wave or something. I was military, was in a special unit. I learned to read people in little motions that no one else even detects. I can learn a lot that way. I learned a lot that night you were in my place.”

“Yeah.” Fine. He wanted me to know he knew me. I’d show him me. “Me too. I looked up the records. You are the sole owner of both businesses, the bowling alley and the bounty hunting business, but you let the old couple be the beard. You do that for them? Is it a matter of pride, or you enjoy the cover? Other things I learned by watching you, you’re smart. Case in point, this entire conversation, but you’re a workaholic, hence why you were there that late at night still doing work. That paperwork wasn’t for the bowling alley. You were relaxed in the bowling alley. You enjoyed being in there, but you got tense when you walked into the other offices. That’s the work you were doing, since you got tense as soon as you picked up your pen. And if you were doing that paperwork alone, that means you sent the rest home. So you treat them good.”

A smile flared for a second. “You got that because I was doing paperwork alone?”

“That and Trundle offered to sneak us booze, but we couldn’t tell you. I watched him. He wasn’t really worried that you’d notice or even care. He poured Jordan a beer a couple times in front of you, and you didn’t blink an eye. That means you trust him.”

His smile fell. “That kid did that?”

I nodded.

He looked away, cursing. “He’s Hawk’s little brother. He’s also like my little brother, that punk.” He shook his head, his hand rubbing between his eyes for a moment. Then, as if clearing his mind, he refocused on me. A cloud seemed to settle over him, making the bags under his eyes a little more pronounced. “You did good. I almost would’ve not caught it, with the whole dropping Justin’s key card in the back, except that Justin never uses that door. That was your tell.”

I closed my eyes. *Damn.*

“After that, I went to the security cameras, and you know what I saw. Took me a bit to figure out who it was. You, and I’m assuming Bren was the other, you both were masked. Kept your heads down. Stayed in the shadows. I only really got you on camera a few times. Can see the flashlights, but it was so dark in there, that’s mostly it. The flashlight, your hands holding the lights, and your shapes every now and then. Saw the flashes, so I’m assuming you were both taking pictures.” His eyes got hard. “Pictures that I’ll want back, by the way.” Then he drew in a breath and waited a beat, glancing off a moment. “The only thing, Bren doesn’t know where the key to get into the offices was kept. That’s what tricked me up a bit until I remembered that I put the key there last night, and you were walking back from the bathroom. That was the only way you could’ve known, and you were good. I had no clue you saw me. Must’ve seen me the second you cleared the door. Probably happened in a split second.”

He was right.

I wasn’t confirming.

Now was the real reason he called me, straightening up from his truck. He seemed casual, but the guy was like a shark just circling, getting closer to the smaller fish he wanted to eat.

I was bracing.

I knew the bite was coming.

He dropped his voice low. “I could go to the station, make a formal complaint. They could haul you guys in. Course, that means Bren would go in and I know she’s got a record. Her

dad has one, too. They'd see her, find out her connection, know that she's a couple steps away from some of their bigger warrants, and are you seeing where I'm going with this?"

Yes, I was.

And yes, I wanted to hit him. Now, please.

He was threatening Bren.

I smirked. "You don't want to do that."

He frowned. "What?"

"You heard me." I moved forward an inch. "You're going to stand here, and toss out threats? Do it. Course, you do that, and you not only piss off me and my crew, but you piss off Bren's brother and his entire company and Bren's dad. From what I heard, Raith did something for Channing because of his dad. You don't think he wouldn't do something if you threatened Monroe's daughter? Because of her connection to their MC? Yeah. You don't want to do that. You'd also hurt Bren. She likes you guys. She likes working with you guys, if you'd only give her a chance."

He'd gone still as I talked, and stiller and stiller until he wasn't moving an inch. When I was done, he closed his eyes. One second, then they opened, and he coughed. "I think I'm handling this wrong."

I snorted. "I'm thinking that's a no-brainer."

His eyes narrowed. "I need those pictures deleted off your phone."

I waited a second. "I already sent them to Channing."

"You WHAT?!"

He came unhinged now, jerking away from his truck, but he caught himself. Though, that might've been because Jordan's truck swung into the parking lot at that moment. Zellman jumped from the back before it stopped, coming to a running stop beside me. Jordan wasn't far off, his door slamming shut as he strolled around his truck.

“Well...on that note,” I indicated to them. “My ride’s here.”

Brock was shaking his head, looking at the ground. His hands were on his hips, and a grumbling sound came from him. “Do you even know what you did? Do you even care?”

“I sent mug shots from one bounty hunter to another bounty hunter.”

“You sent surveillance pictures to the same fucking people being watched. That’s what you did.” A vein was sticking out on the side of his neck. He was getting red.

“No.”

“YES!”

“No,” I shot back, fierce. “Channing’s not like that.”

He scoffed, still shaking his head. “The son of our mark? Yeah, right.”

“Screw off,” Jordan spoke up.

Zellman jerked his chin up. “Back up.”

His eyes narrowed to slits, taking in both of them. “Right. What great friends you guys are. So big and tough, right? You don’t know—”

“Like we don’t know what goes on in the world?” Jordan stepped forward, his head lowered and cocked to the side, but his eyes firmly on Brock. “You serious? Your research is worth shit then. We’re from Roussou. We don’t have the white picket fences or the fancy zip codes. You fight to survive there. You don’t—”

“Well...” Zellman cocked his head to the left. “Some do.”

Jordan stopped, his eyes flicking up before he kept on, “Anyway, we ain’t the sheltered bitches you think we are.”

“I grew up in a trailer.”

Jordan frowned, glancing to Zellman, who was bobbing his head after he just said that.

I frowned.

Brock's eyes squinted.

"So," Jordan looked back to Brock, "don't fuck with us."

"Alrighty, incoming freshman students. Noted. I'm quaking in my boots." Brock was pulling all the punches.

"Oh my God—" Jordan started.

I spoke up, stopping him, "I'm not giving you the pics—it's not even a question at this point since they are out of my hands—and you're not going to do anything about it. Let's all drop the pretenses here. You called me here to see if you could intimidate your way into me giving you the pictures. I sent them to Channing first thing this morning, and if you're recording me to incrim—"

"Don't insult me," he snarled.

I stopped, but asked, "We on the same page?"

He was glaring at me. "You're a freshman in college. What do you know about the wrong side of the tracks? I ran your parents' finances. You grew up privileged."

I sobered. He was right, but he wasn't. In more ways than I could count.

"Considering you know Bren's files, you know I'll know that I'm quite aware of my privilege compared to how she grew up." I motioned to Zellman. "Him too."

"Hey..." Zellman frowned.

Jordan grinned at him. "He's making a point."

Zellman huffed. "I'm just not appreciating that he's using me to make the point."

"Z."

He raised his eyebrows. "I said what I said."

"We have a game to get to, remember?" Jordan was sounding bored.

Right. My dickweed's game.

I jerked my chin up to Brock. "It's been enlightening, see ya around." I started for my truck.

“Hey.”

I looked back.

He was frowning, staring at me as if he were reassessing me. “We kept her out of the loop for her benefit, not the job. We like her.”

“She’ll appreciate that.” I moved for my vehicle.

“Also...” Jordan piped up.

I glanced back at Jordan. He was staring hard at Bren’s boss.

He continued, “She’s loyal as fuck, and she can kick ass. You fuck her over, and all three of us will fuck you over. You might not give a shit about us, thinking we’re young, but trust me, dude. We’re just the first in line.”

Brock’s gaze grew hooded, but he didn’t reply as the rest of us got in our trucks.

Jordan nodded at me. “Soccer field?”

I nodded back. “Bren’s there?”

Zellman nodded, probably to join in. “She’s with Aspen.”

Soccer field, it was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BREN

College sports sucked.

I mean, they weren't fun.

They were.

They were boring.

They weren't boring.

They were predictable.

Not predictable at all.

They were quiet.

They so weren't quiet.

And I was here, sitting on the bleachers, having a whole argument with myself because I wasn't regretting not going to college. Not one bit. Nope. Not at all. Except... being here, sitting here, I was regretting it. Kinda.

I mean, not a ton.

A little bit.

Somewhat.

There was a twinge, but only a twinge.

Why hadn't I gone to college?

That's right, because I didn't think I was worthy of it.

I drew up short, the first time admitting that to myself.

I hadn't thought I was worthy back then.

How fucked is that?

And now?

I was sitting here, next to Aspen, glaring at a bunch of bitches who were throwing Blaise's girlfriend nasty glares, and I was feeling some weird déjà vu because I wanted to pull my knife out just to hear those girls gasp in fear.

I didn't, but I wanted to. Badly.

So yeah, there was a twinge, but not enough to apply for next semester.

"Yo." Zellman dropped down on the bleacher next to me. He gave a nod to Aspen and me before leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "How's Dickweed doing?"

It wasn't said with affection, but Dickweed was the reason we were all here.

Aspen laughed. "He's doing good, but he always does good."

She wasn't being biased. I didn't care for Cross' brother, but I had to give him his due. He played hard and ruthless on the field. Today was no different. He already scored the first goal. He was currently running after another player looking like he wanted to murder him. Getting to him, he moved his feet around, and somehow the ball was kicked clean away from the opponent.

Blaise had it. He pulled it back.

Another opponent was coming from the right.

Blaise saw him.

The first opponent was coming from the left.

Blaise kicked the ball behind him to his teammate, darted past the two, and his teammate kicked it right back. It happened within three seconds, and then Blaise was off running with the ball.

Aspen sighed. "He's got some extra energy today. He's pissed, but I can't figure about what." She shrugged, a small smile on her face. "Guess I'll find out later."

I frowned at her. "Find out in a good way or...?"

“Oh.” She laughed. “A good way. Always a good way.”

I nodded, but still frowned.

Jordan and Cross were walking across the bleachers at the bottom, looking right at us.

Zellman shifted back, his hand raised to him.

Jordan nodded, taking the steps two at a time. Cross trekked the path coming across the bleachers straight to me, ignoring how a few of the girls were watching him the whole time. Okay. More than a few, a whole lot more.

A weird, unsettling feeling moved in my chest.

I remember how Cross had been before he'd been with me. He slept around. Girls liked him, and even when we got together, there were still girls after him, but I felt like I had a modicum of control in that environment. They knew me, or at least knew about me. I was feared, but here...it was a whole different ballgame.

I was not known.

I was not feared.

I was not even around.

That twinge was acting up again. Just a small fraction, though.

Zellman took the row behind us as Jordan came in from the side. Cross came from the bottom and dropped into Zellman's vacated seat. He dropped a kiss on my forehead, moving and murmuring in my ear, “Hey. You look weirded out.”

I shrugged, but said back, “I can't cut all the girls wanting you. I don't know how to process this feeling.”

He drew back, frowning at me, then he laughed. Cupping my face in both hands, he moved down until his lips were on mine. And then, he proceeded to kiss me. It wasn't a chaste, polite in public kiss. It was an indecent kiss, one where he was enjoying me, claiming me, and making me start to pant for him.

And I was. Panting. Lots of panting.

Then he pulled back, a smug smile on his face. My heart was racing, and I knew I was flushed in the face.

He did that on purpose. As much for himself and me, as well as for those bitches.

Leaning back in, he whispered over my lips, “I love you.”

I whispered back, fisting the front of his shirt, “I know.”

He drew back, his hand sweeping down my back. Tugging me against his side, his arm went back to my shoulder and I felt good and anchored to his side. I loved him, and I loved that, too.



Cain’s soccer team won.

Blaise was the MVP, but according to everyone’s reactions, that was common around here. We were leaving, heading to the parking lot with Aspen beside our group when a couple guys were moving to head us off. Cross and I saw them at the same time.

Cross saying, “Jordan,” the same time I spoke, “Heads-up.”

Jordan and Zellman looked, and both slowed.

Aspen was frowning, looking from the guys to us, and back again.

She didn’t say anything, moving so she was behind me more. Smart.

Zellman said to us, “Harper’s frat brothers.”

Cross made a low noise. “Blaise found me on campus today.”

All of us looked at him, our heads whipping around.

His eyes were guarded. “Harper’s back at the frat, called a meeting.”

Zellman scoffed.

Jordan’s mouth fell open an inch. “You’re telling us this now?”

Cross shrugged. “Kinda had other pertinent shit happening, you know.” The glance toward me was noticed, by everyone.

Aspen moved so she was more in our circle. She cast a look my way, her eyes concerned. Her eyebrows pulled low together. “Something to do with you?”

I tried giving her a reassuring grin, but I knew it fell flat. From what Blaise had said, Aspen wasn’t aware of what Harper did that was about her. Blaise was still unclear what exactly happened. Whatever it was, I met Cross’ look, and he nodded to the side.

I followed his wavelength and cleared my throat. “Uh, Aspen—”

“I got her.” Jordan’s comment came out abrupt and harsh sounding. His gaze was hard, leveled on the two guys approaching. He added under his breath, “I don’t trust myself when they start bringing up Harper’s name. I gotta bounce.” He made a concerted effort to soften his look and his voice when he said to Aspen, “You like coffee?”

“I love coffee.”

He motioned to the side. “Let’s grab some for everyone. Think your man wants one?”

They started to walk off, but Aspen turned, sending me a look over her shoulder. She wasn’t dumb, not a bit, and judging by the awareness, she also wasn’t scared. But, still, she went with Jordan and we heard her say, “Blaise will love anything I buy him. He’s that kind of boyfriend to me.”

A surprised laugh rippled from Jordan. He responded, but I couldn’t hear it.

As if a collective subconscious thought went through us, all three of us turned and moved to wait for the two fraternity

brothers. Jesus. They even looked like the stereotypical frat brother. Were those loafers? I wasn't up on my rich asshole footwear apparel. But they had the firm jawlines, meathead necks, etc. I wasn't trying to be dismissive, but I already didn't like that Harper guy, and throw in Zeke? Hell. Blaise was still a question mark, too.

I was going to be a bit negative about them.

But these guys stepped close, now within talking distance.

A few girls were around us. They were sending us furtive looks.

Wait.

I recognized one. She was the girl who'd opened the door that day, tan handprint on her stomach, when I went to talk to Tabatha. I was betting that the entire group was made up of Tabatha's sisters, and that made me take more notice of them.

They weren't looking at the guys fondly. Like, at all.

The handprint girl definitely had frost in her gaze as she was tracking the two guys.

Oh yeah. That made things a whole lot more interesting. I was taking note that I needed to give Tabatha a call, see how she was doing and get a feel of her sorority's feelings on this whole matter.

"Harper said he wasn't supposed to talk."

That was the greeting from the guy in the green polo. He announced it as if it were this great big proclamation we all needed to tremble from. Then his eyes went right to me, and they grew hard. "But he did."

The pink polo shirt guy bristled, his hand jerking into a fist before he stuffed it in his pocket.

"Harper talked, huh?"

The guys looked at Zellman. The bristling guy's eyes widened a fraction of an inch. He shifted back as if he'd not been expecting that from Zellman, or that Zellman would be the one to even speak first.

The green guy raised his chin up. “Thought we were cool?”

Ahhh. Now I got it. Zellman must’ve partied with these guys at some point.

Zellman’s eyes were cold. “This is my crew.”

Just like that. That’s all he said, but his sentiment was noted. His crew came first. Always.

Cross took a breath and stepped forward. “You came here. You said what you said. I’m guessing that was it?” His head lowered. “Or is there more you want us to know?”

The two guys looked at me. They seemed torn.

Cross’ eyes narrowed. “I’m going to be honest. I’m not really sure the point of you guys telling us this?”

That was true. If Harper talked, why were they here? Why not the cops ready to arrest us? Or if there was some other ramifications by them being here and the guys kept looking at me. I didn’t know if that meant Harper told them I’d been the one to beat him up? Would a guy like that willingly admit he got his ass kicked by a female? I couldn’t read these guys, but they looked like they were expecting me to be fearful of them. Or nervous, maybe.

I had to sigh.

These guys really did not know us.

I was probably just making broad assumptions, because who knew if these guys were actually like Harper? Zeke Allen also seemed on the same path as them, but again, he was a stay-tuned sort of situation and things could go sideways with that dude any day of the week.

I tuned back in, realizing that both Cross and Zellman caught on that I was not participating in the conversation. Both were frowning a little at me, and Zellman was now saying, “... we’ll be in touch, how about that?” Oh, yes. I missed a lot. Zellman’s sarcasm could cut a brick. “Thank you and have a great day.”

The two guys shared a look, both seemed confused.

Their whole tough attitude had faded. The bristling guy was no longer bristling and his hand came out of its pocket. It wasn't fisted anymore either.

They had no idea how to handle us.

Okay. I was about to educate them. "Guys."

All heads turned my way.

I tilted mine to the side. "We're the rough-and-tumble type of people. You want to fight? We'll throw down. It's where we came from. It's what Roussou is like. Want to know a bit more about us? There's a whole documentary about us out there ready to stream. If you're looking to scare us, it's the opposite effect. We're just different. We're not going to react how you think. Like, take me, for example. I stabbed a teacher."

Zellman coughed, covering up an abrupt laugh.

Cross was just watching me carefully.

I kept on, my tone all casual, "I did my time, got counseling. I'm better, but then again...maybe I'm not. I could slip back. I probably will. I mean, there's my dad, too. He's now a member of a motorcycle club, and yeah, it's one of those that you should be scared of."

The two guys edged back a step, looking way more cautious toward me now.

Me, I gave them a smile, almost upbeat. "And not to mention the whole reason he went to jail. For murder. He killed someone before I could finish him off. So my dad did my time for me."

...my dad did my time for me.

My own voice was echoing in my head.

I was hearing myself, but hearing it at a distance, like I wasn't connected to myself.

I kept on, but I was also reeling. "So there's that, too. To summarize things up nice and tidy, you're not going to get the normal reaction from us that I'm thinking you're hoping to

get. We,” I motioned to all three of us, “are not scared of you guys, or your house, or really anything.”

Here was the part that I was tired of: the talking, the words, the threats. These guys came over to intimidate us. We intimidated them instead, or at least I did because they edged back another step, looking at me like I was that wild animal I used to be. And I did used to be that person.

But I wasn't anymore.

Jesus.

I was in my head now, and what was I even going on about?

I was suddenly over this whole conversation, this entire situation.

Fuck. I was growing again.

How'd that happen?

Cross sighed. “Get lost, guys. If Harper sent you here to test us, tell him we're quaking in our boots. He'll like that. It'll make him feel better.”

At his words, their entire demeanor changed. They looked relieved, their shoulders relaxed, and one nodded. He nudged the other with his elbow, and both turned away. They were leaving at the same time Blaise joined us, still sweaty from the game, but he'd pulled some soccer pants and a dry shirt on. He scowled at the guys, watching them leave.

“What'd they want?”

Cross glanced my way, then turned to face his brother. “Why don't you call your best friend and ask him? We are not your crew. You're acting like we are.”

Blaise's eyes grew cold, holding his brother's gaze steadily. “Got your underwear twisted, bro—”

Cross went at him, and I moved, but I was on autopilot because this was nothing new either.

Blaise and Cross fighting.

I stepped between them the same time Zellman turned, his back to me, and he was facing Blaise. He shoved him back. I turned back, reaching out and catching Cross in his chest. I held him back at the same time.

He growled over my shoulder, “We’re not here to do your dirty work. I told you this before.”

I didn’t want to look because I didn’t want to see, but I could hear the smirk on Blaise’s face. “Really? Because you already did. I wanted Harper worked over, and you guys did it for me. Thank you.”

Cross went still against my hands, still and solid.

Blaise kept on, “I already worked Harper for what he said about Aspen, but every chance I get where pain can get inflicted on that asshole, on that whole house, I’m taking it. So, thank you because you already did my bitch work.”

Cross’ face went flat, and that wasn’t good.

I jerked, moving him back, and I said over my shoulder, “Let’s go.”

Zellman wasn’t moving.

I didn’t stop. Cross wasn’t fighting me, so I moved him back at a quick pace.

“Z!” I clipped out.

Zellman remained in place, and Blaise was focused on him now, his jaw clenching.

Then, in a flash, Zellman’s fist came up. He punched Blaise right in the face.

A normal hit would send a guy to the ground, but Blaise didn’t move. His face snapped to the side, that was it. He lifted a hand, rubbing where he’d been hit, and he said something back to him, something that was inaudible to us. We waited, but nothing happened until slowly, Zellman turned and started toward us. His head was down and he shoved his hands in his pockets.

As he drew closer, Cross growled, “What’d he say?”

“Nothing.” And Zellman breezed by.

Cross and I shared a look because Blaise had certainly said something.

“I don’t know what to do about my brother.”

I frowned, my hands no longer pushing him or holding him in place. They just rested against his chest, now in a comforting manner, or maybe a shared, frustrating manner, because I said, “Yeah. Me neither.”

Then again, there was a lot I didn’t know what to do about.

Either way, we both moved to follow Zellman.



From: Brenners

To: Tazsters

Subject: Hey

How are you? Tell me the latest with Race.

I told you about 'the hug' we did on Zach. Guess who's back in the fart house?

—Bren

From: Tazsters

To: Bren

Subject: Re: Hey

Are you serious??? I didn't know.

And fart house — lol!

Also, I know that his name isn't Zach. Thanks for letting me feel like a dumbass for weeks.

The Best Twin

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BREN

“Hey.”

I was sitting on the perch in my room, overlooking the backyard. Turning, Cross was coming in, the music from downstairs blaring louder. It muted as he closed the door, coming toward me. He flipped on the fan for extra sound, and suddenly we were in our private sanctuary. The party sounds were still there, but much quieter now as he moved behind me, sliding in. Lifting his legs, he put me between them and folded me back against his chest.

I leaned all the way back, almost feeling lazy now.

Rolling my head, I went back to watching outside.

Jordan and Zellman had the bonfire going, each with a girl on their laps. There were a bunch of others sitting with them, drinking, laughing, and flirting. A lot of flirting.

A part of me was perplexed, because not four hours ago we'd shared words with Cross' brother. Zellman punched him, and Blaise was now one of the guys sitting at the bonfire, Aspen on his lap. She was folded in, her head against his chest, and I was pretty sure she'd fallen asleep an hour into the party. Blaise hadn't moved an inch, stroking her back almost the entire time.

I just shook my head, watching Zellman now laughing at something Blaise said.

I commented, “How the fuck did that happen?”

Cross' arm tightened around me. I felt his laugh behind me. “At this rate, who the hell knows.”

We couldn't stand the guy this summer, then we were reluctantly inviting him over. Words had been shared multiple times. Zellman hit him. And he was down there, sharing a beer, and making not only Zellman, but Jordan, laugh.

“And who are the guys?”

Cross sighed into my ear. “Jordan said he and Aspen ran into them when they were coming back. They’re on Blaise’s soccer team. I’m pretty sure that’s who Blaise wants to be Zeke’s friends, not the frat assholes he hangs with now.”

I moved my head, tipping it so I could see him. “He told you that?”

Cross shrugged. “Not in so many words, but I know he either wants Harper out of the frat house or he wants Zeke out.”

Huh.

That was it.

Just, huh. I had no other thoughts or feelings, just always perplexed when it came to Cross’ brother, mixed with mild to severe irritation.

“Your brother’s like a skin rash. He won’t go away. Then he’ll go away, and we’ll be like, ‘where’d he go?’”

Cross laughed, his head dipping as he dropped a kiss to my shoulder. “No. Blaise is not a skin rash. He’s just straight up hives. The more stressed I get, the worse he becomes.”

Hives. It fit.

“Jordan and Zellman seem to like his teammates, though.”

“I know.” He sounded disappointed.

We sat there for a bit in silence. It felt nice, hearing the soft sounds of the party now, watching the flicker of the bonfire below, and somehow I felt full inside. Full of life, memories, or just family. I wasn’t going to question it too much. I felt good. I was going with that.

Then Cross’ arm tightened again, and my stomach took a dip.

His chest tensed behind me, and my stomach really took a dip.

If Cross was going to whisk me away from the window for the bed, he wouldn’t have tensed. He would’ve just done it, and then landed on top of me. This, he was preparing himself to tell me something, and I knew innately that it wasn’t something I wanted to hear.

I was going to take a guess. “I can only think of one reason my employers would keep me out of the offices.”

Cross froze behind me.

“And I’ve given it some thought, but I’m wondering was it only my father they had on a wall, or was I up there, too?”

It’s the only explanation that made sense, and why Cross kept me out and why he called Channing first.

Cross cursed behind me.

I was right.

Forget churning, my stomach fell out.

I knew, but... I’d been hoping I’d been wrong.

Cross filled me in on everything, and afterwards, I just sat there. I couldn’t move. Think. Feel. Nothing. Because I knew. I *knew*.

My dad. This was all about my dad.

It was finally time that I dealt with my dad.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BREN

Jordan was up when I was grabbing coffee the next morning. I saw him outside, a mug in front of him, and he was staring off at the bonfire that still had a little smoke coming from it. I grabbed my own cup, checked the time, and since I had a few minutes before I had to leave, I headed outside.

“Hey.”

The morning air was crisp and chilled.

Jordan looked over, bags under his eyes. His head inclined and he raised his hand a tiny bit off the table. “Morning.”

They partied late last night. We heard them, though they weren’t too loud. What I definitely knew I’d heard late into the night or early into the morning was someone giggling.

I asked, “Did you have an overnight guest?”

Jordan went back to staring at the bonfire, a whole troubled look coming over him. He had on a sweatshirt, the hood pulled low over his face, and he shifted back in his chair. His hands went into the pocket in the front of his sweatshirt, and he pulled the bottom out to rest lower on his lap. He lounged back, his legs stretching out.

“That was Zellman.”

“Ah.”

Jordan looked over at me, his lip curling upwards. “Bren.”

“Hmm?”

“If you want to know about our love lives, you can ask.”

That statement struck me, because it was weird, but it was weird because it shouldn’t have been weird. I grinned at him, rolling my eyes slightly. “I’m not—”

“I know.” He was talking gently. Understanding flashed in his eyes. “Bren, we get it. You’re a chick, but you’re not a chick. We get that, too. For real, and you can ask us about who we’re sleeping with and who we are dating. Shit. We bug you about yours sometimes.”

I felt myself loosening up, though he was right. Talk like this had never been a staple with me and the guys. I wasn’t sure why, but it felt kinda nice being able to ask him. “So, what’s up with you and Tabatha then?”

He groaned, half laughing. His head ducked all the way down until he lifted once more. “Damn. I walked into that one, huh?”

I raised my eyebrows. Waiting.

He sighed, shaking his head. “I have no clue. I’m still reeling about what she did. The whole thing.”

“Did she actually sleep with him?”

He shook his head again. “I have no clue. I can’t bring myself to ask, and I should. Makes me feel like a coward. But the thought—just the thought of any of it... Why didn’t she come to us for help? We could’ve done something. Anything. Her having to do what she did, that shouldn’t have even been on the plate.”

“Did Cross tell you what his brother told him?”

Jordan nodded, a hard laugh ripping from him. “That fuck’s back in the frat house. And what? We’re going to fight an entire frat house, to get them to kick someone out? That’s not what we do. We handle ourselves. *That’s* what we do, but Tab—she didn’t even come to us. She didn’t come to me.”

“I know.”

He raised a hand, rubbing at his forehead. “The funny thing is that at the end of this, I think Tab and I are done. She made that decision, and she’s not asked to come back to me, but Zellman?” He nodded his head upwards, toward the house. “He’s up there fucking some girl. He’s been out, making friends everywhere, and he’s the one I bet is going to get back with his girl.”

Wait. What?

“Sunday?”

He nodded. “He calls her every night.”

I leaned forward, my mouth falling open. “Every night?”

“Almost every night, or a text just to check in. He’s doing it for me, asking about Tabatha, but he’s asking about her, too. The baby. She still hasn’t given birth.”

Right.

Drake’s kid.

My ex’s kid. My ex who was in prison, and to our knowledge, is still alive. And that caused my stomach to clench.

“So, Sunday and Zellman, huh?”

He nodded. “Yep. I think so.”

I squinted at him, cocking my head to the side. “A hundred bucks says they don’t.”

Jordan’s head whipped back to mine, his eyes widening. “What?”

“You heard me.”

But his grin was slowly spreading. “You’re on, because I know my boy, and he’s going to end up married to her.”

I groaned. “Let’s hope not.”

He laughed, then tipped his chin up toward me. “Heading to work?”

“Yeah.”

“You nervous?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckled while standing just as I did. We both grabbed our coffees. “You’ll be fine, Bren. You always are. You’re our stronghold, you know.”

Cross mentioned something similar, but I never really considered it. I didn’t know what to think of that, to be honest, so I just grinned, ducking my head, and we went back inside. Jordan put his coffee away, then headed back to his room. I was pouring my own coffee into a travel mug when I heard more footsteps coming from the living area.

“Hey.”

It was Cross, and he was yawning. Tired lines were around his eyes, his hair was messed up, what there was to actually be messed up, and he was only wearing boxers. His chest was stark and more

lean than normal. Jesus. I loved him. I slept with him. I was now living with him, but I forgot sometimes how hot he was. He was reaching for the coffee when he caught me checking him out.

He smirked. “Trust me, you don’t have time for round five, unless you want to be late for work.”

I flushed, the back of my neck getting warm. “Shut up.”

He laughed.

I stepped away, but he hooked a finger in my pants and pulled me to him. My back hit his chest and he leaned forward, catching my ear. His finger moved around to the front and dipped inside there, too. “Call me if you get a bad feeling at work, okay? I’ll be there for you.”

I nodded, my breath catching in my throat.

His hand was moving down under my underwear, and his mouth started moving on my ear, then my jawline, then moving farther down to my throat. He swept my hair aside, his mouth exploring back there, and I was full on sagging against him, just as his fingers began to rub over my clit.

“Cross,” I moaned.

“Jesus.” His arm tightened as his fingers dipped inside of me, thrusting upwards.

I gasped, and then he growled, turning me in his arms. His fingers stayed inside, acting like a pivot and then I was up in his arms and he was carrying me to our room. “You’re going to be late for work.”

He kicked the door shut, dropping me onto the bed and coming right down with me.

That was totally fine with me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CROSS

Bren had just tore out of the house right when my phone started ringing from the bedroom.

I went back out, naked, the shower still running for me. Grabbing it, seeing who was calling, I bit back a groan.

“Yeah?”

Bren’s brother laughed harshly from the other end as I went to turn off my shower. “What a greeting. Hello to you.”

I went back, sitting on the bed and raking a hand over my hair. “Don’t start. I know you’re calling with bad news.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know, because, of course, I am. Good news, I’m calling my sister.”

My point exactly. I sat up, the energy I had after being with Bren was fast leaving me. I was exhausted once more. “What’s up, Channing?”

“I’m coming there.”

Whoa. I jerked up. “What?” I was suddenly all the way alert, more than I wanted to be. Post-sex was usually nice and happy and lots of extra endorphins. It wasn’t this. He was putting a lid on my post-sex good feeling. “When? Why?”

“Today, and with my guys. Bren called our dad last night. You know that?”

I went still, super still. “No. When?”

“I don’t know when, but she did. What’s going on up there for her to suddenly decide to do that? I don’t want her around him. He is not good for her.”

He was preaching to me like I wasn't the choir here. I growled back, "I know that."

"Where's my sister? She's not answering her phone."

"She went to work."

"Wait. What?! Why'd she go there? They're going to use her or ice her out. You weren't supposed to let her go back."

"What are you talking about? You're the one who set her up with them for a job in the first place."

"I did because they have a good reputation, and at the time, I had no clue there'd be thirty warrants issued for our dad's MC. Is there more that you haven't told me?"

I paused, gritting my teeth, because there was.

"Cross," he growled at the silence.

I sighed, filling him in on my conversation with Bren's employer yesterday.

"What. The. Fuck?! You admitted to that? He could've been recording you. That's evidence he now has."

"It wasn't like that."

Channing got quiet. "What do you mean?"

"Listen, he said they were icing her out for her own good. They didn't want to put her in the middle."

"Bullshit." He exhaled a big burst of air from his end. "We're on our way up. We'll be there around noon, maybe before. We have a few pit stops on the way. Are you around?"

"I'll be done with my last class around four-thirty."

"I want you available to be there for Bren. Our dad is heading up. He's going to get in town before us, but I don't know if or when he'll approach Bren. We'll handle it, and if I think Bren needs you, I'll call." Now it was my turn to growl at him. "Fuck that. I told you that you have to loop us in. You don't and nothing will get resolved. I'm assuming that's why you're coming up here, right? To resolve something."

"You're in college. You guys shouldn't be dealing with any of this."

“Yeah, well, it’s Bren’s dad, so we will. We’ll do whatever we have to to have her back.”

Channing was quiet a beat on his end. “I’ll call when we’re getting to town. Check in with Bren today. A lot.”

“I will.”

Then we hung up, and I texted everyone letting them know what was happening. We all needed to be on alert.

Jordan: Got it. Bren, let us know how you’re doing.

Zellman: I’ll call Sunday, see if anything’s going on at their end. Bren, thinking of you.

And then, lastly:

Bren: Thanks, guys. So far, so good.

And to me:

Bren: I have to deal with my dad. I wanted to see how he’d respond before mentioning it. That’s the only reason I didn’t tell you I reached out.

Me: Did he respond?

Bren: No, but now I know he’s coming. I’ll be waiting.

Me: Want me to skip class and look for him?

Bren: No. In a way, Channing’s right. You guys *are* in college. You should be college students, you know?

Me: We’re crew first.

Bren: And that’s why I love you.

I grinned.

Me: Love you too.

Bren: Go and learn something, College Boy. I’m heading in to hopefully bust someone’s head today.

Me: There’s my girl.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BREN

I figured it out.

Something had been off this whole time. I thought it was because I was working, or trying to work, and the guys were following such a different path than me. That wasn't it.

We weren't under threat. The administration wasn't going after us. Other crews weren't fighting us. Harper wasn't even a fight, and the fraternity house was nothing. But my dad coming to town or knowing he was coming, it all fell back into place.

Now I felt like I was on home territory, and that was sad.

That was wrong, but it was what it was.

“You ready for this?”

Brock and Hawk had been keener with me when I got to work. I told them the line for coffee had been longer than normal, and no one seemed to care. They all took their coffees and returned back to the offices. Today, Trundle was back behind the register during daylight hours, and I lingered at the bar.

Hawk and Brock shared a look before Hawk gave me a smile. “For transparency, we took all the pictures down. Everyone's pictures.”

“For transparency, my dad is coming to town.”

Both jerked in place.

Hawk's eyes got big. “What?”

“Here?” Brock took a step toward me, his eyes fierce. His mouth looked strained. “To *our* town?”

I nodded, not knowing if I should’ve said anything, but I was between a rock and a hard place. My dad said he was fine. No warrant was out for him. This shouldn’t be a big deal, at least I was hoping. And then I added, “And my brother, too.”

That had a different reaction, a much different reaction.

The air in the room suddenly grew tenser, heavy. I felt it pressing on me.

Hawk and Brock shared another look, and this last one was longer and a whole lot deeper. I wasn’t even going to try to interpret it. I was going to ride the wave. Whatever was coming was coming. If that wave were my dad, my brother, anyone else, I’d be here to endure what came with them.

“Your brother?” The question came low from Brock.

Fear flared in Hawk’s gaze before she masked it, turning for the office. “Well, before he gets here, let’s try to get most of our load done.”

Brock’s mouth thinned, but he said, “Yeah.” Sending a shrewd look my way, he looked me up and down. “Suit up. You’re coming with us.”

My mouth parted. I was so surprised. And excited. And eager.

I fought Harper, but I hadn’t wanted to. This, though. This was different. This was what I could do and do it well, and feeling my heart trying to push out of my chest, I ducked my head and followed Hawk into the office.



The first jump was an old guy.

We went up and rang the doorbell. He answered, and he was taken in. There was no fight, no fuss. Said he didn’t go to his last court date because his wife never told him when it was.

The second jump was an entirely different ballgame.

Skinny lady in her fifties. Blonde hair a mess. Sores on her face. Haggard looking. Yellowed teeth. She offered to blow Brock three times. Twice was to be let free, and the last offer was because she just wanted him.

We were pulling up for the third jump, and the last time they'd done this amount in a day was my first day on the job. Hawk told me on the ride over, "We spent so much time planning on how to scout out the Red Demon members that we got behind in our other workload. We're playing catch-up now."

It was nearing noon, a little after when we pulled up to a white townhouse. A large truck and trailer were parked in the driveway, with another red car at the curb.

I'd been to enough of these with them, so I knew what to expect. We already had our briefing, so when we rolled up, Brock and I darted out and went for the door. Hawk, Big, Burly all took off around to the back. Everyone checked in on their radios, but there was no movement from inside. The windows were boarded up.

Shetland was behind me, running in from his truck parked on the street.

Brock was closest to the door, and he glanced back. His eyebrows raised. Was I ready?

I nodded back, and his eyebrows lowered. A firm look was in place, and he pounded on the door. "Bail Bonds Enforcement! Open your door!"

There was no movement, no answer.

He kept hitting the door. "Open up! OPEN THE DOOR!"

More knocking.

More pounding.

Shetland started tapping the side of the garage with his stick.

“There’s nothing back here. They’re either not home or hoping to wait us out,” came from Hawk over the radio.

Brock reached for his radio. “Is Gramps on the radio?”

Crackle. “I’m here.”

“What was the vehicle that we were told this bail jump is driving?”

Crackle. “A red truck. Old. Broken down.”

“License plate?”

Gramps read the number.

Brock nodded at Shetland. “Can you check?”

“That’s a white truck.”

“Check anyway. We might’ve got the wrong color told to us.”

Shetland moved back, and Brock glanced at me. His finger lifted from the radio. “You doing okay?”

Was I doing okay?

My heart was pounding. Palms were sweaty. Knees were locked, but I wanted this. I was a bull in the gate, waiting to be released into the field. Hell yeah, I was okay. I flashed him a smile. “I’m fine.”

He narrowed his eyes, giving me a second study before Shetland came up. “Yeah. It’s the same plates. They must’ve switched the plates on us.”

Brock swore, then pushed on his radio. “The white truck is the vehicle—”

Shetland’s phone lit up. He read the screen, then lifted it for us to read.

Hawk: I need the radio.

Brock lifted his finger.

Cackle. “This is Hawk.”

Brock replied, “Go, Hawk.” “We’ve got movement back here. They’re trying to sneak out. Patio door opened. He’s

running around the side of the house. To the west—”

Brock and Shetland shot for the west side, darting to meet him around the end.

I held back. This didn't seem right. If he knew to switch the truck, switch the plates, sneak out of his patio door, then it would make sense that he'd know his house was surrounded. Unless...just as I realized what was happening, the garage door behind me burst open.

A body shot out, barreling into me.

Pain slammed through me, slicing everywhere.

I hit the sidewalk pavement, and my hand was embedded in shrubbery.

Feeling my skin being pierced all over, I growled. *No!* That was my first thought as I looked up and saw the guy look down at me. It was the bail jumper. He was a big fucker, and no way was he getting away that easily.

Just then, I heard shouting from the distance. Vehicles were screeching to a halt somewhere, but I was focused only on this guy. He paused, staring at me.

In that moment, it was him and me, and he saw me. He saw my fight. He saw my anger.

His eyes flared, too. He wanted to hurt me, and his knee jerked up. But he caught himself. He was going to kick me or squash me with his foot, one or the other, but I was already getting to my feet and running after him.

He tore out of there, heading past his truck because he was blocked in by another vehicle.

I knew that vehicle. Recognition flared in the back of my head, and I knew who had just joined our fight. My brother and Moose were jumping out of their truck. Moose was heading to block the guy. Channing was behind him. They were going to trap him, and then someone else would take him down.

No. No. No.

This guy was mine—and I screamed as Moose started to lift his arm up to knock the guy down, “NO!”

Moose paused, seeing me hurtling after him, and he moved aside.

The stall helped. I saw it all in a split second, and my plan was already laid out in my mind.

The guy was tearing past Channing, tearing past Moose. He was heading for the street, and he was going to try getting away on foot, but he heard my scream. He saw Moose and he paused, too.

It was just enough.

I threw myself at him, pushing off the street with everything in me. I wrapped around his knees, tripping the guy. As he fell, I was already climbing up him, grabbing his arm, twisting my body around his neck, and as my back hit the road, I yanked as hard as I could. My legs wound around his neck and I had him trapped in place. If he pushed anywhere, he would dislocate his own shoulder. That pain alone usually helped keep people in place, and he was no different.

I felt his head moving. A roar came from him, and fuck—he was about to bite my leg.

I gritted my teeth, readying for the bite, but my brother was there. “You fucking hurt her, you’ll lose your knee, asshole.”

The guy paused, and I had him. I would’ve had him anyway, but Channing’s threat saved me from getting a tetanus shot and stitches. A rush of feet stampeded over to us, and we were surrounded by the rest of my team.

My team.

Mine.

I was sweating. My heart was trying to pound out of my chest. That feeling resonated with me. But I had found my place. *Finally.*

Brock and Shetland got to us first. The rest were a few seconds after, Hawk bringing up the rear with wide eyes and

her brows arched high. She had her hand on her radio, but she wasn't talking or holding it in place. Both Big and Burly nodded to me, grunting.

The surprise was evident on both Brock and Shetland's faces, too.

I was still holding the guy in place, and for a second, no one moved. They took in the scene. I looked at my brother, and he'd been watching me. A small grin was there, warmth and something else flooding over his face before he shook it a second. His hands went to his own vest that he was wearing and hooked in, hanging from it.

His chest lifted up and lowered. "Okay."

He knew. He knew this was what I wanted to do, and I felt my own smile spreading. I couldn't wait to tell Cross about this.

Channing's eyes closed as he continued to shake his head, but then his hands dropped, and he stepped toward Brock. "Monroe. I'm assuming you're my sister's boss?" He gestured to me. "We tracked her phone, saw everything unfolding as we made our approach."

Brock moved to shake Channing's hand, and at the same time, Moose swooped down. He tapped my arm, and as I let go, he hauled the guy off of me and shoved him at Big. Then his hand went to me and I was airborne in the next moment. I was hauled up, set on my feet, and hands were patting me down.

Channing was watching.

When Moose stepped back, he nodded at him. "No holes or cuts. She's in one piece, just scraped up a bit."

I looked at Moose, and his eyes were twinkling at me. He cuffed me on the back of my arm. "Did good, Little Monroe."

I grinned and hit his chest. "Thanks."

Hawk moved in as Big and Burly slapped cuffs on the guy and moved him to their truck. Hawk looked me up and down, doing her own check. "Damn. I didn't know you had that in

you.” She looked at Brock. “She’s like a spider monkey. Did you know that?”

He shook his head, giving me another assessing look, and then returning back to my brother. “Gramps and Bonnie said she could hold her own.”

“Damn right she can.” Channing came for me, his arms opened, and I stepped into them.

He hugged me, squeezing me, and I knew he was proud of me. He cupped the back of my head, and whispered before stepping back, “Jesus. Please just don’t die doing this work.”

I tipped my head back, a wry grin tugging at the corner of my mouth. “Back at you.”

Shared understanding and acknowledgement flowed between us.

We were both Monroes. We both came out of our home, no matter how broken it was, and we were here. We were both doing the same thing. We were at different points, but this was a commonality. I knew my brother needed the fighting, but so did I...and he knew that, too.

He cupped the back of my head one last time, and moved in. His lips pressed to my forehead. “Fucking love you, sis.”

I clasped him back, just hugging him.

Then he stepped back, letting me go, and a whole different look came over him. Edgy, wariness, and danger. It was strong and sudden, enough that everyone around us quieted, picking up something new was coming. At this, Channing grated out, “We need to talk about Dad.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BREN

After we took the bail jumper to jail, Channing and Moose met us back at the offices.

Justin was behind the register, helping out a group of guys and handing them their shoes. He watched us come in, all of us wearing our vests with an almost bored look on his face. Seeing my face, surprise tightened his features, and his head reared back a little. Then his gaze trailed behind me, and I knew he was seeing my brother. His eyes got bigger.

Then he hit Moose, and they were half-crawling into his forehead.

Yeah. Moose had that effect.

Gramps and Bonnie were there, both smiling wide when they saw Channing. There were hugs, greetings. A good pat on my back from Gramps. His hand took hold of my shoulder, and he squeezed in affection. “What’d I tell you?” He was speaking to Brock. “Told you she was a good one.”

Bonnie moved in, brushing her hair back before she gave me a hug. “So proud of you, honey.”

Hawk was grabbing some coffee.

Why they kept having me bring coffee in when they had their own coffee pot was lost on me, but then again, bought coffee always tasted better somehow. Big and Burly were in the fridge, pulling out food items when we filtered in.

Brock leaned against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. He hadn’t taken his vest off. No one had. He lifted his chin toward Channing. “I have to ask, you here for personal,

professional, or both?” The real conversation piece was my father, and myself.

Channing’s gaze was on me as he answered, “Both.”

Moose went to join Big and Burly. They motioned for him to help himself to the sandwiches, and he started piling his own together.

“Then I have to ask, is your father coming here for his daughter or the Red Demons?”

I leaned back against the wall in my corner, listening, but not speaking up.

A darkness flitted in Channing’s gaze before he blinked, and it was gone. He shifted, turning to Brock. “How about you tell me about the Red Demons? I’ve done some research, but not enough.”

Brock’s eyes flitted closed a second as he began frowning. Then, his eyes still on Channing and he flattened his mouth. “I’d think you could tell us, actually. Heard you have something I’d like back.”

Channing’s eyes darkened. “Sure.” He dug in his pocket and tossed a USB in the air.

Brock caught it, cradling it where he did, and his eyes narrowed at my brother. “Something tells me this isn’t the only copy?”

“Nope.” Channing shook his head. “But can you really stand there and say I don’t have a right to what’s on there?”

Brock’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t answer.

And Channing’s head dipped down. “Let’s go over what you might need to know. Maxwell Raith helped me out with a situation. That’s it. That’s all you need to know. Bren’s not involved with the Red Demons. Neither am I. We’re not involved with our father.” My brother leveled him with a look. “And I’m hoping you’re not suggesting there’s anything more there, because if you were, then that’d be an insult. I wouldn’t want myself or my sister being insulted by you.”

A pregnant pause descended over the group after that.

Big and Burly had been sitting in two of the chairs, sandwiches on their plates. They froze.

Moose's back was turned to us. He'd been reaching for a slice of cheese. He froze.

Hawk turned back to the group from pouring her coffee, her eyes going to Brock, me, my brother, and back to Brock.

Gramps blustered forward, "No, no, no." He was waving his hand in the air, big smiles on his face. His voice came out sounding uneasy. "Of course, no disrespect was meant. Brock's like you, I'm assuming. He's dogged and thorough, and dedicated to not only doing his job, but also ensuring the safety of all our team members." His eyes darted in my direction as he finished. His meaning was clear.

But Channing didn't speak. He was waiting for Brock's answer.

A slight growl in frustration came from him. "We kept your sister out of the loop for her sake. We didn't want to put her in a potentially harmful position. After a brief exchange when we first hired her, we've not asked her about the Red Demons again, but since you're here and since we got a tip that the Red Demons are more focused on our team than normal, I need to know everything you know."

"Then you know more than I do."

"Is your father coming here to watch us, or is he coming here for his daughter?"

Channing didn't respond.

Moose finished placing his cheese on his sandwich and looked over his shoulder to his own boss.

I was waiting myself.

Finally, Channing said, "I can't answer that." His gaze found mine, and he almost looked apologetic. "He's been on an apology tour lately. He's going to come and apologize to you. That's all I can say about his intentions."

"So he's already here." That came from my boss.

Channing said to me, “He wants to have dinner with us. You and me.”

Moose finished putting his sandwich together and turned around, holding it on a plate. He beamed. “Good old Derrick Monroe doesn’t know that I’m coming along.”

I hid a grin, but my head was swimming. Some of the adrenaline was wearing off from my tackle. The aches and the cuts on my hand from where I fell into the shrubbery were starting to throb. A wave of exhaustion rolled over me.

“Yeah. That sounds good.”

My tone came out meek, and I cursed because everyone’s attention went high at that.

Channing stepped forward. “You okay?”

My head was pounding, and I remembered that the jump had barreled into me, slamming me to the ground first. That side where he got me was throbbing. I raised a hand up to my face, cupping my cheek and hissed. “Bren?”

Shetland remarked, “She took a hit before she took the guy down.”

Hawk cursed, putting her coffee down. She moved to me, throwing Shetland a nasty look. “And you’re saying this now?”

He shrugged. “She said she was fine. She tackled him, for God’s sake.”

The room started moving around me. I blinked, trying to slow it down, but it went faster and faster.

“She might have a concussion.” That sounded like Channing. “Where’d she get hit?”

Another voice, this one sounding like Brock said, “I’d guess where she’s holding herself. Bren, you need to go to the hospital?”

Moose snickered. Or I thought it was Moose. “Dude, you so don’t know the Monroes.”

Someone moved toward me. Two people moved toward me.

A hand on my shoulder, that one felt soft, feminine.

Another took my arm, and they were bending in front of me. "Bren." It was my brother. I kept blinking, trying to slow the room down, but it wasn't working. He lowered his voice even more, concern edging in. "Do you have to go in?"

I grasped onto his arm and held firm. Maybe he could stop the room.

I was starting to feel nauseous.

Whatever I had in my stomach was coming up. Fast.

"She's pale."

My mouth clamped tight. I wasn't going to throw up. Everything would be fine. This was not a big deal, not a deal at all. Definitely not big.

Channing's hand grew tighter on me. "I gotta take her, just to be safe."

Hawk said, "I'll come with you. She'll want another girl with her."

She didn't know me, but that thought was brief and fleeting, and why was my head hurting so bad?

I heard someone else snort. "She doesn't know that Monroe either."

I was being walked across the room, then led outside.

There was conversation happening behind me, but I couldn't make out the individual voices or what they were saying. I was only aware of being led out into the sun, blinking and hissing, and feeling nauseous all over again. Then I was in a truck, my brother's. I recognized the smell of bullets and coffee, and behind me I felt a dip in the truck.

The door opened.

Hawk scooted in, taking the side by the window. I was in the middle.

Channing came around, getting behind the wheel, and then Hawk gave us directions to the hospital.

After that, everything else just sucked.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CROSS

Jordan and Zellman were right on my heels when we hit the hospital.

I didn't stop at the front desk. Moose was in the waiting room, and seeing us, he stood and pointed down a hallway. Turning the corner, Channing was at the end. He was standing by a desk, looking around him. Spotting us, he straightened, and a second later, a girl looked down our hallway.

I was guessing that was Hawk, based on Bren's descriptions of 'serious badass braids.' The girl had a side braid going down both sides of her skull and falling close to her waist.

Jordan saw her and slowed down. "Whoa."

I passed her, my chin lifting toward Bren's brother. "Room?"

He knew. A nod to the right and a "146" was my response.

I headed that way, going into the ER section. He sent me to the main room, but from there, I saw Bren's other boss standing just outside of an area sectioned off by a curtain. He glanced over, seeing me, and moved back for us. I didn't look to see who all was following us. I didn't care.

Sweeping in, I stopped at the end of her bed.

She was sitting up, the entire side of her face already bruising, and a nurse was taking her vitals.

Bren grinned at me, but she was wincing in pain. Shit. Her eyes weren't totally focusing either.

I turned to her boss, scowling. “What happened?”

“A jump got her on his run for freedom. She took him down right afterwards.”

I was moving toward her, but glanced back at his words. “Alone?”

Zellman laughed.

Jordan suppressed a grin.

Yeah. None of us were surprised, but studying Brock a bit closer, he was. Some of the surprise was still in his tone, mixed with anger, frustration, and uneasiness.

“Hey.” I stepped closer to Bren.

She grinned at me, but those eyes still weren’t focusing. “Hey.”

I grimaced inside. She was definitely in pain.

I asked the nurse, “Concussion?”

She was eyeing me, biting the corner of her lip, but then nodded. “Yeah. We’ll have a list of things she’ll need to do or not do when she’s released.”

“Bren?”

She tipped her head up, an almost drunken smile there, and she opened her legs.

I couldn’t hold back. Stepping in, I slid a hand around her neck, gingerly cupping the back of her head. Angling my head, I tried to peer closer at where she’d taken the hit. It was already purpling with black mixed in.

She sighed, leaning into my touch. Her forehead came down to rest against my chest, her hands falling to my waist.

Zellman and Jordan moved in, standing on the other side of me. I felt the nurse watching us, now eyeing Jordan up and down. Brock had moved to the back as well. The female I was still assuming was Hawk stood next to him. Channing and Moose moved in on the other side of Bren’s bed, pushing the curtain back for them.

The nurse was taking them all in as well.

“Can we take her home?” Zellman wanted to know.

Now the nurse started studying him.

Jordan nudged Zellman with the back of his elbow, but Z ignored it, waiting for her answer.

She nodded, going back to Bren. “The doctor just finished up with her. She needs some downtime, avoidance of light as much as possible for a couple days. No TV. Nothing stimulating. Her brain needs to heal. She’ll be fuzzy for a few days still.”

Bren’s hand firmed on my stomach, sliding up under my shirt.

Yeah. The nurse noticed that, too, and I caught a soft sigh leave her as she moved around us, pulling the curtain back on her end. Bren fully pressed into me, both her arms sliding around my waist and tugging me to hugging her outright.

I looked over her head to Channing. “We need to talk at all?”

He was watching his sister, his eyes clouded over. “No.” He shook his head, motioning for Moose to move back. “We need to make a stop, then we’re crashing in your basement.”

“Hey.” Jordan looked at them. “That’s where I sleep.”

“You sleep in the bedroom down there. Don’t forget, I know that house. I knew that house before you guys moved in. There’s a couch with a pullout mattress. We’re crashing there because I don’t want to be too far from Bren while I’m in town.”

Channing met my eyes again, holding them.

He was going to see their dad, or I was guessing so, but Bren had a concussion. That’s why that D word wasn’t being discussed in the open. He gave me a nod. I gave him one back, and he and Moose took off after that. Brock and Hawk stepped up, taking their places.

Her boss asked, “You got her?”

Another snort from Zellman, but he was grabbing Bren's things.

I answered coolly, "Always."

Jordan added, his tone just as cold, "We got her from here."

Yeah. Hawk was now noticing him a whole lot more. That was an interesting turn of events.

He gave her the once-over, lingering on her ass as both of them followed where Channing and Moose had gone.

He glanced over. "How old does she look?"

Bren said into my chest, "She's twenty-three."

He shrugged. "That's do-able for me."

Bren lifted her head back, glaring at Jordan. "I don't know, but I'm fairly certain she's fucking Brock."

"You don't know?"

She shook her head at Jordan's question. "I can't tell. I just know she's known him most her life. That, and Justin is her little brother."

"The bowling alley guy?"

A slight nod before she winced and sighed heavily again. Her hands curled into my skin. "The bowling alley guy."

Zellman grunted. "Huh. I'm thinking we need to go bowling a whole lot more."

Jordan threw him a laugh as we all started heading out.

Bren slid off the table.

I considered just grabbing her, and lifting her, but I didn't think she'd want the spectacle.

Then it wasn't an issue.

She walked beside me, and Jordan took her other arm. Zellman went ahead of us, opening the doors, and once we were moving down the one hall, I tossed him my keys. He hurried ahead, and had the truck waiting for us as we walked

outside to the parking garage. Once in the truck, Bren and I went to the back. I sat sideways and pulled her down so she was lounging against my chest.

We drove a few blocks before she said to the silence, “I called my dad to town. He came because of me, and I was supposed to have dinner with him tonight. Him and Channing.”

No one said a word.

We waited.

And Bren ended with, “It’s time I dealt with him being back.”

I took her hand, my fingers sliding against her.

Zellman was driving, but he was looking in the rearview mirror at us.

Jordan shifted, reaching back. He touched her knee lightly. “We’re all here for that, you know.”

Her head rolled toward him, and I glimpsed the top of her smile. It was almost washed out, still a little of that intoxicated look. “I know.” She reached for his hand and fitted hers against his, palm to palm.

That’s how we drove back to the house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BREN

“I want to see her!”

A strangled sounding yell woke us up the next morning. Cross flipped over in bed, his feet hitting the floor a second later. He grabbed pants and then he was up, flying out the door, and I could hear him running down the stairs. My guess, he was taking three steps at once and then bam. He was on the main floor. The fact he wasn't trying to be quiet spoke to how worried he was, but I could've told him not to be.

I recognized that yell.

I would've recognized that yell any day, any time, anywhere.

My dad was here.

And then, like a bad déjà vu moment, I heard my brother's voice responding right back. His was low and muffled, but it was there, and even up here, even with a concussion, I knew he was pissed. This had been my life for so many years until Channing moved out.

I took a deep breath. One breath. And then I sat up, ignoring the pounding in my head.

I had had concussions before. This wasn't anything new. I knew the protocol. Knew what I had to do, couldn't do, but heading downstairs and making sure that either or both of my family members didn't leave was one thing I could do. I moved slower, gingerly, because fuck, my vision was still wonky. Grabbing some shorts, a bra, and a shirt, I padded barefoot out to them.

No one heard me coming.

Well, no one except Zellman who was coming out of his bedroom.

He was standing at the top of the stairs, only in boxers, and I saw some scratches on his back that I didn't need to see. There was movement inside his room, and I looked. A girl stared back at me, her hair a mess. She blinked a few times, lines around her eyes soft from sleep, and then she rolled back over, taking the bedsheet with her.

It was the nurse from the ER, and I didn't even want to know *how* that had transpired.

I mean, I knew *how*.

When?

Never mind.

I moved up behind Z, and he glanced at me, moving so there was room. "Hey."

"Hey," I said back.

We were both talking in muted tones.

There was more talking happening downstairs, all quieter than before. Cross had joined the conversation, and I heard the squeak of another door. Recognizing the basement door, Jordan was about to either join the convo, get coffee, or head back downstairs. A beat later, he passed by the stairs and glanced up. Doing a double take, he changed courses and came up.

He nodded at Z, leaning against the wall and folding his arms over his chest. Instead of boxers, he was wearing only pajama pants. They were slipping low on his hips and his eyes took me in, staying on the side of my face the longest. "What are you doing up here?"

Right.

I forgot.

"You guys had people over last night. Cross thought we'd sleep better up here. The sounds, you know."

He cringed. "Sorry. I didn't even think of that."

I shrugged. "Usually you're fine. No big deal."

"How are you feeling this morning?"

I lied, “Better.”

Both started laughing.

“Such a shitty liar, Bren.” Jordan tsked, grinning, but he nodded toward the bottom of the stairs. “Should we wade in?”

There was sound behind us, coming from Zellman’s room. The bed creaked, padding barefoot, and then his bathroom door shut on a similar sounding creak like the basement door.

Zellman was hiding a grin.

Jordan’s head inclined. “Are you kidding me?”

Zellman shrugged.

I added, “It’s my nurse from yesterday.”

“*What?*”

Zellman laughed under his breath. “She slipped me her number, asked to give it to you. I used it instead. She didn’t seem to mind last night.”

And now I knew how that happened.

“Jesus.”

I was snickering, too.

“Enough!” That came from Cross, and hearing his irritation, the rest of us snapped back to attention.

I sighed.

Yes, I had a concussion, but I’d been the one to call my dad to town. Cross was right. Enough was enough. I started to move down the stairs, but Zellman caught the back of my shirt. He raised his eyebrows. “You can hide today, you know. You’ve earned that. We can handle this.”

That was tempting, but I shook my head. “Concussion or not, I need to deal with my dad and let Chan know that he doesn’t need to literally sleep on my couch to take care of me.”

“You sure, Bren?” Jordan dropped his voice low.

I could hear my brother talking in a muffled voice downstairs. The old memories were starting to swim to the surface. I couldn’t deal with that. They’d be fighting in two seconds, Cross was in the mix.

Yes. I was sure.

Cross was standing in front of the door, arms crossed over his chest as I came down the stairs.

My dad was standing just inside the door, to the right. He was throwing a look my brother's way, while alternating with a different one toward Cross. His eyebrows were furrowed, and the sides of his mouth were turned down.

I'd been more shocked at seeing him the last time, seeing him out of prison, so I hadn't really taken him in. This time I did. No one looked up at me. I was still barefoot, so I was silent, and I paused, taking a moment, taking a breath, and really looked at my dad.

He'd always been trim, almost lean, but there was slightly more bulk to his frame now. I was guessing from lifting weights in prison. His hair was kept the same, trimmed, but it always pushed the line between being trimmed down and starting to get a little curl to it. He had it almost military shaved this time. No beard. No mustache that he used to keep. He was tan, but he'd always been tanned. And he liked to wear frayed, yet baggy, jeans along with a white shirt and a jean jacket over it. The shirt was usually stained. The jacket was always tossed on to cover the stain, so the jacket ended up frayed to match the jeans. It'd been his go-to attire, and that was the biggest difference now.

He was still wearing jeans with rider boots, but his jeans were new. They were almost trendy jeans.

I felt a little kick to my sternum because I didn't know how I felt about that.

New jeans. A belt, for the first time I ever saw one on him, and a buttoned-up shirt. Dark blue to match his jeans. It almost looked denim, but it wasn't. But that wasn't it. He had a tie, too. A dark gray tie.

I reached out without thinking, grasping the handrail, and I squeezed.

I didn't know why I was squeezing.

He looked like someone who was coming from church, and that gave me pause.

I must've made a noise.

All three looked up, but those eyes—they were mine.

I sucked in a breath at that.

I knew. I always knew, but in the past few years, I had started to dream that I had Mom's eyes. I didn't. Channing did. Me. I had our dad's eyes. And his hair because I was remembering that he spent so much time outside that his hair had gotten sun streaks from it. Not now. It was dark like mine, though mine was still darkened black from this summer.

I wanted new hair for a new chapter in my life.

Having him here, he was bringing an old chapter back, a lot of old chapters back, actually.

My heart started pounding. My vision started to swim.

I didn't know how I was feeling about any of this.

“Hey.”

There. I drew in another harsh breath, because that was Cross. Low, gravelly, and smooth at the same time. He was my anchor. That voice, I clung to it, and let it pull me back in. I felt it readying my world again, making everything go back to equilibrium.

I turned my head, finding Cross and only Cross.

His eyes were narrowed slightly, concerned, but also patient. I saw it all, and I felt it all.

He'd let me lead.

I gave him a slight nod, and he returned the motion, moving back a little as I descended the rest of the stairs.

Channing was standing in the small clearing that led past the stairs and in front where the television was. It was the way to the kitchen.

He didn't look like he'd slept either. His hair was sticking up, like he'd been grabbing at it. Unlike Cross, my brother had pulled on some sweats that rested on his hips, and like Cross, he was also shirtless. His tattoos seemed to stand out more this morning for some reason. It might've been my concussion. Everything was brighter, more detailed, more blinding.

The scowl on my brother's face was almost more glowering than I remembered last night.

Then, because I had to address him, I lifted my gaze and felt another piercing effect. His eyes were on me, searing me, looking into me. They were warm. Sparkling. Almost glittering. And he was looking me all over, tracing my face, looking down, taking in my toes, sweeping back up, and as he did, I warmed under the scrutiny. I didn't know why.

Yes, you do.

I paused, hearing my own voice mixed with my mother's voice whispering in my head.

She/I was right.

Me and Dad. That's how it'd been for so many years.

Mom was gone. Channing was gone. It'd been him and me. There'd been bad years, but there'd been good, too.

My throat swelled up, remembering that last night so many years ago.

In my room.

Hearing his footsteps going to bed.

Feeling that guy with me, hoping, praying, needing a miracle that he would check on me, and then he did. But he didn't open the door.

I needed him to open the door.

Then his hands, and his words when he did come in, after I stabbed the guy, and after I was getting ready to finish the job.

"Bren."

I forgot he said that.

I rocked back, almost falling until a hand touched my arm. Cross. His strength moved through me, and I clung to it, remembering. I was allowing myself to remember.

I was straddling the guy, already stabbing him.

Then, a hand to my arm. My dad. He was so gentle at that moment.

“Bren. Sweetheart.” He drew me off of him, setting me on my feet, while at the same time taking my knife in his own hand. He moved, touching my shoulders and guiding me to the door. *“Go, Bren. I don’t want you to see this.”*

He thought I went to the door.

He thought I left.

And he turned, the guy had made a gurgling sound.

My dad didn’t look to make sure I was gone. He just knelt and finished what I’d been about to do.

It all hit me right then, all at the same time.

I’d forgotten what he said exactly, and the aftermath, how he saw I hadn’t left, but he wasn’t mad. He took a deep breath, the sound of both of us panting in that quiet room, sounding like deafening echoes to my eardrums.

He crossed the room, took the phone, and dialed 9-1-1. He held it to me, saying, “You should be the one to call.” He nodded to the guy. “I’m the one who did it all. Not you. Got that?”

I swallowed all those emotions as I was brought back to the present, feeling tears threatening to fall. I said, my voice shaking and in a whisper, “Hi, Dad.”



“No.”

Channing broke the tense silence that had fallen over the room.

He moved forward. “No. This is enough. You came here? To her house? Just go.” He rubbed between his eyes. “We will come to you. I’ll bring her to you.”

Derrick.

I was going to use his first name because it felt wrong to call him Dad. He wasn’t, not really, not anymore.

Derrick turned to him, a gleam of pain tightening his features, but he masked it. His jaw clenched, and his Adam’s apple moved

up and down. “Channing—”

“Don’t Channing me either. You’re here for her, not for me... and by the way, are you actually here for her? I had a word with her boss yesterday. He filled me in a whole bunch about Red Demon activity. Your timing is suspect—”

Derrick glanced my way but didn’t say anything.

Well, leave it to me because I would say what I needed to. “I called him. Channing—”

“No.” Channing looked my way. His eyes were burning, blazing. “I knew you would, Bren. He knew you would because that’s who you are. You handle things eventually, but I told him.” He swung back to Derrick. “I told you to call me before even thinking of heading her way. I told you.”

“I know.”

Channing tipped his chin up, his anger radiating off of him in waves. “Then why are you here?”

Derrick held his hand in the air, then he blinked a few times. The side of his mouth flattened, and he swallowed again. “I’m— she called me, Channing. My daughter called me. You’ll understand one day, too. I came. I didn’t want to give you the chance to stop me. I—” He swung his hand toward me in an almost helpless gesture. “She called me. It’s been years since I’ve seen her, and she called me. Me, dammit.”

He was whispering by the end, pain filling his gaze, and he hung his head.

Channing drew in a sharp breath, seeing it all.

He looked at me. “You want this?”

He was trying to protect me.

“I—” I closed my mouth because what could I say here? He was finally being my brother, something he’d fought to achieve for so long, and I was letting him. I needed it now, welcomed it, but ... He was our dad, both of ours.

Channing’s next words were stricken, cutting to the bone. “You got so dark, Bren. So dark. I thought we were going to lose you one day.”

Derrick closed his eyes, as if physically struck. Then he held firm, standing still.

He was doing what I used to do, standing so still that I thought I could disappear.

I was so like him.

I hadn't realized it until now.

"I have to talk to him, and it's time. Things are happening. His world is mixing with mine, so I made a call."

Channing's gaze held mine, weighing my words, and he dipped his head down. "Fine." His hands went to his hips. He cursed. "I should put a shirt on." He eyed Cross. "That's what you sleep in? When you sleep next to my sister?"

Cross let out a sharp, but strangled laugh. "Fuck you."

Derrick had opened his eyes, hearing the new exchange, and he looked from Channing to Cross with an almost awed expression.

Channing rolled his eyes. "Where are the other two dwarves?" He swung his head toward Derrick, a hardness biting his tone. "Bren's decided, so you're about to meet her three dwarves. Sleepy, Dopey, and Grumpy."

A creak came from the top of the stairs...it was Zellman and Jordan. Of course, they were staying in the shadows, listening until they needed to be made known. They moved out so they were in view now. Both still shirtless, and Jordan glared at Channing. "I echo Cross' sentiment. Fuck you."

A hard smile crossed my brother's face. "Here's the Wolf Crew, Derrick. You want your daughter back in your life, they come as a package." His gaze passed over me, softening. "Moose said he was going to take a shower. That bathroom is small downstairs. I should make sure he didn't literally get stuck just trying to enter the room."

He shot our dad another look before heading to the basement. Going down, we heard him holler, "Moose, you alive down there?" There was a thump, followed by a pounding of footsteps, and we could hear Moose's deep voice responding, though his words were muffled.

Zellman and Jordan came down the stairs, hesitant as they looked from me to my dad.

Right.

Introductions.

That was my job.

Cross beat me to it. “Derrick, I’m Cross Shaw.” He touched the small of my back, nodding behind me to the others. “This is Zellman and Jordan. Like Channing said, we’re a package deal with your daughter.”

I leaned into Cross, his hand sweeping up and down my back. I needed that touch, yearning for more.

My dad saw it, noting my reaction, and he nodded slowly. “I heard, but now I’m seeing it for myself.” He gave me a timid smile. “You’re glowing, Bren. Damned glowing. Makes a dad proud to see that.”

Glowing.

Huh.

Never had that term used to describe me before, but fine. I’d take it.

Zellman yawned. “Okay. Now that it seems like knives aren’t going to be drawn, can you all move it to the kitchen? I’ve got a chick I need to move out of here.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CROSS

We were sitting outside for a late lunch.

Bren was out there, conversing with her dad. Zellman and Jordan were there, too, but mostly to keep an eye on things. Everyone was on edge. The one who was the most calm was Bren.

I was blaming the concussion.

But still.

We ordered food in, and I was grabbing water in the kitchen for everyone when Channing and Moose got back from running errands.

“Yo.” Channing was coming in, a hard glint to his face.

I was noticing that he had the same look the entire time, and coming to stand next to me, he looked out over the scene before him. A heavy sigh left him, and he crossed his arms over his chest. Moose was coming behind him. He went to the fridge, grabbed a beer, gave me a nod, and headed to the basement.

Channing spoke without looking at me, “We gotta take off, but I need to have a word with Bren before I do.” He turned to face me now. “And since he’s here, I can’t tell all of you guys at once. You’re going to have to fill your crew in without him around.”

That didn’t sound good, but I nodded.

Better to tackle shit head on.

“What’s going on?”

“First.” He pointed at the window. “That fucker is not here just for Bren. She might be part of the reason, but she’s not the only reason. I talked to Brock and Gramps today, and a cop I know on the force back in Cain. It’s the same situation in Fallen Crest. There’s some corrupt cops and some decent ones. There’s enough decent ones that are using Brock’s team to help round up the Red Demons, so that’s saying a lot. Don’t go to the cops. Secondly, they have one big case that spans a shit ton of them with one eyewitness. That witness, I’m going to try to figure out who it is. From the rumblings we’re hearing, the Red Demons are trying to find out who it is, too. Someone local, and someone powerful. Or someone who has local ties, let’s say that. I’m also hearing that there’s a Red Demon at Cain U.”

I frowned. That was definitely news. “As a student?”

His face was grave. He nodded. “Yeah, so heads-up about that. I got no clue who it is, but we’ll do what we can on our end.”

My frown only deepened. “I thought you were friendly with the Red Demons?”

“Friendly. At an impasse. They drink my beer. I make sure they stay out of Roussou. It’s a tentative peace, and if somehow this rolls over to Bren, that peace is over.” He paused, his jaw clenching. “I hate saying this, but they’re too big for me. They got ties to a lot of people, ties I don’t know about, and they expanded fast since Raith moved into power. The good thing I found out is that they’re keeping Derrick out of it.”

I knew there was animosity between Channing and his dad. Bren had said as much, but hearing him talk about his dad as if he were a stranger, or even an enemy, was a different thing altogether. I was remembering times I wanted to tear my dad’s head off, too, and it wasn’t the same thing. Not the same at all.

I felt a twinge of regret. Maybe I’d overreacted when it came to my own?

Channing was still talking, looking back outside again. “Remember this. If they get rid of that witness, then that case is gone. There’s major tension in Cain because of it, and they’re focused on Cain because it’s the middle ground of a bunch of networks. There’s territory beefs going on down south, but from

what I'm hearing, the cartel has a few people operating up here too. Red Demons are going to go after them, but while there's warrants out for their key people, they're laying low."

"I don't want to get pulled into this. Bren made a choice last year. She wanted a normal life, or normal for her. Not this."

"I know. *He* should've steered clear, at least until everything is done." He shook his head, grinding his teeth. "Bren's like me. She needs to fight. Bounty hunting, that's a clean way to do it. There's a bad guy. You're the good guy. Things might get rough or they might not. There's an adrenaline rush, and I love it. I live for this shit, but dealing with an MC, and this MC specifically, is a different beast. I don't want that for Bren." He looked back, a roughness showing in his eyes. "I got a call from Roussou PD. His case was tossed out, so he's not on parole or anything, but they told him not to leave town. He left, and they're not happy about it. Having said that, there's not much they can do about it. My buddy in the Cain Department told me that they *did* get a call about him. They know he's here and they know the Red Demons are seemingly not using him at all. He's been given the all-clear from the MC, which means he's not to get pulled in at all. I've no clue why they're doing that. Maybe they think he'll be more beneficial as a straight civilian, who knows, but all the big players know about him."

Got it.

It was a lot to take in, but I understood.

I asked, "What do you want us to do?"

He shook his head, rubbing his hand over his jaw. "Do what you're already doing? Love my sister and take care of her. Keep an eye out?"

"I can do that." Now it was my turn. I folded my arms over my chest, leaving the water on the counter. "What's going on with Harper, Sr?"

A different look came over Channing. More business-like. He tipped his head back, his hand falling back to his side. "Right. We looked into it. Harper answers to someone else, someone illegal. We're trying to figure out who it is and see if

we know someone who can do an approach for Sweets. She's still in Roussou?"

I nodded. "Zellman's ex is supposed to give birth any day. They're friends. Jordan said she dropped out of college to take care of her and help her out with the kid."

"Or to hide?"

I cocked my head to the side. "Or to watch out for her mother, because that's why she thought she could use Harper, Jr. for that."

"Whole situation is sideways. You guys worked over the boy?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"He's been quiet."

"He's starting to make noise."

Channing frowned. "That's not good. Either says he's stupid, reckless, or he doesn't need to keep quiet anymore."

"Before we left, I threatened him, said I knew people who could hurt his own mother if he talked."

Channing nodded, his frown deepening. "I'll call Lincoln, have him find the mom and sit on her a bit. My guess is that you'll find that Mrs. Harper was sent on an extended vacation somewhere, probably overseas, and definitely off the grid."

Shit.

Shit.

Shit!

That wasn't good.

"Then we have a problem."

He agreed, "Then you have a problem." He went back to staring at his problem. "I gotta go back. Got work to do. Got a woman to love on, but my gut is saying I'm needed here."

I turned to watch Bren, too. She was smiling.

"You're glowing, Bren. Damned glowing..."

Her dad was right, and looking at him watching his daughter, he knew it. He had a slight smile holding firm. It'd been there the entire time. The only time it faded, and it wasn't gone all the way, was when Channing entered the scene.

“We'll take care of Bren.”

“I know. That's not what I'm worried about.”

His gaze was still hard on his dad. It was more than obvious whom he was worried about hurting his sister.

“We'll watch for that, too.”

“Yeah.” He didn't sound appeased, not by a long shot.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BREN

My dad went to Roussou.

Channing went to Roussou.

And my life, weird as it sounds, had a new normal. Again.

The next two weeks, things were boring. Really boring. The only blip of action was that Sunday had her baby, a little girl she named Drayana. Zellman told us after a call to her that she was already calling her baby Dray, and I had to speculate that the nickname was purposeful. It wasn't long after that phone call that Zellman decided he wanted to head back and 'be there' in case Sunday needed anything.

He was still bringing girls home. He was still heading out to parties, and enjoying college life, but Zellman didn't hear from Sunday one day, and that'd been enough for him. I had no clue if he had midterms or not, but he went to Roussou. We weren't given any word on when he was returning either, so it was a stay-tuned kind of situation.

As for my work, I was part of the team, but they had benched me because of my concussion.

I also met Bonbon, who decided to come back for a visit.

She walked in, her hair wild and looked like she combed it with a fork. Her eyes were dancing all around, and she stopped, seeing me. "Who are you?"

"I'm—"

She flicked her head to the side, grimaced, and cursed loudly. "FUCKING APESHIT HAIRY BALLS!" Then she

looked back at me, her eyeballs taking a second to center on me. After that, she breezed by and said, “My angels said to be nice to you so stay out of my way, kid. Unless you have a fork and a tail, and if that’s the way you party, let’s go a few rounds.”

Everyone was right. She was nuts.

The first day she came in, she was another version of Bonnie, except with graying and white hair. She liked to wear old polo shirts, and mom jeans, with socks and sneakers. Her feet smelled. A lot. It wasn’t a coincidence that the day Bonbon came into the office, it became mandatory to keep the windows open and the fans at full blast. Air needed to be circulated out windows ASAP, and the air-conditioner tended to let the stink stay confined indoors.

Besides always muttering to herself, always shoving her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, she mostly stayed away from me. That wasn’t to say the same for anyone else. She mooned over Big. She brought cookies in for Burly. She watched Brock, sniffed her nose at Hawk, and there was usually an argument behind closed doors once a day with either Bonnie or Gramps. They rotated, apparently.

But Trundle and me, she stayed away from. I wasn’t even sure she knew I was there.

As for my concussion, I had stayed home for the first week. I was allowed back into the office the last few days of my second week, and I only did paperwork. And that meant, if I had to copy, scan, or print something, I was their girl. I ran errands, too. Coffee. Lunch. I ordered pizza if they asked me to. I answered the phones, too, because there was no way they were going to let Bonbon do that.

Someone called in once, and before anyone else could pick up, she answered it, “9-1-1 operations.” And then she hung up, saw us all watching her, and laughed. “They’ll call back, but I made them shit their pants first.”

I kinda loved her after that, but from a distance. A far, far distance.

Big seemed intrigued. Burly stopped accepting her cookies.

As for Cross and me, he was kissing his way up my body right now.

Shoving my legs open, he slid inside, and we were good. We were really good.

“Fuck,” he panted against my throat. “You feel so good.”

Pleasure was licking up my spine, and I ground against him. I scraped my nails down his back in response, and he shivered, as I knew he would. Winding my legs around his waist, I moved against him, almost damn purring. “Fuck me, Cross.”

I was panting right alongside him, the throb in my body deep and demanding.

He growled, rearing back.

Taking my legs, he lifted them up and moved to fit between them, resting them against his shoulders. Then he moved back in, hitting at a much deeper angle. I was gasping, my vision growing black from the sensations hitting me.

He rubbed my clit, and fireworks. Fire-fucking-works, I’m telling you.

Someone was screaming.

Thinking that was me.

I couldn’t tell. I was gone, gooone, and then as my body hit, jerked, climaxed, and started to tremble, he flipped me over. I was brought up to my knees. My hands were pulled together, resting against the headboard, and he slammed back inside. His body lay over mine, as he kept my hands pinned with one of his. The other was kneading my thigh, and he continued moving inside of me.

I almost fell. My legs were jelly from my own orgasm, but he wrapped one arm around me, holding me against him as he kept thrusting inside.

Stars again.

Fireworks bursting...again.

A guttural scream ripped from me, followed by his own growl, and he nipped the back of my neck as I felt him jerking inside of me.

Holy.

Fucking.

Holy.

That was it.

Holy fucking holy.

My brain cells were gone. Dunzo. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. Cross peppered the back of my shoulder with soft kisses as he slipped out, then he picked me up and moved me around to lie against him on the bed.

I had no function of my legs and arms right now. I was helpless to curl into his body, nuzzling into his neck. Helpless. So helpless, and I was loving it.

If I didn't move for a week, I'd be okay with that. Perfectly content. Happily satisfied, and my bones were gone. Melted into my skin and my organs. I was a limp noodle.

Cross moved one of his legs between mine, holding me, and he was kissing my throat again. He was moving around me, so he was half-lying on top of me. I was still catching my breath, one of my hands falling to his back, when suddenly—

Bam! Bam! Bam!

--against the door.

"I heard you all the way down in the basement. Some of us aren't getting shit. You don't have to pour fucking salt in the wound. Assholes!"

Cross paused, his head between my breasts, and then he started laughing.

I was still too weak to do anything except cup the back of his head. "Don't stop," I moaned, lifting my hips just a bit to push against his.

He groaned. “I don’t think I have any more in me, but—”
He ground back against me, and he did.

He so did.

It was just the beginning, though.

I sighed after, my hand falling from him to land with a plop on the bed. “I’m dead. I’ve got no more.”

He laughed, nipping the side of my breast before lifting his head. “You do, too.” His hand moved between us, finding my clit again, and he was right. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as he brought me to a third orgasm.



Cross and I were doing just fine.



“I need to go out.”

Jordan made that announcement as he dropped into one of the chairs in the living room. Cross was working on his laptop. I was curled up next to him, lying across the rest of the couch, half leaning up against his arm.

I was texting back and forth with Tabatha, who finally reached out. I’d been trying to get ahold of her since Sunday had her baby. It wasn’t until today that she finally responded, and I was given the ultra-important mission of not telling Jordan anything she was telling me—and that the 4-1-1 was that she was dating back in Roussou. Little did she know, I wasn’t violating my crew obligation because Jordan already knew. Zellman told us everything he was finding out, it was almost too much. I mean, we hadn’t needed to know how long Drayana’s umbilical cord was, with photos and all.

“What are you thinking?”

“Bren goes back to working tomorrow in her bounty-hunter-in-training or whatever. You have tests this week, just like me.” Jordan shifted in his seat, lines sticking out around his mouth. His whole energy was edgy and frustrated. He clipped out, “There’s a huge block party on frat row. I think we should go.”

“You were banned, remember.”

“It’s a street party. They can’t ban me from a street party, and I think they dropped that. Tab’s not even here.”

True.

Cross glanced down at me.

I looked at him.

I already knew neither of us cared, but Jordan needed to go out.

No words were said.

I sat up at the same time Cross shut his laptop.

Jordan grinned. “I love you guys.”

I snorted. “We’re going to a party for you. Not a huge hardship here.” I was crossing the room, heading to go and change.

He called after me, “Parties are usually a hardship for you, Bren.”

True. I glanced back, grinning and seeing him shooting me a grin. “We owe you.”

He grunted. “Fuck yeah, you do. The animalistic sex was a bit much.”

Cross was walking by him, and without saying a word, his hand flashed out. He smacked Jordan on the back of his head but kept going.

Jordan called after us, half-laughing, “Don’t go another round in there, and you’re driving, by the way. I’m starting to drink right now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

JORDAN

I loved going out with my crew.

It would've been better if Z was here, but it was what it was. Bren and Cross didn't get it. Well, Cross did, but Bren was fucking clueless. Both had no idea the effect they had on people. They were noticed. Watched. Observed. Bren and Cross walked down the street, and it was just *known* that they were there. It didn't matter if people didn't know them. If they didn't, people got curious. Bren was beautiful. Cross was badass. There was something they gave off, something in the air. People felt it, tuned into it, and *woke*.

These were my people. Mine.

I loved walking with them. I loved having their backs. I loved knowing they'd have my backs.

No one fucking got it. None.

These people were my family. I would die for them, and they'd do the same.

It was nothing but pride I felt when I walked beside them down the street.

Everyone was out partying. All the frat houses had their lights shining, windows open, and their own music pounding out. There were neon lights strung up all over. Girls were running around wearing bikinis, neon bracelets, and waving neon light sabers in the air like they were at a rave. Some lawn games were set up, and even though it was nearing dusk, they'd be playing long into the night. There was a reason they were all partying tonight, but I didn't know the why. A couple

girls from class texted me, letting me know so I knew this shit wasn't just frat and sororities. And thinking of them, I shot a couple texts out to them and a few other girls.

I wasn't hurting for company, but they weren't Tabatha.

And even thinking that, I was feeling a burn in my chest.

When push came to shove, she clammed up. She did her own thing. She thought she could handle it on her own, and that shit hurt. Felt like a knife sliding between my ribs, you know?

But I failed her, too.

Bren was the one who hadn't. Bren found out about the cheating and called bullshit. Yeah, yeah. I know she was all huffy and puffy that she was going to go and beat the crap out of Tabatha, or think about it, but Bren was actually softening. All her dysfunctions from the past shuttered, she was becoming functional more and more, and she was friends with Tabatha now. She cared about Tabatha. They weren't normal girlfriends by a long stretch, that was something Tab had come to accept about Bren, but Bren would get to that, too. One day. But all that being said, she went to find out the truth because she was right.

Tabatha wasn't a cheater.

And that was on me. I should've seen through it. I hadn't. I got suckered in, let my hurt feelings control me, my wounded ego and all that crap.

"Hey!"

I turned.

A blue, glow-in-the-dark girl pushed through the crowd. Bren frowned at her, but I recognized her. She was one of the girls who texted me earlier. I gave her a nod. "What's up?" "Hi." She was out of breath, and I checked her out. She was wearing some weird toga sheet thing with the blue neon lights wrapped around her and looped around her neck.

Bren was eyeing the lights around her neck, and I knew what she was thinking. Dumbass chick move. In a fight, she'd

get choked out, but that was Bren for you.

Cross moved in close to his girl, and I went back to eyeing this one. “Trina?”

“Yeah.” She was almost preening, blinking. Her cheeks were rosy, I saw when she got closer to me. “Did you guys just get here?” She didn’t wait for my answer. Turning, she pointed to one of the houses. “My friends and I have a little table over there. We pulled out a picnic table, and there’s a bunch of us from our psych class.” She saw Cross and paused, blinking again, startled. “You’re in that class, too.”

Cross didn’t reply, he had a hand on Bren’s hip.

The girl was studying Bren now. “Are you in our class?”

Bren started to smile, but I cleared my throat, speaking first, “You guys got booze over there?”

Bren’s smile was one of her feral ones. I didn’t know why it was coming out, but this side of B was best dealt with extreme caution. I shot Cross a look and he nodded. He got it, too.

“Oh.” Trina’s smile dimmed a little. “We don’t. I mean, we do, but not for others. My friend—”

“Bitches!”

Another girl came from the crowd, a whole group in tow. When Aspen came from the back, heading right for Bren, I remembered these girls. One was Aspen’s roommate, and the others were her floormates.

“Hey, Bren!”

Aspen went right up to Bren, the feral smile completely ignored, and she threw her tiny arms around her. Blaise’s girl was wearing the same toga-like costume, but a bikini top under it. Knowing how nuts Blaise was about his girl, I was sure she had shorts underneath as well. Not the Trina girl. It was clear she had no bra, and if I had to guess, maybe a thong? Maybe. Maybe not. And she was giving me a look saying that I’d be welcome to find out for myself.

I shot her a grin, and her cheeks pinked.

Then my phone buzzed, and I glanced to it.

It was another girl from my communications class.

Sonya: Red house! I see you. Come 2 me.

“No fair.” The ‘bitches’ girl was scowling at me, nodding at my phone. “I haven’t fucked you. I get first dibs. No girl can cut in with a text.”

Trina glared at her. “Excuse me?”

The ‘bitches’ girl just moved in, putting herself between Trina and me. Her back to Trina and her front to me, and she smiled right up at me, making sure I got a good view of her cleavage. And that view looked damn good, too.

She held her drink right in front of them, taking a slow sip, and being all sultry as she swallowed. “Aspen told me your situation. I don’t care. I like to have sex and I don’t think you’ll be scared of me. My reputation is already getting around.”

Jesus. This girl.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Veronica.” She shot a glance under her eyelashes to her friends. “We could go and come back before Angeline starts giggling. I’m shocked she hasn’t started, to be honest, but between you and me, her tolerance level is getting better. Before she’d drink one wine cooler and the giggles would start.”

I was thinking Angeline wasn’t the giggling girl I’d had at our house. Bren would not be down with that.

I was eyeing Veronica, then moved to the rest of the girls. And nope. It was a different girl. I could tell which one was Angeline because she was staring into her drink, her shoulders shaking the whole time.

“Too late.”

Veronica looked and swore under her breath. “Aww, crap. Now Jade won’t let me leave to fuck you. I’m going to have to watch Angeline all night now.” With that said, she shoved

aside a guy who had danced into our circle and went over to her friend, taking her drink away from her. She finished it for her, then took her hand and dragged her away.

The other girl remained. She'd been over to the house once with Aspen.

Jade? I was pretty sure that was her name, and she was eyeing me, too.

I smirked at her. It was more a reflex by now.

My phone buzzed again.

Sonya: Are you coming?

Sonya: No underwear. And it's toga night. You do the math.

I groaned, but then Jade had come over. I looked, but no Trina. She was gone, too.

"Hey," she said as she sipped her drink.

Dark hair that was pulled back, off her face. Dark eyes. Nice, dark red lips. Pretty face. Fantastic fucking body. She wasn't wearing the toga thing, but had on a tank top, a cute little frilly skirt, and a backpack. The backpack threw me.

"Why the bag?"

She snorted. "I bring my own drinks. You think I'm going to trust some fraternity with my intoxication? No, thank you."

I liked her. She was smart.

"Your name is Jade?"

Her eyes got big. She hadn't expected that from me. She gulped, her head ducking a little. "Yeah. You're Jordan."

"We in a class together?"

She shook her head, a knowing smile tugging at her mouth. She moved her drink up, and I was getting irritated. I couldn't see all of her mouth anymore and that was pissing me off.

She said, a laugh in her tone, "There's a trifecta thing going on with you. One, everyone knows Blaise DeVroe, so

that means everyone knows who his near look-alike brother is. That means they all know you because you come with his brother. Two, you jumped Harper, and he's a frat legacy, so that's big. And three, you're Jordan Pitts. You're six-three and gorgeous. I don't need to have a class with you to know who you are."

I inclined my head. "And you've been to the house, right?"

She blushed. It spread all over her face.

She almost spilled her drink, too. "I didn't know you knew that."

I frowned, edging back. "You fuck Zellman?"

More blushing. She went from a cute tan pink to full-fledged red. "No. God, no!"

My frown deepened. "Nothing wrong with my boy."

"No. Oh my God. I know. And no, I mean—" She stopped, swallowed, and then drank the rest of her drink.

Aspen had moved back to us, a drunk smile on her face. She was swaying to any of the music hitting us from the houses. Take your pick. "Hi, guys." She tipped her head back, her eyes closed, and kept on swaying.

Bren moved in next to her. "Aspen."

"Hmm?"

Aspen did not stop swaying, open her eyes, or even look at Bren. The girl was in her own time zone.

Bren frowned at me. "She's wasted." She turned to Jade. "Where's Blaise?"

Jade shrugged, some of the blush was fading. "This is a girls' night. Boyfriends are not allowed." She eyed Cross, who was keeping a look out at this point. "You're not officially on our girls' night." Her eyes skirted to me. That blush was coming back. "But flirting is totally okay."

I was remembering that Veronica girl. I was guessing flirting and fucking were okay on girls' night?

My phone cut in again.

Sonya: Too late. Offer's been rescinded.

Christ. Who *was* this girl?

Jade leaned in, yelling over the music. "I know you dated Tabatha Sweets. Everyone knows."

I scowled, putting my phone away. "You're offering a pity fuck?"

Her eyes bulged out. "No! No." She eased back, starting to glare at me. "Who do you think you are?"

I snorted. "According to you, you know exactly who I am."

Bren's hand came to my arm. She was frowning at me, taking in the conversation.

I rolled my eyes and ducked down, saying close to her ear, "Maybe this wasn't a good idea. Instead of fucking, I think I'm spoiling for a fight."

Her hand tightened on my arm, and for a second, I thought it was because she wanted one, too. Bren usually did, but she didn't reply, and she wasn't looking at me now. Her gaze was trained past me, and her hand just tightened again.

I looked and groaned.

We had incoming.

Harper was leading the charge, with six other guys behind him. Zeke Allen was included.

In these moments, I always knew what I was going to do. Back up my crew, but I glanced at Bren and then to Cross. He was watching his girl, too. We shared a look, thinking and knowing the same thing.

Bren was the one spoiling for a fight.

Our little feral she-wolf was about to come out and play, and I was going to love it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CROSS

Me: We have trouble incoming. Tell me your guy found Harper's mom?

There was no answer.

They were coming. Bren was primed. Jordan was ready.

We either needed to go or we'd be able to do what we'd always done.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

BREN

Tim Harper was coming toward us.

Some people noticed, stopping to watch. Some were too drunk and kept on partying. I skimmed the rest of his group, my gaze landing on Zeke. He fell to the back, and he kept glancing down. If I were to guess, he was sending the call out to Blaise. With Aspen as blitzed as she was, Harper actually seeking us out, and from the look on his face, he wanted to fight, so I was saying no matter what, we were fighting. One, Blaise would start it if it already weren't going by the time he got here, and two, I wanted it.

I'd been sidelined for two weeks, and while I hated what I did to Harper, I couldn't deny that it had woken something up in me. Something that'd been sleeping. The old Bren, but I knew now that I couldn't keep suppressing her.

I needed the old me and the new me to merge. If I didn't allow it, I didn't want to think of the consequences, but Harper was coming right at me and the old Bren was rallying.

He was a bully. He was coming to push his weight around, show off his power, hoping to intimidate us. He was mistaken.

I lowered my head, locking it in place, and just like that, Cross and Jordan got into place beside me. I heard Jordan bend down, telling Aspen's friend to move her back and away...far away.

“Why?”

He replied, “Just trust me. Her boyfriend will flip his shit if she's here.”

Zeke looked up then, also noting the interaction. He watched, and then tracked Aspen as she was moved back into the crowd.

Once she was clear, he seemed to take a breath and his shoulders relaxed a little bit more. He looked down, and again, I was betting money he sent off another text to reassure his boy.

But then the last of the crowd moved aside, and Harper was now standing in front of us.

I waited, expecting it.

His gaze skimmed over me, going above and over my head to Jordan. He sniffed, actually sniffed. “You’ve been banned—”

He didn’t acknowledge me.

He didn’t look at me.

He didn’t speak to me.

He was scared of me.

He was still speaking, “—from all fraternity and sorority events.”

Jordan scoffed. “This is a street party.”

“It’s a fraternity event.”

Jordan shot back, “It’s a street, asshole.”

I looked at Zeke, seeing his gaze solely on me.

Before, he always had a smirk, something smug to say. Not this time. He was sober, somber even, and he was staring right at me. I tilted my head to the side, and he didn’t react. He didn’t break eye contact.

I frowned at him.

Still. No reaction from him, except his eyes danced to Cross and back to me. He looked again, off in the direction Aspen had been taken, and he nodded, letting out a noticeable breath.

Cross moved so the back of his hand grazed mine. He always did that in these times. Sometimes it was to hold me back, sometimes to give me strength, sometimes to anchor himself, but this time, as I looked at him, he gave the slightest nod. This time, it was to let me out of my cage.

He showed me his phone’s screen.

Channing: We got her. Whatever you’re going to do, be safe. Don’t let Bren get arrested or I’ll toss you in

jail myself.

I gave him a smile, and he hissed under his breath, but he grinned back. He knew what he was doing.

“Harper...” I made sure there was a taunt in my voice.

He froze for a second before looking at me. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, and he raised his chin up. “Yeah?”

I settled back on my heels, getting comfortable. “Remember me?”

It was a matter of time before he talked. I was controlling it. I was deciding when it happened, and it was happening now.

Harper didn’t respond, but I got distracted. Just for a moment.

Beyond him, farther in the crowd was a girl. I frowned, moving to the side for a better view. Kess Foster. She was a blast from the past, the only other girl in the crew system back at Roussou. Her hair caught my attention first, it was like a beacon at times. Almost pure white, but her eyes were the other recognizable attribute. They were like an ice blue color. Sometimes I swore they were grayish white, but she was looking through the crowd. Seeing me, frowning, her eyes narrowed, she started toward me.

Kess was like that.

Her crew had been small, and one of the ones that most forgot was even a crew, but that hadn’t been her fault. It’d been her crew’s fault. Still. She came from crew roots. She scoped out the situation and was coming to help.

That was, until a guy moved ahead of her.

She stopped, still frowning, and looked up.

The guy—he seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place him. Dark hair. Blue eyes that almost matched Kess’, but not quite. A brother? I didn’t remember if Kess had any other siblings, but no. There was an air about them, about them both. He moved into her, also looking at us, but he wasn’t looking at me.

He was watching Harper, and seeing who Harper was talking to—now he saw me and he saw me watching him. That was enough. He grimaced, swearing under his breath (not hard to read

lips when someone says ‘fuck’) and then two guys walked past them, and they were gone.

I looked but couldn’t see them.

That was... odd.

“We want you gone.”

I tuned back in. Harper was taking the charge, motioning for Jordan to leave.

The guys around Harper were rallying, moving in as if they were going to physically force Jordan from the premises.

Cross growled, moving to meet them.

And that was my cue. I went, too, reaching for an old friend of mine. I pulled out my knife. It’d been a graduation gift from Cross. A little wolf had been carved into the handle. I loved it, I now slept with it at my bedside, but it accomplished its desired effect.

The old Bren was here and pushing to join the fight. She wanted out of her cage.

I smiled.

They stopped in their tracks at the knife, but the smile, a smile that I knew was eerie, sent them edging backwards.

Harper didn’t move. His gaze was transfixed on my knife and he paled, his jaw slackening.

What happened next, I’d think back on later.

I’d wonder if we continued how we were going, what would happen. If we would’ve contained the situation, scared the guys off, and Jordan could’ve stayed and had a good night, or if things would have inevitably turned bad anyway?

In a way, maybe it didn’t matter?

Because what did happen was chaos. Then again, I was learning that’s what happened when Cross’ brother joined the mix, and as I was noting Harper’s feared response to me, there was a commotion to the side. People were talking. Conversations were loud. A couple shouts, and then Blaise arrived in a rush. He was a force, like a pin being taken to a balloon, and at his presence, Harper was pulled out of his trance.

His eyes went feral—it was eerie to see it in someone else—and he growled. He lunged for Blaise, actually lunged.

“You motherfucker!” His hands were up, going for Blaise’s throat.

Someone knocked him around. Their body pushed in, giving him a hard hit to the side, and as Harper caught himself, rubbing at his face, he looked. Another snarl started to form. At this point, his frat brothers had moved to form half a circle, but they weren’t engaging.

I thought they would. That was something I would wonder about later, too. If it would’ve been a fight between us and Harper’s frat, but Blaise showed up, and his presence flipped everything upside down.

That body who had stepped in to block Harper? That was Zeke, and he was standing in front of his best friend, his hands in fists, and he was staring down at Harper like he was a bull getting ready to charge.

“You fucking kidding me?” Admonishment from Harper.

Zeke’s nostrils were flaring. His neck was locked and getting red. “You tried to throw me out of the house.”

Harper snapped upright. His gaze went over Zeke’s shoulder to Blaise, then scanned the rest of us and he looked at his friends. He turned back, losing some of his fight. His hand fell from his face. “Zeke. It was a conflict of interest. Even you have to admit that. I mean, look.” He gestured to Blaise. “Your best friend wants to ruin my life.”

Blaise smirked. “Because you make it so easy. Keep being a douche, and I’ll continue trying to ruin you.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Blaise rolled his eyes. “I made a promise, just seeing that promise out.” He put a hand on Zeke’s shoulder and walked around him, taking point. His head angled down, getting in Harper’s face. “Look around you, bro. None of your guys are backing you against Zeke. Think on that.” He tapped the side of his head, and he reached forward.

We saw it happen.

Cross clenched his jaw. I tightened my grip on my knife.

And then, in slow motion, Blaise tapped the side of Harper's head with his finger. And his trademark smirk appeared. "Get it?"

I checked.

Zeke looked shocked, his eyes wide and his mouth opened a small bit, then his gaze snapped forward to Harper.

I felt Jordan moving in behind me.

Shit.

Cross' brother was going to force a fight. It was a different matter if Cross, Jordan, Zellman, or I did it, but someone not crew? Our hand was getting played without our permission. That would not fly, but we were here. We were in this situation. We'd do what we needed to do.

A primal sound came from Harper, but he only jerked forward and shoved Blaise back. "What is your issue with me, man?! Because of what I said about your girl? I was complimenting yo —"

He hadn't noticed that absolute raw rage that was coming over Blaise.

Punch!

We all stopped for a second, because it hadn't been Blaise who hit Harper. Or Zeke.

Standing at the side, the same twin-like, murderous look on his face was Cross.

His face was grim, his jaw set in stone, and as Harper fell down, Cross stepped forward, his foot coming down on Harper's hand. He ground his heel over it.

Screams filled the air, sending chills down my spine as it mixed with the techno and rap music.

There was a pocket of silence and a snapping sound was heard.

I cringed. That was a bone being broken.

Some of Harper's frat brothers started to move in, but Zeke threw his hands out. "No!"

The guys held back, but they weren't happy. One snapped at Zeke, "What the hell, man?"

Blaise looked at his brother, a vein sticking out from his neck, and he shoved Cross back. "I don't need you to do *my* work."

Oh, hell no. *Now* he didn't need us to do his work?

I moved in. Jordan was at my back, but Blaise bent down and scooped Harper up. He threw an arm around his shoulder and scanned the crowd. Ignoring the phones and cameras recording us, he kept looking, jerking Harper with him as if he were a rag doll. That told me Blaise's adrenaline levels were off the charts. He might look like as if he's tightly controlled right now, but he wasn't. He was every bit as wild as Harper was looking, though Harper was starting to look green in the face. His hand was flapping in the air, too.

Spotting someone, Blaise pointed into the crowd. "Jessinda. Come here."

A girl moved forward, stepping into our circle, and I recognized the handprint girl.

Unlike a lot of the other girls, she was wearing a dress. Strapless. White. As she moved forward, it shimmered. Her hair was styled so it looked natural, but hair like that was never natural. Diamonds were dangling from her ears, matching the diamonds on her sandals and around her wrists. She looked very classy, and annoyed, judging by the pinch of her nose.

"What do you want, Blaise?"

He pulled Harper tight against him, looking as if he were jerking around a friend. The hard look in his eyes didn't match his grin, and the sight was a little unhinged. "You know this boy and your girl Tab dated, right?"

Her eyes were narrowed, her mouth flat. "Yeah. Why?"

A bunch of girls came in, crowding behind her. They were all dressed similarly, in white dresses with diamonds hanging from their ears. A few looked nervous. Some were annoyed. Some were intrigued, casting glances at Jordan and Cross, then the rest of the other guys. More than a couple were fixing their hair, but Jessinda kept on point, staring hard at Blaise.

"Did she tell you it was against her will?"

Jessinda's eyes went flat—wait. What?

I jerked around to Blaise. “What are you doing?”

That was my narrative to say. Well, mine because I was the one who handed out the beatdown the first time, but also Tab's and Jordan's.

“What are you saying?”

Harper was still cringing, cradling his broken hand against his chest. He didn't seem to hear what Blaise was saying.

Blaise raised his eyebrows at Jessinda's question. “I'm saying your girl Tab was with this douche because *his* dad,” he shook Harper a little, “owned a bad loan over *her* dad. She was with this dick because *he* told *her* if she spread her legs, he'd get his dad to back off the loan.”

Wait.

WHAT?!

I shared a look with Cross, but Jordan was at our backside. He was rushing in. “The fuck you're saying?!”

This was different from what he'd been told. Tab said she went to Harper, not Harper extorting her. That flipped everything on its head, again.

Blaise's grin was still cool, scanning over us as he went back to Tabatha's sorority sister. “I bet you didn't know that about your girl.” He was looking over at the rest of the girls. “I know your house is connected to theirs. You guys cool with keeping a guy like that in Zeke's frat?”

I chanced a look at Zeke. His eyes were closed, and his head was hanging. His mouth was pressed tight. Then his lips moved, and I saw he was counting down under his breath. Ten, nine, eight, and so forth.

Jessinda looked at the other fraternity guys. “That true?”

They all shared a look, all shifting on their feet.

Zeke opened his eyes now, giving his best friend a hard look before turning his eyes to her. “Yes. We had a house meeting last night. He admitted it to us.”

Jessinda's mouth hung open. A startled laugh came from her, but it was harsh sounding. "He did that to one of my sisters?"

"She was one of yours for two months. She's gone—"

She snapped at the fraternity guy who had stepped forward, "She took the pledge. She's one of ours. That makes her one of mine." Her eyes were fierce, her whole face tightening up and rigid. "You all know who my father is. My mother."

I studied the sorority sisters and then Zeke's fraternity brothers. Not one of them spoke up. Acceptance and resignation seemed to hang over the guys, and one by one, they looked at Zeke and gave him a small nod. As they did, they turned and left until it was just Zeke standing. He looked at Blaise, who was still holding Harper upright.

Zeke's hands were still in fists at his side, but he cocked his head to the side and his arms jerked. He forced his fists open, his palms pressing against his sides before he took a large breath. "Let him go, dude. We got him from here."

Blaise shoved him at Zeke, who caught him, and Zeke and Harper took off, too.

Jessinda cast us a shrewd look before addressing Blaise. "Kinda shitty you did that in front of witnesses."

Blaise shrugged. "Did that for my boy and my girl. I keep my promises."

Her head lifted back, and she was taking him in in a whole new manner. Want and lust flared for a brief second before she stamped it back down. "Too bad you and your brother are taken." She looked at me. "I know you're friends with Tab. I'll tell her myself, but maybe it'd be good if she heard from you as well. She's welcome back anytime. We'll *all* have her back. There'll be no judgment or shame in our house, not when it comes to one of our sisters."

I nodded.

She dipped her head down before turning. She and her sisters left after that.

Then it was Blaise and the rest of us.

Cross and I had been holding Jordan back. He'd been moving in, closer and closer as that whole conversation happened, and sharing one look, both Cross and I stepped aside.

Jordan was through in a flash, and he punched Blaise, a clear hit across the face.

“What the hell?”

Jordan stood over him, seething. “You knew that shit for twenty-four hours and didn't tell me? Fuck. You.” With that said, he left.

Cross and I followed.



From: Tazsters

To: Cain Group, Blaise DeVroe, Aspen Monson

Subject: YOU ALL ARE ASSHOLES

Aspen called me and told me the truth. The dirtbag was never Zach, or Zeke (who I thought it was), but Tim Harper. I hate all y'all. I'm kidding. I think Tabatha told me the real name, but I kept thinking it was Zeke that we were all hating. Okay. I feel like I'm there with you guys now.

By the way, Bren texted me that you're all going bowling. I'm sending my twin a gift.

Payback's a twin, hmmm?

THE BEST TWIN

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BREN

We went bowling.

The lanes were packed, which I noted to Brock as he checked us in. Trundle was there, but helping someone else.

He handed over our shoes, saying, “Yeah. Some pics of your group got on social media. It’s been a slow trickle since then, but you’re right. We’re doing good in the bowling business again.” He gave a short laugh. “Should probably think about fixing the sign outside and repaving the parking lot.”

I grinned, taking my shoes and handing out the rest. “I kinda like the Cougar Lanes, myself.”

He chuckled, then nodded to the guys as they moved to where we’d be bowling. “You doing okay? Your head. Ready for tomorrow?”

I was supposed to go out in the field tomorrow. I knew they were planning on tracking down two jumps.

I nodded now, everything inside of me getting tight, but solid tight. Like I was finally ready tight. “I’ll be fine. I’ve had concussions before. That guy knocked me from behind. I’ll watch my back from now on, better.”

Brock’s grin turned grim. “You and me both. We shouldn’t have left you alone. That’s half on us, too.”

The door opened, and I looked over my shoulder, then did a double take. Blaise was coming in, his arm around Aspen, and the rest of Aspen’s friends were filing in, too. Her

roommate, whom I'd met a couple times now, Jade. Then the floormates: Veronica and Angeline.

Jade's gaze went right to where Jordan was picking up a bowling ball. She swallowed, taking a tiny breath.

Blaise came over, his arm lifting from Aspen's shoulders as she and her friends went right over to where Cross and Jordan were.

Cross saw them and looked at me. His eyebrow raised. He was noting where his brother was, and I shook my head at him. I didn't need him at my side, not for this one.

Blaise noticed the little exchange and laughed under his breath as he moved in next to me. But he didn't say anything.

Not me. I started right in. "Your brother punched him because he worried you were going to start in and not be able to stop. He did that for you, ya know."

"I know."

He sounded cool and calm now, but my pulse was spiking. "Why shove him? Why throw that in his face?"

Glancing at Brock, who was standing there, Blaise sighed and turned back to me. "My relationship with your boy is complicated. You know that."

"I *know* you're a dick. That's what I do know."

He shrugged, saying to Brock, "We'll do a lane by them. Five of us, six, maybe. Maybe three games?"

"Zeke?" I asked.

He skimmed a look at me before handing over his card to pay, telling Brock the shoe sizes that were needed. "Can I ask you for a favor?"

I should've been surprised, but I wasn't. Not at this point, not with this guy.

"What?"

"Aspen doesn't know that Harper did something. I kept that under wraps from her."

I rolled my eyes. “Aren’t you Mr. Honesty? That’s holding the truth from your girl.”

He flinched, his eyes going over my shoulder for a moment. “I know. I don’t like it, but Aspen’s been through enough shit.”

“What’s the favor you want?”

“Aspen and her girls are doing a girls’ night next weekend since this one didn’t pan out. Jade’s cool. She’s got her eye on your boy, so they might ask you to join them. I know your history with female friends is spotty, but could you join them? I have a feeling Veronica is going to take them to a party, and I’m still worried about Aspen. Harper was pushed out tonight, but I don’t know if it’ll stick. He’s got some loyal friends in the house. They might push to get him back in, and if Veronica takes the girls to one of their parties, I won’t be there. You get what I’m saying?”

Fuck. “Payback?”

He nodded, his eyes flaring for a second. “Yeah.”

I already knew what I was going to say, but sighed and nodded. I knew I’d say yes the instant he mentioned Aspen’s name. Soft spot and all. “You know I will.”

He grinned, taking his card back and gathering up the shoes. “I know, but I wanted to give you a heads-up about what you might be walking into.”

I gave him a hard look back. “Right. Thanks for that. How’d you know we were here?”

“I have my ways.” That was it.

He laughed before giving me a nod and going to join the group.

I watched, noting that Blaise sat across the two lanes from Cross. Neither looked at the other, and neither spoke to the other. Jade and Veronica, on the other hand, totally talking to Jordan.

“Do I even ask?”

I turned back to my boss and shook my head. “No. We’re kinda stuck with him.”

CHAPTER FORTY

CROSS

The words had been rolling in my gut since my brother shoved his way through the crowd, and especially since everything that went down earlier today.

I didn't like it. Not a bit.

And I needed to let him know, but it hadn't been the time then.

It hadn't been right when we got to the bowling alley, either, when Blaise showed up with his friends. Jade got Jordan's number and asked where we were, so I knew he'd be showing up.

The girls were enjoying themselves. Jordan was enjoying them, too.

So, for them, for Jordan, I kept quiet. I waited.

But now, seeing my brother take a phone call and dart outside, I was done waiting.

Cool, calm, smooth, I took my bowling shoes off and put on my regular ones.

The only person who noticed was Bren, and when I looked up, her eyes were speculative. She looked at the door, and I gave her a small nod. She raised an eyebrow, and this time I was the one signaling to her that I didn't need her help.

She nodded, settling farther back in the chair to keep score. Zellman wasn't here, so she filled in. Jordan was too busy flirting. Me and Bren, though, we were good bowling, enjoying each other's company, grazing arms and hands as we

moved to go bowl and come back. Blaise noted the touches, his eyes darkening as he watched his own woman, but Aspen was having fun. She was laughing at Jordan, and her face was glowing being around her friends.

I knew it was killing him to see how I was touching my woman, and he had to refrain from touching his.

I enjoyed the torture, but it was time to stick another knife in his gut, metaphorically speaking, and I moved across the lobby, keeping to the shadows to not draw attention to me.

Jordan's laugh cut out behind me.

I looked back. He was watching me, but Bren moved. She said a few words and he nodded to her, then to me.

I ducked out through the door.

My brother had moved out into the parking lot, but I saw his phone's light and he was saying in a quiet voice, "Yeah, Mom. No. We're good." A pause. "I promise. Yeah."

I could hear Marie saying her goodbye. Blaise reciprocated, then hung up, stuffing his phone into his pocket as he started back to the front door.

I moved back against the building, just shy of the front entryway.

He came across me, moving forward when I moved.

I grabbed his arm, throwing him back against the wall, and I shoved him the rest of the way, jamming an arm up against his neck.

My brother stilled, then snapped alive. He was fighting, trying to shove me off, but I was ready. I knew Blaise could fight, so I was prepared. He tried to kick me out away from him, but I shoved harder against his throat until he stopped, and now he was gagging.

"It's me, asshole."

He froze again, then sagged back. "What the fuck? This because of tonight? I'm sorry for not showing more

appreciation that you punched Harper for me. *So many thanks.*” He was being sarcastic.

I shoved harder, enjoying hearing him choke before I relaxed my hold. “You’re dangerous.”

He snorted, half-laughing. “Right. *You?* You are actually saying that to *me?*”

I kept my tone low, calm, and cold. Two could be like that. “As of tonight, you are going to stop pulling my group into your personal vendettas. You are going to stop pushing the boundary, and...” when he tried to speak again, I spoke over him, “you know you’re doing it. You outed Tabatha, which outed Jordan, which could’ve outed Bren. Everything connects, and you know that. You knew what you were doing tonight.”

“I had to. Jessinda Hinckley’s father is a senator. She’s got family connections that out-connect Harper’s family. Harper’s a legacy. That means he’s going to be a bitch to actually get removed from the house, and no, tonight didn’t actually do it. It just put a dent in his campaign to stay and get Zeke removed instead. I’m doing this for him, too, and yeah, I’m sorry that I outed Tab and your boy since she was his girl, but I had to. It was a calculated move. Getting Harper kicked out helps you guys, too, because he’s a cancer. He’ll grow and fester and he’ll be toxic the longer we’re all here at Cain together.”

Maybe.

I got what he was saying, but I wasn’t okay that he was using my group to further his agenda.

“If you want to go rogue against Harper, do it on your time. Stop saying anything that connects to my crew. Got it?”

There was a little bit of light, and some of the red from the neon sign shining down on us. We could see each other clearly, and he studied me for a moment. He was measuring me.

I was done. Our family shit aside, I wasn’t going to stand anymore and let him play roulette with my crew, with Bren.

Finally, he dipped his head down. “Fine, but I did ask your girl if she’d hang out with Aspen next weekend. I don’t know where Aspen’s friends will take her, so I can’t be there to protect her.”

I stepped back. “Bren said yes?”

He nodded. “Then, that’s different. You’re giving us the choice to wade in or not. Do more of that shit and we’re good.”

“Right.”

“Right.” Another dark glare at him, but my brother was standing down, accepting what I said. And because I actually didn’t want to risk getting into a physical fight with him, I turned on my heel and went back inside.

Blaise followed a beat later.

He kept to his side. I kept to mine.

We were fine, that way.



From: Cross

To: Tazsters

Subject: Yes, payback is a bitch.

Stay tuned.

—always the best twin

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BREN

Things were good, until they weren't.

I went to work, helped in the field, but Brock also gave me a huge book. He pointed at it as he walked by. "You gotta learn all of that before you take your test."

My test. I needed to pass a test before I was an official bounty hunter? Seems like I actually was a student.

After work a few times, I met Cross at his school's library for a study session.

Okay, I lied. I was trying to make myself sound like a better student than I was. The study session happened one time, and never again. A college library, or a library of any sorts, was not a place I wanted to be in unless I was going in wearing a vest, my Taser gun at the ready, and a radio clipped to my shoulder. The rest of the week, I went to work.

I went on bail jumps. I helped where I could, stood back when I was told.

I came home.

I ate or met Cross and Jordan for dinner.

After that, Cross and I studied. In the bedroom. Our living room. Outside. A diner. Anywhere except at a library.

Cross liked the downtime, even though I learned that he actually didn't need to study that much. He was 'going through the motions.' I asked about it, and he sighed with a shy little smile that made my knees melt.

"I like the normalcy."

“What?”

He shifted, looking a little uncomfortable. “You know, we’re just studying. Normal. We’re not fighting or searching for a drug dealer I want to kill, or your drug dealer ex. No one’s being taken to the hospital. You know, normal. Quiet.”

“You like the quiet?”

He nodded, his eyes shifting to the floor for a beat. “Yeah. I feel settled. I’m not worried that someone I love is going to be taken away from me.”

Right.

I was rocked, *rocked*, but right.

That made sense.

“Okay,” I whispered. “You like the normalcy.”

Another nod from him. “I like it when you’re next to me.”

Well.

Then.

Warmth spread through me at that last statement.

My throat swelled up, but I didn’t know why, and I didn’t have the words, so I went back to studying. Normal. Quiet.

Guess I’d be studying more from now on.

And those nights when it was just Cross and me at the house, I felt the quiet. I was okay with the quiet. And knowing how Cross felt about it, I was *really* okay with it now. I could do that.

That was the goal until Jordan came home. Two out of the four nights, he had a girl with him.

I saw both of his guests. I didn’t know either of them.

The other two nights, Jordan had people come over. They were from a couple of his classes. One was the psych class he shared with Cross, so for those nights, the peace wasn’t so peaceful. A couple of the guys wanted to talk with Cross. A few of the girls wanted to flirt with him. He was polite to the

guys, shot the girls down, and took my hand, leading me upstairs to my room those nights just to escape.

Jordan shot me an apologetic grin each time.

It was Friday now, and tonight was when the quiet stopped being quiet.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BREN

My phone was ringing, and it took a hot second for me to realize that it wasn't the alarm.

Cross lifted his head up, looking, and he reached over me. Checking the screen, he moved back and sat up on his side of the bed. "There a reason you're calling thirty minutes before she needs to wake up?"

I frowned, but I wasn't frowning enough to sit up because he was right. I had thirty more sleeping minutes to go.

I heard murmuring from the other end, then Cross looked at me. His face tightened, even with his hair sticking up, and he still looked good. He had stopped shaving very recently, so he had a nice patch of gruff hair there, enough that it was distracting me that he was on my phone and not looking happy about it.

"Fine. I'll tell her."

He hung up, tossing the phone onto his nightstand.

I waited.

He shook his head. "Not yet." He wasn't the only one checking the other out. His voice came out rough, "Sleep or something else before I have to tell you who was on the phone?"

There'd be no sleeping now, so I smiled and pulled down the bedsheet.

A wolfish smile took over his face and he was over and on top of me within seconds.

~

We went two rounds, long past my alarm, and Cross was just coming out from the shower. I was tugging my shirt down and met his gaze in the mirror. “You have to tell me now.”

His whole face tightened, but he sighed. Reaching for a towel, he raked it over his head. “That was your brother.”

I don’t want to say my heart stopped. That would’ve been an exaggeration, but it paused. My chest tightened. That was more accurate because Channing calling that early in the morning was never a good sign.

I had my hair pick in my hand, but I set it back down and flattened my palm against the counter. I needed that foundation to stop the shaking. I looked down at it, too. “No one died, or you would’ve told me that right away.”

“No.”

I waited, breath suspended.

He was silent, and that fact alone told me it was still bad.

I closed my eyes, still waiting.

“You know your brother. You know how he is when it comes to you and... Your dad is here again.”

“What?”

“He’s *already* here.”

“What?”

Cross sighed before moving into the bedroom. He went to the closet, and I followed, his voice trailing out to where I waited by the bed. “Channing got the call by a cop buddy of his. Your dad’s in Cain. Channing thought the Red Demons had put him up somewhere. He didn’t want you to be caught by surprise, so he called for the heads-up.”

My dad was here.

Okay, then.

He hadn't called. He'd probably call, or maybe he wouldn't call.

I no longer knew what I was feeling or if I was feeling anything at all when it came to him. I mean, he'd already been here. Then he left, now he was back again? But not because of me. Because of... Because of why?

Why was he here?

Cross came back, his eyes gentle and studying me. "You okay?"

I stiffened, but nodded. "Yeah. I mean, yeah."

What did I say here? I had no clue.

Cross grimaced, his mouth curving down. "I could skip my classes? Ride along with you? I'm sure Brock would be okay with that."

I shook my head, clearing my throat. "No. No. That's fine. That's okay."

"Bren." He moved closer, but he didn't touch me.

I was glad he was giving me that space.

His head bent, and he was within touching distance. He did that on purpose, letting me make the choice or not.

He said, "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

I moved to leave since I was dressed and ready. He caught my hand, pulling me back. No words were shared, just a last look, and I gave him another nod. "I'm good. I promise. This stuff with my dad, it's just complicated, but I got a handle on it."

Then, pulling my hand free, I left the room.

Jordan was just coming up from the basement. He had a nine a.m. class, but it was early for him. Seeing me, he paused, still on the stairs, grimacing.

I braked. "What?"

That look said enough.

“I seriously need some coffee,” came from behind him, and his eyes closed. He took a second before he stepped out into the hallway. He cleared the stairs, and I was blessed with the vision of Jessinda Hinkley herself.

She paused, her mouth falling open. She’d been fixing her bra strap, with her hair needing to be combed through. A red tank top over jeans that were more like a second skin, high heels, hoop earrings, and even though she had washed her face, there were still remnants of eyeliner underneath her eyes.

I was guessing Jordan had gone to a party last night.

Jordan coughed, clearing his throat, and gestured over his shoulder. “I—uh—coffee. I can do that. Bren? You want some?”

Jessinda was Tab’s sister. I was pretty sure this was sister code violation.

She closed her mouth, coughing, too, and came up the last few steps. She glanced at my feet before giving me a once-over. “I... Yeah. So, you and Jordan live together, huh?”

I leveled Jordan with a look. “Is this you getting back at Tab?” Because he had said he’d be moving on to her sisters.

He cringed, his hand raking through his hair. “No.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“It’s not.” He motioned to Jessinda, then let his hand drop by his side. “It just happened.”

And I had nothing to say to that. Turning, I started for the kitchen.

Jordan went to stand in front of the coffee machine, shirtless and only in his sweats. I was counting the nail scratches on his back when he looked over his shoulder. Seeing my gaze, he cursed under his breath. Three coffee mugs were set on the counter, creamer next to them. The machine began to spew.

“It’s not that, Bren. I promise.”

I didn't have time to deal with that anyways. "My dad's in town."

His gaze sharpened and he wheeled completely around. "What?!"

Jessinda had been moving across the kitchen but faltered at hearing his reaction.

I added, indicating her, "You know me. Tell Tab yourself. Don't make me do it."

"Fuck." His head reared back, and he glared at the ceiling. "Crew, Bren. Crew!"

I pointed at Jessinda. "Friend code. Tab lectured me last year about it. Don't put me in that position."

"I've chosen you over her so many times—"

"This isn't quite the same and you know it."

A pent-up growl erupted from him, but he sighed right after. "Yeah. I know. I'll tell her."

"Wait." Jessinda's last foot came down hard on the floor. She snapped out, "What?"

Jordan skimmed her over, his mouth tightening. "I'm not dating Tab anymore. I've not actually done anything wrong. Bren's hardcore with her loyalty, and she's not loyal to you right now. You're the one who violated your code, so you gotta call her and tell her."

Her mouth had been hanging open, and it snapped shut. "You're fucking with me?"

Jordan shook his head, resigned.

She swung my way.

I gave her a hard stare back. "Do not even think you can scare me. Do not play that game. You won't win." And with that said, I was done.

The coffee had churned enough. Jordan poured one of the mugs, then handed it over to me. He lifted his chin up. "Your dad, huh?"

I sighed, taking the cup. All the fight in me left with that one question, all in a sudden whoosh. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged, but my throat was burning. “Me too.”

Cross was coming out from the bedroom.

He stopped just short of the stairs, taking in the scene.

I didn’t say anything. He didn’t either, but we watched each other as I passed by, heading for the door. It was enough, and I drew in some needed strength from Jordan, and from that look with Cross, and somehow, it worked.

The tightness in my chest loosened.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

BREN

I walked inside Cougar Lanes and my first encounter was Brock, coming my way.

There was a whole storm on his face. I stepped back, more out of self-preservation, but he swept past me. His hand took my arm and he pulled me right back outside, right back where I'd come from.

“Hey. Hello.”

I pulled my arm from his grasp. “Don't touch me like that again.”

He held his hands up. “Sorry.” His eyes went past me, to the door. “You know who's in there?”

“What?”

“Your fath—”

That was all I needed to hear.

I swept right back inside, and there he was. I would've seen him the first time if Brock hadn't distracted me.

Sitting in a booth, one of the only three we had along those walls, his back was to the door. Papers were spread out in front of him. A cup of coffee and a pitcher on the table. He had a small plate, and what looked like the last crumbs of a muffin. There was a laptop opened up as well.

I stepped so I was right in front of him, and he looked up. A slow smile spread over his face, but he was expecting me. Well, he was in my workplace, so that was a no-shit moment.

“Bren!”

“Dad.” I took in the papers. They were applications. A pair of reading glasses was on the other side of the laptop, along with a cell phone. “What are you doing?”

“I’m applying for jobs.” He shot a grin over my shoulder. “I didn’t think they’d hire me here, but I was tempted. You looking for more help manning the bowling alley? I know a bit of maintenance, could help fix things when they break.”

Brock’s voice was low and tense. “I’m thinking that’s a pass.”

Derrick laughed.

My dad. Derrick.

My head was swimming.

“That’s what I thought.”

Brock settled behind me, his hand coming down on the table. “You can’t stay here.”

“Why not?” He motioned to me. “I thought I could be here, do some work, and be here when my daughter had some free time? I promise to keep ordering if that’s the issue.”

“That’s not the issue, and you know it.”

Brock nudged me, so I shifted, facing him and my dad at the same time. My back was now mostly turned toward the door.

“He’s here to keep tabs on us.” Brock raised his voice, more speaking to my dad than me. “Red Demons know that we’re closing in on where the big wigs are hiding, and they want all eyes on us that they can get. It ain’t going to happen. You have to leave, Mr. Monroe.”

I closed my eyes, memories assaulting me.

“...we’re charging Mr. Monroe with the assault and murder of ...”

It washed over me, with the feels, the smells. The stale beer assaulting my nose. The dried sweat. The metallic smell of the blood. How blood could have a smell was beyond me, but it did.

I could feel the knife in my hand again.

The sound of his footsteps.

“Honey?”

My eyes snapped open. I was jarred back to reality, and I stared hard at my dad. “You have to leave.”

“But, Bren—”

“NOW!”

I didn’t want to go back there. If him being here was bringing memories from that first night, I didn’t want to endure what else I’d go through, again. The longer he stayed, the more I’d have to fight through.

“Bren—” He started to slide out of the booth.

It wasn’t fast enough. None of it was fast enough.

I needed Brock off of my back.

I needed my dad out of my life.

I needed all of it *gone*.

I grabbed his computer, snapping it shut, and was out the door in two steps. Heaving it over my head, I threw it as far as I could. Vehicles were pulling into the parking lot. I heard the crumble of the dirt under their tires, and I knew others had come out to watch what was going on, but I ignored all of them.

I had to.

My heart was pounding.

My hands were sweaty.

I felt like I was having a panic attack right then and there. No. I *was* having a panic attack.

Going back inside, my dad hadn’t moved. Brock too. Both were still in place, and I bent, sweeping the rest of his papers into my hands. Those followed behind his laptop. I tossed it all as hard as I could, but some flew back in the wind. A few even sailed right back inside.

I stepped on one, and I was almost dry heaving looking at what else he had there.

His phone.

His glasses.

I reached for both, but he jerked forward. Grabbing his phone, he stepped into me and wrapped his arms around me. “Sweetheart—”

“I’m *not* your sweetheart!” I ripped myself from his arms.

Another man in a matter of minutes who decided to touch me. He didn’t have that right. Brock hadn’t either. I was going feral again, the need to teach them both a lesson.

I waited, my hand ready, and I glared at him. “Get out. Get. Out. GET OUT!”

“Hon—!” he tried to yell at me, and he reached.

He shouldn’t have reached for me.

My arm moved back. My hand pulled out my knife, and I embedded it in his arm, right in the fleshiest part. His eyes went wide, staring at it. His face paled. “Bren!”

Someone else gasped behind me.

I felt hands on my shoulders, and I growled, whirling around.

It was Hawk. She stepped back, releasing me immediately. “Bren.”

God.

I hated that tone. Soft. Soothing. Like I was a fucking animal that needed to be tamed. Domesticated.

Fuck that. Fuck her. Fuck my dad. Fuck everyone.

My phone was ringing.

I heard it jarring, and then I felt it, and I pulled it out.

Channing calling.

I answered it, “I just stabbed Dad.”

There was total and complete silence on his end. Then, a soft, “Bren?”

“I want him gone. Now.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

He exhaled sharply on his end. “Walk to the bathroom. Wash up, and then go and sit in a cool office. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

My brother would do what he always did. He’d take care of it, and I knew he’d be sending Cross my way. So, because of that, because I trusted my brother, I nodded. “Their air-conditioner doesn’t work.”

“Bathroom. Wash. Sit in front of a large fan then.”

I repeated his words, and I felt Hawk hovering over me.

“Bren.”

“What?”

“Give the phone to Dad, then go to the bathroom. You have someone there with you? Where’s Cross?”

“He’s at the house.”

“Okay. Anyone else there with you?”

I looked and said, “Everyone.”

“Okay.” I heard him bite off a slight laugh. And he repeated, “Let someone go with you to the bathroom, and give the phone to Dad. Okay? I’ll make sure you’ll get your phone back. I promise.”

I had no argument. I trusted my brother.

I turned to Hawk, knowing I was speaking like a zombie, knowing I wished I were feeling like one. “I need you to go to the bathroom with me.”

She was nodding before I started speaking. “I will. I’ll do that.”

I looked at my phone, then her.

Her hand closed over mine, the same one holding my phone. She took it from me. "I got this, too." She was smiling at me, trying to reassure me. She reached behind her at the same time, and I saw Brock take my phone.

I was okay then.

They'd handle it.

I could go and wash now.

For some reason, I felt dirty, and it was dirt that would never wash off.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

CROSS

I was in a shoving mood, so when Jordan and I got to Cougar Lanes, I was disappointed to see the doors had been propped open. We swept through, and the entire fucking lobby was filled with bounty hunters. And Trundle. He waved from behind the register, but even he looked stressed.

We took one step inside, but a crazy-looking lady was in our way. Her hair looked electrocuted and she stopped in front of us, a finger up in the air. “When your girl chills out, you tell her that there can only be one of us. That said, if you hurt her, I will take your entrails out and eat them with chopped liver and garlic.”

“Bonbon! Leave them alone.” Brock came over, literally standing in front of Bonbon, who sniffed and went away. He cursed under his breath, shaking his head. “Hey. Sorry about her.”

I didn’t give a fuck. “Where is she?”

He motioned to the offices. “We got her in a room. Her brother was pretty adamant about making sure it’s a cool room so she can calm down. We set her up with a fan, but I gotta say,” he shifted closer, “she looked eerily calm.”

Jordan snorted. “Looks are deceiving with Bren.”

Brock eyed him. “I guess.”

A few of their other guys came over, but Brock said to me, “Her dad had set up camp here.”

Jordan swore, turning away.

Brock continued, now giving him the side-eye, “Bren seemed surprised at first, then she snapped. He and I got into it, just a little back and forth. There’s a timetable on the deal moving forward against the Red Demons. They’re looking for the witness.”

“What?”

I was here for Bren, not for this shit.

“Only reason I’m explaining any of this is because things are tense and amped up. If the Red Demons don’t find this witness, then a ton of them will go away for a very, very long time. They’re getting desperate. Pulling Derrick Monroe and having him do babysitting duty on his own daughter tells me how desperate they are.”

I still didn’t give two shits about any of that.

“Get to the part where she stabbed him.”

Brock eased back, his head tilting to the side. “She just snapped. I really mean that. Went ballistic. She tossed his computer in one go.”

Jordan snickered.

“Came back and tossed his papers. She was doing a third trip when she was going for his phone. He moved in, grabbed the phone, and touch—”

“He touched her?!” I was simmering.

He nodded, easing back yet another step.

More had joined our group. Hawk. An older lady and man. Another crazy-looking chick, with gray and red hair. She had large glasses shoved up over her head, like a bandana holding back her hair.

I rubbed my forehead, needing to get my own stuff settled.

Bren would be tail-spinning. I already knew it.

Fuck.

Fuck!

“Okay. What did Channing have to say, and where’s her dad now?”

Hawk moved in. “I took her to the bathroom, helped wash her up because she had some blood on her. Then I’ve been with her in the office until you got here.”

Brock clasped her on the shoulder, dipping his head to her. “Channing had a word with their father on her phone, then Monroe handed it over and took off. I’m assuming he went to the hospital, or maybe not. Demons have their own medical people, so he probably went there. Channing just said to keep her tight, that you’d be coming for her, and to hand off her phone to you.” He dug it out of his pocket, extending it to me.

I pocketed it, sharing a look with Jordan.

He was moving his head left to right, mirroring how I was feeling. He moved in, intending only for me to hear. “This is insane. Her dad’s shit? All the crap she’s been through, and now this?”

Yeah.

I wasn’t happy either.

Brock overheard, and his eyebrows pulled low. “This is the Red Demons. We’re not their most central location, but they have a good stronghold here.”

“Where?”

He started to answer, then stopped. “No. I’m not doing that.” He moved aside, gesturing to their offices again. “Get your girl. Take her home. When she’s good, she can come back.”

Jordan snorted. “That’s not how we work.”

I gave him a dark look, and he shut up.

No. That wasn’t how we worked, but at this point, we didn’t need to broadcast it.

We were in. We were being pulled in.

The dad showed up at Bren’s workplace. Bren snapped, and now, we’d see this through, no matter where it would take

us. That's what we did. And fuck, I hoped that wherever this took us, whatever we had to do to help Bren move on from whatever made her snap, that it did not mean we'd be taking on that entire MC.

“We'll get Bren and go.”

“Hey.”

He called to us as we took a step through their group.

I looked back.

He had both eyebrows raised, halfway up his forehead. “Tell me you're not about to do something seriously stupid.”

Jordan smiled, moving to block me from his view. “Don't worry. We're not about to do something seriously stupid.” He turned around, met my gaze, and I knew we both were thinking the same thing.

We were about to do something seriously stupid.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

BREN

Apparently, I still had issues with my dad. Go figure.

I knew those feelings were there, just not how strong they were. They were packed in there, layer upon layer of them, and fuck, if I hadn't a clue how to get that shit out. No way was I heading back to counseling. I couldn't handle the first stint I'd been court-ordered to do.

I needed to work out. Fight. Maybe drink. Fuck. That'd get it all out of my system, or so I was telling myself that when Cross and Jordan came into the office.

No words were shared. They weren't needed.

Jordan moved to pick up my bag and vest.

Cross walked toward me and looked me over, then handed me my phone.

After that, we filed out of there, moving through a large crowd of everyone in the lobby. I didn't look at the booth where my dad had been sitting. I didn't know why, maybe I didn't want to see if he'd left anything, or if there was still blood there. A big fucking boulder sat in my stomach and lodged up just underneath my rib cage. It wasn't moving, and I was already detesting the feeling of it and the reasons it was there.

We got outside and all of us headed for Jordan's truck.

He got behind the wheel. Cross and I jumped in the back, just like in high school, just like last year.

God.

That felt like a world away—when, in reality, it'd only been a few months. Half a year, to be exact.

Jordan slid open his window. “Where to?”

I nodded to Cross. “Call my brother. Find out where he thinks my dad might be staying.”

Cross had automatically shifted, pulling his phone out, but he paused at the end of my statement. “You sure about that?”

I was more sure about that than anything else.

He read my face and nodded. “Okay.” Then he began dialing, hitting it on speaker.

A second later, Channing answered, “You got Bren?”

“I do.”

Silence.

From Channing, “She’s sitting right there?”

Cross’ hand curled tighter around the phone. “She is.”

I couldn’t imagine what was going through my brother’s head, but his tone came back sounding bleak. “And she’s going after him?”

“We are.”

Channing made an audible grunt. “Fine. Shit. I’m going to regret this, but fine. I’m assuming you’re calling because you guys want to know where he is?”



CROSS

Bren took the phone from me. “Where is he?”

I flinched, hearing how gravelly that came out. There were threads of pain interlaced with agony, and that had everything

in me in pain. I felt a fine slit being cut down the middle of my chest, with hands digging in to further pull it aside, exposing my organs.

“Damn, Bren.”

Channing heard it, too.

He coughed, a husky whisper coming back for a moment, “He’s at—” He coughed, clearing his throat. He came back, sounding clear again. “The Red Demons are known to hang out at The Twister Sister, a bar on the east side of Cain. He might be there, or he might be somewhere else. I’m fairly sure that they put him up somewhere, but I wouldn’t know where to even tell you to look. And remember, I’m positive they have other hangouts, but that’s the locally ‘known’ place they’ll be at. That means the only guys there will be the guys who don’t have warrants out for their arrests. You get me? Just ’cause they’re not illegal right now, doesn’t mean they’re not guys to be worried about. They’re still dangerous.”

Bren’s fingers curled so tight around the phone, her knuckles started to turn white. “Tell me about the heavy hitters with them.”

“Bren—”

“I need to know. I’m not going to do anything, except talk to Dad if I find him, but I have to know what we might be walking into.”

Channing was quiet on his end.

Two seconds.

Five.

Ten.

Then, fifteen seconds later, he said, “I can’t give you a rundown on all the members. We’re still gathering intel ourselves, but you know Maxwell Raith.”

Bren nodded. There’d been a run-in involving him this past summer.

“Heckler is another one. I don’t know his real name. He’s one of their enforcers, but the other big name to know is their VP. Ghost. I can’t remember if I’ve told you about him or not. His name is Shane King.”

“King?”

“He goes by Ghost.”

Bren didn’t reply, but she didn’t hand the phone over either.

“Word’s been put out that you’re protected. My cop friend let me know that the last time I was there. Having said that, you go in there, looking for Dad, I can’t guarantee there won’t be someone going rogue. You stabbed one of theirs. They take that seriously, very seriously. You might not be as protected anymore.” A beat. “I *really* don’t want you going there.”

But we were.

Bren looked up, holding my gaze.

I reached over, taking the phone from her. Her fingers didn’t move.

“It’s Cross again.”

“I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all. Wait. Maybe I should come?”

Bren’s brother knew the score. You try to cage Bren in, and she’d break free every time. It was the only reason he was giving her what he knew, so he knew where she was going. He knew that. I knew that. Bren knew that. And seeing her look, Bren was set.

I said into the phone before hanging up, “We have her back.”

Jordan glanced back, pausing at a red light, meeting my gaze. Yeah. He knew what was happening.

We were following our crew member.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

BREN

I had no plan. I just knew that when Jordan pulled up outside The Twister Sister, I needed to talk to my dad. Ignoring the entire row of Harleys backed up and parked in front of the door, I headed inside. A few bikers were at the door. I recognized the cut and emblem of the Red Demons. Two had the word 'prospect' across the back of their cut. All of them stopped, skimming me over, but I walked past.

They didn't stop me, or Cross and Jordan.

One of the guys was pulling out a phone just as I stepped inside and waited for my eyes to adjust.

The inside was a stark contrast from the sunny outside.

The music in the background was at a soft lull. It wasn't overbearing, and neither was the smoke. The smell of stale booze lined with a faint trace of sweat and dust. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed different groups inside. A few pool tables were smack in the middle of the room, with different bar counters placed throughout the bar. A large main bar ran the length of the back end of the room. High-top tables and lower tables were placed all over. Some dartboards were on the far side of the room, alongside the jukebox. A stage was in the corner, running the length of a wall. The hallway to the bathroom was just beyond where the stage was set up. An open floor area was in front of the stage.

A few guys were playing pool, and all paused to stare at us.

A group of people were bellied up at the bar, sitting and talking with the staff. Some waitstaff were handing out drinks.

There were maybe twenty people inside, maybe a few more. For the large room, it didn't seem like that many.

I heard movement behind me, a page being turned, and I looked.

My dad was sitting at a high-top table in the corner. He was alone. His arm was bandaged, and some of the papers from earlier were all spread out in front of him. A beer bottle was next to him, but unopened, and there was a coffee mug sitting beside it.

“Can I help you folks?” A waitress was heading for my dad, a coffee pot in hand. She paused, her black hair in two thick pigtails resting just beyond her shoulder. She had a white shirt tied in a knot underneath her rib cage, as well as tight purple shorts that just covered the tops of her thighs. Her makeup was red, rosy, and cheery. All three words came to mind. She looked like a '50s pin-up girl, and her eyes were warm. Her smile was welcoming.

“Bren.”

“Aww, Pops. This your daughter?” The waitress moved around me, heading over to fill up my dad's mug without him asking.

He was watching me, a lot more cautious than this morning. “Yeah. This is my daughter. Bren.” He had a pen in his hand, and with it he gestured to Cross and Jordan behind me. “And a few of her friends.”

The waitress' smile just got warmer, but she barely took in the guys. Her hand went to her hip, the other still holding the coffee pot. “Well, there you go. Pops here is family, so you know what that means, right?”

I didn't respond.

My dad coughed to clear his throat, and he stood from his stool. He moved around the waitress, patting her on the hip. “How about we get an order of some burgers and chicken baskets? My daughter is underage, her friends, too, so we'll just do soda.”

“Gotcha.” She winked at me, moving past us. “You guys get ready for some Twister Sister food, and you’ll never eat at another place again. Montreal’s won awards for his creations at the grill.”

“Thank you, darlin’.”

She winked at ‘Pops’ before she left.

Jordan moved closer, saying under his breath, “What’s *her* name?”

I elbowed him in the stomach.

He harrumphed, cradling his stomach and shooting me a look.

I ignored him, standing at the end of my dad’s table until he took a silent breath. He nodded to the empty stools on the other side. “Thinking you should claim one of those, hmm? Maybe your boys can take a walk.”

“Or play a game of pool.” Jordan was already spying the last open table.

The back of Cross’ hand grazed mine. “You okay here?”

I nodded, grazing mine against his arm in response. “I’ll be fine. And if I’m not, you’ll come running.”

A crooked grin was my response.

Jordan had started for the table, and he picked up a pool stick, holding it over his head. “You break, buddy.” He started pulling the balls out from the dispenser. “Have I told you how seriously phenomenal I am at pool?”

I couldn’t hear Cross’ response.

“They ain’t stupid, are they?”

I turned back, taking the inside stool across from my dad. It gave us enough space, and I shifted so my back was to the wall. I was facing most of the room, my feet resting on the stool’s footrest beside me. “Why do you ask that?”

He dipped his head, his gaze somewhere. “Because they’re about to get hustled.”

I looked over at them.

Three of the guys playing pool at the neighbor table were moving in.

Jordan started to converse with them, but Cross looked back at me. He held his hand in a small wave, motioning for me to stay where I was.

“You forgot how rough Roussou is? You get dementia in prison?” I flashed him my teeth, knowing it wasn’t a smile. “Maybe you were actually in there longer than you thought.”

He was reaching for his coffee but paused. A soft laugh came out as he finished his grip and lifted the mug to his lips. “Right.” He took a sip, putting it back down. “But this ain’t Roussou. These guys follow a different set of rules than your crew.” He gave me a steadying look. “You’re out of your depths in this world, and for once, I’m eternally grateful. You got a foot in the good world, and by good, I mean at college and find a job that’s not bounty hunting. You find your niche there, embrace it, and you stay out of this world. I don’t want you here.”

I swallowed a whole fucking knot, because damn, that stung.

“You get all that because I stabbed you?”

He snorted a laugh. “I got all that because you walked in here with your boys, without a trace of fear on your face.” He scowled. “I don’t like that. I don’t like that at all. This world, I do not want you in it.”

“So you said.”

“I’ll say it again,” he bit those words out, roughly. He pounded a fist down on the table. “Not my girl. Not my daughter. No. Your brother did a horrible job raising you—”

I hopped down, shoving back the stool. It crashed into something behind me. I didn’t care.

This wasn’t a quick reaction.

This had been building from years of listening to him and Channing fight, years of watching him walk out that door after

Mom died, years of hearing him coming back drunk and stumbling. Years.

And I snapped, again, because apparently I needed to.

I let loose and this time, it felt damn good. This time, I knew exactly what I was saying. “Fuck you.”

He went still, his eyes narrowing. “What’d you say?”

I raised my voice. “Fuck. You.”

His eyes got big, showing off the whites, and his cheeks filled out, showing off more redness. I noticed then that he had a slight mustache growing, and he wasn’t keeping it combed. It was all mangled, the strands pointing in every which way.

“Excuse yourself. Right now.”

I was experiencing whiplash. The room was spinning around me.

Who did he think he was?

No.

This, *this* was what I came to tell him. He was laying it out for me, all nice and to the point, so here goes my turn.

A sad laugh came from me. He heard it, growing even more still.

I shook my head, just barely. “You got out of prison for killing someone, and you came right to my door. You want to know what Channing did, right? He shooed you away. He got between us, and he kept you away because of this.” I skimmed him up and down, my lip curling up in disdain. “You don’t have a right to tell me to ‘excuse myself.’ You don’t have a right to judge Channing on taking care of me. He was there. You weren’t. You want to know what you left behind? A goddamn mess. That was me. I went to jail, Pops.”

He winced, jerking backwards.

“I got dark.”

“...*I thought we were going to lose you one day.*”

I winced, swallowing that memory. “I got seriously dark, Dad.”

The firefly.

I felt her rising.

“I wanted to die.”

He was paling. I kept on.

“I stabbed my principal. He didn’t take to it. I got jail, counseling, parole, community service. All of it. And it could’ve been worse. Wanna know why it wasn’t? Because of Channing. Want to know the type of parenting you would’ve done? Wait. That’s right, you can’t. You weren’t there.”

I was getting worked up now, on a roll.

My voice rose.

“Always fucking fighting with Channing. I lost my brother for years because of you. He left because of you. You did that. You. Your fucking drinking. And she died! Mom died, and where were you?! Gone! Drunk! I had no parent. None. My only one died, and I still go and look for her. Same fucking house, Dad. But she ain’t there. She’s not even a ghost. She’s just gone, and you get out because of something I helped set in motion. That crooked cop, people found him out because of me, because of my crew. We were a part of that, so where’s your gratitude? You ungrateful dick.” I backed up.

The entire bar was silent behind me.

I so didn’t care.

I was still going, and I raised my hand in the air. “The fact is that I didn’t kill that guy. You did. I thought it was my fault. I thought you did what I couldn’t do, and you did it for me. That wasn’t the truth. All this guilt, all this debt that I didn’t even know was in me, buried deep—that’s yours. Not mine. Don’t you fucking dare tell me to ‘excuse myself’. You don’t want me in this life?” I threw both my arms out. “When the fuck did I ASK TO BE?!”

Panting.

Breathless.

My lungs were shrinking.

But I had more, so much more. It didn't register that my dad started looking behind me, or that he straightened away from his table, or that he had a whole different sort of look on his face. Nope. None of that registered until it was too late.

All I was registering was that I needed to end this. "Stay the fuck away from me. Stay the fuck away from my friends. You don't know who your daughter is anymore, and you clearly don't give a fuck about getting to know her, so do her and yourself a favor. Stay. The fuck. Away!" I was thrusting my finger in the air, punching it with each word. "And I'll do *whatever* fucking job I want to do. Holy shit! I want to throw my knife at you." I tore myself away, my chest rising rapidly, and I blinked away a couple tears.

They weren't from sadness. They were from frustration because I *really* wanted to hurt him again, so bad.

Then I saw the guys who had come inside.

Then I saw how everyone else was watching the guys who had come inside.

Then I recognized one of them.

Maxwell Raith.

The president of the Red Demons MC was staring smack-dab at me.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

BREN

“Boss.” A guy moved toward them from the bar. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He was tall, looked around in his fifties, but the years in the sun gave his skin an almost leathery tanned look. The whites in his eyes were almost startling, and those eyes were hard. There was an edge of irritation to him, too.

“I’m fine.” Maxwell was staring at me as he responded, then he switched and took in my dad. “Derrick.”

“Max.” My dad moved around me, suddenly a lot more tense than he’d been before. He swung an arm toward me. “She, uh...she’s angry.”

“I know what she is.” He stepped more fully into the bar, and the other two moved with him. The last one stepped clear of the door, letting it shut, and the bar was back in darkness for a brief moment. Maxwell came over toward us, still watching me, but he moved to greet my dad. “Derrick. It’s damned good to see you.” They thumped each other on the back.

I was transfixed.

My dad was grinning. He was happy.

I’d only witnessed that look on his face a handful of other times, a couple memories with Mom, and the other times were when he was drunk.

One of the others moved farther inside the bar, disappearing. The other came over, greeting my dad the same. I heard my dad say, “Heckler,” and sucked in my breath. Jesus. This was their president and their enforcer, or one of them, as

Channing had put it. That other guy...I hadn't gotten a good look at him. Was that their VP?

Cross and Jordan moved closer to us, taking up my back.

Maxwell noticed that and skimmed me up and down. "Gotta say, I'm not a fan of riding for three days and walking in to hearing a daughter bitching out her old man. That's not how things work in our world. Being grateful goes a long fucking way."

Yeah. Fuck him, too.

I responded, "All due respect, Mr. Raith, that's family business, and if you think my father's been a great father to me, then it's really just *family* business."

The other biker who'd come with him was staring at me. He had white hair almost all over him, even his beard. And his eyes, they were ice blue, almost a gray/white color as well. He was a bit more solid than Maxwell, built like a square versus the broad shoulders and lean waist build of his president, but there was no mistake, that guy was all muscle. He took his sunglasses from where they'd been shoved on top of his head and smirked. "Derrick, you got a feisty daughter there."

My dad grunted, moving closer to me. "Don't I know it. Are you guys passing through town?"

Maxwell pulled his gaze from me to my dad. "We all need to sit down. We'll talk about it then." He turned back to me. "Knowing what your brother does now. Now where you ended up taking a job...is this going to be a problem?"

I opened my mouth.

My dad said, "My daughter ain't a snitch."

"Even so." Maxwell nodded to his man. "Take her phone while she's here." He looked at Cross and Jordan. "Them too."

Heckler moved in, an eerie gleam in his grin, showcasing some blinding white teeth. "With pleasure." He stepped in front of me, eyebrows arched. "Hand 'em over." His glance went to Cross. "If you don't, I got no problem searching for 'em. You too, boys."

“We’ll just keep them while you’re here. Once you leave, Heckler will give them back.” Max’s shoulders suddenly drooped, and he yawned, raking his hand through his hair and beard. “I’m fucking exhausted, Bettina.”

The waitress moved in, her voice caring. “You want a place to rest your head or freshly brewed coffee?”

He took her in, his eyes lingering as he looked at her from top to bottom, then his mouth twitched. “How about a private room, you and me? And then coffee afterwards?”

Her smile turned *a whole lot* more warm. “You got it, Boss.”

She took his hand, and as she began to lead him away, he looked over his shoulder. “Sort your shit, Derrick, then get your kid out of here. We got church tonight.”

Heckler stuffed all our phones in his pocket, but then he moved away too. A couple girls came over to greet him, and he put his arms around both. They moved to the other side of the bar, and soon, one of the girls was straddling him while the other began rubbing his shoulders. Shrieks of laughter and moaning soon came from his corner.

Everyone else went back to what they’d been doing before, but the mood seemed lighter for some reason. Lighter, but also more serious at the same time.

I was distracted when my dad asked gruffly, “You got more to yell at me about?” A pained expression in his gaze held my tongue, and he added into the pocket of silence, “I am sorry for being a crap father. I know all you said was right, and that I’m in the wrong. I get heated, speaking too fast, but you’re right about all of it. And Channing’s done a great job.” He drew in a breath, those eyes flashing wetness for a second. He raised a hand, touching my shoulder and he had to take a moment. Swallow. Then his head dipped down as he lightly squeezed my shoulder. “He did good. You do what you gotta do, and I mean that in every way.”

I’d been holding in oxygen, and it seemed like I’d been holding it in since he got out of prison.

Hearing his words now, that huge boulder in my stomach dissolved. I was blinking back tears, and I didn't know how to handle that.

This was not my old dad. He *had* changed.

“Thanks, Dad.”

His eyes were so sad, but he gave me the smallest smile, his hand squeezing again. “Anytime, honey. But you should go. These guys won't be here long, so make sure not to call them in. They'll know it was you, and then, well, there'll be problems.”

I nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“I didn't go to your job to use you. Yes, I went to do surveillance, but it was also my excuse to see you. I ain't perfect. Lord knows how much I ain't perfect, but I love you and I'll continue to work on doing right by you. I'm sorry if you thought I was using you. That thought never entered my head, to be honest.”

Cross and Jordan moved in, closing in our small circle.

My dad inclined his head toward them, his hand moving around and pulling me to his side. “I got a long road ahead to make things right, but I'm going to try. That's a promise I can make, but for now, you all need to get going. Do your thing. College. Studying, whatever it is. Take care of my girl.”

“And her job?” Cross had his head tilted forward and to the side. “Her brother?”

Derrick stiffened, his head raising up. His hand was gentle on me, but his arm was rock solid. “Don't narc. Let Channing do his job. Let my girl do her job, but no snitching. That ain't a problem for you guys to take on. You hear me on that? You guys are clear of this, so stay clear.”

Cross' head dipped again, his gaze meeting mine.

I was at a crossroads, it seemed.

Then the decision was made for me, in that moment.

A guy rushed inside. “Cops coming!”

Another guy yelled out, “Let Prez know. Get the civvies out of here.”

Girls were running around. Guys were dashing. Windows were locked up.

Heckler came over, at a more leisurely stroll and dug inside his pocket. He pulled out the phones, putting them on the table. He said to Derrick, “Get out of here. Your kid, her friends, you. You’re clear of this, Pops. That’s how Max wants it.”

My dad’s fingers now curled tighter into me, but his head jerked up and down. “I’ll be at the house.” His words were for the biker.

Heckler moved his head up and down, staring us down for a beat. “Get a job, Pops. That’s what Max wants for you. Keep clean.” He said to me, “You don’t need to worry about your dad. We got no plans to dirty him, hear that? And we’re taking off. Your boss asks you questions, you don’t say shit. Got it?”

My lips parted. My throat went dry.

I said, “Got it.”

Yeah. Seems like I chose. I was on the side of no-snitching. Then again, when had it ever been an actual question for me? I was crew through and through.

Cross grabbed up the phones and took my arm. “Let’s go. We gotta jet now.” He pulled me toward the door. Jordan was already heading out. When I lingered, he said, “Now!”

So, we went.

I looked back, seeing my dad one last time, and then we were gone.



From: Tazsters

To: Cain Group

Subject: why why why

Why has everyone stopped calling, texting, and emailing. I need my emails. I live for my emails.

Where have all the emails gone?

—The Best Twin

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

BREN

I was experiencing déjà vu, but not at the same time.

This time was different.

Another year, another time, and we'd been driving Alex Ryerson back.

Another month, another time and I'd be walking out of jail.

Another moment, another place and we'd be at the hospital getting someone patched up.

This time, it wasn't us. It wasn't our fight. We were heading home, except for a quick stop at the drive-thru for Jordan. He wanted food since we never got the burgers or chicken baskets from The Twister Sister.

Walking into our house, one after the other, we moved around the kitchen.

I grabbed the plates.

Cross grabbed the drinks and glasses.

Jordan went back outside, taking the food with him.

No words were spoken. None were needed. We all just knew.

I dipped in the bedroom, changing clothes and grabbing a blanket.

Cross was waiting for me at the door. He'd taken everything out, and I saw as we stepped outside that Jordan had the fire going. The patio table had been moved over, the

stools moved aside to make room so we could eat next to the fire pit.

We all sat down.

Plates were passed out.

Food was portioned.

Drinks were poured.

We sat. We ate. We just were.

After the food was done, the wrappers put away in a garbage bag, and another round of drinks had been poured, Jordan was leaning forward. Elbows resting on his knees, he was staring into the fire.

He said, "I'm going to go to Roussou tomorrow." The fire's reflection was playing over his face, casting him in orange and red dark shadows. It lit up his eyes. They were somber. "I'm going to bring Zellman back."

And even that made perfect sense.

We needed all of our crew together.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

BREN

My phone woke me the next morning.

Cross was curled behind me, one of his hands on my hip and he stiffened, groaning. “Who keeps fucking calling you at —” He looked, and then growled. The phone kept ringing, but I didn’t move. This was a small luxury I indulged. Cross would field it for me, and he did, reaching over me to my nightstand.

“What the hell?” he muttered under his breath, sitting up and hitting accept.

“This is a call from the Potomahmen Correctional Facility. Do you accept the charges from inmate—”

“Yes.”

A second later, I heard my ex’s voice coming from the phone, and Cross was glaring hard at the room. “What do you want?”

A laugh from Drake. “Can I talk to her?”

“Why?”

Even though Cross hadn’t put my phone on speaker, I could hear Drake loud and clear.

“Just let me talk to her. Please.”

He turned to me. “You don’t have to take the call. You can tell him to go to hell.”

I sighed, sitting up. A yawn left me, but we both knew Drake was calling for a reason. I had no doubt that what he wanted to tell me wasn’t what he was going to say at all. But

knowing Drake, knowing the games he always played, I still knew I needed to take the call.

Simply put, it was what it was.

I shrugged but held my hand out.

Cross handed it over and slid out of bed. He went to the bathroom, and I watched him the whole walk, enjoying it *immensely*.

Taking the phone, I hit the speaker button and sat back. “What do you want?”

Another laugh, this one louder and more genuine. “There she is, my old Bren.”

I rolled my eyes. “I ain’t your old anything, except if you’re referencing an old regret, but I do. I truly do. I regret ever dating you, and also, why are you not dead? You snitched. By prison law, you should’ve been gone in the first week.”

Another laugh, but it was lessening. I was getting to him, or the threat had. “That’s cold, even for you.”

Except it wasn’t, because while I had been worried about getting that call, the one stating someone I used to care about had been shanked in prison, it never came. The more time that past, the more confident I became that Drake had somehow escaped certain death. Then again, that was also something he did.

“Let me guess, you had another card to hold over someone?”

An abrupt laugh. This one was short and brief, still genuine. “Something like that, yeah.”

Cross came back, then disappeared into the closet. We were in his room, so it was a larger walk-in than mine upstairs. He came back with sweats pulled on, but nothing else. Leaning against the wall, he crossed his arms over his chest.

I found myself getting distracted.

Once again.

“Why are you calling?”

He drew in a long breath. “Word is that my baby mama had my baby.”

I frowned. That’d been weeks ago. “Yeah?”

“Sunday’s not letting me see the baby.”

“Why would she? Isn’t that too early?”

“Not for pictures. Not to even be told what she named my kid. Fuck, Bren. I don’t even know if I have a son or a daughter.”

Oh. Whoa. Sunday was being cold, ice cold.

“That’s nothing to do with me.”

“That’s the point of this call. You do me a solid, I’ll do you a solid.”

See. He always had an agenda.

“How could I do you a solid?” I hissed, “And do not make an innuendo about that or I will drive there and shank you myself.”

Another laugh, but his humor was fast fading. “A call from you. If you push her to let me in, get to know my kid. Fuck, just telling me what I have would be big. What do I have, Bren? A daughter? A son?”

I looked up.

Cross was frowning, and some of his normal annoyance had lessened. A brief flare of sympathy was there. I answered, hoping I wasn’t violating some major code with Sunday (I was still learning). “You have a little girl, but I’m not saying anything else.”

He exhaled sharply, sounding loud over the phone. “Thank you. Thank you. That means... fuck. That means a lot. Thank you.”

I was already frowning, because damn, I don’t know if I should’ve told him. “As for calling her on your behalf, I need to think on it.”

Cross' head lifted up, his chin jutting out, and he clenched his jaw. "What's the solid you're doing us?"

"Ahh. Of course. Lover-fucking-boy has to be in on this conversation. Isn't it enough you stole her from me, Cross? Huh? I can't even have this call asking to find out about my own kid—"

Cross crossed the room in two strides, plucking the phone out of my hands. "Listen to me, dipshit. Fucking tell us what 'solid' you're doing for us, or I'm hanging up and we'll not say a goddamn word to Sunday about you. Zellman's with her, did you know that?"

"Shut up," Drake clipped out from his end.

"Yeah. He's there. Heard she had the baby and he didn't feel right not being there. He's been there. With her. Helping her. With your kid. He's probably held your kid, changed her diapers. She'll know he's more her dad than you are if he sticks with her—"

"Shut up!"

A hard and feral glint shone from Cross. His lip curled up, but he quieted. "That's what I thought. Stop dicking around and get to the point. What do you have that you think we'd want?"

"There's word out that a certain motorcycle club that Bren's dad belongs to is looking for someone."

Cross met my gaze.

He was talking about the witness, the lone witness holding together an entire case for thirty warrants. Of course, Drake would find out who that was.

"And?"

Drake laughed, now sounding cocky. "And I'm wondering if you want a name?"

"Why don't you call them yourself?" "Uh, because I think them reaching out to Sunday on my behalf would do more damage than be helpful."

The sarcasm was heavy.

“Stop with the attitude,” I called from the bed.

“Ah. And there’s my ex speaking again. So, what’s it going to be? I’ll give you something to help out your daddy, and you help me out. An even exchange.”

“My dad’s supposed to be clean of everything, so this actually doesn’t help my dad.”

As soon as the words were out, I grimaced. I had learned. Right? This was Drake. You don’t trust Drake Ryerson. It was a cardinal rule in my world, and I just broke it. Why had I told him that?

“Doesn’t matter. One and the same. If Raith and the club keep looking for the witness, time will tell, but I’m guessing they’ll get more desperate. Even the ‘clean’ members will get pulled in to get dirty, and that’s your pops, Bren.”

Pops. Even he was calling him that name.

Cross frowned. “Why’d you call him that?”

“What?”

“Pops. Why’d you call him that?”

“That’s what he went by in here. They talk about him still.”

I frowned. Was that normal? But then again, he got released because of a dirty cop, so maybe he was more known than I would’ve thought.

“What’s it going to be?”

Cross raised an eyebrow at me.

I shook my head, saying, “We’ll have to think on it.”

Drake groaned from his end. “Don’t tell me you need to do a stupid ‘crew meeting’ about it? Or are your boys there?”

I glared at the phone because it wasn’t any of his business, then I forced myself to relax. I chided back, “No. Jordan is actually on his way to Roussou today, not that it’s any of your

business. And don't be jealous, Drake, just cause you don't have a crew."

He snickered. It was short and sweet. "Fine. I can wait till your boys get back. Have your crew meeting. I got phone time tomorrow morning, or I can email you with the name. Your call."

That was it.

I started to get up from the bed.

Then, "Hey, Shaw."

I paused, the bedcover half in the air.

Cross' thumb had been moving to the end button. "Yeah?"

"You guys are all in Cain, right?"

"How's that your business?"

"We got a Tim Harper on the prison board here. Word around here is that he's big where you are. I know his kid. Can you believe that? Random, huh? What are the odds that you know him, too?"

I was up in a heartbeat and snatching the phone back. "Are you on social media? I didn't think you could go on there from prison."

He laughed, this one lasting long and it sounded ripe. "No, no. We can email. That's about it, but I just thought what a small world, right? So do you guys know a Harper there?"

I recognized this new tone from him. He was fucking with us, and not giving a damn, I ended the call.

"Do you—"

Nope.

I tossed the phone onto a pile of clothes, grabbed his hand, and tugged him back to bed. He needed those sweatpants off and right now.

"Okay, then."

I laughed, my mouth finding his, and there were no more words shared.

CHAPTER FIFTY

CROSS

“Dickweed.”

Not this again.

I rotated on a pivot, my hand already up in the air. Blaise was coming in from behind me, and I grabbed him by his throat. The momentum of him coming to a stop, and I backed him up to a tree behind him. Slamming him against it, I was in his face. “Stop. Calling. Me. That.”

I’d been walking to class, not enjoying that I left Bren back at the house alone. Jordan left early this morning, and I knew he was hoping to get back either tonight or tomorrow sometime. With everything that happened yesterday, Brock thought it’d be a good idea if Bren took a leave of absence until the whole Red Demons thing was laid to rest.

Bren didn’t know when that would happen, so she was also not only taking a leave of absence, but she was studying for her bounty hunting license. So at least she wasn’t wasting her free time.

All that said, I was on edge.

I had two crew members out of town, one who wasn’t keeping in touch enough to make me feel comfortable, so the other had to go get him and bring him home, and then there was Bren who was home after dealing with some serious emotions. All that shit, and just my normal ‘brother’ anger was getting channeled into Dickweed right now.

His eyes opened. “Whoa.” He stiffened, then his hands were up and he shoved me back. It was a brief hit, almost like

a pop, but I didn't fight it. I let him go, stepping back, and my head lowered, but I kept my gaze on him.

We had a whole crowd around us.

He rubbed at his neck, reassessing me. "What crawled up your finger hole?"

"Don't." I stuffed my hands into my pockets because I wanted to hit him.

Badly.

Really badly.

He rolled his eyes, stepping away from the tree. "Yeah, yeah. Guess I had that coming." Then, his bag was picked back up from where he dropped it, thrown over one shoulder, and he started for our class alongside me. "Girls' night is tomorrow. Aspen's going to call Bren herself, but I'm extending a reminder about what she said she'd do. Oh, and they're planning on starting at Aspen's dorm room. The RA's a soccer groupie, so she lets Aspen do whatever she wants."

I wasn't surprised.

About any of that.

"Bren will do what she promised."

"Good." Then he looked around, making a big show of it. "Noticed your one boy's been gone for a while. When's Dickwit coming back?"

We stepped inside the building and I pushed him back out, grabbed the door and shut it in his face. Hitting the doorjamb, I flicked him off and backed away from the door, smiling.

Now I was in a good mood.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

BREN

Cross: Girls' night is tomorrow night. Aspen is going to call you. Blaise wants to make sure you'll still do what you said.

Cross: What did you say you'd do?

Bren: I will and I just said I'd go for added protection for Aspen.

Cross: He's worried about Harper?

Bren: Yes.

Cross: Harper was in class and sitting with his frat brothers. Blaise said it wouldn't be that easy to get him kicked out of the frat.

Bren: Where was Zeke sitting?

Cross: Zeke didn't come to class.

Bren: Interesting. Where did Blaise sit?

Cross: Right next to Harper.

Bren: I can only imagine...

Cross: It was pretty funny to watch.



Zellman: I'm bored.

Bren: Me too.

Zellman: Why are you bored? Miss you guys, by the way.

Bren: Miss you back. And I'm studying for my license test.

Zellman: That's cool. You'll be awesome at that. What's the gossip there?

Bren: There's too much for a text convo.

Zellman: Really????

Bren: Come back here. Will fill you in.

Zellman: J-dawg is supposed to be in class. Why's he calling me?

Bren: Answer and find out.

Bren: Zellman?

Bren: Z?

~~~~~

**Bren: Zellman?**

~~~~~

Channing: Got word something's happening. DO NOT GO ANYWHERE NEAR DAD OR ANY RED DEMONS! Stay the fuck away from your job, too, just to be safe.

Bren: Brock put me on LOA anyway.

Channing: Why are you on a LOA? What's a LOA?

Bren: Leave of absence, and he thought I should stay away until the RD stuff settles, too.

Channing: That's good then.

Channing: Wait. Why did he do that?

Channing: Because you stabbed Dad?

Bren: Yes. I found Dad at Twister Sister and yelled at him, told him to get out of my life.

Channing: Holy fuck...

Channing: I'm going to ignore that you never called to check in with me because I think you're my new hero, Bren. My sister, my idol.

Bren: Shut up.

Channing: You're Moose and Linc's idol, too. Congo's in a mood, so you're not his.

Bren: I can die happy.

Channing: Don't talk like that. Ever.

Bren: It's a phrase. I don't mean it.

Channing: Still never say it.

Bren: When are you coming back for a regular visit? No dad drama.

Channing: I'm not sure. Maybe sooner than I thought, but I don't know what's happening, just that something *is* happening. My guys on the streets are not talking. Everyone is bunkering down and even all the way over here in Roussou, that's not a good sign.

Bren: How do you know it has to do with Dad's MC?

Channing: Because they're the only name being talked about lately. Just stick with your crew and college stuff. You should be fine then.

Bren: Will do. Love you.

Channing: Love you. BE SAFE! And if you have to stab Dad again, I want to be there.



Jordan: At Roussou. At Sunday's. Did not take much convincing. Zellman is coming back.

Bren: Good. You have time to talk to Tab?

Jordan: Yeah. I'll fill you in later, tho. That's more complicated.

Bren: Okay.

Bren: Got a call from Drake this morning. There's something Cross and I need to fill you and Zellman in on later.

Jordan: Something bad?

Bren: Could be. We don't know.

Jordan: Crew meeting?

Bren: Crew meeting.

Jordan: I'll tell Zellman. He's drooling, said he's been bored changing diapers, being sleep-deprived and not getting ass.

Bren: I didn't need to know the last part.

Jordan: Neither did I. You're welcome.



Zellman: What's happening? I can't handle the suspense.

Bren: Crew meeting when you get back.

Zellman: We're coming back tonight then.



Message to Wolf Crew:

Zellman: CREW MEETING!

Jordan: Dude. Not necessary. I'm right next to you.

Cross: In class. I'm bored. What's going on?

Bren: I told them we have something to fill them in on later.

Zellman: CREW MEETING!

Zellman: I need to get laid. I have not gotten laid the entire time out here. Sunday and I are very firmly never getting back together. Ever. I need sex. My hand hurts.

Bren: We don't need to know that.

Jordan: Dude.

Cross: Still bored. Text more, Z. What lotion do you use?

Jordan left the group

Bren: You're just asking to annoy J and me. You're not even planning on reading his response.

Cross: It's like you bone me. I mean 'know' me.

Bren left the group.



Unknown number: This is your father. Stay away from Twister Sister and your job.

Unknown number: I love you.



Bonbon: I programmed my number in your phone.

Bonbon: If you need backup doing whatever you're doing, call me. I know a guy that can get a van, the VIN numbers scratched out and dummy license plates. No questions asked. He'll just charge twenty bucks to clean it out afterwards.

Bonbon: Offer's always there.

Bonbon: You should change your passcode.



Bren: Hey.

Taz: Nope. I'm enjoying the emails.

Taz: Miss you! Stay safe. Hug my brother for me.

Taz: The one you sleep with, not the other one.

Taz: Just clarifying.

Taz: Going back to emails now.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

BREN

Aspen calling.

I was still frowning about my dad's text when I answered. "Hey."

"Bren! Hi!"

I eased back. Aspen's voice hitched at the end, squeaking. She was nervous.

"What's up?"

"Um. So." She let out a breath. "I know Blaise asked you to kinda watch over me tomorrow night, but I'm actually calling about something else."

"Okay?"

She was silent.

I waited.

Another beat.

I had to smile. For how in your face her boyfriend was, I forgot how not in your face his girlfriend was. "Hey, just so you know."

"Yeah?" She inhaled into the phone.

"I would've hung out with you tomorrow night anyway. Your guy didn't have to ask me to do that."

"I know." A sigh. "But it's nice to hear. But, okay. Here we go. Um, I was thinking that since Blaise doesn't have a game tonight, and he just texted that Jordan and Zellman both weren't in class so ... would you and Cross be interested in a

double date? With us, I mean. Tonight.” She rushed on, not letting me answer, “I mean. You know. It doesn’t have to be anything big or a lengthy time investment. Or, it can be short. We don’t even need to talk. We can do dinner and a movie. Yeah. Maybe a drive-thru so Cross and Blaise don’t have to talk, then a movie.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. “I think both will endure a date for us.”

She sighed again. “You don’t know Blaise—” She cut herself off. “Wait! You do. You totally know him, but yeah. Let’s do that angle. If I tell him it’s important to me, he’ll watch himself.”

Which was something I wasn’t surprised about.

Aspen was the giant pinkie finger and Blaise was wrapped around it. Totally and completely.

“We can do dinner and a movie, if you’d like?”

“I would.”

We decided on a venue and a time, and then I delivered the news.

Cross’s response was, “What?!”

I laughed. This was going to be a fun night.



Aspen picked a diner that was off-campus and set a little off the normal path, meaning when we pulled up, the parking lot was half-empty. Cross parked the truck and just shook his head. “Why are we doing this?”

I laughed.

I’d been laughing most the day.

“Because Aspen called and it’s Aspen.”

He growled. “That doesn’t work for me. Why the fuck are we doing this?”

I grinned. “Because Aspen called and it’s—”

He threw open his door and stalked out.

I laughed, following. Meeting around at the front, Cross shook his head. “You owe me for this.” And his hand dropped to my ass, giving me a good squeeze.

My mouth dropped, but I felt a whole zing go through me. Yeah. Maybe I would owe him, and he relaxed, grinning. “You okay with that?”

I was just fine with that. A full fucking throb was starting in me, and now I was pissed we had to do dinner *and* a movie.

I hadn’t told him about the movie part yet.



“So.”

Aspen looked at me.

I looked back. “So.”

Cross and Blaise were glaring at each other.

The waitress had come and gone. We had our drinks. The orders were put in, now we waited. And we had ordered so quickly, because yeah, the silence. *All* the silence.

Aspen cleared her throat, picking up her drink. “So, um... Cross.”

He looked at her.

She swallowed, her head dipping. “How’s your sister?”

Immediately, the tension slipped into a different feel. Blaise settled back, a cocky smirk coming to his face and Cross’ face darkened, tightening. He nodded at his brother. “He hasn’t told you? From what I’ve heard, she’s talking more to him than me.”

Blaise grunted. “She’s your twin.”

“You got an opinion on my relationship with Taz?”

And, “When I get pulled into listening to her complain about how you’re still not taking her calls, yeah. I got an opinion,” was shot right back.

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’ve already told you. Stop ignoring your sister.”

“I’m not ignoring my sister.”

“You been to see her?”

Cross frowned. He glanced at me.

Blaise wasn’t done. “When’s the last time you talked to her? Talk-talked, like on the goddamn phone and longer than five minutes.”

Cross continued to frown.

Blaise leaned forward, the smirk gone and a scowl in its place. “Then educate me on how she and Race are doing. Oh. Wait. You can’t, because you don’t know.”

“The fuck you’re talking about?”

“Yeah. Maybe you should call your sister.”

His point was made. The mic was dropped and Blaise leaned back, that smirk coming back once more. But his eyes narrowed, and he was waiting.

Cross’ eyes narrowed right back.

The air was thick.

A shiver went down my spine.

I met Aspen’s gaze, hers was worried. I was just waiting.

With this tension, Cross was debating if he should jerk his brother over the table and throw down, once again, or move forward in a different manner.

When he drew in a breath, and his hand pressed hard into his leg, I knew he was fighting for control.

Damn.

That meant he was losing control.

I coughed and took over. My hand went to his, and I pressed my nails into the palm side of his hand, not enough to hurt, but enough to pull him out of whatever fighting mode he was fast going into, and it was my turn.

“Why are you such a jackass all the time?”

Aspen’s eyes bulged out. A shocked gargle rippled from her.

Blaise’s eyes slid, no joke, slid toward me. He looked like a cat preening for a new victim.

I had to smile because whether he was realizing it or not, I was off-limits. One, I was his brother’s girlfriend. Two, Aspen liked me. And three, I was also his girlfriend’s protector tomorrow night. Triple the protection.

I waited, enjoying this, and a second later, he made a frustrated growl. “Fucking A.”

I laughed.

The sound did it, cutting through the layers of packed air, and both brothers took in some of that oxygen, moving it through their lungs.

Aspen seemed to be panting, her eyes still wide and jerking from one side of the table to her boyfriend. Noticing, Blaise shot her a reassuring smile and his arm moved under the table. Then stopped and both shared a more tender look.

Aspen melted, and Blaise softened.

It was a miracle we were witnessing from where I was sitting.

At that time, the waitress brought out the appetizers, and as soon as she left, Cross said quietly, “I don’t know what Taz is saying to you, but she and I are good. We’ll always be good. We shared a womb together, and what issues we might have are between me and her. Not you. Whatever she’s saying, it’s not *my* relationship with her that she’s worried about.”

Blaise frowned, his eyebrows dipping down. “What are you saying?”

Cross waited a beat. Then, “I’m the brother who almost killed someone for her. You’re the brother she just met, and the one who is going to a different college than her. You’re the brother she was trying to establish a better connection with before he left from where she was, and you’re the brother who was dodging her most of the summer.”

Oh. Whoa.

I hadn’t thought of that, and glancing at him from under my eyelids, Cross hadn’t said anything about Taz calling him either.

Blaise looked at Aspen.

She tilted her head to the side, and I knew they were holding hands under the table. I could see from the arms moving toward each other.

Aspen murmured, “The nice thing about your sister is that she seems pretty forgiving.”

Blaise winced, closing his eyes.

I had to note this.

We were having a moment. Well, me because I was sitting here, but it was mostly Cross sharing, Cross pointing out something deeper, and Blaise not hiding his regret. He was showing it. Cross was silent, letting him have his moment, and Aspen was there, helping to sweep up the regret so he felt a little better, a little hopeful.

It was a nice moment.

It was a family moment.

Blaise dipped his head to Cross. “Thanks for that.”

My guy’s smile was there, but it was cool, as was his tone. “Good. Now tell me what’s going on with her and Race?”

And there, in our little diner, I felt another shiver sliding up my spine this time. There’d been random moments the two had joined forces, but neither wanted to. They’d been forced to. This time, not the same. Taz unknowingly had brought ’em together in a way, but I didn’t think she’d enjoy Blaise sharing

what he shared. “He’s been flirting with another girl in his econ class.”

Yeah.

She really wouldn’t like that that was shared because Cross’ eyes instantly went flat and dangerous.

Blaise’s mirrored his, and I knew at some point in the future we’d be traveling to Grant West.



I enjoyed telling Cross about the movie after there was a fight over who got to pay. Blaise won because he slipped away and tracked our waitress down, through the kitchen, in the back, where she was on her break.

He got the check and he was already starting to gloat about it.

That’s when I told him.

“The night’s not done.”

Cross stopped and stiffened, his head jerking my way. “What?” he clipped out.

My cheeks were starting to hurt from all the grinning. I shouldn’t find this so entertaining by now, but I did. I couldn’t help it. We were past when the tension had been alarming between the two.

I nodded, biting my lip and stifling my laughter. “Yeah. We’re going to the movies now.”

“What?!”



Cross won the movie fight.

We got there first.

He picked the movie.

He paid for the four tickets.

He was the one who gloated through the whole showing.



From: Cross

To: Tazsters

Subject: wtf

How often do you talk to Blaise?

Stop telling him that you and I aren't talking. That shit ain't funny.

I'm still the best twin.

Love you a fucking ton.

What the hell is going on with Race? Not lying, T. I will come there with my crew and I will handle him. I trained with that guy. I know his weaknesses.

But for real, are you okay? You've not said anything about Race.

—always the better twin

From: Blaise DeVroe

To: Tazsters

Subject: sorry but also not really sorry

Heads up. Cross is pissed. I said something to him.

Blaise

From: Brenners

To: Tazsters

Subject: kinda worried

What is going on with you and Race? Is it the roommate thing?

Bren

From: Brenners

To: Race Ryerson

Subject: fair warning

I don't know what you're doing, but stop it. I mean it. If you don't want to be with her, cut her loose. If you do, treat her right. Love her. Cherish her. Protect her. And fair warning, Cross is pissed. There might be a trip in the future.

Bren

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

BREN

I was getting ready to head to Aspen's dorm where she assured me was 'ground zero' for the insurrection of girls' night. I asked what that meant, and her reply, "Drinking. Lots of drinking. And getting our outfits approved."

I was down for whatever the night was going to entail. That was, until Cross came to my bedroom and knocked on the door once.

I looked up. He was standing just inside the doorway, a funny expression pulling at his mouth.

I paused. "What?"

"Um. You might want to come downstairs."

I'd heard car doors outside, and conversation, but I just assumed the guys were back. Jordan texted saying they wouldn't get home Friday night after all. So then it was Saturday morning. We were now well past seven in the evening. I was supposed to be at Aspen's in an hour.

So that was why I asked, "Jordan and Zellman are finally home?"

Cross didn't respond, just watched me a second. "Something like that."

Unease trickled through me, but I went.

Cross led the way.

I came behind and paused halfway because Jordan wasn't alone. Zellman wasn't alone either.

Tabatha stood just inside the door, two bags on the floor next to her, and she was watching me, her eyes large and sad.

She swallowed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Heya, Bren.”

“You’re back?”

She nodded, glancing to Jordan.

He was standing beside the couch, his hands in his pockets and a whole brooding look on his face. His hair was messed up. He didn’t look like he cared. His eyes were exasperated, and he flicked them to me. “She’s staying for a few days.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Cross finished going down the stairs and moved toward the kitchen. “You want something to drink, Tabatha?”

“Water?”

Cross nodded.

“Thank you.” But she was looking back at me, and still biting down on her lip. “Is it okay if I’m here? I mean,” she linked her fingers together, her hands wringing, “my sisters have been amazing, but I’m not ready. I go back there and Jessinda,” she cut off, a short and dry laugh coming from her. “You don’t know Jessinda. She’ll want to know everything, and I’ve gotten enough texts from her to know she found out some things and yeah. She won’t stop till she crucifies Tim.”

Tim.

I forgot that guy had a first name.

That asshole Harper just seemed the most fitting way to address him.

I kept my thoughts to myself, looking at Jordan, and gave him a *look* look. His mouth flattened and his eyes narrowed, but he knew what I was asking. Had Jessinda spilled the beans like she was told?

He coughed, his voice coming out as if he were being force-fed. “Uh. About Jessinda—” He stopped, his gaze steady

on Tabatha as his Adam's apple moved up and down in a swallow.

Tabatha shook her head. "Don't. I know."

I was effectively rocked back on my heels, though I didn't actually move. I felt the momentum. It was a fast swing from my blind spot as Tabatha continued, surprising me even more, "Jessy called, told me that she got drunk and Jordan was there, and Jordan's hot, and yeah." She cast him another look, the pain that flared was so vivid, I felt punched by it again. "I mean, I deserved it. I know what I did—"

"Stop."

Tabatha jumped backwards, skirting until she hit the wall.

She didn't seem as if she registered hitting the wall. Her gaze was glued to Jordan and he dropped to the couch. His head in his hands, his elbows on his knees and he bent low, letting out a long and low, savage growl before he shot back to his feet.

His eyes were wild and he advanced on her. "You messed up by not coming to me, to us. That's it. We know he told you that you had to do what you did, and that's a crime."

Her eyes started shining, and she began blinking rapidly.

Her face lowered.

He was across the room in two strides. Touching under her chin, he raised her head up and he kept on, speaking softer, "I'm a guy. I can't put myself in your shoes and tell you what you should've done or shouldn't have done. The only thing I can say is that I wished you had come to me. That's it. I can only imagine you felt a certain way, a desperate sort of way that you did what he said to do so that the whole situation didn't blow back on your mother. Right? Because that's why you did what you did, if you felt forced to do what you did."

Tears were rolling down her face.

I was thinking this wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

"I'm sorry, Jordan." Her voice cracked into a whisper.

“I know.” He stepped back, looking at me.

Zellman had been sitting on the other couch this whole time, his own bag beside it and he watched all of it. Cross came back to the living room, a few water bottles in hand, and he handed them off to Z. They were passed to Jordan, then Tabatha.

She took it, staring at it, and she began picking at the label, just running her nail over it. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“I—Jordan told me what you guys have done.” She looked up, tears brimming around her eyes. “Thank you.”

I nodded. “We care.”

Her face shuddered.

“Thank you,” she choked out again.

“Tab.” Jordan reached for her, but she dodged him, bending to grab one of her bags. She went around. “I’m going to go to the bathroom. Excuse me.”

Jordan let out a ragged breath when we heard the bathroom door close. The fan was turned on after that.

He sank back down on the couch. “Holy fuck.”

Cross moved in, taking a seat on one of the chairs. He sat on the arm, his foot going to the coffee table.

Zellman lounged back on the couch, his leg resting on the table, too. Both were watching Jordan, and Jordan looked to me.

“I don’t know how to put into words what happened to her. I was so pissed and hurt thinking she cheated. Then hearing he extorted her? I can’t comprehend what that actually is. There’s gotta be layers and layers of shit there, and how do you unpack all of that?”

He was looking to me for answers. I shook my head. “No one has the answers for that except Tab, and honestly, I don’t think she even has them. No matter what, she should talk to a therapist and go from there.”

He nodded, raking a hand over his head. “Fuck. Just, fuck.”

Cross nodded to Zellman. “You okay? With Sunday?”

Zellman shrugged, his face tightening. “Shit with Sunday is same ol’, same ol’. She’s talking about going to Florida and living with her aunt. There’s a job she can do there, and her aunt’s willing to watch Dray during the day. I guess she’s got a bunch of cousins there, too.”

“You and her?”

He rolled his eyes to Cross’ question. “She don’t want anything from me. She’s kinda about hating men right now. She and Drake, they don’t see eye to eye—”

Cross shot me a look.

I straightened from my wall. “Wait. What?”

Zellman’s eyebrows pulled together. “What?”

“Sunday and Drake? They’re talking?”

“Yeah.” His head moved up and down. “Why?”

Cross made a scoffing sound. “Why am I not surprised?”

Both Jordan and Zellman looked from Cross to me and back again.

“This have to do with the crew meeting we needed to have?”

Goddamn Drake. That’s all that was going through my mind, but I let out a sigh. “Yeah. He called and asked for us to do him a solid. He was claiming that Sunday wasn’t letting him be a part of Dray’s life.”

“That’s not true, like at all. She calls him every day and they email. He knows she wants to go to Florida and he’s trying to keep her from leaving.”

Anger burst inside of me.

“Why would he lie?”

“What else did he say?”

I turned to Jordan. “He knows about the Red Demons, that they’re looking for a witness, said he knows who that it is. He wanted me to see if Maxwell Raith would want to get that name. He said he’d tell me to tell my dad if I’d put in a good word with Sunday to let him be a part of his kid’s life.”

“That’s all a lie. He’s firmly involved.”

Jordan asked Zellman, “You think this could be a weird way to try to control her? Manipulate her somehow?”

Zellman shrugged, sitting up and scooting to the edge of the couch. He pulled his legs and rested his elbows on his knees. “Who the fuck knows. Don’t know how, though.” He looked at me. “He say anything else?”

I shook my head, then remembered. “It was weird.” I looked at Cross. “He mentioned Harper.”

“Harper?” Jordan’s head lifted farther up.

Cross added, “Said there’s a Harper on the prison board where he was, and knew he was from Cain. He knows Harper’s son, and wondered if we knew him.”

“The fuck?”

Cross nodded at Jordan. “I know, but with Drake, who the fuck knows what he was really after.” He glanced around. “I’m assuming we’re not playing ball with him?”

Zellman looked to me.

Jordan looked to me.

Cross was already looking at me.

It was my dad, his MC, and I nodded. I think I’d already knew my decision before I even hung up with Drake’s call.

“I can’t get behind handing over a witness’ name to my dad’s MC.”

“Agreed.”

“Sounds good to me.” From Jordan.

Cross only asked, “You’re okay with that?”

I thought on that, thinking deep, feeling deep.

Being loyal to my dad was one thing, but turning over a name to an MC that I was not a part of was a whole different matter. This was a fork in the road. If we got that name, handed it over, we'd go down a path that I didn't want to go down. I wanted to be normal, or as normal as I could be, and I wanted to do a job, have a career, and spend time with family and friends.

I wanted what I hadn't had growing up.

"I am. Yeah."

"And if your dad finds out that you could've got the name and didn't?"

I looked at Jordan. "Then we'll deal with it then."

"Good. I'm more than okay with that."

Zellman groaned, standing up. "I'm tired. I've dealt with my ex and her baby and I just want to sleep for like the next millennium. And I'm so behind with school. Shit."

Jordan grinned, reaching over as he stood and tapping Z on the shoulder. "Everything said, I'm glad you're back."

Zellman half-growled. "We're going to have to do some study sessions, like a fucking ton of them."

Cross asked, "That something you want to start tonight? Bren's heading out for girls' night."

Both Z and Jordan looked at me, eyebrows slightly raised.

I flushed, then I cursed because I wasn't used to flushing. "What? I have friends."

Jordan snorted. "Yeah. Us. And the one in the bathroom."

I flicked my eyes up but laughed. "Whatever. I'm branching out. And there's Hawk."

"Right. The female warrior who provided backup once to a sorority house?"

I grinned. "Fuck off, Jordan."

He laughed, then looked over.

Tabatha had materialized around the corner.

“Hey.” He started for her.

She shook her head, her face pale, her eyes puffy, but she held a hand up. It had a phone in it. “Jessy called. I—uh—I’m going to head to the house after all.” She put her phone into her pocket, using both hands to tuck strands of hair behind her ears. She included everyone as she said, “I really do appreciate everything you guys have done, but I think I need to be with my sisters right now.”

I nodded. “We’re here if you need us…”

Cross added, “You need anything, Tab. You know to call us.”

“I will.” She turned to Jordan. “Could I get a ride over there?”

“Yeah. Of course.” He gestured behind her. “Let me hit the bathroom, then we can go now.”

As he did, Zellman headed upstairs, Tabatha migrated over to the door. She had one bag in hand and she lingered at the door. Almost abruptly, as if she found the courage to say it, she said to me, “I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Can I call tomorrow?”

“Sure. Are you—are you okay? You want to talk now?”

She shook her head, her eyes darting past me to the hallway as Jordan was coming back. “No. I just—I know you called a bunch, and I have a few things I want to say to you. All good, I promise.”

“Oh. Okay.” I gave her a smile.

Jordan came over, taking the bag she was holding and grabbing the other. He said over his shoulder as she moved outside, “Be back, yeah?”

I nodded, then moved to watch them as they got into Jordan’s truck and headed off.

Cross came to stand next to me. “You okay?”

“She’s not the same person.”

And she wasn’t. Tabatha meant well at times, was spoiled at times, was a bitch at times, prissy at times, was a friend at times, but she always had fight in her. That girl who was just standing there, the fight was gone. She wasn’t the same person, at least not right now.

He looked, too. “Yeah.”

I hoped she came back, one day.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

BREN

I felt like I was heading to a dorm meeting point to plan the world's insurrection. I didn't know why, but it lingered with me.

I showed up. There was rap music blaring from Jade and Aspen's room, with the door open. No one inside.

So, I waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Two girls came from the exit stairs, saw me and paused. "Hey."

I lifted my chin up. "You guys know where these two might be?"

"Oh." One hid a grin.

The other pointed down the hallway. "They hang out a lot with Angeline and V. Room 413."

So I went to room 413.

I knocked.

No answer, but I heard more music blaring from inside. It sounded like Spanish rap, so I knocked again.

No answer.

Trying the knob, it was unlocked. I opened the door, looked inside and nothing.

So then I stood there and thought, *If I was a girl, where would I get ready to go out for a girls' night?*

Yeah. I felt like smacking myself.

I headed for the bathroom, which also had music coming from inside. This time it was techno, and I pushed open to see four girls dancing in sync, up and down, and yelling along with the music. I had no clue what song it was or even what words they were saying, but they were all in different stages of getting dressed.

I'd met these girls earlier, but there'd never been a lot of personal time with them, not like this anyway. So I didn't know know them, just who they were basically.

Angeline's freckles looked flushed, and I wondered when she'd start giggling. I knew that much about her.

Veronica was next to her, shorter. Her dark eyes looked fierce and her hair looked shiny and ready to rumble. I also knew she was known as someone not to fuck with, which was now making me wonder why Blaise wanted me here? Oh well. I knew Jade a little bit better, but not much.

Then there was Aspen.

She saw me in the mirror, her hair being curled and she shrieked. "BREN!"

The rest looked and, "BREN!"

"BRENNERS!"

"It's the Bren Bren!" Veronica was nodding emphatically, her bottom lip sticking out in approval. "Nice. You're hot. I'd do you if I went that way."

Oh.

I grinned because who wouldn't smile at that?

"Thanks."

She winked, going back and stopping her bouncing/dancing so she could finish her eyeliner.

Aspen was all dressed, looking like she needed to finish her hair.

Jade looked ready to go, or I thought? I wasn't sure. She was swaying back and forth in front of the mirror now, using a lip gloss as a microphone.

And Angeline, she ducked her head, her red hair falling forward to avoid me.

Note that she wasn't only an uncontrollable giggler, but also hella shy.

“Hey, guys.”

“Oh! Drink?” Jade asked, taking her backpack off and hefting it with a solid thud on the counter. “We're mostly ready, just waiting for Aspen to finish her hair—”

“Done!” Aspen announced, yanking the cord out from the wall and then hurrying to put a bunch of her makeup in a plastic container. She spoke as she worked, “Yeah. Give Bren a drink. Tonight is for fun. We're all going to have fun tonight.”

We're all having fun.

I was down with that *also*.

Angeline started gathering the makeup on the counter in front of her and Veronica, while Veronica turned and leaned her hip against the sink. She was eyeing me up and down again. “So, you're the one with Blaise's brother, huh?”

I glanced at Aspen.

She was hiding a smile. She and Jade shared a look. Both were hiding grins.

“Uh, yeah.”

Veronica raised her chin up, giving me a side-eye as Angeline finished getting all of their stuff. “You're friends with Tabatha Sweets?”

“You know Tabatha?”

“She’s a Kappa. That house is the best on campus. Plus, Jessinda Hinkley is like sorority-royalty. We heard you had a scrape with Hinkley. I want to know how that went down?”

What had I gotten myself into here?

But instead of answering, Aspen went around me and opened the door. Jade followed her, holding out a glass. She pushed it into my hand. “Hope you like a pink vodka? It’s with lemonade and Sprite. I pre-made them because where we’re going, you can’t be too sure.”

I took the glass, but asked as she slipped around me, following Aspen, “Where are we going?”

She was through the door.

I looked back to Angeline and Veronica. Both were watching me. Both weren’t looking happy now. They were more cautious.

“Where are we going?”

“You can’t tell the guys.”

Oh, God. This was why Blaise wanted me here.

“Why?”

“Uh.” Angeline was holding their makeup container in front of her with both hands. She moved toward me two steps and nodded to my drink. “Maybe you should drink that whole thing before we go?”

Where *were* we going?

“Tell me. Now.”

Both ignored me.

Angeline shrugged and left.

Veronica followed but winked as she sauntered out. “Drink up, sweetie. Heard you and me are the muscle tonight.”

I gave her a side-eye now. “How many times have you fought?”

“I have a black belt, but I’ll be honest, it’s usually only drunk douchebags. And I normally just go for their junk, then

try to scratch their eyeballs out. By then, they take off running from me.”

She left, and I stood there, not knowing how to comprehend anything that just happened.

I drank. I figured how this night was starting, it'd be my one and only.

Then I shot Cross a text before I left the bathroom.

Me: Girls are going somewhere weird. Remember my GPS tracker is on. Call me every thirty minutes.

He buzzed back as I was in the hallway, seeing the girls at the exit door, waiting for me. I noted as I passed that both rooms were quiet. Seriously. These girls were fast.

I checked my phone.

Cross: Want us to stay close, no matter what?

I was going with my gut, knowing that Blaise had been worried enough to ask me to be here.

Me: Yes.

Cross: On it. We'll leave in twenty. Zellman's in the bathroom.

Me: I didn't need to know that.

Cross: We're a crew.

I had no response, so I put my phone away and drank my drink in front of the girls.

Jade smiled. “Nice! You want a refill?”

I glanced at Veronica, and she gave me a slight head shake.

“I'm good till we get where we're going.”

“Okey-dokey.”

And off we went.



Yeah. Blaise was going to be pissed.

I was pissed.

Cross and Jordan and Zellman would all be pissed.

We were at a fraternity party, and it wasn't a typical frat party. Even though it was fully dark by now, I could see where we were, and we were not at their house. We were also the only ones here so far, at least there were no other cars around.

It was Zeke's fraternity, and I knew this because Harper was here. I'd been to one or two of his house parties, and the numbers were lower here. We were in the woods, a full forty-minute drive from Cain. The farther we got, the uneasier I got.

"Why are we here?"

We'd just left Jade's SUV, and the girls were starting forward. Jade had reassured me multiple times that she hadn't drunk at all, but wasn't planning on it, so I could drink all I wanted.

None of this felt right.

I looked at Aspen. "What are you doing?"

She seemed startled, blinking and her head moved back. "What do you mean?"

Jesus. She truly looked clueless.

"Do you know that guy?"

I gestured to Harper, who had now spotted us, and I was not liking the look coming over his face. A gleam was starting, and he stopped talking to his buds, watching us openly. I noted how his hand was nicely encased in a sling.

But he was still coming, and he still had that gleam in his eyes.

I kept an eye on him as I reached for my phone.

His eyes darted, seeing where I was reaching, and he started for me.

He knew I was going for my phone. I keyed in my code and hit the dial, knowing I already had Cross pulled up, and I

hit the speaker. Harper picked up his pace, but I kept my phone in my pocket. Pulling my hand out, he slowed back, but he was still heading our way.

“Hey.” A hand tugged on my shirt.

Aspen was trying to get my attention. “What are you talking about?”

“Your boyfriend has had beef with that guy.”

She looked. “Who?”

Jade was looking, too, and seeing Harper, she gasped. She moved back a step.

Veronica looked, her eyes narrowing, and she moved the opposite way, moving so she was almost guarding our entire group.

Angeline was next to Jade, gripping her hand.

I did a double take, noting that she was also glaring at Harper, who was closer to our group and had five other guys with him.

“Who the fuck picked this party?” I growled to the girls.

Aspen’s mouth fell open, but she hurried out, “We all did. We thought it was a barn dance, that’s all. Who are these guys?”

I smothered another growl because I was betting they were the only ones who got the invite, and fuck Blaise for not being honest with his girl about his enemies. I glanced down, making sure my phone was still turned on and that Cross was hearing this. I tried to pull it out, so it wasn’t too smothered against my jeans.

Aspen’s phone started ringing, but Harper was on us.

“Monroe. I don’t believe you were on the guest list.”

The girls all went still.

Veronica was measuring the guys behind Harper, and yeah...it wasn’t looking good.

They were all built thick, looking like they ate bricks for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Then maybe snacked on little boulders for a late-night snack.

I stepped around and positioned myself slightly in front of Veronica. “What was the play here? What were you going to do?”

“Were?” He smirked at me, his head moving to the side so he could look Aspen up and down. “Nothing past tense about that. I still plan on getting to know Mrs. Blaise DeVroe.” He jerked his chin up. “What’s up, kid? You’re Aspen Monson, huh?”

“My boyfriend doesn’t like you?”

I was surprised at how chilly her tone was, and looked back. She wasn’t hiding. She looked pissed, livid even. Angeline had a hand on her shirt, and I noted that was to keep Aspen back. That was a nice sort of surprise. An enraged girl could do damage, and Aspen was fast looking enraged.

Harper’s smirk only deepened. “You know, I had a family function recently and talked to some of my cousins. They’re past brothers, too. One of them knew your brother. Nate Monson.”

“Yeah?” A nice little snarl from Aspen.

“Yeah.” Harper was loving it. “He said to show his thanks to you. Said it was because of your brother that we got a brand-new house. Guess the other one was burned down.”

Whoa.

I had new respect for Aspen’s brother, and even though I’d met him a few times, we never really interacted. Cross still had a problem remembering meeting him. He tuned out anyone who wasn’t us, so that meant anyone older.

“Are these your brothers?” I asked, scanning the rest of the guys and moving to the group behind sitting by a campfire near their two trucks. Coolers were pulled out. They looked like they were grilling. I was counting maybe ten other guys.

Shit. I was so not getting a good feeling here.

Then I saw a mattress on the floor, and that whole shit feeling was fast turning into a nuclear feeling.

“Were you going to rape them?”

I was seeing red.

I felt the air sizzling.

I noted in the distance that someone was moving away from me.

I swung my gaze back to Harper, and he was gloating now. Not smug. Not smirking. He was *gloating*.

I was going to rip his mouth off so he couldn't gloat anymore.

Then I was going to break his other hand.

“You don't fucking know who I am, do you?”

I wasn't being conceited. I was doing this so one, he knew. He couldn't say he hadn't been warned, but also because I wanted to get in his head. I was going to fight. I already knew I was, and I was going to stab and I was going to make them bleed, and I was probably going to go down, but I was going to take as many of them down with me.

Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!

“Bren?”

Holy déjà vu flashback from the bad of bad times.

My head literally swam as I saw one of the guys head over, clutching a cup and frowning. He came at us hesitantly and then moved at a quicker pace once he recognized me.

“Alex,” I rasped out.

Alex Ryerson.

I was in a bad dream. That's what was happening as I watched the guy who led the charge from the last time I thought I needed to take on an entire group that was coming my way.

Alex had always been stocky, kinda like these guys, but he was more slimmed down. Not in the muscle way. In the

muscle way, his arms were bulging.

I noted, also taking in his short haircut so he looked almost military, “Jail was good for you.”

He laughed. “County. That’s all I did.”

“So...you’re out.”

He nodded, taking in the others and then Harper. “I’m out.” He gestured to Harper. “Want to tell me how you know Tim here?”

Harper was taking in this scene with confusion on his face. At Alex’s question, his mouth flattened, and a vein stuck out. “You know Monroe?”

Alex nodded, taking a sip of his drink. “Sure do.” His gaze caught and held mine, and I swear I thought a hidden message was there for me. “We used to be enemies in high school. Bren was the reason I went to jail.”

My mouth dropped. “Are you kidding me?”

He winked. It was slight, so slight it looked more like a tick, but I knew what it was, and I shut up seeing it.

He continued to Harper, “Fought her crew, too, bunch of times.” He went to scanning the vehicles. “No Cross? That’s shocking.”

“It was *supposed* to be a girls’ night.”

“What is going on here?” Jade moved forward.

Aspen was with her. “Yeah. I’d really like to know what this has to do with Blaise.”

At Blaise’s name, Alex’s eyes sharpened and went right to Aspen. “I remember you. Monson, right?”

“Yeah.” It was obvious she didn’t know who Alex was. That was fine. There was too much history here to educate everyone. “Are you from Fallen Crest?”

Alex smirked, his gaze including me. “Roussou.”

“Oh.”

I was thinking about something totally different now, and hoping to hell there wasn't something else in the works here.

I told Alex, "Drake called me."

His gaze had moved onto Veronica, who was starting to thrust her hip out toward him. They were both eyeing each other, but at my words, his gaze whipped to me. "What?"

"He told me something about my dad." I was testing him, seeing if he knew what I was talking about.

His eyes went flat, flatter than Harper's mouth had been moments ago.

He knew.

"Is that why you're here?"

He swore. "No. No way, Bren. I'm here because I know Harper. His dad was friendly with my uncle."

My head lowered.

He read my motion right. "Yeah. That uncle."

Race's dad, the dad who ran the drug business in Roussou before Drake turned on him and ensured all of them went to prison, or just county, in Alex's case.

I nodded to his drink. "Sober?"

He looked down, his eyebrows pinched together. Then he laughed. "This is pure soda, but drinking wasn't my issue, and to answer your next question, I'm clean." His gaze jumped to Harper before swinging to me. "Got clean in county. Planning on staying that way. And now that we've covered all the bases, you want to tell me what you're really doing here?"

Alex had never been an ally.

My stomach was starting to churn, but that mattress. I kept going back to that mattress.

I asked him, "You know why that was brought out?"

He turned and paused before swinging back. His gaze met mine and I saw the look there. He wasn't happy. His lips thinned. "No, Bren. I'm really here just for a get-together.

Harper invited me, said it'd be a good time, but that was it." He gestured to the mattress with his drink. "None of that, not like what you're thinking."

"What shit is she thinking?" came from Aspen.

But Alex didn't answer.

I didn't answer.

Harper didn't either.

Jade swore behind me. "Those invites were only just for us, weren't they?"

Veronica swore. "And there ain't no barn, is there?"

Harper's smile was almost evil. "No, ladies. There's no barn, but yes, you were the only special ladies on the invite list."

Jade grimaced. "I want to barf."

"Me too." That was Angeline, and she sounded just as pissed as the others.

Good.

Good!

They were fighters. Warmth spread through me. They weren't going to wilt or cry or whimper. They might not get a lot of hits in. They'd for sure take hits, but they would fight. The guys were not expecting that.

I looked right at Alex. "You against me?"

And for the first time I had ever known Alex Ryerson, he smiled at me. It wasn't sleazy or swarmy. It wasn't dirty. There was no hidden agenda. Nothing. No pride. No ego. It was a pure and authentic smile, and it was almost blinding right before he tossed his drink. "Bren, you and your crew have saved my life twice. That means something to me." He dipped his head down. "I'm with you."

Good, because Alex could fight, too.

Relief flooded me, almost so much that I got lightheaded for a second.

“What are you doing?” Harper barked at Alex.

A laugh was his response. “Have you seriously never seen Bren fight?”

Harper flinched, his gaze cutting to me.

Alex saw the look, frowning at me.

I shrugged. “I beat him up once.”

Harper’s chin jutted up and he puffed up. “I didn’t have my bros then. It wasn’t a fair fight.”

“You didn’t even fight back, dude. And I was the only one swinging.”

He cringed, but then caught himself and covered. “Whatever.”

I was running an inventory of my weapons, but I really only had one. My knife. The one with the wolf carved in the handle.

Harper was glaring at Alex. “Are you serious right now? You’re going to throw down for this bitch?”

Alex’s eyes got all glittery and dark. That was the old Alex, but he was darker now. Before he’d been angry, and the ego had been his biggest weakness. I wasn’t seeing the ego anymore.

It was nice to see people could change. I mean, besides myself, though I wasn’t really feeling a lot of change right now.

I’d accepted our situation, so the alarm had diminished into acceptance.

Now I was starting to get thirsty. I was beginning to salivate. And it wasn’t for something to drink.

Alex saw the look and his grin spread. “Missed seeing that girl. Nice to know she ain’t totally gone.” I shot him a look. “Who said she was gone?”

“Everyone.” He snorted.

I didn't know if I should be insulted or complimented by that?

Harper shook his head. "This is stupid. You've messed all of this up, Monroe. You being here is forcing my hand. I wanted to do this smooth—" Meaning he wanted to drug the girls. "I wanted everyone to have a good time—" Meaning he wanted the boys to have a good time. "And we'd all be good afterwards."

Meaning that he was going to dose the girls with enough drugs so they'd forget what happened.

I cocked an eyebrow up. "Were you going to leave them as they were when your boys were done with them? Or were you guys going to wash them and fix their clothes so they wouldn't know what happened to them?"

"Oh God."

I had no clue who said that, but it wasn't one of the girls.

It was one of the guys, and the guy who spoke swung toward Harper. "You said we were just chilling, pulling a prank on Allen 'cause we didn't invite him."

Harper stepped back. "It's not like that."

The guy next to him was frowning at him, then at us, then Alex, and back to Harper. "We're here as a favor, dude. You're getting kicked out. We all know it and we came here to say goodbye. None of us knew any of this shit was going to happen." He nodded to the girls. "This was not our idea and we would not have been down for it."

Aspen growled.

Yes. Aspen.

I wasn't mistaken.

"I don't care. I'm pissed." Also from Aspen.

Harper began backing out of our group, and he studied the group, then studied where all the vehicles were going.

He was going to make a run for it.

“Are you kidding—”

At that moment, like we were characters in a movie and were in a rebel camp, masked guys materialized from the woods. All were masked, every single one of them. They weren't there a moment ago, then blink, and there they were. And they were dressed head to toe in black. There was no sound.

Harper kept talking, digging into his pockets. He hadn't seen them.

I didn't think—someone yelled, “What the fuck?!”

Someone saw them.

Then everyone saw them.

The girls jumped together, gasping and one screamed. I thought that was Angeline but couldn't tell for sure.

Alex moved in, his back to me.

Nice to know he was going to protect me.

He darted around me, going to the girls, and he placed a hand in the middle of my shoulders and pushed me forward.

Yep. There's some of the old Alex.

I shot him a look, but I couldn't deny that I was freaked.

Every instinct in my body was screaming to run.

These guys—there were too many of them, and they were fit. The black from head to toe helped with the dangerous vibe I was getting, but half of them looked like they could eat these guys for breakfast and a late-night snack. Forget boulders for these guys.

And they were holding guns.

I hadn't noticed until now.

More than a few had AK rifles swung over their chest. They were walking forward, unfazed by the yelling from the guys, but they moved through them with ease.

They were looking, looking, looking.

More moved in.

We were completely surrounded, until one came up from behind us.

He moved to Harper and took him by the arm, then he lifted his hand and made a motion. A few others made the same motion, and almost as eerily as they had materialized, they started to leave, except they didn't return to where they had stepped in from the woods.

They moved past us.

No one moved.

No one spoke. The yells had cut off abruptly.

The air was almost suffocating, but everyone felt the same instinct that kicked in with me.

These guys would kill, so shut the fuck up.

Everyone shut the fuck up.

The only person who argued was Harper. "Hey!" That was his first fight, but he was jerked forward as the guy who found him began walking him back toward where the vehicles were all parked, where the road led in from the other road. One by one, these men walked past.

All silent.

All moving like shadows, except they weren't. Their feet touched the group. They left tracks.

They moved past me, and they were close enough that I knew they were real, and not a figment of my imagination, but it was almost like they weren't.

And then there was one who brought up the back end of the group. He didn't have the black from head to toe. He wore a white mask, like a hockey helmet or a white mask that a serial killer would wear. No joke. For real. A serial killer.

He moved, but it was like he wasn't moving at the same time.

I looked down not wanting to make eye contact, but as he went past me, that white mask looked my way and he stopped.

My heart lurched into my chest, but I held firm.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't inch back.

I couldn't show weakness, so I kept my face impassive, and a second later, he moved forward.

I felt as if he'd let loose with a spell on me, and I could suddenly breathe again. It was so sudden and so jarring, that I felt tears surge to my eyes, but then another guy, one of the last two who brought up the rear passed me by.

He went slow and I could see through his goggles.

The others, no. I didn't know why, but this guy—his eyes were...recognition flared through me, and I gasped, but he shook his head. He was telling me to keep quiet, and I clamped down on my reaction because I knew who this guy was.

Heckler. The Red Demon with the almost white eyes.

Holy...shit! Those were Red Demons.

And they were here.

And they grabbed Harper.

Why did they grab Harper?

Was one of them my dad?

Was Maxwell the one wearing the white mask?

A thousand questions ran through my head, but Harper was quieted almost immediately, and then they were gone. Simple as that.

They materialized. They found their target. They left with their target, and no one made a move to stop them. No one was stupid enough. If we had, they would've killed us. Everyone felt it in their gut, and I was shook, because the last time I felt this was when my attacker caught me coming into my

bedroom, when he pushed me to the bed and covered my mouth with his hand.

But like that time, I would've fought back.

After a few minutes, as if we were all afraid to move or say a word, someone broke the seal. "I think they're gone."

Then it was chaos after that, but not within me. I could breathe. I just breathed. The other girls started crying.

I mean, they were crying, but they were also pissed. And they were swearing.

And Veronica had sidled up next to Alex.

I pulled my phone out, saw there was no reception, and now knew why Cross hadn't rolled up.

I asked around, "Anyone have a phone with reception?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

BREN

Cross and the guys arrived three minutes after the masked men left.

We'd called the cops, so it wasn't too long after they got there when the air lit up with blue and white. Cross swept me up. Jade looked to Jordan. Both seemed tentative with each other, but Jordan pulled her in for a hug. Angeline was eyeing Zellman, and he was eyeing her back. It seemed like a beat later when Blaise drove in with Zeke exploding from his passenger side.

I glanced at Cross. "You called him?"

He nodded, his jaw tight. "He was *quiet*."

Oh, whoa. That said everything.

Cross' arm tightened around me, and he buried his head into my neck. He pressed a kiss there. "Got a text from Zeke."

"You did?" That wasn't normal either.

He nodded, his face grim. "Asked if I knew where you were, thought it might be where his brothers were."

That said a lot. Zeke reaching out to Cross, not a thing. Ever.

Then Cross' hand tightened around me and he asked, "Why am I seeing Alex Ryerson holding one of Aspen's friends?"

I grinned and patted his chest. "I'll fill you in on the way back."

And that's what I did.

I gave my statement because Tim Harper getting taken was a big deal. More and more cops were pulling in, but it wasn't until when a detective broke away from a large group and came over did I realize what really happened.

He was thirty-ish, and tired. A buttoned-down shirt. Gun holster. Badge clipped to his side. He wore jeans and his hair looked raked through. He came right to me and lifted his chin up. "Bren Monroe?"

I nodded.

He pulled out his wallet and gave me his card. It was held between two fingers, and I took it.

He pointed to it. "Come to the station tomorrow?"

"I already gave a statement."

"You're Channing's sister, yeah?"

I was confused. "Yeah..."

Another point to the card. "Come tomorrow and give me another statement."

Cross frowned. "Why?"

"Because the case against the Red Demons just fell apart."

"What?"

Wait.

What?

"Harper was the witness?"

The detective didn't respond, just echoed, "Tomorrow."

"She'll be there."

I glanced at Cross, and he shot me a look.

There was more happening that I wasn't understanding, but fine. I'd wait and find out.

Jordan moved in. "It's late. We have a long drive. Can we head back?"

The detective nodded, starting to back away. “For those who were here, if they gave a statement, then they can go.”

He headed back.

Blaise came over, Aspen remaining back with Zeke.

He asked me, “Aspen said what you confronted Harper about. That true?” His jaw was clenching, and his eyes were fierce.

“Yeah, but it looks like it was just him with the plans. The other guys backed away once I started talking about it. They thought they were coming for a goodbye party since he was getting kicked out of the frat.”

“Fuck that. Some fucking goodbye party.” He shared a look with his brother. “I bet you a million fucking bucks that he was going to drug the guys, too, get them all in one go. Hurt me. Hurt Aspen. Hurt the house that kicked him out. Such a fucking piece of shit.”

“Yeah, well, he’s gone.”

“Aspen said those guys were scary.”

I felt a kick in my gut. I couldn’t say anything. Not to anyone. Not ever.

I nodded, letting out a shaky breath. “Yeah, they were.”

Cross’ fingers flexed into my skin, and I knew he’d felt my reaction and would ask me about it later.

“Okay. Well.” He looked back. “We’re taking off. We can get most of the girls with us, but Jade said she drove.”

Jordan overheard. “I’ll go with her.”

“Us too.” Zellman was next to Angeline. He was holding her, and she was firmly snuggled up to his side.

That was interesting.

Jordan caught my look and shared a small grin with me.

I snorted.

He laughed.

Blaise looked between us, then held his hands up. “I don’t want to know.” He went back to Aspen and soon, they were heading out. Alex came over and said he was leaving as well. Veronica was headed back with Blaise, Aspen, and Zeke.

“Alone, huh?”

He shrugged, dropping his head to the side. “As I live and breathe, but respect. Yeah?” He held a hand out. I shook it, and he extended it to the others, saying, “Met Harper through his dad and my uncle. We kept in touch, but I didn’t know he was like this. Or maybe I did. That was back when I was a douche, so maybe that’s why we were friends. Gotta admit, never felt totally right coming out here, getting his call out of the blue.” He nodded toward me. “But it was nice to be on the right side this time.”

Jordan, Cross, and Zellman all gave me a look, all with their eyebrows raised.

“I’ll fill you guys in.”

Jordan grunted.

After that, Alex left.

The others were starting to leave as well. Most went right away, probably fearing they’d get in trouble by being associated with Harper.

Jordan said to Jade, “Mind giving us a moment?”

Zellman nodded to Angeline, too.

Both girls went toward Jade’s SUV.

The guys moved in, and without pausing, Jordan came forward and cupped my face in both hands.

“Oh!” I jumped, then his forehead touched mine. “Hello. Hi.”

He breathed out, closing his eyes. “*Are you okay?*” His voice was strangled.

My eyes darted to the side, seeing the same emotion reflected on Zellman’s face.

Both were intense.

“Yeah.” I let out some air.

I could feel Jordan take a breath. In. Out. And he said under his breath, “Thank fucking God.” He released me, stepping back and he blinked rapidly. “Thank fucking God.”

His words were whispered.

Zellman moved in.

I was expecting the same face-cupping thing, but he wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. It was a big bear hug, and he moved me back, carrying me a total of three steps before setting me back down.

He whispered in my ear, “If anything had happened to you—anything.” He pulled back, his eyes hard and he shook his head. “Anything.”

I knew what he was saying. Understanding spread through me, and I reached up, grasping his wrists. My hands held tight, and I said just as fiercely back, “Same.”

He jerked his head up and down, stiff. “I fucking love you, Bren.”

“Same.”

He moved forward, cupping the back of my head and he pressed a kiss there. “Shit. I love you.” He sniffed and wiped at his nose once, almost savagely, before rolling his shoulders. He turned around. “Come on. Let’s see to the girls.”

Jordan gave me another one of those intense nods before they went over.

I moved up next to Cross, and we watched as Jordan went over, opened Jade’s driver’s door where she was sitting. Words were exchanged. He looked firm. She looked surprised, but she slid out and he took her place.

Jade went to the front passenger seat, and Zellman took the seat behind her, right next to Angeline. I saw him reach for her hand right before he shut the door.

As their taillights lit up, Cross put his arm around my shoulder. “You need to call your brother.”

And, well... fuck.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

CROSS

This girl.

I loved this girl, and she was asleep, the bedsheet across her thigh, and I just wanted to hold her.

All day long.

Every night.

Every day.

Forever.

I was going to marry this girl.

My girl.

Mine.

One day.

Until then, I just pulled her into my arms and held her.

All. Night. Long.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

BREN

“You want a coffee?”

His name was Detective Brennan. That was the name on the card he gave me the night before, and that’s who I asked for when I came to the station. It took longer than I thought to get here. Cross showed me how much he enjoyed when I wore my ripped jeans.

The detective had come out almost right away, but he looked harried. He showed me to a back room, indicated I could have a seat and was now at the door, waiting my response to his question.

“Uh. Sure.”

He nodded. “Cream? Sugar?”

“Both.”

He left and I pulled my phone out, sending a text to Channing.

Me: I’m here.

Channing: At his desk?

Me: A room.

I waited, expecting a quick response. My brother was usually good about that unless he was in the middle of something with Heather or his job. When it took a little bit, I was starting to get nervous.

Channing: Keep your phone on, just in case.

Alarm spiked.

Me: What?

Channing: Call me without him knowing and keep this line open. If I don't like what I'm hearing, I'm calling him.

At that moment, the door opened and Detective Brennan came in, two Styrofoam cups in hand. "Here you go." He placed mine on the table and motioned to my phone with his elbow. "You'll need to put that away."

He wasn't taking it away. That was something.

I slipped it off the table, but not before hitting the call button and placed it on the top of my bag, out of view of his gaze. I was hoping my brother was just being extra cautious, but I'd been in another police station when there'd been others plotting to go against my crew. One never knew how careful was too careful.

"Okay." He had a file tucked under his arm and he grabbed it, opening it on the table. He took a picture from the top and turned it around, sliding it in front of me. "You know who that is?"

I looked. It was a woman.

Dark hair. Cardigan sweater. Pearl necklace. A pleated skirt, one that looked trendy a decade ago, and I couldn't believe I just thought that. Aspen and her friends must've worn off on me more than I thought. She had a purse in hand, in mid-step off a curb and going toward a limousine. A phone was to her ear and she was looking off in the direction of whoever took this photograph, but not seeing them. She was looking at something or someone to the side, just in the same direction.

"No. Who is that?"

"That." He pointed at the woman. "That is Meredith Harper, the wife of Timothy Harper, Sr. and the mother of Timothy Harper, Jr."

I frowned. "Why am I seeing her picture?"

"Because she's the reason you're sitting here."

I was confused. “Huh?”

He grinned before taking the picture back and sliding another one in front of me.

It was Harper’s dad. Same smirk. Same bone structure, except this guy had half the hair Harper did and a bigger gut. Harper didn’t have a gut, but he would in twenty years. He was also in handcuffs, his head down, and his pants undone. Whoever took this picture had perfect timing.

Harper, Sr. was being led out of a building, two cops beside him, and right behind him a woman was stepping out. Long legs. Tight dress. Hair hanging down. She was also in handcuffs.

“I’m just going to educate you here. This is Harper, Sr.” He pointed to the woman. “This is the hooker we arrested him with.” That picture was taken away and he laid out three more. Different men. Different women. All in handcuffs. “And this is the prostitution ring that Harper, Sr. participated in and was arrested during. How we found out about this—” Meredith Harper’s image was laid on top of them. “—was because Mrs. Harper here got tired of the cheating, the hookers, the drugs, and when she found out her husband impregnated Harper, Jr.’s high school girlfriend, she decided enough was enough. She came to us, and we pulled him in.”

I sat back, chewing on all this.

I wasn’t liking what I was feeling.

“What does this have to do with me?”

He took Meredith’s picture away and put Harper, Sr.’s picture back on top. “This guy didn’t like being arrested. This guy decided that he had information on the Red Demons, and he wanted to use it to get immunity for this shit.” He pulled away the top picture and used it to wave at the others. “Harper, Sr. was stupid because what we found out today is that all the evidence we thought we had on the Red Demons was bogus. All of it. Not the information itself. That was real, but Harper, Sr. can’t be used as a witness anymore because what we weren’t told is that Harper, Sr. is also in bed with the cartel.”

A phone started ringing in the room, and it wasn't mine.

Detective Brennan stared at me, his eyes hard, and he clenched his jaw. "If I look at my ringer, am I going to find out that it's coming from your brother?"

I swallowed. This guy was the most cop-like cop I'd ever met or seen on television. He was emanating frustration, exhaustion, but a ring of danger. And right now, the frustration was only slightly edging out the air of danger, and so I swallowed. Again.

And I didn't answer that question.

He grunted before leaning back and pulling out his phone. He turned it off, then indicated my own. "Pull it out. Call your brother back—"

I reached for the phone, but it was still in use.

Channing's voice sounded from it, "I'm here. I'm listening."

Brennan gestured to the table. "Put it there." He raised his voice. "But you listen, Monroe. Not a word."

My brother, for once, was quiet.

I was also now impressed by this cop. As cops went, he might do.

"So, we have an issue. One, the case fell apart. We can't bring forward a witness who will never testify, and we'll know he'll never testify because what cartel would ever let one of theirs enter the court of law. A dead witness. That's who they'd let in. In a body bag, but cartel aside, last night Harper, Sr. and Harper, Jr. were both taken. And your sister here was a witness to Harper, Jr.'s kidnapping. Witnesses said that two of the men stopped and stared at you. Witnesses also said that you seemed like you recognized one—"

"Bren, take me off speaker."

I jumped. I'd never heard that voice from my brother.

I hesitated a second and he roared, "Right fucking now, Bren! Right NOW!"

I grabbed the phone, taking him off speaker and put the phone to my ear.

“Get up right now and leave.”

“Wha—”

“Get up! Grab your bag. Get up. Then leave. NOW!”

I bent for my bag.

As I stood from the chair, Channing added, “He can’t keep you there. You’re not being detained for anything. Don’t look at him. Walk out. Keep me on the phone as you go. Tell me where you are.”

I expected Detective Brennan to say something, but he didn’t. He stared at me, his eyes turning a mean shade, and I reached for the door. I half-thought it’d be locked. It wasn’t.

I narrated, “I’m leaving.”

I went down the hall, telling him as I moved throughout the precinct.

I went past the front desk, and I told him that.

As I went through the door, feeling the sun back on me, I told him, “I’m heading for my car.”

“Okay. Put me back to speaker. I want to be there as you drive to the house.”

My hands were shaking once I got in, and I dropped the keys twice before inserting them all the way. As I pulled out from the lot, I said, “You’re scaring me, and I don’t scare much.”

“I know.” He let out a breath of air. “Just keep driving. I’m going to hang up. I need to call Brock. Is Cross at the house?”

“Yeah. It’s Sunday.”

“The others?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see them when I left.”

“Okay. Just call ’em, but Bren, I have to ask...did you recognize any of those guys who took Harper?”

I didn't answer. I made a vow last night not to tell anyone. The only person I was going to tell at a later time was Cross, when that later was going to be, I hadn't decided. Knowing me, it probably would've been as soon as I got home after talking to Detective Brennan.

"Fuck, Bren!"

"They weren't cartel."

He was quiet. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. That's—that's better, at least. But I have to ask, is there anything I need to know? And I'm saying anything. Anything weird. Anything odd. Anything that doesn't make sense to you."

I frowned. "No—" Drake. "Wait."

"What? Wait, what? What?"

"Drake."

"Ryerson? Your ex?"

"Yeah." My heart was beating fast.

"What about him?"

I ran down the phone call to him, and again, my brother did one of his silent spells.

It took until I was pulling onto the block for the house before he said, "Bren. If it was who I'm thinking you recognized, then word did get to them who the witness was."

"That cop said the case was done. That the cartel wouldn't let him testify—"

"But the information was correct. They're like the cartel. They don't let loose ends stay loose. You know what I'm saying, right?"

Fuck.

My palms were sweaty.

My heart was trying to beat out of my chest. "Channing—"

“No. No. Don’t get scared. I’m sorry. I’m reacting like this because you’re my sister, and you’re three hours away from me, but I’m leaving. I’ll be there in a few hours. Is Dad still there?”

“Yeah. I think.”

“I’m going to call him, see if he knows anything.”

And that just tightened my chest all over again. I felt like someone was squeezing my entire body in one giant grip. *Squeeeeeeze.*

“Did they or whoever you saw think you recognized them?”

Again. No answer from me.

“Shit! No.”

I pulled into the driveway, parking beside Cross’ truck and I turned the engine off, leaving the keys in the ignition. Each outburst from Channing was setting me on edge. I was so far on the edge, I was off of it. I was in the air, hanging suspended over a cliff. And how I wasn’t falling, I didn’t have a clue.

“Bren.”

I *did not* like how soft my brother’s voice just got.

“Bren, you have to know that Brennan calling you down there today might’ve been a ploy.”

“I thought that guy was your friend.”

“Not anymore.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, a ploy?”

I leaned forward. From where I parked, I could see the backyard of the house. I couldn’t fully see the patio table, but there was a chair pulled out. And beyond, was that... I leaned even more forward until I recognized what I was seeing.

“They’re here.”

My brother had been talking. I hadn’t registered, and I was the one who cut him off.

I said it again, “They’re here. They’re in the backyard. They have Cross.” And I was scrambling.

“Bren!”

The phone was turned off as I was out the door and running for the backyard.

I had no plan. No weapon. No ways to escape. I just had me, a panicked heart, as I rounded the corner, my heart stopped.

The guys were home.

Or they were supposed to be home.

But no. No one was back there, except—“Dad?”

He was standing on the patio. Arms folded. Head bent down. No. He wasn’t standing. He was pacing, and he whipped his head up at my voice, then immediately shot a frown at the other guy with him. Maxwell Raith. Unlike my dad, whose shoulders were tight and he seemed strung-out, his MC president looked anything but. Feet kicked out. Head leaning back, his face up for the sun, and as he saw me, too, he lifted up his arms in a big stretch over his head.

“Bren.” My dad started for me, but stopped. He sent another glance to Raith.

I was looking.

There were three other guys on the far side of the lawn, but they were lingering and talking to each other. A few looked over, but went back to their conversation. One was on his phone and he lifted his head, shooting us a frown as if we’d interrupted what text he was sending. All of them wore Red Demons cuts, all looked rough. And all could’ve been the same guys I saw take Harper last night. Their body types fit.

“Bren Monroe.”

Maxwell brought my attention back to him, and he sat up, but kicked out the chair across from him. He nodded to it. “Take a seat.” There was an edge to his voice. That wasn’t a request. It was a command.

My legs turned wooden.

The guys behind them seemed relaxed. They weren't primed for battle, but everything from my dad was saying the opposite. And Raith, I was getting the sense this was another day in his life. No big, no little, just...it was what it was, but it could go bad real quick and he had no problem with that.

I sat. "Where are the guys?"

My dad sucked in a breath, but he didn't respond.

Maxwell did. This was the Max show, and the authority coming from him was just cementing that to me. "They got a call from your brother. Something about how you were arrested at the precinct and were already being transported to Roussou."

"What?" I frowned. "Channing wouldn't call and say that. I was just on the phone with him."

A strangled gargle came from my dad, but Maxwell ignored him.

He smiled at me, as if placating me. "Of course your brother didn't make that call, but one of my guys rigged up a handy-dandy voice app and the message that your boyfriend got was from your brother, just not currently being said. If that makes sense?"

No. It didn't, but they weren't here.

That's all I cared about, and with that, I sat back and one of the many knots inside loosened up. Just one. The rest were still tight and wound up.

"This is about the cop I just talked to?"

Irritation flashed in Raith's gaze, the first time I really saw a hard emotion from him and he leaned forward. Resting his arms on the table, he angled his head toward me. "We know you recognized Heckler. And since you're aware the lengths we'll go to silence one witness, you can imagine what we'll do with you. You alone can link us to that kidnapping last night. Now." He paused, glancing to Derrick, and he took a deep breath before turning back to me. "Pops has been adamant that

you won't say a word, but Pops is new and a lot of the guys haven't seen him in action. We've also done a few favors for Pops regarding yourself and your brother, two bounty hunters who could turn around and track us if you're seeing a dilemma here. Not to mention that a lot of my men don't know Pops either and they're going off my shared experience of living with your father in prison."

I glanced at my dad, whose head was low, but his gaze was on me. Those eyes—I flinched. They were heavy and hard, resting right on me and pinning me to my seat. "So, what do you want?"

"Besides a guarantee you'll never talk about who you recognized?"

"Yeah. Besides that?"

He stared at me, long and hard again.

There was a whole beat where no one moved, no one said a word, and a shiver went down my spine.

I was in trouble. Very real and serious trouble here.

They took someone right in front of me, infiltrating an entire party with masks and guns. They were prepared and they moved almost as one unit. That spoke of a seriously tight unit.

And they were here, knowing I'd been called to the police station and they went the distance to clear out any witnesses.

I had nothing.

I had nothing to bargain with them, no way out, no escape plan, no way of fighting. They were a force I'd never even knew existed, but they were here and my dad was one of them.

Blood.

Family.

Loyalty.

All three of those were held in high regard with them.

I had all three on my side, which was why I was even getting this sit-down.

That realization hit me hard, and I had to blink back some tears because it wasn't until just now that I thought I'd been about to be killed by their hands, because I recognized one of them.

I looked at my father, though my words were for his President. "I never visited you in prison, and I'm sorry about that."

He sucked in his breath, an audible sound to it, and his head jerked as if I slapped him.

I kept on, needing both men to hear what I had to say. "I knew Channing was worried about you coming to see me. It was a whole big thing. And my employers were worried because you were connected to the Red Demons, but in all of that when you actually did come, I didn't know how to feel about it. I didn't know how to feel about any of it because there are not good memories between you and me. Not in that house. Not when Mom died. Not when you fought with Chan so much. But I think, now after having some time to process because I know I snapped a little, but you killed the guy so easily in front of me. And you did it for me, but you also did it because he touched your daughter. And you were kind in that moment to me, gentle even, and it was like that one thing wiped out all the bad and I didn't know how to think about any of it. But, Dad, you left me alone so much of the time." I closed my eyes, taking a moment for myself.

The years. The memories. Mom laughing. Channing yelling.

The door being slammed shut.

The quiet after.

Always the quiet after.

"When you went away, a part of me thought you just wanted a way to get away from me."

"Bren, honey." His voice didn't sound familiar to me, not anymore. That was a stranger, but he sounded regretful. He

sounded kind.

“I thought that I didn’t deserve a family, and that’s why Channing left, why Mom died, and why you went to prison. Then I had the guys, but it took a long time before I let them in. But, Dad. They’re in. I’ve let them. I’ve let Channing back, and I’ve slowly started to believe that I *am* worthy to have people love me.”

“Sweetheart.” A chair was pulled out, scraping over the patio floor. He reached for me, but paused, remembering the last time I was touched. His eyes closed. He was struggling. A battle of emotions played out over his face before those eyes opened once more, and I saw the same haunting there that I’d felt for so many years. “I’d like to hold your hand. Can I do that, Bren?”

I stared back. Steadily. Then I shook my head. “No, but it means a lot that you asked, and it means more that you want to.”

His head hung down, and he nodded before pulling his hand back. It fell to his lap, and he stared at me across the table. “I wasn’t a good enough father to you, and I killed that man because I thought, ‘Finally, there was something right I could do for my girl.’ I never knew you thought any of that, or felt that way. I’m so sorry, Bren. I’m truly so sorry. I’m a... a broken man and there are no excuses I got for you. Just, I don’t know.” He glanced to Maxwell before grimacing. “They need to know you won’t say anything.”

I glanced at the man, deciding before turning back to my dad. “I think that’s a given. I never told anyone that you killed that guy to finish what I started until last year. Kept that to myself, and I’m not stupid.” I looked and spoke straight to Raith now. “I don’t know what I can do to reassure you, your men, but I won’t say anything. I don’t want to battle with you guys. I do want to be a bounty hunter. It makes sense to me. I grew up from violence and it’s ingrained in me. I need it, but I can channel it so it’s good that way. I won’t hunt any of your men. I’ll excuse myself from the team every time, but other than that, I don’t know what I can do or give you to make you feel safe with me.”

“There’s nothing you can do now, but there could be in the future.”

I waited, my heart pounding.

Without showing any emotion, he said, “You could name your firstborn child after me.”

Then, nothing.

I sat there.

He sat there.

I didn’t look at Derrick.

“You’re shitting me?”

“Bren!”

A wide smile broke over Maxwell’s face and his shoulders shook in laughter. “Yeah. I’m fucking with you.” He stood, his chair scraping over the patio. At his movement, the other men were all on high alert and began to come toward us. Maxwell motioned to them, saying to me, “I know you ain’t going to say shit because if you did,” his tone turned dangerous, “you know we’d come back and we’d kill that boyfriend of yours.”

I felt all eyes on me, weighing my reaction.

I showed them my teeth. “My dad touched my arm and I stabbed him. Did it without even thinking. It was instinct. What do you think I’ll do if you threaten my loved one again? Or if you did do something to hurt him?”

The guys didn’t say a word. They were waiting for their leader.

And judging me, observing me, Maxwell Raith gave me one small nod. “I know. That’s why I know you’ll keep your mouth shut, but listen to me on this. The feral little wolf thing you got going on, it won’t last. You’ll get married. You’ll have kids. You’ll be happy, and that’ll soften you up. Speaking on behalf of your pops here, I hope you get that life and that’s where I’m hoping our two paths never merge. As long as you keep quiet, you and I will never see each other again. And I say that with the best intentions if you get me?”

I got him.

And I was stunned that I got him.

He left, his men moving behind him.

I heard the sound of motorcycle engines starting up later, and my dad stayed throughout the whole while. I looked up now, and once the sound of them faded, I asked, “So what do you want now?”

His eyes flashed, and it struck me deep inside. Sadness. Emptiness. I felt it from him because that’s what I used to feel, before Cross, before Zellman, before Jordan, before Channing, before Heather, before my life right now.

A part of me pitied him, but he said, “I want everything from you, everything you’ll give me, but I’ll ask for nothing.” He stood, moving around the table, and he bent. He went slow, making sure I was okay with it, and I remained until I felt him kiss my forehead.

I closed my eyes.

He whispered there, “Be happy, Bren.”

I waited.

My eyes still closed.

I never heard him leave, but I knew he did and I knew after that day, that I’d only see my dad if I sought him out.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

BREN

It was twelve minutes after Derrick left when I heard the first screech of brakes.

Car doors slammed.

Feet were pounding on the sidewalk.

There was shouting.

The doorbell was ringing. Someone was punching it over and over again.

Pounding on it, fists were hitting it and I heard from the back of the house, “BREN! ARE YOU OKAY?!”

Then, not a moment of silence where I could respond, I heard, “Dude! Check the back of the house. Maybe that’s unlocked.”

Zeke came barreling around the back side of the house, and seeing me sitting there, he braked to a sudden halt. His eyes were wide, alarmed, and his jaw tense, but then he cupped a hand by his mouth and hollered, “SHE’S BACK HERE!” He frowned at me. “You okay?” His head tilted to the side. “You look weird, Monroe.”

Huh.

That was it.

That was all I had in me, because hella shock syndrome here. Maxwell Raith left with a threat to my loved ones and I’m pretty sure I might never see my father again, so yeah... There weren’t words to summarize that, not that I would because this was Zeke.

And speaking of Zeke—I frowned and asked at the same time Blaise came running around the house, “What the hell are you doing here?”

He scoffed, but Blaise stopped next to him, raking me over, and he’s the one who answered. “Cross called, said he got a message from your brother that you were in trouble.” He looked around, scanning the backyard. “What the fuck? What happened?”

Yeah.

There was that whole situation where I couldn’t tell any of them about.

I shrugged. “I’m fine. I mean, there were people here, but they’re not and I’m good.”

I waited.

They didn’t leave.

“I mean, thanks for coming, but I’m good.”

They still didn’t leave.

They shared a look.

Zeke raised an eyebrow.

Blaise grunted. “Me too.”

Both looked at me—eerie.

Blaise said, “Sorry, but no fucking way. My brother called me for help. I’m not moving till his ass gets back and he can grovel in thanks at my feet.”

Zeke grinned, but he had the graciousness to glance at the ground. His shoulders were shaking.

“Knock it off,” I snapped at him. He didn’t, and I had to add, “Why aren’t you in a counselor’s office or something? Shouldn’t you be permanently scarred? Your frat frenemy was kidnapped last night.”

His shoulder stopped and his head snapped back up. “Thanks for the reminder, and you’re welcome. We came to help your ass.”

Like they could've done anything. I shook my head. "Whatever. I'm fine. I'll send Cross to 'grovel' at your feet later."

Except as soon as I finished speaking, another set of car tires were heard, pulling up on the driveway and slamming to a stop. More car doors.

More running.

This time female voices.

"That's Blaise's Wagon—BLAISE!"

"It's locked."

More doorbell ringing.

A dull-sounding knock on the door. My guess, someone was hitting it with the bottom of their palm.

"What are you doing?"

"I just got my nails done. I like Bren, but no way am I ruining my manicure."

Someone snorted. "Priorities, man."

Zeke snorted/laughed, and elbowed Blaise in the ribs.

Blaise groaned, his head falling back. "What the fuck?" He started walking around to the front of the house. "WE'RE BACK HERE! And what the hell are you doing here?"

They came from the other side of the house, and Blaise turned around, looking past me.

Frustration evident on his face as he started walking toward me. "Aspen, I told you—"

The body hit me first before thin arms wrapped around my stomach. A head buried into my shoulder blades. Another body hit me from the side. More arms around me.

"Scootch over. I want in here, too." And I got a hug from the other side.

A fourth person walked around, and I eyed Jade with nearing alarm.

She grinned, shaking her head. “No worries. I’m glad you’re obviously okay, but I’m not a huggy person.”

The person behind me gave me an extra squeeze before letting go, and walked around, too. “Not true. She hugs me.” Aspen shot me a grin before turning to her boyfriend. “And if you think I hear you say, ‘Oh shit, something’s wrong with Bren. Gotta go,’ and I’m not coming to be here for her, you’re a moron. I’m not dating a moron, so I know you’re not going to question me again about why I came to make sure my friend is okay.”

Blaise glowered at her, but after a moment of both sharing a look, he sighed and held open his arms. Aspen walked right into them, tipping her head back and smiling at him.

The two girls let go, stepping back.

Angeline was blushing. I’m not sure why.

Veronica was half-glaring at Zeke, half-looking like she was eye-fucking him.

He was doing the same, except a lot less of the ‘eye-fucking’ and his hostility level was amped way higher. “What do you want, Nut Kicker?”

She smiled, and it looked like pure evil for a moment. “Look at you. All foreplay, Allen.”

Jade snorted, laughing. “Oh my God, you two. I don’t understand. I don’t understand at all.” She asked me, “But you’re okay, right? You look fine.”

“I—”

A third vehicle roared up, slamming to a stop. This one was louder and bigger, and I knew that engine.

Good Lord, I could only guess who had called them?

These guys were quiet, and I knew that so I was still watching for them. The others had stilled, but didn’t look back. They were waiting for the sounds of running, doorbell, and pounding. Nope. Not these guys. It took only a second before Brock turned the corner, his Taser gun raised and ready.

He wasn't alone, and they were all in their bounty hunting gear, all black, vests, everything.

Hawk was right behind him, sweeping out beside him.

They saw me, saw the others, but they didn't stop running.

The weapons were checked and then Brock ran past everyone and picked me up. His arms wound around me tight. I watched over his shoulder as Hawk waited, a faint grin showing. She looked especially Vikings badass today. Her hair was pulled up on both sides of her face and wound into a high French braid that had volume to it. She had a couple feathers clipped into it, too, and her makeup looked even warrior-esque.

“Holy cripes.”

That was Veronica. She got a look at Hawk.

“Whoa.” Then, a smarmy, “What's your name?” That was Zeke. He noticed Hawk, too.

But Brock was putting me back down, and I heard the rest of the cavalry arrive behind him.

He stepped back, his hands on my shoulders. “You're okay?”

I nodded. “My brother?” That was the only guess I had.

He nodded back, grim. “He called. Said you were on the phone and heard you. He said the Reds might be here.” His eyes glanced around, ignoring how now Veronica, Jade, and Angeline were all checking him out and gawking. He settled back on me, taking a step backwards and letting go of my shoulders. “I'm seeing they're gone.”

Shetland stepped up next to him.

I glanced down, still making sure I noticed his hands, but they were hitched to the sides of his vest. He tipped his chin up to me. “See you're still in one piece, Ball Buster.”

I frowned. That was a new name from him. I spoke to him and Brock, and for Hawk because I knew she was listening,

“I’m fine. Yes, they were here, but I’m okay. Everything’s okay.” I held my hands up. “I promise.”

Big and Burly ambled up, and Veronica’s eyes got huge. “Whoa! Who are these gigantic Magic Mikes?” She went back to looking at Brock. “You look like that guy from *Outlander*. Bren, where have you been hiding all the delicious people? And who else do you know?”

“What’s up, Little Monroe? Nice to see you’re still standing.”

I hid a grin. “I’m good, and... I can’t say anything else.”

Brock nodded. “Got it.” His face shuttered closed, though. He wasn’t happy.

“Sucks all those warrants went away like that? All disappearing in the wind like ash.” Shetland was eyeing Brock, the end of his mouth curved down.

Brock growled. “Can’t do anything about that.” He found me again. “You’re going to get another slew of arrivals in a couple hours. Your brother was on the way here, and he set the call in to your boyfriend. They shared notes. Neither was happy about how your crew got called away.”

Crap. I had called Cross as soon Derrick left, but only hearing a savage exclamation from him that he was glad I was okay, he hung up and I knew they were heading back right away. They’d been on the road for a full hour by the time I called.

But I hadn’t had time to process the Red Demons trick to get them away either.

“Shit.” From me.

“Yeah.” From Brock.

“It sounds wicked, though.” Hawk was looking at Brock. “Something maybe we could use in the future, if we got our hands on whatever they designed.”

Brock sent her a look saying ‘yeah right.’ And I agreed. “I doubt the Red Demons are going to hand that over.”

I became aware of a body sidling up next to me, then Veronica's elbow nudged my arm. She said in a hushed voice, openly trying to eye-fuck Brock now, "Um. Introductions? Don't be rude here." She winked at me. Twice.

Right. Subtle.

But I did the introductions.

"Hey, there." Zeke was now sounding like Joey from *Friends*.

Hawk was eyeing him back, but with disdain. "Don't. I eat little boys like you for breakfast. I am not the one to hit on."

"Oh." He eased back.

Aspen had turned so her back was to Blaise's chest. His arms were hugging her, locked around the front of her chest and her hands were resting on them. She gave me a small smile, a whole dreamy look in her eyes. "I don't know what happened before we all got here, but we're all here and I'm thinking none of us are leaving until we're all reassured you're okay. Even though you obviously are. Bear with us and our anxieties here."

Veronica snorted. "Speak for yourself. I want to know what other hotties are showing up—"

And like clockwork, as if Veronica had summoned them, another screeching sound happened. This time from farther away, so I was guessing they had to park on the street.

We heard the sounds of swift sprinting, but they were quieted.

I was primed. I was ready.

I knew who was coming.

They were coming in from the grass, and I turned around, knowing they weren't going to come through the driveway's entrance. And then there they were.

Cross was first. He was always the fastest, and the few who were in the way stepped back. He had a clear path, and then he was in front of me, he was sweeping me up, and he

was walking me away from the group. His head was buried in my neck, but he just kept going.

All the way.

I gave up and just wrapped my legs around his waist and I held on.

This boy. This guy. This man. I was going to marry him. I was going to have his babies. I would fight him, with him, and for him forever. He was mine, all mine, and I was going to savor that he came into my life.

His hand pressed against the back of my head and finally he stopped. We were inside the house. How we got there, I had no clue, but we were in total privacy.

“God.” He lifted his head, setting me on the kitchen counter.

My legs remained wrapped around his waist. He didn’t step back, just his head moved so he could see me.

“I was so fucking scared. That call—” he choked off. The terror was still in him. One of his hands pressed to my leg and he closed his eyes, needing a minute to control himself. “I couldn’t even talk to you on the phone. You called, said you were fine—and I wanted to kill someone. The need to rip their heads off, it was just like when you were arrested.”

I wound my arms around his neck and pulled him back in.

“It was the Red Demons.”

His hand went up my back and he grabbed fistfuls of my shirt. His head buried into my neck. “I know.” His voice was muffled. “I want to kill them. I want to—”

“No.” I eased back again, leaning back on the counter.

His head tipped back to see me. I framed his face with my hands, trying to wipe that fear from him if I could’ve. “It’s done. Everything is done. They know I recognized Heckler—” Oh, yeah. I already told Cross, and Zellman, and Jordan, besides Channing. They all knew. The Red Demons didn’t need to know that part. “I promised not to say a word, and promised not to hunt them as a bounty hunter later, but it’s

done. It's done. They're out of our lives. I think my Dad, too. He told me he wanted everything from me, but he'd ask for nothing. I know what that means. That means he's gone unless I reach out. It's over, Cross."

He searched me, then drew in a shuddering breath. His gaze fell to my mouth and he cupped the side of my face in his. "If they had done something to you—"

The Red Demons knew what I promised to do to them if they had hurt someone I loved, but they didn't know Cross. They had no idea. Cross flipped his shit when I was arrested. I shuddered myself at what he'd do if something happened to me.

Drawing in one more harsh breath, he framed my face back and tipped my forehead to his. "I love you."

I whispered back, my hands falling to his arms, "I love you, too."

We took a few more minutes before there was a discreet knock.

The patio door slipped open.

Cross tensed, cursing under his breath, but our time was up.

Zellman swept in next, the same fierce hug that I got last night.

Jordan joined.

After a full minute, when it became obvious they weren't going to let me go, Cross joined us and I lost track of time as my guys held me.



Two hours later, it was a full-on party.

Aspen and her friends went to get food and drinks. The grill was turned on and Zellman and Jordan were in charge of

the meats. I'm pretty sure they had plans to grill a pizza, or two of them. If they could grill water, they would've.

By this time, Tabatha and Jessinda had joined us, too, but they came in at a slower pace.

Tabatha came over, gave me a tight hug, and she stepped back, flicking away some tears. She couldn't look at me so she was half-turned away, but her hand was on my arm. She gave me a squeeze. "Just be safe, Bren. Please be safe from now on."

I grinned. "Right. Because I invited them here."

She looked then, more tears spilling as she did, and a small laugh slipped out. "You know what I mean." Then her eyes trailed past my shoulder, to the backyard. "He's back there?"

Jessinda waited for us to have our moment, then gave me a nod and went to the backyard.

That honesty I could handle. She knew she and I were never going to be friends, but there was a small moment of decency where she gave me the nod, glad I was good. Then, off to the true reason she was here.

"That's going to be interesting."

The words came from me as both Tabatha and I watched her go. The doors slid open, and when they closed, we saw that Jordan wasn't alone. Jade was standing next to him and he was grinning down at her. Oh yeah. Jordan was full-on flirting with Aspen's roommate.

Tabatha stiffened. "I didn't know about her."

"I think it's a new development."

I eyed Tab, not knowing what my place was here.

Then she sighed and stepped back from me. "Whoever he ends up with, I just hope he's happy."

I nodded. "I think he will be."

She blinked away some more tears, then gave me another reassuring smile. It was forced, but it was there. She looked at my hands. "You should have something to drink. What do you

want? I'll go and get it for you. Or I can run to the store?" She was now seeing everyone else and her eyes got big. "You've got a whole party happening. What about little sandwiches? There's a deli not far. I'll run and grab some."

"No, there's already—"

Didn't matter.

She was gone.

And this time, I had no idea if she'd come back.

Then, the arrival I'd been primed and waiting for.

I heard his truck stop on the street.

I had a full view of them, and he stopped smack-dab in the middle of the street, not giving a fuck, and launched himself out of his driver's seat. He rounded the back and I was standing. I was moving to the door.

He was clearing the front lawn in record time.

I was opening the door.

The door was caught and wrenched open, and then my brother was there and I was once again caught in a tight hold and I was being pulled back outside.

A ripple went through Channing as he just held me.

"I'm ok—"

"Shut up. I need this." His tone came out strangled and rough.

I let myself be held, and held, and held.

Another ripple went through my brother before he growled, shaking his head. "I'm going to rip his head off. I'm going to—"

I just let him say the threats. He needed to spew them out.

After my moment with Cross, I called my brother and told him everything that happened. I wanted him to know, but it hadn't mattered. He still wanted to murder our dad. I knew he wouldn't, but I was letting my brother have his feelings. Super healthy of me, right?

But then Moose was next.

Congo.

Lincoln.

I wasn't prepared for the full team of his bounty hunting office.

It was thirty minutes later when another truck pulled up, and Channing, who hadn't been able to make it into the house yet, stiffened. "What the hell—"

A blonde fireball was heading our way.

And a hand shot up in the air as she bypassed him, going right for me. "You fucking tell me your sister is in trouble, and don't wait for me?!" But then Heather was in front of me and she took a moment, touching my sides before tears welled up in her eyes. "If they had done anything to you—" But she was done talking, too.

I was hauled in for another hug.

She was rocking me back and forth, her whole body trembling. "I would've killed them. All of them. I would've taken a hunting knife with me, and ripped them from balls to throat, and then I would've hacked off their legs, their arms. I would've kept the head for last—"

"God. Woman. I love this graphic side of you." Channing was smirking next to us. "Please, tell us more."

She tensed, but her hand moved and I heard a smacking sound.

Channing just laughed before easing in, sliding an arm between us and he stepped back, Heather in his arms. She growled up at him and tried to grab for his head. "You—"

He evaded her hold, still laughing and said to me, "Excuse me. I need to make things up with my woman, or I'm in for a world of hurt that'll last a year."

"Damn right, you are."

He picked her up, heading into the house, and I had a feeling he was taking her to the basement. I just hoped they

didn't go to Jordan's room because ... gross.

Heather wasn't alone.

Scratch had been standing on the sidelines, waiting for his turn.

He gave me the most endearing and sweetest smile and my heart broke, literally.

My tears started falling, and my cousin stepped in, grabbing me up and wrapping his muscled arms around me. "Aw, cuz. Don't." He smoothed a hand down my hair and folded his body around mine. "I'm just so thankful you're okay."

I don't know why it was my cousin.

Maybe he was just the last one I could handle, or how tender he was holding me, but I broke.

I was sobbing in his arms, and I didn't even know why I was sobbing.

Maybe because of the stress of what I thought I was running into when I first got home? At seeing my dad? At hearing the true threat from the Red Demons? Of my dad saying goodbye in his way? Or everyone else coming when they heard I was in trouble?

I was sobbing. I was a mess.

I was a puddle of emotions, and I didn't know how to rally myself. This was so un-Bren-like that even that was making me cry until after my cousin held me for a few more minutes, then the door opened and arms I knew so well took me from my cousin.

Cross had me, and that was enough for me.

The dam broke, and I fell all the way.

I'd have it no other way.



From: Tazsters

To: Brenners

Subject: first saying it here that I'm super glad you're safe

That's it. I'm done emailing.

We're FaceTiming from now on.

Also, is this the wrong time to tell you that there's something sexy about a guy in the white mask. Yes, scary as fuck. Yes, there's creep vibes too. And most definitely dangerous, but yeah... kinda hot and I'm saying that in a whisper so don't be mad at me.

SO WISH we'd known about the impromptu party at Casa de Cain.

OH! I know I called before, but I'm repeating again that Race and I are good. Miscommunication. He's clueless when other girls try to flirt with him. I have since educated him, and he now treats them as if they have a virus.

The Best Twin



Two days later and I took the garbage out, when a shadow moved.

I whirled, not knowing what to expect.

Bonbon was there. There was no wind, nothing, and yet, her hair was moving around like she had her personal fan. I had no clue how she did it.

She raised her eyebrows up, dressed in camouflage, and she smiled, her teeth flashing in the dark. "The van option is there. Always."

"Jesus Christ, Bon!" Hawk came up behind me and moved toward Bonbon. She took her arm, then turned to me. "Sorry. So sorry. She called me and insisted I drive her over. She was going to leave a casserole. That's all."

Brock told me that he was going to have me ride with Hawk on our bail jumps from now on, and I was excited for it, but I still had no clue how I felt about Bonbon.

“Uh. Yeah.”

Bonbon pulled her arm from Hawk’s hold and almost seared me with her gaze. “And you tell your man, chopped liver and garlic. He’ll know what I’m talking about.”

Hawk cursed again. “Okay. We’re done. No more late night scavenger hunts with you.” She began guiding Bonbon past me, giving me a tired and exasperated smile. “Again, so sorry. I’ll see you at the office later.”

“Yeah.” I watched them go. “Later.”

A whole uneasy feeling took root in my chest. I had no clue if I wanted Bonbon as an ally or an enemy. She was terrifying in both cases.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

BREN

We had another shocking moment when a month later, after Cross went on a bail jump with me, after he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he was alone against the bail jump. Cross got in the way. The guy outweighed Cross by two hundred pounds, but hadn't mattered.

Cross took him down, but he didn't get out of that fight unscathed. And Brock swore that all my guys would get the right training because we couldn't take in our bail jumps already roughed up. Shit happened, but apparently that was frowned upon.

That night was when our surprise happened.



CROSS

Someone was pounding on the door, and at the same time, ringing the doorbell.

They sounded as if they were alternating. *Pound. Ring. Pound. Ring.* They were jabbing at the bell.

Bren and I were coming out of our room, and at this point we weren't hurrying to the door as fast as we would've a few days ago.

Zellman got there first and yawned before nodding at the door. "It's your brother."

My brother.

I was jolted at hearing that, but I didn't know why.

As soon as he said it, he turned back to his room and we heard a female speak from inside.

Bren and I shared a look.

Zellman was drowning his sorrows the only way he knew.

The basement door swung open and Jordan came out. "What's going on?"

Bren asked, "You alone down there?"

"What?"

Pound.

Ring.

I went for the door, flipping the light on as Bren commented, "Never mind. It's Blaise."

"Oh. Gotcha." And Jordan swung around, the basement door shutting once again behind him.

There was a pattern here.

As I opened the door, I glanced at Bren. "You can head to bed, too, if you want?"

Her answer was to take a perch on the couch's armrest and she smiled, the same bags under her eyes that Zellman had. Yeah. We all looked the same.

It'd been a trying month, lately with Zellman since he learned Sunday was already in Florida to be with her aunt.

Then I turned around, and my brother was standing frozen on the front step.

His gaze was stuck on my face and he sucked in his breath. "Holy shit." His jaw clenched. "Who did this?"

That jolt happened again, but this time it was harder, faster. It spread through me.

I was rattled.

“What?”

“Who the fuck did this to you?” He jerked his chin up, indicating me.

Bren came to my side, her hand resting on my back and she walked around me. Looking out at his truck, she asked him, “It’s two in the morning. Why don’t you come in?”

He clipped his head to the side, jerking back a step. “No. No. I’m good. Just need to know who did this to you.” He was looking at me, speaking to me, but his answer was directed toward Bren. “Got an email. Who did this to you?”

A full ten seconds.

That’s how long it took before it penetrated, but—my brother gave a shit about me.

He cared.

That knowledge warmed me, and that shocked me.

Blaise.

I had no idea how to process this.

“You can’t touch this guy—” Bren started to say.

“Cross,” Blaise growled.

“Seriously. It was a bail jump. Cross hurt him worse.”

He cared. The motherfucker actually cared.

“I’m fine.”

“You shitting me?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

He looked me up and down. “You don’t look fine.” He let out a curse, his hands in fists. “I’m going to have to go to the soccer field and do drills till the morning now. I can’t hurt someone.”

Bren’s hand pressed into my side and she looked up at me.

Her gaze was beseeching, and crap.

I said before I really thought about what I was saying, “I’ll go with you.”

His eyes narrowed. “You look like you can barely stand.”

I grinned. I didn’t look that bad, just not quite as pretty as before. “I’ll be the prettier one of us real soon. The guy only roughed me up a little. And I’ll come with. I can just sit or whatever. I can retrieve the ball for you or something if you do shots on goal.” My grin deepened. “Because we both know you’ll miss. Your aim is for shit.”

He half-laughed. “Fuck you.” Then, a cocky smirk. “You can be goalie.”

I barked out a laugh and groaned right away. My ribs were hurting from that, too.

He raked his hand through his hair. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll drive and bring you back.” He said to Bren, “Don’t worry. I won’t work him over too bad. Can’t. The fucker’s half-incapacitated.”

She waited as he left before pressing both hands to my chest. “You sure about this?”

I drew her in, holding her. “Yeah. I didn’t see it till just now, but he cares. Guess I got a brother out of this after all.”

She smiled, and her eyes grew tender. “Guess you did. Brothers. Who knew we needed them until we got them?”

Or got them *back*, in her case.

I drew down, my lips to hers. “Come here.” She surged up, closing the distance, and she showed me her love in that kiss.

After that, I went and hung out with my brother. *Voluntarily.*



From: Tazsters

To: Brenners

Subject: I did a thing.

I might've totally lied and exaggerated about Cross's injuries to Blaise.

Not sorry.

Like, at all.

But also, don't tell him.

The Best Twin

We're going back to FaceTiming again. It's much more fun, but one last email.

CHAPTER SIXTY

BREN

“Talk about cryptic.”

Tabatha was half-laughing as she walked up behind me. I glanced back, not getting up from my position. I had called her here, and she sat down the next second.

“Seriously. Are we turning into stalkers now?”

I was at my new place, or my new place in Cain overlooking the houses.

I didn’t know the reason I came to stalk, just that it had something to do with my mom, but after my last realization talking with my dad and Maxwell Raith, I knew that was all bullshit.

I deserved a family. I had one, but I’d have one in the future complete with a husband and children. One day.

And happiness.

I’d have that, too, because I already did.

But to the reason I asked Tabatha to come find me here, I figured there was no reason to stall.

“You know, I couldn’t figure it out. It took me awhile, like a few days, but I kept thinking that Drake called me to tell me he knew the witness. We decided not to ask for the name and the next night, Tim Harper was kidnapped. In front of me. And I found out the next day that his dad was the witness against the Red Demons.” I turned to look at her.

I had my knees up, but she was sitting with her feet together in front of her, her knees angled out, and she was

looking down at the ground. Her shoulders were hunched forward, her head down.

“It was you.”

I wasn't asking. I already knew. I just didn't know the how.

When she didn't speak up, I added, “You're my friend. That's something I've been working at this whole year, since last year when you and Sunday informed me how I wasn't being a good female friend. I've been trying this year. Maybe I'm messing up at it, I don't know, but I think when I know that somehow you're the connection, I feel like you should tell me how that came to be. It's friend code.” A breath. “Or girl code? I'm sorry, I'm still trying to figure that out. I knew crew code and soulmate code, and I'm a fledgling for everything else.”

“Oh my God. Shut up.” Tabatha lifted her head, rolling her eyes, but she reached up and flicked away a tear. “You're like a baby demon who's all cuddly. I can't take it, and yes, it was me. How you figured that out, I have no ide—”

“It was a guess.” That she just confirmed.

As if she realized this, too, her head went back down on a soft sigh. “Right.”

“Tell me why, Tab. Tell me how.”

Another soft sigh, but this one ended into a sob. “You know why. Harper was killing my mom. I mean,” at my look, she clarified, “the stress of him, what he was holding over my parents is what was killing her. I found out two things that day when I went home. I found out that Tim Harper, Sr. was threatening my dad if he didn't pay his debts, and he had dangerous friends so he could follow through with any threats he was saying, and I found out that my mom has a heart condition. I didn't know about either, and let me tell you, it rocked me. It rocked everything about me. The old Tabatha, gone. Done. She died that day, and when you hear a legitimate threat being made against your family and you've never been exposed to that world, everything looks different. You count up what weapons you have, what options you have, and when

you come up seriously short, you reach a desperate level that you'll never understand." She looked over, another tear slipping from her eye, but they were hollow. And they were haunted, just like me, but I saw a bitterness underneath them.

Tab had changed, but it didn't have to do with Harper, Jr. like we thought.

"What'd you do?"

"I had to, Bren. I know you guys were trying to help, and I know your brother was keeping tabs on my mom for me, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't going to be enough." Her voice broke, trembling, before her face hardened again. She rasped out, "I didn't know how to fix it, so I tried to figure out how to make it go away. That's what I did."

"Tab." I was whispering. She was breaking me here. "What did you do?"

"I didn't know who else to contact besides you and your brother, except... Drake. I contacted Drake."

That's how he knew.

The dots were starting to connect, but there were so many of them.

"Just tell me."

Her head bobbed up and down. "I will. I promise. It's just, it's hard." She flicked another tear away, and her voice dropped another decibel. "I got in contact with him, and he called me. I told him what was happening, and I asked if he knew or could find out anything to help me, help my family. That's all I did in the beginning, I swear."

And knowing Drake, even if he was in prison, that wouldn't stop him.

"What else?"

"He said he'd ask around, see if he could find a solution to my problem. After that, nothing happened. Not for a long time until suddenly he called, the day before Jordan came to get Zellman, and he said that things were in motion. He was going to set things in motion and to be ready. That's all he said."

I frowned. “The day before Jordan went to Roussou?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Then the next day, he called again and he said, he had a name to help me out. But he couldn’t tell me over the phone because you know...” Because calls were recorded, and I nodded, knowing what she meant. “But he said he’d email and give me directions what to do.”

“That was the day Jordan went to Roussou?”

Another nod. She started picking at the grass underneath her. Pulling blade after blade up, running her fingers down it, smoothing it until she tore it in two. She sliced each one straight down the line, an almost perfect tear. “The day, but I didn’t know Jordan was coming when Drake called me.”

“What did he say in the email?”

“It was weird, but I figured it was coded again, because you know.”

Because they could read emails, too.

“He said, “I’ve thought about your problem and I think you need to go back with your boy. You need to take the advice of his crew, and you never know, the solution might be the most random.”

“That was it?”

“Yeah, and he also said he’d email again telling me what to do with what I got. So, it didn’t make sense until Jordan showed up. Then I got what he was saying. I was supposed to go back with Jordan, hear what you guys had to say, and then listen for some random thing. None of that made sense until I overheard Jordan and Zellman say that Drake called you, and you guys needed to have a crew meeting. After that, I mean, it was simple. I came here, waited for your meeting, and overheard everything. I didn’t know anything about the Red Demons or the witness. Then they asked if Drake said anything else, and you said...”

I was there.

I was remembering.

“He say anything else?”

I shook my head, then remembered. "It was weird." I looked at Cross. "He mentioned Harper."

"Harper?" Jordan's head lifted farther up.

Cross added, "Said there's a Harper on the prison board where he was, and knew he was from Cain. He knows Harper's son, and wondered if we knew him."

"The fuck?"

Cross nodded at Jordan. "I know, but with Drake, who the fuck knows what he was really after."

"Harper."

"Yeah," Tabatha said. "I knew that was the name I was waiting for, but it didn't make sense to me. None of it made sense. After that—"

I was remembering that part, too.

"You left. Went back to your sorority."

"Yeah, and then I got another email that night."

"What'd it say?"

"Just a name."

I looked over, waiting.

"Kess Foster."

I drew in a ragged breath, feeling as if I was just smacked in the face.

This was the second time since last year she popped up for me. "I saw her recently."

"She goes here. I didn't know that at first, but I figured since he told me her name, I should look her up. When I saw she was a student here, and what dorm she lived in, I was guessing that Drake was telling me to go to her. I didn't know why. I didn't—I mean, I remember Kess. She was nice. Quiet, though. She was the only other girl in a crew back home and I thought, it's Drake. He's crazy, but he tends to know shit, and because I didn't want to wait, I went to her place. Knocked on the door, and a guy opened up."

I was remembering that, too.

She stopped, still frowning, and looked up.

The guy—he seemed familiar, but I couldn't place him. Dark hair. Blue eyes that almost matched Kess', but not quite. A brother? I didn't remember if Kess had any other siblings, but no. There was an air about them, about them both. He moved into her, also looking at us, but he wasn't looking at me.

He was watching Harper, and seeing who Harper was talking to—now he saw me and he saw me watching him. That was enough. He grimaced, swearing under his breath (not hard to read lips when someone says 'fuck') and then two guys walked past them, and they were gone.

I looked but couldn't see them.

“I saw him. At a street party. He was looking at Harper and I thought that was weird. Kess was coming to help us out because that's how she is.”

“She was crew. That makes sense.”

“That guy, he's her boyfriend?”

She nodded. “Yeah. He opened the door and introduced himself, and as soon as he did, I knew I wasn't supposed to tell Kess. I was supposed to tell him.”

“Why? Who was he?”

“His name was Chris Raith.”

Raith.

Maxwell Raith.

Then I remembered what Cross told me.

“My brother told Cross that there's rumors the Red Demons had a student on campus.”

“I don't know about that, but I recognized that name you guys said at your meeting. Maxwell Raith and this guy had the same last name, and I saw a motorcycle in the dorm room's parking lot so I just told him. I had no clue.”

Jesus.

She was blindly going forth, sending a message that she didn't even fully understand.

She kept on, "The guy said Kess was grabbing her laundry, but I could wait if I wanted. And I told him, 'I think I'm here for you actually.' And then I said Harper's name. I said, 'Drake sent me. It's Harper.' After that, I bolted. Literally turned and sprinted out of there. I never even saw Kess. And I didn't know what would happen until the next morning. Jessinda came in my room, half-sobbing and hysterical because the guys all witnessed Harper get kidnapped. Right in front of them. Guys with masks and guns. Scary shit, huh?"

She had no clue.

"I was there, Tab."

"What?"

"I was there." I already told her before. "They took him in front of me."

I was remembering them, too. The guy in the white mask. Heckler stopping and staring at me.

Another shiver went down my spine.

I didn't want to go back there, when Maxwell Raith was in my backyard. No way, no how. Another nightmare for someone else, not me. That was behind me, or it would be now that I knew all the connecting dots.

And that also meant that Drake had used me.

"I'm sorry, Bren—"

I stood up, cutting her off. "I don't want to hear it."

My stomach was churning.

Tabatha.

Drake.

I didn't know how to do any of this. How to be used and be okay with that? That wasn't the game I played in life.

I played no games. I didn't know how.

But fuck them. I knew that much.

“I’m okay, I think.”

“What?” She looked up, frowning.

I looked out over the houses, knowing who was sitting at my feet, and knowing that I was different again. “I think I’m good with friends. You got that guy killed, and I even understand why you did it. You wanted the problem to go away. You wanted your mom to be okay. I understand that, but I don’t like this feeling I have. You used me and two guys are dead because of that.” Three. My assailant. Three were dead. “And I had a hand in that, whether I knew it or not and I’m good. I mean, I have to live with that and I have to live with some other things, but you and me. We’re done. Clean slate. I’m going to be friends with other girls like Aspen, like her crazy floormates. They kinda make me laugh. You. Jessinda, if she comes around because of Jordan, I don’t know what’s going to happen between you all and Jordan, but I’m out. You come around for him, you and I are civil to each other, but that’s it. I’m done.”

With that, I walked.

And there was no regret.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

BREN

It took me six months to get approved, but I needed to do this in person.

It was the only way he'd be honest with me.

Once I was sitting at the table, it took a few moments for them to grab him, but it didn't seem long enough until Drake was coming toward me.

He looked good.

And I wasn't noticing in that way, as his ex. I was noticing it as someone who knew him, had once cared for him, and knew this would be the last time I saw him again. Or I was hoping.

He'd never been bulky, but he was lean and muscled now. The angles on his face seemed harder, more chiseled. And he just seemed tougher. I caught a few of the other prisoners glancing his way as he sat across from me, and then I noticed the tattoo on his neck.

It was the emblem for the Red Demons.

That. Right there. That told me what I came to find out, but I'd driven all this way, waited all those months to get approved, I wanted him to say the words.

"Heya, Bren." His eyes twinkled at me, and he grinned. "How are you? You look good."

A small nod. A small smile. Some polite conversation.

That was fine and dandy.

Now to business. "I know what you did."

His small grin vanished, and he leaned forward, dropping his tone. “I know. Tabatha gave me the heads-up.”

I kept lingering on that tattoo on his neck. “Is that why?” I nodded at it.

He reached up, covering the tat, and an awkward sounding chuckle slipped from him. “Why’d you make the drive if you already knew?” He frowned, his hand fell away and he cocked his head to the side. “You didn’t know, did you? You just found out.”

“I couldn’t think of why you did it because you don’t do anything unless you’re getting something out of the deal. Tabatha getting in touch with you, giving you a problem to help with? That’s not you to do it out of the goodness of your heart. So I thought about it, and I just figured—just come and ask. Maybe he’ll be honest for once.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up. “Ah. Bren. When you talk to me like that, you don’t make me want to be forthcoming at all.” He started soft, sweet, and then ended with an edge, and his eyes flat. “Jesus. At least be kind with your request?”

I mashed my lips together because what I wanted to do and what I wanted to say, I couldn’t without getting arrested myself. So I sat put and waited because a mean glint showed in Drake’s eyes and he jerked even more forward over the table. “You’re going to come here and judge me for what I did? Fuck you, Bren. Fuck. You. You know why I did it. I have a kid. I came in here with a target on my back already. Excuse you if I got an opportunity to help myself out, to get me some protection because that’s what I did. That was my deal with them. They got a whole group in here. You should know. You joined ’em.”

“You used me—”

“That’s your pissing point? That I told you bullshit, knowing you’d never take me on the offer? Sending someone to overhear and do the dirty work for you? I set you up to say some words. That’s it. I needed someone that made sense of why I’d be calling them. You’re my ex, that shit makes sense.

And it worked. It all worked. She got a mom that's not going to die. I'm not going to die. My kid gets a father in a few years. You got to decide not to get dirty and help your pops out, and what? That's it."

"Two men—"

"You don't know anything. You got no clue if they're dead or not. They're just gone. That's it, and I heard the chatter. I know it happened in front of a bunch of college kids. The other Demons filled me in. They all know you know, so you're in this box with me. Get off your high horse and stop judging me for trying to survive because that's all I'm doing."

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Maybe Drake would have a soft spot with me because I loved him for a moment in my life.

Or maybe he wouldn't, and when I walked out of here, I truly hoped to never see him.

All that said, all those conflicting thoughts and emotions, I knew what else he was saying. We were stuck where we were. I was going to keep quiet for my life, Channing's life, Cross', Jordan's, Zellman's, and anyone else affected by loving me. And for Drake, I'd focus on Drayana because he was right. He got a kid and that little girl would love and worship her dad, and I didn't want to take the dream away from her.

"Okay."

That was all I had.

I started to stand up.

Drake reached over, tugging me back down.

"Drake!"

He let go, holding his hand up over his head.

The guard settled back, but still frowned at us.

Drake grinned. "No touching. You can only hug kids in here. Listen, I'm going to get out of here. I cut a deal when I

came in, but when I get out, I'm a Red. Forever. They have different rules for prison guys joining up, so it's not official official. It will be. I'm telling you this so you know that you got another guy on the inside, and I'll do what I can to look out for you. You know something on us, but I'll vouch for you and Pops will, too. That will hold weight. I'm not saying this for any other reason except so that you know. That's it. Contrary to your low opinion of me, I do do things sometimes for other people. I've loved two girls in my life and ...” He motioned to me, not meeting my gaze anymore. He was looking at the floor, half-turned away from me. Then he finished, “And the other one has my eyes so there you go. Have a good life, Bren.”

He was off the seat and heading for the door before I registered what he said.

And when I did, he was through the door.



“How was it seeing Drake today?”

Cross asked me that as I slid into bed that night.

I just got back thirty minutes ago, since the drive there and back took most of the trip.

Drake's words stayed with me, and I didn't know how I felt about them.

But I said, “He joined the Red Demons, did everything for protection.”

Cross faltered, his head rearing up. His eyebrows arched. “He did?”

I got under the covers and something settled in me, settled in my chest.

I was home.

I don't know why I felt it now, but it was a wave and I knew—everything would be fine.

I nodded. “He did it for Drayana and he said he’s going to look out for me when he gets out of prison and joins the Red Demons full time.”

“Hmmm.”

I was waiting, expecting.

Cross didn’t say anything.

“You’re not going to ask why?”

He looked up, meeting my gaze and there was a knowing in his gaze. It took my breath away. He said, a sad smile pulling at his mouth, “I already know why, Bren. We loved you at the same time.”

“I love you.”

Another smile, but less sad. “I know that, too. I’m the one who got you.” He leaned forward, his forehead coming to rest against mine, and he said softly, tenderly, “I’m the one you’re going to call husband. I’m the one who gets to call you wife. I’m the one who will have children with you. I’m the one who gets your forever. And he knows it. He’s always known it, just like I’ve always known it.”

Not letting me respond back, he touched under my chin and dipped his head.

His mouth found mine, and he didn’t let me speak for a long time.

EPILOGUE

BREN

Years later

To say that I never saw my dad after the Red Demons came to our house would've been a slight exaggeration, but the truth was that I didn't see him much after that. Over the next weeks and months, I went back to working for Cougar Lanes, passed my test, and became a full-acting bounty hunter.

I saw my dad a few times.

It was on my end. I reached out, asked if he wanted to do dinner.

He was still in Cain, and was working at a local garage repair shop on the outskirts. After I got more familiar with Cain, and more specifically, the underbelly of Cain, I knew that shop was one of the businesses owned and ran by the Red Demons.

Still.

It was clean, or that was the rumor.

A few times we had to hunt down one of their workers, guys who weren't a Red Demon, and on those occasions, we went to the shop. I saw my dad. Pleasantries were exchanged.

He'd ask how I was doing, how Channing was doing. I answered, and reciprocated.

It was surface talk, nothing deep. I knew he wanted a closer relationship, but I couldn't.

I just... I couldn't.

After working through my self-imposed guilt over what he did, thinking he did it for me, thinking he did time for me, I didn't harbor any resentment toward him. I was more 'nothing' toward him. There were some good memories, but not many. I loved my mom. I missed my mom, but I had Channing. Channing was my blood family, and once I came to that decision, I decided I was okay not having dinner with Derrick so much.

I was told recently that he took a job promotion within the same franchise to a shop closer to Roussou. And I adhered to what I promised Maxwell. Any time a Red Demon member popped up on our grid, I recused myself from the hunt. Brock was fine with that. So was Gramps. Hawk too. They all understood, and once that member was apprehended, I returned to the fold.

I got a lot of hours manning the bowling lanes, which Trundle loved. He kept asking me how to get 'the Jessie girl,' or 'those other three chicks who come in with the Tree Willow Girl' to give him a chance. I told him to focus on girls his own age, but he was ambitious.

That was his response every time.

As for those girls mentioned, all of them had stints in our house.

Zellman dated Angeline for a year. They broke up, got back together, broke up, and we were experiencing déjà vu from his relationship with Sunday. They were currently on a break, but that'd last till tonight. Party. Booze. And the heated looks both were giving the other when the other wasn't looking told us that Z would have a girlfriend again, only to break up probably the next day.

The whiplash was real from them.

As for Jordan, he got a little bit more diverse.

He and Tabatha tried, and they lasted for six months.

They genuinely grew apart.

Tabatha got more ambitious in her sorority, and she started dating a pre-law guy, or so we were told through the

sorority/fraternity gossip mill that was named Zeke. Tabatha's new guy was rumored to have a high potential to run for Congress one day, and Tabatha seemed happy. Her dad's loan went away with the disappearance of Harper, Sr., and I never heard another word about either Harper again.

I made peace with what I knew.

Back to Jordan.

He dated Jade and they lasted longer. A year and a half. They seemed happy-ish. Jordan didn't talk much about Jade. She was nice, but quiet toward the end, and it wasn't long after they broke up that we realized why.

He and Jessinda Hinckley got hot and heavy, almost immediately.

They'd been together since and were now on their second-year anniversary. And the two were dynamo, almost literally. Jordan never moved out from our house, so Jessinda was over, a lot, and the two fought, *a lot*. They also made up, a lot, and the heavy pants and wall thumping (even from the basement) became like background noise at times.

But Jordan was happy.

Spying Zellman and how he was grinning at Angeline, or Angeline's ass, he seemed like he was going to be happy tonight.

Everyone was over at the house because they were graduating. We were having an out-and-out rowdy party. Sometime during the summer, Jordan and Jessinda were planning on moving to where she was going to law school in Los Angeles. Zellman hadn't talked about the future with Angeline, but it was known that he'd be going wherever Jordan was going.

As for Cross and me, we were following right behind.

My brother had a solid network of bounty hunters, and with my own reputation expanding, I got a job down there. Cross was going to attend graduate school. Turns out, he enjoyed architecture, and was heading to get a masters in the field.

Jordan got a business degree, so he'd be getting a business job and starting the advancement process in whatever company he applied for. He decided not to join his dad's company, instead letting his sister take the reins for after their dad retired. It seemed to make everyone happy.

As for Zellman, he got a communications degree, though he was going to study for his fugitive apprehensive licensing test.

Yes.

He was going to be a bounty hunter right alongside me.

ANOTHER EPILOGUE

BREN

“Bad news.” That was my greeting from Hawk the second I walked into work, as she was holding out my coffee.

I took a breath, just inhaling and had to decline. “Not today.” I eyed her warily as she frowned before handing off the coffee to Bonbon. Yeah, that’d been a shock to me, too, when we learned our new employee had passed her test. She was a certified bounty hunter, and I’d never been more terrified in my life, for the bail jumps.

“And what’s the bad news?”

“We got a Red Demon on the boards today.”

I groaned. That meant I was staying in the office, and seriously, not today. I was needing some action.

“But,” she piped up, smiling, and after working with Hawk for this last year, that smile never got old. She was my second or third type of family. I didn’t want to decipher the different groups, but I knew Hawk would take a bullet for me and the feeling was reciprocated. “We got a call from your brother. The guy they’ve been chasing popped up down here. They’re heading down, but wanted to see if a couple of us could help out.”

“That’s more like it.” There was a whole blooming feeling in my chest.

Hawk’s smile just got wider. “I thought so. Also, your brother said since he’s sending Congo. That you’re more than able to call in some of your own crew members.”

The door opened. The sunlight flared inside before a silhouette blocked it, shading us. As soon as the door shut, I saw Zellman heading our way with his own special glower on his face, but I already knew it was him because he pulled into the lot right after me.

He was still texting when I walked past his truck and rapped on his window.

“Fight with Angeline?” Please. No more. I thought they got their shit together, finally.

The glower turned into a scowl, which was totally different from Zellman. He growled. “Not because of why you’re thinking. She just texted, said Veronica needs a place to stay. The Nut Buster is going to be staying with us for the next two months. I’m going to go crazy. I’m going to turn into Bonbon.”

She breezed past us, saying, “White van. Offer is always there.”

His head reared back as she went into the bathroom and he visibly shook. “Will she ever stop with that?”

Hawk shook her head. “No way. Not until someone actually takes her up on the offer. Then she’ll probably hump them from happiness.”

“Can’t your man take her back?”

A snort/grin was his response. “Brock ordered a new champagne bottle to be brought to the office when she announced she was coming to work with us, for an entire two weeks. Two weeks. And Brock doesn’t drink.”

Speaking of Brock and how they were more open that he was her man, I asked, “You’re heading back there this weekend?”

She sobered, nodding. “Yeah. You’ll be okay?”

“Me?”

She indicated to me, her eyes darting down. “You know. Today’s your last day for awhile and all.”

“Oh.” Warmth spread through me, sending little tingles to my toes and all the way to the back of my neck. It sucked today was my last day on the job, but the reason was a whole new chapter in life. “I’ll be fine.”

Zellman grunted. “Cross redid an entire room for them, just to have sex in. Those two have always been like rabbits once they got together and came out of not-ever-being-secretive at all, but—”

“Hey!”

He lifted up a shoulder, throwing his arm around my neck and pulling me in for a hug. “Come on, B.” His forehead rested to the side of mine. “Thick and thin. Crew forever and all that shit. You know I love you, but you and Cross, fucking rabbits. And yeah, that pun is totally intended.” But he hugged me tight for a second and he said quietly just for me, “You know I love you. Always crew.”

I did. I tipped my head back, letting him see that I was happy. I patted his chest. “Always crew.”

“Well, now that we’ve had your daily ‘crew’ moment, I’m also letting you know that I put calls in. Suit up and head out to meet your brother’s man, and you’re supposed to pick up your man and Jordan, too.”

Sometimes they joined in, but only when it was approved, and I was more than down with that.

Zellman and I went off, grabbing our gear, and he headed out first to the parking lot.

I was stepping out from the door, checking my phone when a text came through.

Cross: Old times.

Me: Old times. Leaving now.

Cross: Good. I’ll be ready.

Zellman shot forward in his truck and leaned over to shove open his door for me. “Come on, B. After this bail jump, we’re going bowling to celebrate.”

Zellman still sucked at bowling. Zellman was also the one who asked to go bowling.

I got inside. “That sounds good.”

And because I couldn’t help it since finding out, I moved my hand to my stomach.

Yes. I was happy indeed.

We had a baby crew member coming.



From: Tazsters

To: Everyone

Subject: champagne and dancing around holla

I'M AN AUNT! I'M AN AUNT.

SUCK IT, EVERYONE.

I'M AN AUNT.

The BEST Twin

They better name her after me.

THE END

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oh man. I don't think there's anything I can write here to express how I've felt writing this series.

I loved writing *Fallen Crest*, but there was something about Roussou that pulled at me. I wanted to explore what universe that we glimpsed through Channing and wow, when I started writing the first few chapters, I got chills.

Bren was such a dark character.

I've written dark before, but I don't think any of my characters have touched what Bren had. And the love she has for Cross, Jordan, and Zellman. I will truly miss these guys.

Thank you to everyone who has loved the Crew Series right along with me.

Thank you to my agent, to my proofreaders, my beta readers. To the admins in my reader group. Gah. So many! Rochelle Paige, Eileen Robinson, Crystal Solis, Amanda Wooden, Christina Santos, Debra Anastasia, Helena Hunting, Ilsa Madden-Mills, Pam Lilley, Elaine York, Paige Smith, Kara Hildebrand, Chris O'Neil Parace, Amy English, and seriously so many. You guys were always around when I either had a quick question or a long voice message, lol! I know there's so many, but I'm trying to remember who has helped from *Crew*, *Crew Princess*, and has still hung with me through *Always Crew*. The ladies in Tijan's Crew and Tijan's Audiomen. You all are seriously so amazing. I'm so extremely blessed to have you ladies in those groups. Your enthusiasm and positivity, it gives me the extra boost of energy sometimes I need to keep writing, keep editing, get one more chapter done on my project. You all have no idea.

I don't quite remember when I first thought of the idea for this book, but I do remember writing it in my hotel room at RT in Atlanta. I believe I had just been playing around with the first chapters and in that hotel room, I had an aha moment where I knew I needed to get serious and really get going on the first *Crew* book, and now we're here. I remember picking out the first cover for *Crew* and I got shivers. I loved it so much, and thank you to everyone who has helped share about these books and have stayed with me during these characters' transition and changes.

Love, love, love!

I'm tapped out with words right now and I'm becoming a blubbering mess, so again— thank you so much! From myself and Bailey.

—Tijan

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And more!

RICH PRICK

CHAPTER ONE

Everyone knew who Blaise DeVroe was.

It didn't matter that he'd come to Fallen Crest Academy late in the year—and FCA was *not* a school you showed up late to.

I knew this because I showed up shortly after this year—my senior year—began, and no one, I repeat *no one*, knew who I was. Since my parents decided to have a mid-life crisis and tried to make up for some of their wrongs and bring me back to Fallen Crest, my last year of high school had sucked. FCA was filled with rich, stuck-up people. That meant you had to speak their language to be in their groups, and I didn't. Not because I didn't have money. My parents were movie producers and directors. We had money, and I previously went to one of the most exclusive private schools in North America, *and* a stint in a boarding school in Europe.

I could be fluent in stuck-up-ese if I wanted to.

But I chose not to. I've never been that girl.

I was the library girl.

I was the book nerd girl.

I was the wallflower.

On the whole, I tended to avoid people. I didn't people well. I had an affinity for blending into the background. It's a skill. I'd been perfecting it all my life.

But anyway, Blaise DeVroe was the opposite of that.

He may have moved to this school late in the year, but he walked in as if he already owned it. And to his credit, he kinda did.

The guy who ran the school before Blaise showed up was Zeke Allen. He's this wealthy jackass who's a bully, a muscular douchebag, and who slept with girls and then talked shit about them. He was king of the school by default, I guess—not because he was anything fantastic.

Then Blaise DeVroe walked in.

Guess who gave him a welcome-home hug? Zeke Allen did!

I was there, just coming out of the counselor's office, so I saw it all.

Blaise DeVroe strutted in with that cocky walk all the athletes had, and he was gorgeous. Like, seriously gorgeous. He had the high, arching cheekbones only the prettiest of the pretty-boy models had.

I knew this too because I'd done some reluctant gigs in the business.

But back to freaking stunning Blaise DeVroe. He had a chiseled, square jaw. He could have had his own waterfall off that jawline. Dark eyes. His hair was short, but long enough so he could rake his hands through it and let it be all adorably messy. And his body. Don't even get me started on his body—I was all crushing on it because it was *sick* and I mean that in the hot kind of sick way, not the real sick way. He was definitely not the real sick way at all.

He wasn't as big as Zeke, but he had these big, broad shoulders. Trim waist. And there were muscles everywhere. I swear I saw shape definition in his neck.

Blaise DeVroe: the *hottest* guy at Fallen Crest Academy.

One of the richest guys too.

I didn't hear the story of why he came here—not the real reason. Rumors circulated that his mom was going through a divorce, but there were also whispers about secret siblings. I

wasn't on the up-and-up with anyone, so I never heard for sure if any of that was true. All I knew was Blaise DeVroe had walked into the hallowed and pretentious hallways of the private school in our town, and he was hailed like a long-lost son or something.

Or something, as it turned out.

Blaise and Zeke knew each other from childhood. Zeke considered him his long-lost best friend. So it was a coming home sort of situation.

Not that I could talk much about the history of FCA, because I was new myself, but I had been here almost a whole semester before Blaise. And full disclosure, I'd been here when I was much younger at the private elementary/middle school. That was before Mom and Pops decided they didn't like the influence my older brother's best friend was having on him, so they pulled both my brothers and me out of here.

But that's a whole different story.

The story for right now is that I'm being a total weirdo stalker and perving on Blaise DeVroe getting his dick sucked.

Like, right in front of me.

In hindsight, this was probably not the best idea I'd ever had. And I've had some doozy ideas. But this one takes the cake. I just couldn't help myself. As I've mentioned, I usually keep to myself, but something got into me this year. Every time I heard about a party, I couldn't make myself go, but I also couldn't *not* go.

So...I went.

But I stayed on the outskirts, so the people actually attending the party didn't realize I was there. There'd been a big bonfire that our town and the neighboring two towns had a while back. I was there, but I'd decided to make it a camping trip—just for me.

I was there, but not there. And that night had ended weird too, but nothing like this one.

This time the party was at Zeke Allen's lake cabin. Not that his cabin was a cabin. It was a mansion—a twenty-room *mega* log cabin, which no one even blinked at, because that's just normal for these people. Most everyone was staying at the cabin, not trekking back here into the woods like me. I'd set up my tent a bit away, doing my camping thing again (something I love, by the way), when I heard voices. They weren't down by the house, spilling out over the back patio, or even at the lake. Nope. These voices were up the hill, coming from farther into the woods.

I'd done my research. Zeke Allen's cabin was set a good ten miles away from the nearest neighbors. I should've been in the clear to sneak onto their land, do a little freestyle camping, and listen to the party sounds like the loser I was. But noooo. I was about to get company.

As I snuck out of my tent, and realized who it was, I almost crapped my pants.

It was Blaise DeVroe, holding hands with Mara Daniels.

As popular girls went, Mara Daniels was one of the nicer ones. She was on the dance team. Dark hair. Shorter, but athletic. The problem with Mara was that she was friends with the other popular girls. Some of them were nasty—hence the reason I wasn't friends with them. Not that they'd tried to get to know me. Not that I even registered on their radar. But then again, that's what I did.

I didn't engage. I didn't attend. I was on the edge. I was the invisible girl, and here I was, being the invisible girl once more, but man...

When I saw it was him, and then saw how his hand went from holding hers and guiding her to a tree to slipping around and grabbing her ass, something came over me. I couldn't retreat back to my tent. I couldn't even stay hidden behind a tree and just listen.

I know, I know. This was all sorts of wrong, but Blaise was Blaise.

He'd become the guy in my dreams, my weird schoolgirl fantasies. He was my high school crush. Everyone had one. If you didn't, you're even weirder than me, and that's saying something. So when I started salivating over Blaise DeVroe, I kinda just let myself go. I mean, nothing was ever going to happen. Guys like him didn't date girls like me. They didn't even notice girls like me.

I wasn't crazy. That'd make me all sorts of delusional.

I was a realist. I knew my place in life's hierarchy. I was at the bottom. I was not the very bottom—because of my family—but socially, I was barely one rung up the ladder.

Anyway, when Blaise started kissing Mara, when Mara knelt in front of him, when she opened his pants and took out his cock—I lost all train of thought.

I watched as she took his dick in her mouth, as her head began bobbing up and down over him.

And, oh my God.

My whole body was awash with sensations, and I was captivated. Captivated! Entranced. Mesmerized.

I could not look away.

Then I felt throbbing and a warm feeling between my legs, and it was game over. It was all I could do not to make a sound, because I wanted to. So bad. I wanted to moan. I wanted to touch myself, but I didn't. I kept myself reined in, but watch? Oh yeah. I watched.

I couldn't *not* watch.

I watched the whole thing.

I loved the whole thing.

And then at the end of it, I almost died.

* * *

BLAISE

I was getting my dick sucked while a weird chick watched us.

“Hmmm...Blaise.” My girl moaned, readjusted, and took me in again. She reached up to stroke under, and damn, that felt good. My eyes almost rolled back, but I caught myself and held steady. My hands went to her head. Sometimes a little guidance went a long way, and as I applied gentle pressure, my girl was receptive. So I started to drive her mouth over me. All the while, I never stopped watching the other girl.

I couldn't place her.

I was pretty sure she hadn't been at Zeke's party, but who the fuck knew. He'd invited fifty people, way more than he needed to, but Zeke was a lovable bully idiot. He was mean. Some might say he had a slime effect on them, but he was my best friend. I couldn't judge. I had an attitude the size of fucking Alaska. Anyway, back to Zeke. He liked to go big, and that included his parties and his fuck-ups, and there were a lot of both.

That girl...

I liked her.

Fresh face. I could tell she was light on the makeup. Her face was one of those that would look jaded under a ton of crap, but without it, she looked the way she did right now: innocent and pure. Though the fact that she was watching my blowjob didn't fit either of those adjectives. She was tugging on her lip now, her hand lingering on her shorts.

Christ.

Her shorts.

My chick was wearing a bikini top and shredded jean shorts—and those shorts were hardly there. They were more decorative so she didn't get arrested for public indecency. All the girls at this party were like that. Bikinis, and anything else they wore was painted on their bodies. The old school way of thought might've labeled them sluts or whores, but since we

were all liberal and progressive, we went with *sexually healthy appetites*.

I, currently, was enjoying my girl's appetite.

She opened her mouth wider, angled her head to the other side, and oooh yeah—I was in at a whole different depth now. Fuck it. I took hold of her hair and started moving. She moaned, but only widened her jaw and spread her knees a little more apart. She was bracing herself.

Fuuuuck yeah.

That meant I could go a little harder, which I did. I shoved her down a bit more, a better angle, and right there. I loved when they let me take over. But then I looked back up to watch Voyeur Girl. My friends and I did not hang out with girls like my voyeur. My dick got harder. I almost cursed, gritting my teeth. I had not expected that reaction, but I'd take it.

The girl watching wore a buttoned-up maroon shirt, the ends tied at her waist. She had a good rack. The shirt was bunched up to hide 'em, but I saw her girls. They would be a decent handful, almost perfect. And she wasn't wearing a bra. There was enough of a tease between the buttons that I could see just skin, just tits.

The rest of her... I had no words.

Khaki shorts that ended mid-thigh, and what a fucking thigh she had.

This girl could model.

Long. Lean. Legs meant to wrap around your waist—I thrust a little harder, and my girl groaned around me. I needed to ease up, but I was almost gone. Almost. Not quite.

Then Mara reached up and massaged my boys. That was enough.

I unloaded into her.

She swallowed like a champ and smiled up at me. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and for a second, the weird chick was forgotten. I grinned at Mara. I always

liked Mara's blowjobs, and because I wasn't an asshole, I tugged her up and moved her farther behind the trees so she was hidden from view.

Now was my turn to make her feel good.

Kissing her, I slid my hand inside her shorts and inside her, and when she was done and moaning, I looked over my shoulder. The other girl was still there, still glued to her tree, her eyes still right on us, but this time, she saw me.

Her eyes bulged out, and she inhaled sharply. She jerked back, and I grinned, lifting my hand to my mouth. I tasted Mara on my fingers as I watched her. Then I winked.

She uttered a muffled scream.

Chuckling, I grabbed Mara as she tensed in my arms.

Her head snapped around. "What was that?"

"Nothing." I kept her tight to my side as she fixed her pants. "Come on. Let's go back to the party."

As we left, I glanced back.

The girl was gone.

To read Blaise and Aspen's story, go here!

[*Rich Prick*](#)